

EASYGOING TERRITORY DEFENSE

by the
Optimistic Lo

~PRODUCTION MAGIC Turns a Nameless Vi

into the STRONGEST FORTIFIED CITY~

NOVEL

3

Written by
SOU AKAIKE

Illustrated by
KURURI



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"I'm just
no good."

"And why
do you think
that?"

Frankly,
I think you're
incredible."

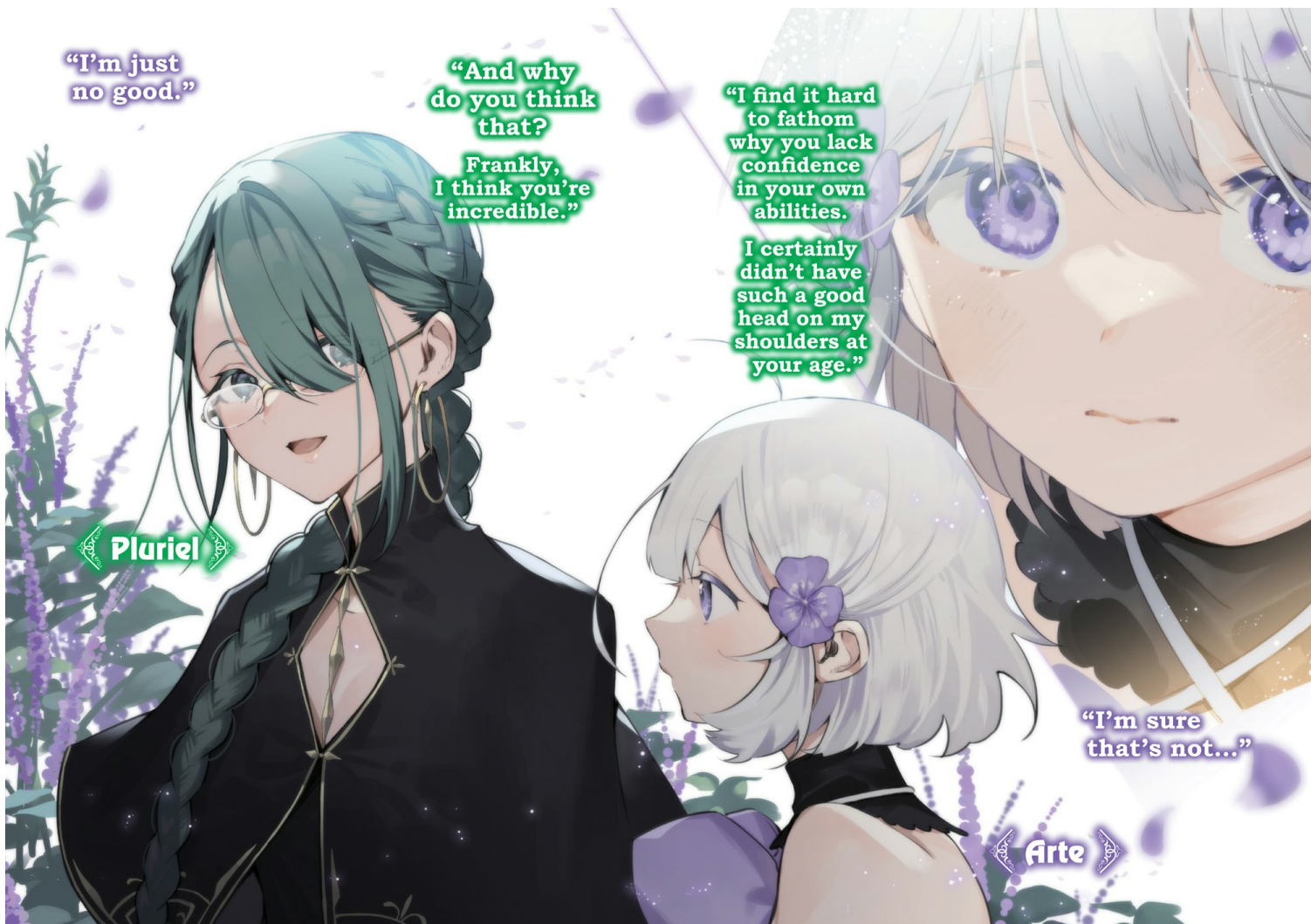
"I find it hard
to fathom
why you lack
confidence
in your own
abilities."


I certainly
didn't have
such a good
head on my
shoulders at
your age."

Pluriel

"I'm sure
that's not..."

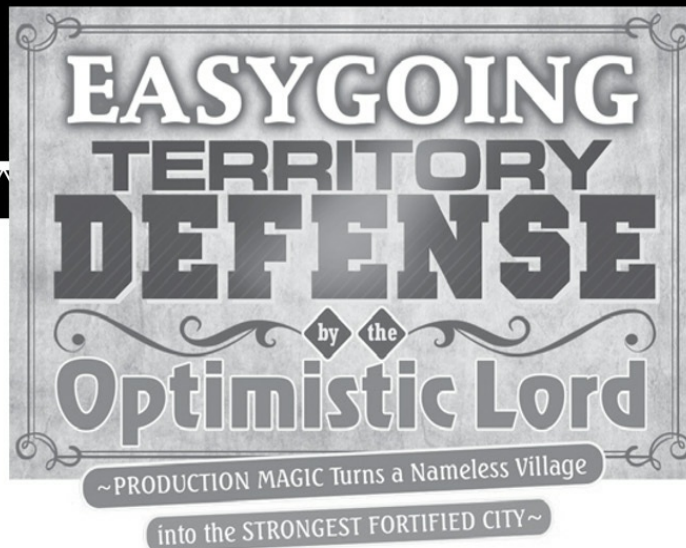
Arte





“When I think back on how you looked when I first met you in Count Ferdinatto’s territory, you are so much more expressive than you ever were before. I suspect the reason for that is less your environment than it is Baron Van?”

“Lord Van is tremendously kind, so he’d never...”



NOVEL

3

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. 3

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★
EASYGOING TERRITORY DEFENSE
BY THE OPTIMISTIC LORD
★

Prologue:

Arriving at the Battlefield, Begrudgingly

WOE IS ME.

The youngest son of a noble house, exiled to some Podunk village out in the sticks, all because he lacked an aptitude for the right kind of magic.

Set up as the lord of that forgotten land, the energetic child worked himself to the bone developing and fortifying the village. Legend had it that the boy eventually holed himself up in his new home and lived happily ever after.

At least, that was the future I envisioned for myself before I was forced to go to war.

“Man, this sucks. Seriously.” And yet here I was, arriving in the town nearest Scudet. Scudet was where the fighting was, but we had just lost a battle, so we needed time to regroup and reorganize our troops.

We rolled in to find hordes of knights and mercenaries scurrying about the town. It still wasn't nearly as many troops as I'd expected. *Don't tell me they've already run off to take back Scudet?*

“Did the enemy already bring down the wall?” I whispered to myself. “Maybe I just couldn't see it from our position? That would explain rushing to take back the city, at least.”

Dee folded his arms. “Hmm... I understand the desire to retake what was taken, but...”

“Scudet's forces got their butts kicked. Wouldn't it make more sense to properly reorganize before trying to take back the city?”

“That is what I would do. I would wait for reinforcements and prepare for the long game.”

I heard footsteps approaching where we stood in the middle of town, then the distinct clanking gait of someone moving in armor. I turned and stopped

short, shocked to recognize the person before me. On some level, I had known this meeting was inevitable, but I still wasn't emotionally prepared.

I bowed my head respectfully. "It has been some time, Father."

Looking down at me was a man I had not seen in a year: Jalpa Bul Ati Fertio. My dad.

I was pretty sure that he was a bit thinner than he had been when I last saw him, but his sharp gaze remained unchanged. He was flanked by his personal guard, decked out in black armor lined in gold. My old man valued strength and ability above all else, so he made sure that his Chivalric Order was full of skilled knights.

Those knights hung back while my dad glared down at me. "I heard you became a baron."

"Ah, yes. I have not changed my name, so I go by Baron Van."

"I heard you slew a dragon."

"Ah, well, a forest dragon, yes."

He wrinkled his brow at my casual tone.

"How? Not even I could defeat a dragon of that class alone. Such an opponent would necessitate the full power of my Chivalric Order," he demanded, a questioning look in his eyes.

"...Um, I did it with my ballistae."

He snorted an exasperated laugh. "Hah! Ballistae, you say? Impossible. Or what, are you telling me you shot bolts made of mithril at the beast? What nonsense."

The only response I could muster to his insults was a sigh. There was, quite frankly, no way I could get this man to believe what I said. "Marquis Jalpa, do you happen to have a sword or shield you don't need?" I asked.

Father blinked, but his confusion at the abrupt subject change quickly gave way to rage. He suppressed his anger and turned to the knight next to him. "Give me one of your spare swords."

“Yessir!”

The knight smoothly unhooked the short sword at his waist and handed it to me. I raised the sheathed weapon parallel to the ground.

“Khamsin, cut this,” I whispered.

Khamsin silently drew his sword and swung. The sound of metal on metal was muted. Father and his knights watched, confused.

“Wh-what did...” No sooner could the sword’s owner get these words out than the sheathed sword split in two. Its bladed end fell to the ground.

This bellowed sword was impossibly sharp. Even more impossible was that the cut had been performed by a ten-year-old boy. Father and his men were dumbfounded.

Hmm, I think I’ll name Khamsin’s sword the “Zantetsuken” next time I perform maintenance on it. Sounds awesome.

Father stared at me, disbelieving. “What...is that sword?”

Before I could answer him, I was interrupted by a familiar voice behind me. “Baron Van!”

I turned and was greeted by the sight of a beautiful woman with amazing proportions approaching me; the American dream in every sense of the phrase. “Viscount Panamera! Long time no see.”

Panamera was equipped with light, white armor, the exact opposite of my father’s. It was a bit more decorative than what I’d seen her wear in the past. I assumed this was her loadout for big, important battles. “Hrmph. Looks like you’ve gotten taller.”

“Indeed. I plan on being taller than you one day.”

“Ha ha ha! I’d like to see that! Now then, His Highness awaits. Follow me.”

“Oh, he’s already here?”

“Yes. He has eagerly awaited your arrival, hoping you’ve made something interesting again.”

We continued to chat merrily, but my father looked at me. “...Van,” he said

hoarsely. “Did you truly defeat a forest dragon?”

I shot him a smile and nodded. “That I did. I’ll show you my ballistae after I go say hello to His Highness.”

“A wise idea,” Panamera piped up. “Seeing is believing, after all. Or I’d gladly show off my own ballistae, if you give me a few bolts.”

“No, I actually have better models now than the ones I gave you.”

“What? You’ve already developed a new model?! I want one!”

“I’ll make you some next time. We can talk prices later.”

I attempted to soothe Panamera as I made my way towards His Highness, my father following at a distance. It seemed he had nothing else to say to me after our last back-and-forth.

As we proceeded through the town, the military presence steadily increased. Lines of elegantly clad knights stood before the two-story manor that was our ultimate destination. Their red armor was especially striking.

This must be the king’s imperial guard, also known as his Red Armors. I’ve heard people from foreign nations are terrified of them and call them the Bloody Armors.

Panamera announced us. “It is I, Viscount Panamera Carrera Cayenne. I have brought with me Baron Van Nei Fertio.”

“You may enter.”

The red-armored knights cleared the path by lining up on the left and right sides. *Cool!* They stood at attention, each in the exact same position: the perfect image of military discipline.

“Whoa...” I breathed, making Panamera chuckle.

“Impressed by His Highness’s royal guard?”

“Yes! They have an incredible presence. They must be powerful, huh?”

Panamera nodded, smiling at me. “Of course. Only five hundred may don the red armor. Every year, those who have been judged worthy are tested in battle with the current royal guard. The idea is that they must use their own power to

seize the position. That means that anyone who makes it into the Red Armors is a truly adept warrior.” She paused, then added in a whisper, “...I suppose, depending on your gear, you might have a chance at winning.”

One of the Red Armors looked at us then. Panamera paid them no mind and proceeded into the manor. All I could do was grimace and jog after her, scrutinized by the kingdom’s greatest knights.

Damn you, Panamera! You did that on purpose!

By the way: trailing behind Panamera made for a wonderful feast for the eyes.

Eventually, she led me up to the second floor and into the reception room. The wooden walls and floor lent the space a warm, calming atmosphere. In the center of the room stood a long table that could seat eight people, with three seats to each side. In the back, at the head of the table, sat a single man.

As I entered the room, all eyes turned to me.

“Mm, Baron Van! Welcome!” The man in the back stood. This was Dino En Tsora Bellrinet, the king of our great nation. He waved me over. “We were just discussing how to take back Scudet, but now that you’re here, we must rethink things! Let us discuss how to best involve you in our strategy.”

The king looked excited, but the expressions of the middle-aged men around him were more dubious. I bowed and, hoping they would accept my presence, delivered a basic greeting: “Um, pardon me. I know I’m new here, but I hope we can get along.”

I continued to duck my head as I took a seat. Panamera, grinning, sat to my right. Father passed me, expressionless, and sat in one of the open seats around the center of the table.

His Highness looked over everyone present before speaking again. “Normally, now would be the time to seek aid from the lords neighboring the capital city, but time is of the essence. I propose we take back Scudet using Marquis Fertio’s Chivalric Order, the border order, Count Ferdinatto and Count Ventury’s forces, and those commanded by Viscount Panamera and Baron Van. Any objections?”

One of the thin, droopy-eyed, middle-aged men looked at me with concern. He wore well-crafted armor without a blemish on it, and his shoulder bore a crest designed after a windmill. This must have been Count Ferdinatto. It was my first time seeing him. True to the rumors, he seemed to have a real lack of self-confidence.

For a moment it looked like Count Ferdinatto wanted to say something, but in the end he maintained his silence and averted his gaze. *Hmm, he kind of reminds me of Arte before she gained confidence in herself*, I thought. *The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, huh? His face is thin, but he's still quite attractive—I can see why Arte is so pretty.*

The white-haired man across from Count Ferdinatto furrowed his brow in my direction. In a hoarse voice, he asked, “Is this child Baron Van?”

“Ah, yes. My name is Van Nei Fertio. I became a baron only just the other day...” I smiled bashfully, but the white-haired man’s gaze sharpened.

Judging by the names the king had called out, this man was probably Count Ventury. The only other people in the room were His Highness’s retainer and the assorted Chivalric Order commanders. Count Ventury turned to the king. “Your Highness, please cease with the bad jokes. What could a child like this possibly accomplish...?”

The king’s amused smile was enough to quiet the count. “A bad joke?” His Highness echoed cheerfully. “I can see why you would assume that. Once you’ve seen how Baron Van fights, however, you’ll change your tune. Look forward to that moment.”

I couldn’t help but raise my hand. “Ah, excuse me. Actually, I won’t be participating in the battle to take back Scudet.”

My tone was the kind you might take when turning down an invitation to drink with your work buddies. Everyone in the room went wide-eyed. Count Ventury and Father in particular looked at me sharply, but Count Ferdinatto mostly looked puzzled.

Turning his gaze toward daddy dearest, Count Ventury said in a low voice, “What is the meaning of this? If I am to take his words at face value, then are you pretending to participate in the battle on your child’s behalf?”

Daddy dearest glared back at him. “Count Ventury, do you truly think me so underhanded? I am making my oldest son, the current acting head of the family, participate in the battle. There is no reason for me to send my youngest son away.”

Well, that’s awful. I’m not even ten yet! You should object to me participating at all! Be more affectionate!

There were many things I wanted to say, but I swallowed my words and opted for a smile instead. “Father has nothing to do with this. I am simply concerned for my territory.”

Count Ventury and daddy dearest’s glares both grew sharper. My father said, “Our nation’s defenses have been threatened. Are you telling me you refuse to cooperate because you want to protect a tiny village that could be blown away by a strong gust of wind?”

“You may be a child,” Count Ventury added, “but you have tunnel vision. No matter how much you protect your tiny territory, if we lose the Scudet stronghold, the situation will only worsen. Considering that you’ve been invited to sit here, I would hope that you had enough presence of mind to arrive at that conclusion yourself.”

Both of these men were seething with rage. I took it head on, though, and nodded pleasantly. “Of course I understand that. Conversely, do either of you truly understand my position? In the face of great danger, you powerful aristocrats both brought your armed forces to the front lines. Have you given any thought to the struggles of a lord trying to protect his small village with everything he has?”

I am angry. Very, very angry. I had attempted to shut both men down, but they still looked like they had things to say.

That was when the king stepped in. “Hmm... In that case, speak as to why you will not participate in this battle.”

Thanks! I love you, Your Highness!

I cleared my throat, then looked around at everyone at the table. “Thank you very much. First, I was put in charge of a miniscule village that was on the verge

of collapse. Three knights, a retired butler, a maid, and a slave boy all decided of their own free will to come with me; other than them, I have received no support or resources from home. I have done my best despite these odds, and in a single year, I have made my village bigger and stronger. No one there struggles for food or to put clothes on their back.”

As I explained my circumstances, everyone looked at daddy dearest, who was staring me down with an unreadable expression. I continued.

“Still, it remains a small village. I somehow managed to put together a Chivalric Order, hired a great number of mercenaries, and came here. In this situation, should Yelenetta invade my village, we have no chance of winning.”

This was complete BS on my part. The king and Panamera, well aware of my actual circumstances, looked pained. Nobody else at the table possessed that knowledge, though, so there would be no immediate objections.

Or so I thought. “So you think it possible that Yelenetta might target your territory?” Panamera asked, surprising me. “Why do you think that? Count Ferdinatto’s fortress has strategic value, but as you say, your village is small. I cannot see any value in sending troops there.”

Once again, every set of eyes in the room turned to me.

“This is just conjecture,” I warned, “but...after struggling for many long years, Yelenetta finally invaded and decisively took down Scudet. Their wyverns helped them do it, but the main reason for their success was their new weapon, the black balls. From their perspective, this is different from the minor clashes they’ve engaged in before. I have to assume that they’ve come here with great confidence in their forces. If they plan to take down Scuderia, they won’t stop at taking Scudet, but aim to conquer other important strongholds. To do that, they’ll need to ensure we don’t confine ourselves in those strongholds, because that would force them into a protracted siege battle.”

Panamera raised an eyebrow. “In other words, they will take any neighboring towns and villages that could be used as supply routes?”

“They wouldn’t have to take them. They could just make them unusable. By burning them to the ground, for example.”

Everyone in the room grimaced. His Highness looked at me. “Attacking multiple strongholds simultaneously, while sending troops to smaller towns and villages...” he said slowly. “That doesn’t sound like a realistic strategy to me. Every nation requires troops, resources, and funds to defend themselves against neighboring nations. Even in all-out war, they don’t deplete their forces entirely.”

He explained these things to me patiently and clearly, since I was just a child.
Thanks, Your Highness!

I nodded respectfully, but then voiced my disagreement. “I’m sure that has been the case in the past, but this time is different. If Yelenetta possesses dozens of wyverns and marionette mages, I have no doubt they’ll send ten to twenty groups to our strongholds and towns. Remember, they brought down Scudet. It’s entirely possible for them to simultaneously target multiple locations.”

The king grimaced and leaned back in his chair. It seemed to me like he’d decided my position was worth thinking over. But then Count Ferdinatto spoke for the first time.

“...I think this is worth looking into. However, there’s something about what you said that gives me pause, Baron Van. From your phrasing, it sounds almost as if you’ve developed a means of combatting Yelenetta’s new weapon.”

“I believe I have. I’ve got a way of handling both the wyverns and black balls.”

The directness of my response made Count Ferdinatto fall silent. Count Ventury, on the other hand, smacked the table, enraged. “Foolishness! How could we even listen to this child’s foolishness?! Their forces could push back not only the border knights, but also Marquis Fertio’s Chivalric Order! I refuse to believe they have multiple armies capable of such a feat! And even if they did, what could you do to stop them if you went back to your village?”

Everything Count Ventury said made sense: I was, in fact, a young child participating in a war council. I was aware that nothing I said held any weight.

Regardless, I had no intention of backing down. “It raises our odds of victory considerably. That much is a fact. Besides, I don’t intend to return home without getting anything done here first.”

Count Ventury glowered at me. *Oh, gosh. How scary! He's got the eyes of a murderer.*

The king had turned to face me fully. I said, "I will be on my way shortly, but before that, I'll drop off my new ballistae and some brand-new, extra-strong catapults that I've developed. I'll also leave my super powerful rapid-fire machine bow squad with Viscount Panamera, which should be more than enough of a fighting force."

The king and Panamera both murmured their pleasure. Count Ventury, obviously, wasn't quite so thrilled.

With no other options, I stood from my chair and turned to Count Ventury. "Please forgive me, but I must be a bit rude if I am to convince you of what I'm saying. Count Ventury, could you lend me a sword or shield?"

I expected him to explode in a fit of rage, but instead he cast a silent glance at the large, armored man sitting next to him. That man held up a thick, heavy-looking shield with one hand. Just how strong was this dude?

I'd seen a handful of people like Dee before, who could use gigantic broadswords straight out of a video game. This served as a reminder that I was in a world where people could ignore physical limitations, even without using magic.

The man holding up the shield was looking at me, which briefly gave me pause. He was probably Count Ventury's commander, but...why were his facial features just as intense as his master's? Were they father and son or something? They certainly resembled one another.

"...What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Ah, my apologies. Just hold it like that. Let me see... Your hand is in the middle, okay. Here we go..." I mumbled, checking the position of his hand. He seemed puzzled by this whole display. "Okay, please stay still for a moment." In one rapid movement, I unsheathed the sword at my hip and slashed at the shield.

I sliced through a vertical third of the large shield, my momentum bringing my sword clean through the wooden table below. Fortunately, I didn't get as far as

the floor. The onlookers appeared stunned. The chunks of table and shield hit the ground with sounds that were obnoxiously loud, calling everyone's attention to the severed pieces lying on the floor.

"Is it just me, or have you increased that thing's sharpness?" Panamera whispered as she looked over at me, prompting everyone else to do the same.

With the eyes of the room on me, I smiled and raised my sword in front of my face. This was my precious ornamental sword; its blade held nary an impurity. I'd made it with orichalcum, which meant that it even reflected the light stunningly.

"This sword here has the finest stroke imaginable, but the iron swords I sell are nearly as sharp." I looked around the room. "As are the bolts fired by my ballistae. Those ballistae were what helped us defeat a forest dragon. Oh, and for the record, we took down the wyvern that attacked our village with an older catapult model."

"You defeated a dragon with ballistae?" asked Count Ventury in a low voice.

Before I could answer him, the king interjected. "Mm. I have seen him take down a wyvern in a single strike."

That shut even the count up.

As if to seal the deal, Panamera spoke up next. "I was involved with the slaying of the forest dragon. All our magic did was buy time. It was the baron's ballistae that pierced the scales of the beast and defeated it. I can confirm their power."

Count Ventury, my old man, and Arte's pops exchanged glances. None of this was particularly easy to believe, but they knew they couldn't question what the king said. It wasn't worth wasting brainpower on: I understood they would never believe words alone. I was going to do what I came here to do, then head home.

"Okay," I said, "I'm going to get to building those mobile ballistae and catapults, then head back. I've also prepared ballista bolts and barrels filled with shuriken for the catapults, so please use those."

"You are going to...build them? Now?"

“Van, I have stayed silent up until now, but it appears to me that you do not understand our current situation. Time is of the essence.”

“Yup!” I said, cutting the middle-aged men off before they could begin to stew with rage all over again. “Okay, going outside now!”

I beat it out of the room. The knights by the entrance all turned to face me. “Baron Van, is the meeting over?”

I nodded and lifted a hand. “Yup. I have some stuff to do, so could you clear the main street for me?”

“Yessir! Of course!” One of the older knights began to issue clear and concise commands. “Clear the main road! Get to the sides!”

Man, the king’s knights really are something else. Not an ounce of wasted energy, and they move so quickly.

I sensed His Highness and the others approaching from behind and turned to my squad at the front of the main street. “My bad! Could you guys get me the materials?!” I shouted to them.

“Yes, of course!” Khamsin called back promptly. The carriages full of materials began to move.

Just gonna whip some weapons up and hurry home. I’ll start with the foundation... I thought, but before I could do anything, a loud, angry voice exploded behind me.

“Child...! Baron Van! How dare you take such an insolent tone before the king!”

Oh, wow. He’s super pissed. Cold sweat ran down my back as furious-sounding footsteps approached me, but I quickly switched into work mode.

First, I had to build a huge foundation with wheels attached to it. Since I had already built multiple models for SeatoH, I managed to whip one up in no time at all. As it turned out, the more you used magic, the easier it got. Everything went according to plan: the approaching footsteps and angry voices came to a halt as I finished crafting the catapult’s foundation. I exhaled in relief and started building the upper parts of the large weapon.

The support pillars rose. The large axle came together. The rotating mandrel sprouted from the side. It was a fascinating sight, like watching a well-made claymation film.

Two large axles appeared on either side of the mandrel, followed by a large pole extending forward and backward. In some ways, the thing resembled a massive seesaw, but it was far more dangerous than that. I used mithril alloy to reinforce any load-bearing parts: the springs, axles, bearings, and mandrel. At last I had a super-awesome, Van-made catapult that more than deserved the astonished gaze of everyone present.

Each carriage bore sufficient materials to build one catapult. And this thing was so big that you had to tilt your head way back to look at it.

I went to construct a second catapult while everyone stood frozen and wide-eyed around me. Eventually Count Ventury finished his reboot sequence and started shouting.

“Wh-wh-what is this madness?!”

I turned to face him and found my old man, Arte’s pops, and Panamera standing in front of the manor with him. The king and several knights came up behind them. “Oooh! So this is your new weapon!” the king enthused, approaching the first catapult.

Panamera trailed behind him, wearing a strained smile. In a slightly exasperated tone, she said, “I see you have built yet another absurd weapon.”

“Now, now,” I replied, “just wait until you see it in action.”

I turned back to my work, crafting more catapults and lightweight ballistae. Upon completion, I turned toward the king. “Now then, I will leave these weapons and my prized Chivalric Order with Viscount Panamera.”

The king and the viscount both nodded silently. The middle-aged noblemen, meanwhile, finally gathered enough of their wits to speak up.

“H-hold on just a moment!”

“Why isn’t anyone asking about this absurd magic?!” Count Ventury demanded, approaching me in a fit of rage.

Khamsin instinctively gripped the handle of his katana. As he shifted his stance, it wasn't only Count Ventury who reacted: every knight present took notice.

Realizing that the atmosphere was accelerating toward disaster, I grabbed Khamsin by the collar and pulled him back. "I'm so sorry about him. I'll depart without saying anything else. If you wish to know the details of these new weapons, feel free to approach Viscount Panamera. Farewell."

I bowed my head and took a step back, urging Khamsin to lower his head.

In Count Ventury's stead, the king stepped forward to speak. With a bold smile, he asked, "Can we win with these weapons?"

I stopped in my tracks and turned to him. "I cannot guarantee anything, but I've done everything I can. Assuming that the enemy does not surpass my estimations, I believe our chance of victory is over ninety percent."

The corners of the king's mouth quirked up. He nodded. "That works for me. Until we meet again, Baron Van."

"I look forward to that day." Our conversation having reached its conclusion, I bowed my head and turned on my heel.

Aw, yeah! I get to go home now, right? I'm going, okay? I'm really going.

And with that, I set out on my journey home.

Chapter 1:

The Superweapon

“IT CERTAINLY LOOKS INCREDIBLE, BUT WILL IT REALLY be useful? What do you think, Marquis Fertio?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it, but His Highness and Viscount Panamera have, and they understand its power.”

“Hmm...”

Count Ventury and Marquis Fertio were staring up at one of the catapults while the king and Panamera conducted their final checks. Paula stood at attention in front of the machine bow squad, which Van had left behind.

The king spoke to her directly. “Hmm. Are you the captain of this squad?”

“Y-y-yes!” she said, all nerves. “My name is Paula!”

The king smiled and acknowledged her with a nod. “I remember your face. I will be relying on the strength of your leadership.”

“Oh! Thank you very much!”

The king remembered her! Paula was dizzy with gratitude.

Panamera cut in. “Captain Paula, you and your squad are an essential fighting force. I will do my best to ensure you suffer no casualties before we return you to Baron Van.”

“Th-thank you, ma’am!”

But Panamera wasn’t done. “That being said, since you have been seconded to me, I will treat you as I would my own knights.” She grinned. “You will obey my orders.”

Paula’s face twitched a little, but she loudly replied, “Y-yes, ma’am! We will keep that in mind!”

The members of the machine bow squad, who had stood more or less at ease,

tensed at the shift in atmosphere. The king nodded, looking them over. “Well done, Viscount. You’ve only just taken their reins and already they seem more disciplined,” he said quietly.

Panamera tilted her chin down, her expression unchanging. “Baron Van’s Chivalric Order is undoubtedly powerful, but they are too dependent on his weapons. If I may be frank, I judge them deficient in basic combat skills.”

“Hmm, true. This is Baron Van, after all. I doubt he spends as much time reprimanding them as he does training them in the use of their weapons, and not even the commander of his Chivalric Order, the Dragonslayer, could keep his eyes on everyone at once. For better or worse, their approach to battle is lax.”

“I concur. It would do them good to train alongside the other Chivalric Orders. Since we have them here, I propose we put them through their paces for two or three weeks.”

Panamera and the king smiled at one another. Their conversation was inaudible to Paula and the others, but those expressions alone were terrifying.

Panamera

“STAY IN FORMATION!”

“Yessir!”

“You! You’re half a step behind!”

“Sorry, sir!”

Endless shouting accompanied Paula and her squad as they brought up the rear of the marching line alongside the ballistae and catapults.

When Van led the march, he would have his men and women take turns riding, stop for a brief rest after an hour of marching, march for another three hours, then take a longer break. Basically, they had lots of downtime. But Panamera’s men walked for an hour, rested for five minutes, and repeated that process for the entire day. On top of that, meals were only provided in the

morning and evening. This was standard practice for Scuderia, but for Van's Chivalric Order, it was brutal.

In truth, the squads in Seatoh Village that fought with swords and spears did undergo rigorous training. Quite a few members of those squads had experience as knights, mercs, or adventurers, and everyone else was blessed with strength and stamina. But the machine bow squad was different. They had been brought together because they lacked that strength and stamina in the first place. Even Dee's usual training leaned more toward target practice, honing their ability to defend Seatoh Village from a distance.

"C-Captain, we need to take a longer break..." one member of the bow squad pleaded.

"Th-there are no longer breaks..." huffed another. "Look, even my legs are getting stiff."

"My legs are going to snap in half..."

This complaining continued throughout their five-day march.

That night, the forward recon squad returned to camp from scoping out the situation in Scudet. The captains gathered for a meeting.

Panamera's Chivalric Order was small and highly skilled. Despite its size, it had more than ten captains, each an experienced warrior in their own right. Some already had their killing intent on full display, even though the fighting had yet to start.

Today, Paula was included among those captains.

"As the one captaining our vital reinforcements, you are key to this battle," Panamera said to her. "Come in."

"Oh, r-right! Excuse me!" Trepidatious, Paula took her seat and raised her head, surrounded by large men clad in full armor.

A simple table stood in the center of the room, and everyone sat straight-backed around it. All eyes were on Panamera, who looked sharply back at her captains.

"First, let us share information. It seems our enemies are gathering supplies

while they reinforce Scudet's walls and gates. During the last, disastrous battle, the border knights and Marquis Fertio's Chivalric Order were targeted by wyvern attacks and deadly flames from Yelenetta's new weapon. During that battle, however, Baron Van and his troops engaged the enemy and defeated a number of wyverns." Panamera paused and looked around the table. "In other words, until they receive wyvern reinforcements from their home country, it is unlikely they will set foot outside of Scudet."

The captains nodded. Paula copied them a beat later.

Panamera continued, "Scudet's location leaves us no means by which to cut off their supply line from Yelenetta. This means that our best, most effective option is to crush them before they can finish resupplying."

One of the knights spoke up. "If I may?"

"Be my guest."

The knight, having received permission to speak, glanced at her. "You mentioned that Baron Van was able to eliminate a not insignificant number of wyverns. Captain Paula's machine bow squad possesses the same equipment and weaponry, correct? In that case, if Yelenetta brought in more wyverns, could we not dispatch them?"

Panamera raised a single eyebrow. She murmured thoughtfully, "You mean that as long as we can defeat the wyverns, we have the advantage, because it's easier for us to concentrate our forces..." She trailed off, then shrugged and spoke at normal volume. "I believe that the losses Marquis Fertio sustained render our old way of fighting insufficient."

She drew her sword.

"Frankly, our Chivalric Order is weaker than Marquis Fertio's. Not in terms of skill or quality, but in numbers. The gap between us is large, both for mages and for soldiers."

She stabbed her sword into the ground, focusing everyone's attention on it.

"The fortress city was encased in iron walls, protected by the border knights, and supported by Marquis Fertio's personal Chivalric Order. Yet Yelenetta took it easily."

Every face in the room turned grim. Seeing this, Panamera drew her sword from the ground.

“The era in which elemental mages could destroy the enemy with brute force ended ten years ago,” she said. “And now the era of introducing mages to the battlefield multi-directionally and intermittently is coming to an end, too.”

One of the knights objected. “Are you implying that Yelenetta holds all the cards...?”

Panamera grinned, sheathing her sword. “Either they hold them, or Baron Van does with his long-range ballistae and catapults,” she said cheerfully. “Personally, my bet is on Baron Van.”

Everyone’s eyes turned again to Paula. For a moment she was flustered, but she fortified her resolve and sat up straight. “I too believe Lord Van’s weapons to be the strongest. I plan on proving that in the coming battle,” she stated faithfully.

The captain’s eyes widened slightly.

Panamera looked at her, fascinated. “I thought you a bit unreliable at first,” she said under her breath, “but now I see that your heart is strong.”

Five days later, Panamera and her forces arrived at Scudet. Shortly thereafter, the personal forces of the king, Marquis Fertio, Count Ventury, and Count Ferdinatto all took up their own roles in the operation.

“Do not break formation. We will lead the wyverns. Proceed with care.”

These were the orders given to each of the Chivalric Orders.

Except Panamera’s. She said, “Do not attack. We have one role in this operation: protect the bow squad.”

“Yes, ma’am!” her knights cried. They drew their swords and held them before their faces.

Panamera, every inch the beautiful noblewoman, turned then to Paula and her squad. In a mere ten days, their skills had changed significantly. Their formation was rock solid.

Panamera, gazing at them, began to speak slowly.

“Doubtless you are aware of this, but you are key to this battle. We will risk our lives to guide the wyverns and protect you. In return, I ask you to do everything in your power to eliminate the beasts.”

Paula and her troops nodded deeply, their expressions grim and determined. “Leave them to us,” Paula replied, speaking for her entire squad.

Panamera looked pleased with this response. She cast her gaze to the troops standing behind their captain. “Baron Van lent me half of his bow troops, protectors of his territory. That means that you are highly skilled soldiers in whom Baron Van has utmost faith. He trusts that you will return alive. Be sure to reward that trust by winning and returning home safely.”

The look in the squad’s eyes changed as they nodded.

Paula

WE KEPT FORMATION AS WHISTLES AND GONGS rang from inside the walls of Scudet. Nothing could be seen from the outside, but the air seemed to become charged around me.

“Captain, preparations are complete!” one of my troops called.

“Okay, got it,” I called back. “Be ready to move at any time.”

Everybody returned to their posts: two people at each ballista and five at each catapult, ready to fight the moment they heard the signal.

Over the last ten days we had undergone the same kind of harsh training and discipline given to normal Chivalric Orders. I felt like I finally understood what it meant to be a knight, as well as the pride that came with holding such a position. Before, I’d cared only about completing the mission Lord Van gave me. Now, I realized that everything we did would bring glory to Lord Van’s name.

“We can’t lose, guys,” I told my troops. “We definitely can’t let ourselves die, either, but let’s go into this intending to win at all costs.”

“Yes, ma’am!” they shouted back. I turned my back to them and looked

toward the battlefield.

Up ahead at the front lines, from the center of the cavalry, Count Ventury cried, "Onward!" He began to lead the charge toward Scudet's front gates.

As if they had been waiting for this moment, Yelenetta soldiers began pouring onto the top of the wall. Some of them wielded staffs, and tension gripped Viscount Panamera's Chivalric Order. Even with our new battle tactics, elemental mages remained a threat. Utilized correctly, a few of them could rival thousands of soldiers.

Reversing his horse's direction, Count Ventury raised his staff and cried to the heavens. "I shall riddle them with holes! Aqua Bullet!"

An impossible number of water drops gathered at the tip of his staff, turning first into a current and then a vortex. Count Ventury released the water vortex from his staff; it started small but grew larger and larger, eventually ripping through the ground itself to collide with Scudet's gates with a loud boom.

The wall shook from the collision. Up top, soldiers panicked and crouched in place, trying to avoid being shaken off the wall.

"Follow me! This is our stage!"

"Yessir!"

The cavalrymen raised their staffs in unison, and within seconds their fire, water, wind, and earth magic was flying at the gates. This use of magic was unorthodox, but it worked: Scudet's mighty gates crumbled to the ground. Even part of the nearby wall collapsed from the impact.

"Oooh!" exclaimed a trooper on the ballista team. I looked over at the group. "Just what you'd expect from Count Ventury's infamous mage squad! I had no idea he had such first-rate mages...!"

"The ballistae are capable of attacks at this distance," I reminded my troops, "but do not get ahead of yourselves. Our objective is the wyverns and the wyverns alone."

They nodded silently.

Viscount Panamera hadn't told me how the other Chivalric Orders would be

operating, but Marquis Fertio and Count Ferdinatto were already on the move. The way their Orders spread out to the left and right resembled a pair of wings; despite the situation in which we found ourselves, the sight was unexpectedly beautiful. Not a single movement among them was wasted, and their form shifted as smoothly as if they were a single organism.

Yelenetta's forces also began to move. The soldiers atop the wall peeked over its edges, gripping their bows tightly. But then, unexpectedly, a massive shadow appeared beyond the crumbled wall.

Unease rippled across the battlefield. Even at this distance, fear gripped my heart; I could imagine how the frontline soldiers felt.

Reddish-brown, stone-like scales. Four legs as large as tree trunks. Its giant body could barely squeeze through the gates, which were wide enough to easily accommodate a large carriage. Its sharp eyes and fangs embodied malice and savagery.

A dragon. It was a dragon on the battlefield.

"I-impossible!"

"Fall back! Attack with only bows and magic!"

"If you get close, you'll be crushed!"

Desperate orders flew as the formation, which had sought to surround the fortress city, fell into disarray. It looked as if a wave had run through the formation as soldiers tried to put distance between themselves and the massive beast.

Of course there was panic. Nobody had anticipated doing battle with a dragon. Their equipment was inadequate to the task, never mind their mental readiness. The threat posed by a large dragon was entirely different to that of several smaller wyverns.

Count Ventury's orders echoed throughout the battlefield. "It has no wings! It must be an earth dragon! Do not stand in front of it or you'll be blasted by its breath!" Thanks to those orders, the formation didn't collapse completely—but it hung on only by a thread.

“This is bad,” said Viscount Panamera, audibly frustrated. “If the left and right flanks are attacked now, they’ll be annihilated. Everyone is too focused on the dragon.”

No sooner had she spoken than angry voices echoed from the front lines of the left and right flanks. Those voices came from Marquis Fertio’s and Count Ferdinatto’s Chivalric Orders.

“The dragon is not our only enemy! Only the mages will stall the beast. Everyone else keep your eyes on the archers on the wall and the enemy circling us!”

“We will strengthen our defenses and keep on the move! Guide the beast away from our main forces!”

Each flank began to move independently, responding to the rapidly changing battlefield. Following suit, Count Ventury mobilized his own men. “If the wyverns appear, we will guide them! If Yelenetta’s army appears, we will engage them directly in combat! We will distance ourselves so that we’re available to move at a moment’s notice!”

Everyone present was a veteran fighter. Even in unexpected circumstances, following orders was second nature. Before long the dragon was encircled and the archers on the wall kept in check.

“...Hmm, well done indeed,” Panamera said in a low voice, as if to herself. “If this holds up, we will avoid having to withdraw. So...” She turned and approached me. “I have heard that earth dragons are almost as tough as the Zaratan that lives in the sea. No blade can pierce their hard scales, and over a hundred first-rate mages are needed to take them down... At least, that’s what they say. Can these ballistae pierce its scales?”

“I have never tried it myself, but I believe in Lord Van,” I said.

Panamera nodded and looked at the ballistae. “I am usually not the optimistic type, but...” She turned her gaze toward me. “I do as well.”

The smirk she offered me was joyous.

Yelenetta

RELEASING OUR DRAGON ONTO THE BATTLEFIELD forced the enemy to quickly change its strategies. Still, they only really seemed to be putting distance between themselves and the dragon. Futile as it seemed, they were deliberately using their powerful mages as decoys while their troops surrounded the creature.

I smirked as I watched the chaos unfold below me. “I suppose there are few ways to deal with a dragon, after all.”

We had used an exorbitant number of black balls to slow down the dragon’s movement, then chained its legs. Only then could the marionette mages effectively control it. It was an expensive ordeal, both monetarily and in terms of human lives, in addition to the time it took to enact. If we couldn’t put it to use, all that effort would have been for nothing.

But, as I gazed down on the battlefield, I saw the dragon proving its worth.

The mounted mages were undoubtedly Count Ventury’s. They had destroyed the gates with strong magic in no time. Now they were showering the dragon with blasts of that same magic, but the beast was barely taking any damage at all. If anything, it was Ventury’s forces who were in trouble, cornered and needing aid from the other mages.

“I would have liked to have dispatched the wyverns and finished this in one go, but I cannot afford to let my guard down...” I said to myself.

If this was the same enemy we always faced, our new weapon would bring us a swift and glorious victory. But the last battle had come as something of a surprise. We did take Scudet as planned, in the end, but we suffered far more casualties than we’d anticipated. As a result, I’d dispatched a messenger to our support forces, asking that they expedite our resupply.

Leaving aside Yelenetta’s invasion of the capital city, thanks to my brother and our main military force—should the other two armies occupy their targets without taking significant damage, I would face harsh judgment for what happened in Scudet.

Enraged, I cried, “This is all because of that damned mysterious group of soldiers!” I turned on my heel.

Behind me, my vice commander, Freightliner, glared obstinately at me.

My little brother was a weak man. He had been to battle numerous times, but still served as an aide to myself and my other younger brother. He had no talent with a blade and no aptitude for magic, so perhaps this was unavoidable.

“Freightliner,” I said, “we are going to split our troops. You take the infantrymen and attack from the right flank. Use the black balls to keep them in check and force them toward the dragon. I will take the cavalrymen and do the same from the left flank.”

Freightliner nodded a few times, giving me an inscrutable smile. “Well done, Brother. Our enemies will have to deal with the dragon in the center of the battlefield as well as black ball explosions from both sides. I imagine you will dispatch the wyverns to finish the job?”

His tone and expression were meant to flatter me. Rage boiled up within me at the lack of pride and drive that his adulation revealed. I clicked my tongue. “Fool. Have you already forgotten the last battle? Whether I dispatched the wyverns or had them stand by on the wall, they were killed. Something or someone on the ground beheaded them, and the ones in the sky were shot down with some kind of spear. All dead.”

“Y-you won’t use them? Then what was the point of replacing them?”

“Dragons and wyverns are precious resources. To lose any more would be a massive blunder on our part. They would be best utilized in taking the capital city. We should conserve our forces until the final invasion.”

Freightliner blinked at me as I explained my plan to him. Finally it clicked, and he applauded. “I see, I see! Well done, Brother Buses. So all we need to concern ourselves with now is pushing back the enemy?”

“More foolishness! Our enemy has taken this formation because they fear the dragon. If we surround them and chip away at their forces, it will be an easy victory. I intend to have Marquis Fertio’s head no matter what. And in the ensuing pursuit, we will crush most of their forces.”

“I-I see.” Freightliner showed no indication that he understood my strategy, so his response came off as half-hearted.

“Enough of this! You need only do as I say. Now hurry up and take the men!” I shouted, making Freightliner panic and flee.

Fleeing his angry older brother, Freightliner led the cavalrymen into battle as Buses observed coldly from a distance. Then Buses turned to his own troops.

“It is time,” he told them. “If things begin to seem dangerous, use the black balls at your own discretion. We ride!”

Roused by Buses’s battle cry, the troops cried out in return and began their march.

Freightliner, watching his exuberant allies gallop toward the battlefield, sighed, irritated. “Everyone’s getting way too excited over their new toys,” he whispered to himself. “A bunch of idiots, the lot of them.” Then he shrugged and mounted his horse.

As Freightliner left Scudet, he turned his eyes to the battlefield, where Scuderia’s army was scrambling to keep the dragon at bay with blasts of magic. He whispered to himself again. “It is true that, should things proceed as planned, this will be an excellent opportunity for us... But that one set of troops at the rear still hasn’t moved an inch. The enemy’s new weapons have a narrow focus, which increases their destructive power. It might be a good idea to split their forces up.”

He glanced at the nearby officers, then continued, “Using the black balls on a tight formation would be pointless. We should divide into groups of ten and pursue. We needn’t press them too hard, however. Our forces on the other side will probably lead an all-out chase against the enemy, keeping them from focusing their efforts on us. Let’s just see how this plays out.”

He said this last bit aloud, engendering disapproving glances between the officers. One of the middle-aged knights took it upon himself to speak for the rest of the group. “This is our chance to inflict serious damage on the enemy.”

Freightliner smirked. He summarized his thinking simply and concisely. “I

understand why you feel that way. But remember, the enemy revealed new weapons in our last battle. They've also unleashed a large number of mages on the battlefield, and historically, those mages have been central to their tactics. With those facts in mind, do you really think this will be an easy fight for us?"

The middle-aged knight groaned. "You are correct, but this is different. In the face of our mighty dragon, their new weapons mean little."

"Wishful thinking. Imagine if their new weapons had no effect on the dragon. Were it me, I would retreat to terrain where I could effectively draw in the beast and suppress it. After all, sending all my mages up against a dragon would end in my defeat—the enemy would pursue us and we would be forced to retreat. Do you really think Scuderia will fight so stupidly?"

"Hmm... You do make a lot of sense." The knight thought for a few seconds, then came to a decision. He turned to his men and shouted, "These are direct orders from Lord Freightliner! Split into groups of ten and surround the enemy! Do not exert too much pressure. Pursue slowly and carefully!"

"Yessir!"

His soldiers, highly trained, promptly began to carry out their new orders. Freightliner exhaled in relief and rode away from the battlefield. "All that's left is knowing when to push and when to fall back." He narrowed his eyes. "How will this play out...?"

Just like that, the state of the battlefield changed. Freightliner might just as well have signaled for it himself. Yelenetta's forces surrounded Scuderia's troops and boxed them in, forcing them toward the dragon. As predicted, they swiftly changed tack, putting distance between themselves and Scudet.

The dragon turned its head away from Scudet and toward Scuderia's main forces. A loud, vicious boom erupted on the battlefield.

It had come from the dragon.

With blood gushing from both of its eyes, the creature raised its head and cried in pain. This only invited further attack. By the time it fell to its side, flailing wildly, it was bleeding from its neck, chest, and stomach.

Flames leaked from its mouth, directed at Scudet. "Get down!" someone

shouted. Freightliner didn't need to be told twice: he leapt from his horse and hit the ground, and not a second too soon. Flames erupted from the beast's mouth like magma, blasting away no less than a fifth of Scudet's wall.

Freightliner clicked his tongue, watching the unfortunate troops atop the wall melt where they stood.

"We've lost this battle! Retreat!" someone shouted.

It had taken mere seconds for Freightliner to reach this conclusion. He tried to calm his horse enough to ride it to safety.

Chapter 2: A One-Sided War

Panamera

PANAMERA COVERED BOTH EARS TO MUFFLE THE dragon's roar of pain, then took stock of the situation.

"We were only able to do minimal damage to its back, but its eyes, mouth, and stomach have also sustained heavy damage," she explained calmly. "It is unfortunate that we could not put it down in a single blow. Luckily, its breath was directed at the enemy; things would have been disastrous otherwise. A terrifying thought."

Paula nodded, her face ashen. She turned around. "It's still moving. Are we okay?"

"As long as we remain careful of its breath, there should be no more casualties, but it is paramount that we take the beast out permanently. Right now, pursuing the enemy is our priority. If we let them flee now, we lose."

Paula made to reply, but her words died on her lips as five black shadows flew out of Scudet. They spread their wings and made directly for Paula and Panamera's location.

"Wyverns?!" Paula cried. "Five at once?!"

"They are desperate. Paula, can you shoot them down?"

"We can!" she assured Panamera. "Everyone, get ready! Remember to lead your shots! Every ballista operator who's capable should target them!"

Despite the panic, Paula and her troops swiftly adjusted the angles of the catapults and ballistae, preparing to fire. The wyverns approached like a typhoon, but the squad stayed its course.

"Everyone ready?! Fire!"

At Paula's command, the catapults and ballistae opened fire. A cacophonous

storm of black boxes and ballista bolts sliced the air. Moments later, the boxes burst, unleashing their payload: countless silver pieces. Metal shuriken.

In a blink, they spread through the sky, raining hell upon the wyverns. They cut holes in wings, torsos, and legs. Raw instinct allowed the wyverns to evade any blows to the head, but they were riddled with holes. Not one went unscathed.

The wyverns dropped from the sky at a lethal velocity. Paula, frowning, shouted, "Everyone, take cover behind your shields!"

Panamera grinned, watching the soldiers conceal themselves. She stepped forward. "Incredible results. Well done, Captain Paula. Leave the rest to me," she said, activating the spell she had just finished. "All of you stand back! Let our enemies be burned to a crisp, Vermillion!"

As she uttered these final words, three layers of magic circles appeared before her, each summoning a ball of flame. They melded with one another, creating a massive, fiery sphere. Like an enormous flamethrower, this inferno sphere spread wide and rose up to meet the falling wyverns.



In an instant, the sky was orange, and the wyverns' hulking bodies were engulfed in flames. The flames ignited the air itself, changing the trajectory of the wyverns' fall. Their flaming bodies slammed into the ground, one after the other, shaking the earth itself.

"Th-that was close..."

"We're okay, but..."

The wyverns had just missed Paula and her troops, averting disaster. Paula stared at the burning corpses before her, then turned to find Viscount Panamera grinning.

Panamera's troops were the first to react with heroic roars: "What a joyous occasion! We've destroyed the enemy's dragon and their wyverns! Their primary weapons are no more! Victory is ours!" Paula and her squad soon followed suit, and the cheers grew louder and louder until they engulfed the battlefield.

These victorious cries decimated the morale of the enemies atop the wall. Bit by bit, their front line was pushed back, until Yelenetta's forces abandoned the fortress city.

With victory in their hands, Scuderia's forces were ready to pursue the enemy—but then they received orders to cease.

"B-but why...?" Paula asked, bewildered.

Panamera snorted. "Our leaders likely decided that the enemy's exploding weapon was more dangerous than the dragon or wyverns. I would have issued the same order. Remember, there are mountain roads behind Scudet. Imagine trying to pursue an enemy equipped with such weapons through mountainous terrain. To pursue would be to send our troops to needless deaths."

Paula still looked a bit confused, but she said, "I-I see..."

With a loud laugh, Panamera patted her shoulder. "Fear not. The battle is won, and we have you and your troops to thank for that victory more than anyone else. You may return to your lord with your heads held high."

Paula blinked, but she answered Panamera's smirk with a smile of her own.

Van

A GROUP OF SOLDIERS HAD BEEN WATCHING FROM a distance to see how things unfolded on the battlefield. They grinned at one another when the troops' victorious cheers reached even their ears.

"Whelp, I guess we ended up watching the whole battle," Van said with a sigh. He raised both arms and stretched them.

"It looks like they managed to win... I hope nobody is hurt." Till sounded worried, but Khamsin puffed out his chest.

"No way could they have lost with Lord Van's weapons," he scoffed. "I guarantee that Scudet's victory was complete and nobody was harmed."

Van nodded, though his smile was somewhat pained; Khamsin had been in a protracted state of excitement since the battle began. "Yeah. In any event, I think Paula and the others are probably okay. Knowing Viscount Panamera, she'd have made it a point to keep them safe."

"Viscount Panamera would definitely protect them," Khamsin agreed promptly.

Arte giggled, looking around at them all. "Hee hee! In that case, I will call back the puppets."

"Good idea. Best to pull them out quickly before they're spotted."

"Right. Then... Huh?" Arte frowned, doubt lacing her voice. "I've spotted one of Yelenetta's soldiers retreating. It appears they were attacked..."

A brief silence fell as Van considered this. After a moment's thought, he raised his head. "Let's capture him. We might be able to figure out how our enemy got their hands on those black balls."

"Understood. I shall give it a try."

Despite our team's victory, I decided to leave the battlefield behind as quickly

as I had arrived. The only problem was that I now had a prisoner to deal with.

“It’s over... My life is over... They are going to interrogate me and kill me...” came the man’s anguished whispers. “This is awful... I can’t go on... I don’t want to be tortured!”

I sighed. “I never thought we’d get our hands on a prince. And our second one to boot! I’m not collecting princes!”

“Collecting princes...” Till echoed.

“What’s so funny about that?!”

For some reason, Till was desperately trying to stop herself from laughing. I turned around to look at the young man behind me. He was slender, with the good looks of a pop idol, bright green hair, and tears running down his face. There was currently a sword held to his neck, and boy oh boy, did he look pale. He was covered in cold sweat, which, coupled with the tears in his eyes, made him look like a middle-school kid who had been bullied all his life.

As for me, well, I was the bully. “So, you’re Freightliner Yelenetta, correct? First of all, I have no intention of killing or torturing you. For now.”

“For now?! I knew it! Once you meet up with the main forces, you’ll have my head!”

“No, no, no, no... Man, you’re so negative! We’re not even meeting up with the main forces. I’m going home.”

“H-home...? S-so you can take your time torturing me?!”

“I’m seriously not going to do that,” I replied, exasperated.

Freightliner trembled. He clearly didn’t believe a word I said.

There was a lot I wanted to ask him, and as luck would have it, he had spilled the beans with very little fuss. I felt kind of awkward about the whole thing, but I was pleased I didn’t have to use a truth serum on the guy. “To be honest,” I said, “you’ve given us a lot of valuable information. Once we confirm you haven’t been lying, I wouldn’t mind just letting you go.”

“R-really? You won’t kill me? You’re not going to torture me?”

“Nope, not at all,” I replied breezily.

Freightliner must have been truly terrified to be acting so desperate with a child my age. I understood why, but given his status and all, it would have been nice to see at least a little bit of backbone.

Who am I kidding? If this were me, I might’ve sobbed in fear.

“Yelenetta’s really going all out, huh?” I murmured, mostly to myself.

“Alliance or not, sending the majority of their troops our way is a wild choice. You guys might be in an even rougher position than we are...”

The light vanished from Freightliner’s eyes. “All I can think is that they’ve gone mad. There is no such thing as a perfect alliance. Everyone prioritizes their own country’s gains. Even the black balls are just being imported in. It would be one thing if we had a monopoly on them, but... If it were me, I’d...”

Freightliner trailed off and began whispering to himself. He kind of looked like he had lost his mind, but his actual words were imparting crucial information.

“Hold on a second,” I said. “You guys have an alliance with Hethel, right? The country ruling the eastern end of the continent? Were those black balls coming from the center of the continent, then?”

Freightliner sighed, his expression darkening. “Our new siege weapons, magic, castle fortifications... They’re all from the center of the continent. I wouldn’t be surprised if the black balls were as well. Neither Hethel nor Yelenetta has the technological means to develop that kind of weapon.” He looked away bitterly.

I tilted my head. It was true that new technology and knowledge typically came from the continent’s center. From what I could see, even education had made more strides over there. But this was different from any other new weapons or tactics that had been introduced before. Using gunpowder to develop arms was, to put it plainly, bad news. If those black balls were circulating around the continent, it was possible that some other nation had already developed usable firearms.

I had reassured myself that progress on that end was slow thanks to the presence of magic. But if a fighting force got its hands on firearms that were accurate even at mid-range, things would get nasty, fast.

“Well, if you happen to be able to introduce me to any importers, merchants, or nations that can intermediate on that front, it would be greatly appreciated. Oh, and any information you can provide about the manufacturing process and the materials required to make black balls. And since we’ve heard about Ylenetta’s invasion plans, it would be useful to get details on each army’s fighting power and anything you know about the new weapons. Also...”

I ticked off the questions on my fingers as they came to mind. Freightliner began to vibrate, and then to sob. “I-I-I don’t have enough fingernails for that! Gah! I’m going to be tortured! Killed!” he screamed.

I turned to look at him with half-lidded eyes. “I told you, we’re not torturing you,” I reminded him irritably. Then I smiled. “But if you do keep screaming like that, I’m going to smear horseradish all over your mouth and nose. Just a little childish prank.”

Freightliner had no way of knowing what the heck wasabi was, but the threat alone made him go even paler. He snapped his mouth shut.

We returned to Seatoh Village to find signs of a struggle, though nothing too major. Esparda stood in front of the maids and soldiers and greeted us. “Welcome home.”

They all bowed their heads to welcome us back. Dee beamed and nodded vigorously at them. “We’re home! We took Scudet back easily, so we decided to come back early!”

Esparda’s eyes widened, but just barely. “Already? Well, I should expect nothing less from you, Lord Van. When I heard that the iron fortress had been taken from us, I foolishly assumed a castle siege would last months.”

Then he turned his gaze on the war wagons behind us and seemed to quickly put things together. He smiled but soon noticed that there were fewer of us present than expected. “What happened to Captain Paula and her troops?”

“Oh, they’ve been temporarily integrated into Viscount Panamera’s forces. They’ll probably be pretty late returning.”

“Hmm, what excellent experience that will give them. Most would find our

Chivalric Order's lax attitude unbelievable. This is a good opportunity for them to learn how things are done in other Chivalric Orders."

Dee shouted a laugh, and his troops grinned smugly. Sure, maybe the discipline around here was lax, but Dee's training regimen was monstrous. If even the mood got stricter around here, people might start to have nervous breakdowns.

With that out of the way, I made my way back to the manor.

"Huh? You caught brother Unimog? Then wait, is this village on the edge of Marquis Fertio's territory...?"

When we arrived at the manor, I let Freightliner out of the carriage and briefly summarized the situation, hoping to get more info out of him. But he looked around the village, doubt settling over his face.

"Correct. This is Seatoh Village, my territory."

"...Huh. This was supposed to be an impoverished village that brother Unimog could take down easily." Freightliner's eyes bulged. "There's no way this is Seatoh Village! You must be lying! I only had a brief glimpse, but that wall is grander than even Scudet's, and all these buildings have an odd design about them. Plus you have all these incredible towers!" The soldiers to his left and right brandished their swords, but he paid them no mind.

"Awesome, right?" I said. "I made the towers on both sides super tall to make it easy for us to observe the area. I imagine our wall is tougher than the one in the capital, and we've even taken down a dragon on our own. I'm very proud of this village."

"Incredible! Wait, no, no! That's amazing, but this is definitely *not* a village anymore! It's so far removed from the information we have that it's making me dizzy!" Freightliner gripped his head in both hands.

Mm, perfect reaction. Little Van lives for this. I wonder if there's anything else I can surprise him with...

I mulled it over as we entered the manor. I held back to receive everyone's

greetings before making my way to one of the offices, where Freightliner was tied to a chair. Flanking him were Arb and Lowe, and Dee stood directly behind, stone-faced. Arte and I sat across from him on the sofa, flanked by Till and Khamsin.

Freightliner was surrounded, which probably explained why he was trembling like he'd seen a ghost.

"Now then, young Freightliner," I began, "I'm sure you understand, but it would be in your best interest to give us any information you have. If you don't, you'll regret the day you were born."

Freightliner agreed immediately. "I-I understand! I'll tell you everything! Just don't kill me!"

I shook my head. "I see... You're a stubborn one. I respect your courage as a member of the royal family, but given your situation, this is foolish. As a test, we will first pull off your fingernails, one by one. Next, your teeth. Then your eyes... What should I save for last?"

"W-w-w-wait! Hold on! I'll talk! I don't care about royalty or whatever! I swear complete loyalty to you, Lord Van!"

"Heh heh heh... How long can you hold out, I wonder?"

"Are you listening to me?! I'm not trying to hold out! I'm submitting with everything I have!"

Ha! This is fun. He's great. I was thoroughly enjoying this newbie's reactions, but then I saw Till and Arte grimacing at me. *Did I go too far?*

"Okay, okay, I get it. I guess we'll have to do the whole torture thing some other time."

"Some other time?!" Freightliner was vibrating like a magnitude seven earthquake.

"I'm just messing with you. Now then, with the understanding you'll be our ally going forward, please answer all of our questions."

"O-of course!"

This was the most positive response Freightliner had given me since we

began. He straightened his back.

In the ensuing hour, Freightliner spilled his guts. We were in the process of going over all of the details. "...So, to sum it all up, Yelenetta's plans were to assault three separate locations, and judging by what we have seen, the attacks on Seatoh Village and Scudet failed," Esparda said.

Dee smiled broadly. "Yelenetta came up with quite a plan, but their wyverns and black balls have been thwarted. This is all thanks to you, Lord Van." Khamsin nodded happily.

But Esparda and Arte were less thrilled. Arte wore an especially grave look, and she was trembling. Esparda watched her from the corner of his eye and spoke in a low voice. "In both cases, our forces had access to Lord Van's weapons, but the final target is Count Ferdinatto's territory. He possesses no such armaments, and his primary forces have been dispatched to Scudet. Those left behind must be engaged in a fierce struggle."

Everyone looked at Arte. Arte On Ferdinatto, the count's youngest daughter. Her family was inhospitable toward her, but she was undoubtedly still concerned for their well-being.

Arte turned to me then, a brave expression on her face. Her eyes were moist, but as she spoke, her words were elegant. "Lord Van, I believe that Count Ferdinatto's territory will be able to hold out for at least a few months, even if Yelenetta sends their second-biggest military force there. We should wait for Lady Panamera and Paula to return."

She spoke quickly and frantically, so I raised one hand and cut her off. "Let's reorganize our forces, pronto. We can't leave immediately because I need to build new mobile ballistae and catapults, but I'll be as quick as possible so that we can go save them."

Tears welled in Arte's eyes. As she struggled to fight them back, I looked at Esparda.

"Can you get the materials ready?" I asked him. "I also need manpower. Mind if I bring some folks from the Chivalric Order with me?"

Esparda was silent for a few seconds, his expression pensive. "Let us temporarily combine both orders and select twenty individuals from the group. We can also hire thirty adventurers. It will be a small team, but with your weapons, they can provide adequate ranged support. According to Sir Freightliner's information, the army heading for Count Ferdinatto's territory is not yet aware of our combat capabilities. We can procure sufficient materials, so we can depart in two days' time." Esparda got to his feet, prompting Dee and the others to do the same.

"This is Arte's home we're talking about, after all. We'll save them no matter what," I said, rising as well. But Arte stopped me.

"No, Lord Van. I cannot rely on you for matters concerning House Ferdinatto. If you allow me to take my puppets, I can go there myself with a handful of adventurers."

I needed to make another ten units on top of the mobile ballistae and catapults I'd brought home with me. I struggled to get enough bolts and shuriken bombs, but fortunately I'd already made a bunch of them, so things worked out. All that was left was to convince Arte.

"Look," I told her, "I know you're going there to provide backup, but you're walking straight into the front lines. I really think I should go with you... I'm already used to traveling by carriage, so it'll be fine. You don't owe me a thing."

It didn't matter how many times I tried to convince her to let me accompany her: Arte was having none of it. She politely turned down every offer I made. I'd never seen her act so stubborn about something before.

"This is a problem," I mused aloud. "I suppose I can force her to bring the mobile ballistae and catapults with her, but..." What was I to do?

But when nobody else was around, Arte came up beside me and grabbed the hem of my sleeve. When I turned to her, wondering what she was up to, I saw that her eyes were full of tears.

"Wh-what's wrong? Are you so worried about your family you want to leave early? We're planning to leave tomorrow, but..."

Arte shook her head, her shoulders trembling. *Aw, crap. I really don't understand how girls think, do I?* Young Van stood there useless, his pure heart wracked with guilt.

I watched Arte sob, kind of panicked, but eventually she calmed down. “My apologies, Lord Van,” she sniffed. “I know you are truly worried about me, and yet I...”

Only then did I begin to understand the complex, confusing feelings she was dealing with. When was I finally going to start thinking like a noble?

“Right,” I said under my breath, “if I save Count Ferdinatto, his house will...”

Arte turned her puffy eyes up at me, then buried her face in my chest. “I’m so sorry!” she wailed.

I was right on the money. The problem plaguing Arte was that she had to prioritize her house’s interests. Given that Arte had been sent here to become my fiancée, it would normally be a good thing for me to come her house’s aid—but I had already overperformed.

My territory was tiny. Worse yet, it bordered Yelenetta, the nation with whom we were currently at war. If I came to the count’s aid, my catapults and ballistae would be celebrated for turning the tide and winning the day; the king would even reward me for my heroism.

To reward me with cash would look like poor behavior on His Majesty’s part, because little Van possessed so little land. If he did that, he might lose the trust of some of the nobility. The most stable income for landed nobility came from taxing the citizens. Those with plenty of bountiful territory could get by on taxes alone.

Then what would happen if the king gave young Van more territory? It would have to be taken from someone else. Probably from Marquis Fertio and Count Ferdinatto.

With that in mind, should I go and protect Count Ferdinatto’s territory, what would the king do? Count Ferdinatto’s usefulness to the king had been on a steady decline, so His Highness would probably shave even more land off of his territory. But that would be unfair, given the count’s active participation in the

fight to take back Scudet...meaning the king would have to give me either cash or a chunk of territory taken from Yelenetta instead.

I wasn't sure how the other nobles would react, but with the powerful weapons in my possession, I was sure the king wanted to expand my territory. It was the most likely outcome. Arte had come to the same conclusion and decided that a member of House Ferdinatto should be the one to save the count's territory instead.

Still, even if Arte led the charge, the king would recognize my weapons. He'd probably give me credit anyway. I folded my arms and groaned. "In that case, I guess I have no choice. I'll send ten members of my Chivalric Order home with you as bodyguards, along with twenty adventurers." I sighed. "And you can take the puppets with you in my stead."

Arte wiped the tears from her eyes and bowed her head deeply.

"I shall be on my way, then."

I was still worried. "Please be careful. If things look bad, never forget that you can back off," I reminded her.

Ortho slapped his chest and looked up. "Leave it to us, Lord Van. We'll keep her safe."

The other adventurers nodded, smiling broadly. Kusala took a proud pose, a machine bow in each hand, and declared, "We got this covered! Hell, I'm good enough with a machine bow that I could join the squad if I wanted!"

It was the dream of every man to dual wield, but with Kusala's chubby build, the display looked a little silly. (Kusala, dexterous as he was, had mastered the machine bow and was now instructing the other adventurers on its use. The adventurers residing in Seatoh Village and the adventurers' town were all a cut above the rest!)

"Don't worry," Pluriel put in, sounding just as confident, "we will protect your future wife."

That half smile of hers annoyed me. It was the expression she always wore

when she teased me for being a little kid. Returning it with a pained smile of my own, I said, “Please do. If you get back here in one piece, I promise to give you all a bonus. I’m counting on you guys.”



The adventurers pumped their fists and cheered. Shortly thereafter, Arte said her goodbyes to Till and Khamsin, with whom she had grown rather close, and left for Count Ferdinatto's territory.

My original plan was to take a small group with me and tail her, but there was no way I'd be able to keep a lid on that. I'd be found out eventually. As much as it sucked, I had to believe in Arte and the others and see them off properly.

I stood aimlessly at the gate and watched them go until I couldn't see them anymore. That was when Esparda cleared his throat and approached me. "Now then, Lord Van, you have amassed a great deal of work. I need you to attend to it as soon as possible."

"Wait! At least let me stew in these feelings for a little bit..."

"I gave you plenty of time to switch gears, and now that time is up. As the lord, you must think about your territory now."

"Aw, c'mon! I got home from the front lines and then worked a whole bunch. I haven't gotten to rest in ages. I'm literally going to die."

"If you have enough energy to complain, you will be perfectly fine. Now come. First, I must deliver a report about what happened in the village while you were gone. Additionally, Ladavesta and Sir Bell would both like to speak with you."

"Can you put together a priority list? I don't mind if you handle it, let's just do this one thing at a time. Oh, and tonight we're holding a festival and I refuse to hear otherwise. If we don't have a barbeque, I'm going to go on strike."

"...Fine. I had planned for you to study this evening, but..."

"Are you a monster?! I've been suspicious for a while, but now I'm almost certain!"

It'd been a while since Esparda and I had had this kind of back-and-forth, and it cracked Till and Khamsin up. They weren't even trying to come to my aid anymore.

You guys are unbelievable. If I wasn't the lord, you'd be in big trouble, I thought.

I checked on the mountain of work waiting for me at the manor. A good number of monsters had been slain and sold for cash. The problem was that the Bell & Rango Company was bursting at the seams.

“We’re running low on arrows. Please make more.”

“Some residents’ drains are clogged. Running the water doesn’t fix anything and it smells. Please fix it as soon as possible.”

“Andre had his third child. We would love to have you name him.”

“We don’t have enough carriages. According to the company, the ones available on the market aren’t nearly as good as Seatoh Village’s carriages. They would like Lord Van to make some if possible.”

“We have new residents. About fifty in total, but ten of them wish to join the Chivalric Order. Please interview them.”

All kinds of requests had piled up in my office.

“Can you ask if any of the new residents can work at the Bell & Rango Company? I’ll interview them eventually, along with the folks who want to join the Chivalric Order. I’ll make some more carriages when I get around to crafting consumables. Do we have enough horses? It sucks having stinky toilets, huh? Let’s prioritize fixing that. Andre had another child, eh? What about Van Damme for a name? Sounds strong, right?”

With my plan of action in place, I zipped over to the scene of the toilet disaster. Something was odd.

“Ah, Lord Van! Thank goodness you’re okay!”

“Long time no see, Ami. I’m still in one piece, but thanks for your concern! I heard your toilet’s clogged. Did you flush anything weird?”

“No, just the bark I use to wipe...”

“That’d do it. Master detective Van’s already solved this little mystery. Next time, could you buy toilet paper from the Bell & Rango Company? It’s a daily necessity, so they sell it super cheap.”

“Oh, thank you so much! I’ll make sure to use that stuff going forward!”

“...All right, clogging solved. I widened the sewage piping, so things should be fine now. Okay, I gotta get going.”

“Th-thank you very much! You’re the best, Lord Van! You’re just like they said! Fast, considerate, and cheap!”

“Why does that sound like a business catchphrase?!”

While I was running about performing maintenance on toilets and sewage pipes, I began to seriously question my role as the lord of Seatoh Village. *Is fixing this kind of stuff really my job...? But hey, if everyone’s happy, who cares?*

“Here you go. A set of one thousand arrows. We’re running low on materials, so please issue a request to the guild to replenish our stock. Oh, and I made a war wagon, if that’s all right? If you take the mobile ballista down, you’ll have plenty of room to load stuff onto it.”

“Thank you so much! Actually, one of the traveling merchants also said he would love to have one of these carriages.”

“That’ll be one platinum for a single carriage. Ask him if he’s good with that the next time he drops in.”

“W-will do!”

Making things is part of a lord’s responsibilities... Honestly, I shouldn’t think too hard about this. Van, you are a crafting machine.

I went about finishing jobs, eventually finding myself in talks with Bell over at the manor.

“I got in touch with a merchant friend of mine who deals in monster part transportation, and I’ve put out a formal request, but we’re reaching our limit.”

“Hoh.”

I nodded seriously at Bell, who seemed terribly exhausted. He let out a deep sigh and dropped his shoulders. “We’re very close to the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range here,” he said, “so there’s not much we can do about all these monsters. The problem is that normally we’d only be able to chase off the larger beasts, but instead we end up killing them and collecting their parts. And those parts are in pristine condition!”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

Bell glared at me. “It’s profitable, which is good. We’ve been giving out special bonuses when we sell above a certain amount, to prevent any kind of disparity before we hire new workers. And just like you said, we’ve been able to sell daily necessities and food at a low cost to the villagers. The problem is that we stick out like a sore thumb.”

I cocked my head at him. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve been splitting up to sell parts in other large cities outside of the capital, but the fact that we’re constantly going around hocking such valuable materials has really made us stand out. It looks irregular. The Business Guild is going to audit us soon.”

“Didn’t that happen before?”

“That was only the Mary Chamber of Commerce, the kingdom itself, and the Adventurers’ Guild. All the businesses around the nation are part of the guild, but they’ve never been investigated before. It’s unheard of for a tiny little business out in the sticks to come under investigation!”

It kind of felt like he was throwing shade my way, but now wasn’t the time to worry about that. Bell sure wasn’t making it easy for me to crack jokes. “Wait, isn’t the Business Guild the biggest in the world? Their headquarters is in the next continent over, right?”

“Exactly! They haven’t made any big moves on this continent yet, but over there, they’re the top dogs.”

“Why would they be coming here...?” I sighed, which made Bell glare at me again.

“I’ve wondered if they might be colluding with the Mary Chamber of Commerce and the Scuderian government under the table. To keep membership numbers high, the guild doesn’t take any money from tiny businesses outside of a small admission fee. With bigger businesses, though, they take a portion of all sales.”

“I see. It makes sense that they would come to investigate, then. Will someone from the Mary Chamber of Commerce come as well?”

Bell nodded. “Of course. They’re the ones under the most scrutiny, to be honest. A small business in a small territory is producing a huge sum of wealth, and the Guild fears that the Mary Chamber of Commerce is taking it all.”

“If they were right, that would be a problem, but nothing shady is actually going on here. Shouldn’t we be fine?”

Bell looked annoyed by the whole thing. “Sadly, it’s not that simple. The Business Guild investigates everything, down to the tiniest of details. They’ll even want to investigate whether the local lord is in cahoots with us. In other words...”

“They’re investigating me, too?”

Bell nodded decisively.

Arte

AS WE PROCEEDED DOWN THE ROAD, A FAMILIAR sight unfolded before me. Fields of wheat, bipedal demi-dragons pulling carriages... In Count Ferdinatto’s territory, villages and towns were relatively distant from one another, so instead of using horses, we used dragons. They were slow-footed but tough beasts.

Something was off, however. Usually, the road would be packed with traveling merchants and adventurers. I would have expected it to be busier than it was.

“I knew it,” Ortho said aloud. “Just as Freightliner said. They invaded in the count’s absence.”

Pluriel threw him an irritated frown. “Don’t say that in front of Arte!”

Kusala folded his arms and nodded. “She’s right, Ortho, pal. Guys who can’t show no thoughtfulness never get the girl.”

“Ugh... You’ve gotten real big for your britches now that you got yourself a gorgeous wife...”

I couldn’t help but smile, listening to their conversation.

I was concerned about the invasion, but there was no point in panicking. Lord Van wouldn't have if he were here. He would make some kind of joke to calm everyone's nerves.

At first, I'd thought he had an unshakable heart of steel. I was wrong, though. The true reason Lord Van never panicked, feared, or cried was that he had the heart of a true noble, and the pride that came with it. By staying strong in the face of conflict, Lord Van gave his followers the ability to manifest their own true powers.

"I appreciate your concern, everyone," I said at last, smiling at them. "First, let us head to the city and learn what has transpired. The lower city is surrounded by a wall, so we will make it in time. We should not panic."

Ortho and the others stared at me for a moment, looking shocked, but the shock soon gave way to smiles and nods. It seemed that I might have impressed them, at least.

Van

I DIDN'T LIKE THE IDEA OF BEING SUSPECTED OF SINS I didn't commit, so I organized all of our monster parts and materials so that they would be easy to count.

One of the pros of little Van's government was that it was extremely transparent. Fair and upright, honest accounting, candid, and—if that wasn't enough—delicious. That was our motto. Honestly, I had no idea how things would shake out, but I figured an open-door policy and telling them to "go right ahead" would do the trick. They'd come away from this experience thinking, "What an impressive attitude! Someone so honest could never evade their taxes, never mind commit embezzlement!"

There is not a single hole in little Van's plan, ba ha ha ha ha! I finished my preparations, wanting to be ready for our incoming visitors at any time.

But as the days passed, Bell's expression only darkened. No matter how much we lined up in storage, there were always more monster parts coming in.

"Rock scales, flying bichir, giant forest trolls... Oh, and there's even a red

saber. Wow, a black drake?! Isn't that a lesser dragon?!" One by one, parts from giant monsters were shipped into storage, concluding with an actual dragon.

My surprise was perfectly contrasted by Bell, who whispered to me, "These new parts haven't been reported to the capital, never mind the Business Guild."

"Huh? Why?"

He turned to me, his eyes shining with tears, and explained what he'd been up to. Or hadn't been up to. "Those damn adventurers just keep slaying dungeon monsters, so the Adventurers' Guild has been passing them off to us! And then the apkallu keep giving the village rare ore, I guess as a way of paying taxes to you or something, and Esparda has been selecting a few from those and giving them to us... Plus, the adventurers pop into our shop all the time to get their hands on the equipment you've made. There's been no time to get around to the monster parts from the creatures defeated by the village's defense force! No matter how hard I try, I only have the time to strip the parts."

He'd been turning in weekly requests for more personnel, but he still didn't have enough hands. On closer inspection, there were huge bags under the poor guy's eyes, and he'd clearly lost some weight.

"Man, you poor guy."

"...That didn't sound very sincere," he said, sounding exhausted. This was a man who'd lost all of his trust in humanity. It was all well and good for a person to keep busy, but this was just too much.

"So what you're telling me is that the Bell & Rango Company, raking in the dough, is doing some serious embezzlement."

"No! I just haven't had time to get to everything! Haven't you been listening?" Bell demanded.

I chuckled. "Sorry, sorry." Pointing to the materials, I asked, "Then couldn't you just say that these are scheduled to be reported?"

Bell folded his arms and groaned. "There's just so much here. I don't know if they would believe me. This is my first time being investigated by the Business Guild, so I've never spoken to or met with anyone from it."

“Wait, really? Is this really all that uncommon?”

“Not exactly.” A complicated expression crossed Bell’s face. “They send investigators to the Mary Chamber of Commerce every year, but someone at the top deals with them, so people like me, well...”

That made total sense. Whoever got dispatched from the Business Guild was effectively a tax officer, so they would only speak with key members of the organization who could explain a given situation. “Well...I’m sure things will be fine.” If this was the first time for all of us, then there was no use freaking out, so I wasn’t going to bother doing so.

Apparently on the verge of tears, Bell sighed again. “I’m going to keep doing what I can for a little bit longer. I’ll finish my material ledger so that I can prove that we planned to report these parts. Though I’m only half done...”

“Yikes. In that case, let me gather all the paperwork so that we can show how busy the Bell & Rango Company has been. I’ll have all the monthly revenue documents, employment reports, and sales documents on my equipment gathered for you.”

A nasty sound escaped Bell’s mouth. “Ah...” Cold sweat began to run down his now-pale face.

I narrowed my eyes. “Don’t tell me you’ve been evading your...”

“N-no, it’s the opposite.”

“What?”

I had no idea what he was implying, but Bell laughed dryly and looked at me. “We’ve been...overpaying our taxes...”

“Wait, for real? Thanks!”

I couldn’t believe they’d been doing that in secret. I’d have to sell him a bunch of new weapons and armor at wholesale prices down the line as thanks... though that could ultimately lead to more profit and more tears.

But then I realized something important. “Wait, doesn’t that mean I’m the one who’s going to come under suspicion?”

Bell suddenly looked incredibly meek. “You’ll be under even more suspicion

than us for collusion...”

“What are you doing, Bell?!”

“I-I’m so sorry!”

I did a complete one-eighty, complaining at him while he bowed his head in deep remorse. Then I shot him a wry smile and waved one hand. “I’m just messing with you. How could I get mad when you did all of this for me? Next time, just pay me the normal amount. I’ve gotten more than enough money from you guys.”

Bell nodded, still holding back tears.

Truth be told, Seatoh Village’s revenue was insane. The tax money we got from the Bell & Rango Company wasn’t insignificant, but it was still just one part of the total sum. Honestly, the profit from selling the monster parts we got from the Seatoh and Esparda Chivalric Orders was even bigger. Oh, and just for the record, the money we got from selling my equipment, ballistae, and arrows was also pure madness.

Some expenses went toward reducing the price of necessities and consumable goods at the Bell & Rango Company; those were sold at a deficit. And if more money was required to make that possible, I covered it with my own personal funds. I also paid for the apkallu’s food, daily necessities, and sundries.

Then there were the operating expenses for the Chivalric Orders and the fairly high salaries for the knights themselves. Esparda and the others needed to be paid as well. There were also subsidies for the farmers who had lower incomes. I was still paying the poll tax for everyone who lived here, but I didn’t plan on demanding they pay those taxes anytime soon, if ever.

My territory was significantly more advanced on employee welfare than pretty much anywhere else, and it was still totally in the black.

I would have loved to claim that this was all thanks to my superior managing skills, but that wasn’t really true. Unlike other territories, we didn’t have to spend money on roads, walls, building construction, or any kind of infrastructure maintenance. This was a massive boon for us. Building a wall was

supposed to require several months of work and a huge number of people; we didn't have to concern ourselves with that. Consequently, our territory made a net profit that other territories could never hope to replicate.

"...Wait. If we just explain exactly what's going on in this village, wouldn't that be enough to convince them?"

"W-would it?" Bell sounded dubious.

No, no. Little Van's plan is perfect! "Just leave this to me. As the lord, I'll deal with the investigator from the Business Guild myself," I declared, smacking my chest.

At long last, relief washed over Bell's face.

Only two days later, an individual who called themselves a guild investigator arrived at Seato Village. The Bell & Rango Company's office staff, Esparda, Till, and Khamsin all worked together, pulling multiple all-nighters to finish filing the important documents we needed. I definitely hadn't expected to go through all of this.

Despite my nerves, I set out to greet the Business Guild investigator. I still hadn't received any tidings from Arte, but I was hoping she was doing okay and not pushing herself too hard.

Chapter 3:

Arte's Fight

NO ONE COULD HAVE ANTICIPATED THE FEROCITY of Yelenetta's invasion.

Our scouts reported that the border's smallest towns and villages were gone, taken over like they were nothing, and that the army was closing in on the castle city—the largest and most populous nearby settlement. I had to get there as fast as possible.

Only one more hill to cross, and then I would be able to see the castle city. I was teeming with a mixture of concern, hope, and dread as we ascended. From beyond the hill, I heard terrified screams and the clatter of objects colliding.

I could hold myself back no longer. "Mother?!" I cried, leaping from the carriage, barely holding back a flood of tears. I threaded my way through the group of adventurers, getting ahead of them.

Somebody tried to stop me—"Lady Arte!"—but I paid them no mind. I dashed past them and up the hill. When I crested its peak, I found the ruins of the castle city laid bare before me.

Black smoke billowed into the air. Part of the wall had collapsed into rubble. More than ten thousand troops were in the vicinity and five wyverns circled in the sky, dropping their payloads down into the city below to create pillars of fire.

"Lady Arte!" Ortho exclaimed. He put his hands on my shoulders, steadying me before my legs could collapse under me. "It looks like the wall only just fell! We can still make it in time!"

I gasped and began to sob.

"Lady Arte, listen to me! There is no time! Please give us our orders! We might still be able to do something!"

Hearing these desperate pleas, I managed to regain some of my composure. Not much, but enough. I grabbed Ortho's arm with both hands and lifted my

head. “I cannot do that. The enemy must be driven back by a member of House Ferdinatto. Everyone, prepare the ballistae! I know this is not the optimal spot for a surprise attack, but please lend me your strength! Please save my home!”

My cries were desperate and unsightly tears streamed down my cheeks. This was no way for a count’s daughter to behave, but when I gave words to the emotions threatening to burst out of me, the adventurers raised their arms and roared.

“Leave it to us!”

“Ain’t no way we can ignore a request from Lady Arte!”

“Yahoo! Time to show those Yelenetta bastards what adventurers can do!”

Their words only made me sob harder. “Thank you! Thank you!”

House Ferdinatto

WE RECEIVED A REPORT FROM ONE OF THE messengers: a neighboring town had been attacked. It was impossible to push back the enemy with the town’s remaining knights, so we evacuated the citizens to the castle city.

The enemy was Yelenetta, but this was nothing like the small skirmishes we’d had with them in the past. They were keeping the pillaging to a minimum and taking over the towns and villages en route instead, stopping briefly to rest before continuing directly toward our city. Given the speed of their invasion, their true objective was clear to me.

“I cannot believe it. Their invasion of Scudet was a mere diversion...” I whispered to myself, looking outside from my vantage point in the lord’s hall. Black smoke billowed into the sky, the citizens’ cries echoed throughout the city, and armored soldiers ran through the hallways. The sounds of those soldiers’ movements were almost enough to convince me that the battle had already breached the castle.

Twenty years had passed since my betrothal to the current lord, Berriat. How often had I imagined these exact events transpiring in the intervening years? As

the daughter of a viscount and a member of the nobility, I had thought myself prepared for this eventuality, but faced with it at last, I found myself overcome with fear and concern.

This was terrifying.

How would I die? My son was with my husband. I had two daughters, both betrothed. It could be said that I had fulfilled my duty as a noblewoman. But that did not mean I accepted death.

“M-Mother...!” My twelve-year-old daughter grabbed the hem of my dress. Her voice trembled. She must have sensed the fear in my heart.

I grabbed her shoulders and glared down at her. “Do not cry! When the time comes, I shall make it appear as though you took your own life. It will be known that you died a true, noble death. You have nothing to fear.”

A pitiable expression crossed her face, but she nodded slightly. Gentle tears began to fall down her cheeks.

“Had I known this would happen, I would have married you off as soon as possible, and not bothered with the long engagement...” I whispered. My plan had been for her to go through bridal training until the age of fifteen, so that I could see her off as a proper noblewoman. How could I have known she would never reach that age?

There was no point in lamenting what had passed. *I must at least die a noble death. My final job is to die with grace, in a way that causes no hardship for House Ferdinatto or my home.* The words with which I’d rebuked my daughter applied to me too.

Outside the window, the wyverns circled over the city. The screams gradually grew louder as chaos approached us. “I remained disciplined as a noblewoman, as the wife of a count. I did nothing wrong,” I told myself quietly. “Nothing.”

“M-Mother...?”

My daughter gazed at me with concern in her eyes. It reminded me of my youngest daughter, who I had decided to pretend never existed. “...Arte,” I whispered, closing my eyes.

I did everything I could to be a perfect wife. To not bring shame upon myself. I steeled myself when I raised my first and second sons. I steeled myself when my first and second daughters were engaged to their future husbands. And then I learned of Arte's magic aptitude.

It was as if a thread within me snapped. Everything I had done for twenty years as a count's wife was destroyed in a single moment by my youngest daughter. At least, that's what I thought at the time. So I decided I did not have a youngest daughter.

But now, at death's door, I realized that I had been foolish. I had allowed myself to be chained by the rules of noble society. I was so concerned about my reputation as a noblewoman that I closed Arte in her room and refused to ever see her.

I was certain she cursed the very ground I walked on, but I hoped she was well. We'd sent her off to a worthless little village in the middle of nowhere, a place with no strategic value to the enemy. She would probably outlive us all.

"Such hypocrisy. I have no right to wish for such things." I shook my head. Then I heard a soldier running toward the lord's hall.

The door crashed open and an older soldier looked at me. "R-reinforcements!" he said. "They're few in number, but they're powerful!"

I whirled to look out the window. Outside, one of the wyverns was under attack by something; it was losing balance. It folded its wings forward, making its body smaller, then fell to the ground like a puppet that had lost its strings.

"Wind mages? How powerful must they be, to have taken down a wyvern in one strike?!" I shouted, astonished by what I had seen. When I turned back to the soldier, I found him wearing a complex expression.

"W-we do not know, but we have confirmed that they are flying House Ferdinatto's crest! But we also know for certain that they are not one of the house's Chivalric Orders!"

"Wh-what does that mean? It isn't my husband?" I demanded. Nobody could answer me.

Did someone out there possess foreknowledge of House Ferdinatto's plight?

Had they chosen to come and save us?

Despite the confusion and doubt spiraling within me, I brought my hands together and began to pray.

House Ferdinatto's Army Commander

I COULD HARDLY BELIEVE WHAT TRANSPIRED BEFORE me. I had been stunned to see wyverns in the sky soon after we spotted Yelenetta's banners, but that was nothing compared to seeing those wyverns drop to the ground, one right after the other.

I had no idea what was happening. I thought I heard a sharp sound, like something slicing the air, followed by a loud boom, and then the wyverns began to act strangely. Then they fell.

They were under attack. By someone. Something. That much I understood, but who was the attacker? The men thought it was a first-rate wind mage, but that didn't appear to be the case, and this wasn't the work of an earth mage either.

"Commander!" one of my troops yelled. "Yelenetta's troops have stopped moving!"

Another said, "The wyverns have been annihilated! All that's left are the fifteen thousand infantrymen!"

The reports were coming fast and hard. I still couldn't make sense of them, but I had no doubt the enemy was just as confused by the sudden appearance of reinforcements. We couldn't afford to take our eyes off of the prize.

"Pay careful attention to the enemy's movements and strengthen our defenses at once!" I ordered. "Our reinforcements are few in number! If they're a squad of mages, they'll be screwed if the enemy gets in close! If Yelenetta turns their backs on us, crush them from behind immediately!"

The soldiers responded in the affirmative and took their positions. Prior to the arrival of the reinforcements, we had been at a clear, near-insurmountable

disadvantage, but at long last there was light at the end of the tunnel, and the troops were more driven than ever. With the threat in the sky taken care of, I could order my soldiers to charge from the front and expect them to act on it immediately. At first I had stationed all of the heavy infantry at the broken wall, but now I ordered the cavalymen to take up positions behind them.

Castle sieges typically lasted months at a time, and reinforcements were the key to victory. Given that, as well as the power of our newly arrived backup, Ylenetta would take one of two courses of action: move in to crush the reinforcements, or retreat.

My primary concern was the portion of the wall that had been destroyed. If Ylenetta's forces were confident in their ability to break through our defenses, they might march right through that hole. I climbed to the top of the wall, hoping to get a better vantage point from which to assess our situation, and reminded myself that we needed to consider either possibility.

It was then that a new report reached my ears. "Commander! Ylenetta's forces have split into two groups!"

"What?!" I sprinted to the edge of the wall and peeked out through the anti-arrow fencing. He was right. They had split into two groups, respectively ten thousand and five thousand strong—but what shocked me the most was that the larger group was heading for the hill upon which our reinforcements stood.

Had they decided that they only needed five thousand men to take the city? "Don't you dare underestimate us, you rat bastards!" I yelled, shaking with fury. Then I turned to my troops. "Listen well, swords of Ferdinatto! The enemy underestimates us! They think they can destroy us with a paltry five thousand men! Are we that weak? Answer me! Is our Chivalric Order that weak?!"

The expressions on their faces transformed to fury, then determination. I felt power emanating from the hand in which I gripped my sword.

The biggest problem facing us was the mysterious magical tool that had proven capable of destroying the wall. That weapon was still in the enemy's possession. It would be foolhardy in the extreme to charge in without a plan.

I shouted orders to the archers on the wall: "Shower them with arrows. Do not hesitate!" Then, turning to my cavalymen, I said, "We'll pass the heavy

infantrymen and charge the enemy. They won't see us coming! But be sure not to strike them from the front. Remember, they destroyed the wall with some kind of projectile weapon, so we must corral them as quickly as possible. Based on their actions so far, their projectile supply must be limited! Make them waste what they have left!"

The men drew their swords and shouted affirmation. It was time to strike back.

"Heavy infantry, open the eastern bank! Western bank, prepare your shields and step back! Draw the enemy in!"

The goal was for our men to lead the enemy into a position that was more advantageous for us. Judging by the tactics they had used, Yelenetta's commander was not experienced in combat. The state of the battlefield suggested that they were fatally slow at making decisions.

It was clear to me that without their wyverns or strange new weapons, they stood no chance against us.

I watched the cavalrymen ride off, then turned my gaze back to the battlefield. The enemy's larger group was approaching our reinforcements head-on. Our reinforcements were countering with the same weapon that took down the wyverns, but this time it had little effect.

The enemy should have retreated after we broke through their formation of five thousand troops. They had lost both their main fighting force and their opportunity to take the city they were targeting. Pressing on was pointless.

But their commander had yet to issue the retreat command. I couldn't understand it, and I had not expected it.

"The enemy is stupider than we anticipated!" I shouted. "Their morale can't get any lower! We'll leave a skeleton crew here and pursue them! If they still don't pull back, you have my permission to run them through with your spears!"

I tried to hide my impatience, but it was probably obvious from how quickly I spoke. The most important thing was to save the men and women who'd come to our aid. My troops knew that and, shouting their acknowledgment, charged

off in pursuit of the enemy. The ground beneath them shook as the enemy's weapons detonated, but they heeded it not, striking furiously with their swords.

But then, unexpectedly, the tide turned against us. The cavalrymen's horses stopped, spooked by the loud explosions. Our infantrymen lagged behind: they wouldn't make it in time. Our mages were out of magic energy, and the enemy was way out of our archers' range.

"Damn it all! They'll crush our reinforcements! There must be something we can do!" I stared at the battlefield, my mind racing. The enemy was closing in on our saviors. There was no time left. Angling my horse toward them, I shouted, "Men, we need to back our reinforcements up! Try to keep their casualties to a minimum!"

But then the archers atop the wall began to stir.

"What? What is it?!" I yelled, awash with dread. *Are they already...?!*

The scene that unfolded before me looked almost like a twisted joke. Human beings were flung like dolls in every direction. Yelenetta's armored soldiers were being batted away by what appeared to be a giant club.

Every few moments, the battlefield would echo with the sound of something slicing the air, and more soldiers would go flying. Whatever this was, it was not a normal attack.

"What the...?! Is it some sort of magic?!"

"No! There are two armored individuals moving strangely! They're racing through the enemy formation!"

"What?!" I rode up the hill. At the top, my eyes settled on two large silver warriors swinging huge swords through the enemy's ranks. As for why I was able to spot them amidst the enemy's massive army...

As reported, they were moving strangely.

Despite wielding swords as long as they were tall, the silver warriors leapt easily over the enemy and dashed through the crowded battlefield as if it were something they did every day. They showed no signs of slowing down, not even when they were hit by swords, spears, and arrows.

Everyone present, myself included, was in awe of their heroic deeds. Yelenetta's army fell into disarray; the foes they'd expected to handily crush at close range were tearing them apart. Their formation was in shambles and soldiers were fleeing in all directions.

Within ten minutes, Yelenetta's army collapsed. They were annihilated.

Arte

“LADY ARTE! THIS IS BAD! THEIR MAIN FORCES ARE headed this way!”

“U-understood! There are no wyverns left, correct?!”

“That was the last one! The enemy's changing course to take us down first!”

“We shouldn't take their knights head-on, right?”

I placed a hand on my chest, trying to calm my racing heartbeat as I received reports from the adventurers. When I looked up, all I could see was the approaching enemy army. I wanted to cover my ears, which were blasted by their battle cries and their footsteps as they stomped in time.

“We will intercept the enemy!” I declared. “The confrontation will depend on our ballistae and machine bows! Everyone else, raise your shields and focus on defending our troops!”

“Yes, ma'am!” the men shouted.

Everyone listened to my words and did as I instructed. Instructions from someone like me... I was truly grateful.

“Lady Arte, should we delay the enemy with our magic?” Pluriel asked, checking in with me.

I nodded, turning to look at the approaching enemy once more. “Can you freeze their feet? If we can force them to stop in place...”

“The range will be limited, but we should be able to freeze the area in front of us. It's not gonna last long against a group that large, though.”

“Please do so!” I replied, bowing my head. “If we can stop them for even an

instant...!”

Pluriel nodded. Her smile looked pained. “And here I thought Lord Van was surprising. I swear, my impression of you nobles

has been changing quite a bit recently,” she said in a low voice. Then she turned to Ortho and the others. “Everyone, let’s do what we can to stop them in their tracks. If they get too close, we’re done for.”

“If our arrows can hit them, their arrows can hit us! There’s only so much we can do to stall them!”

“If only we had brought Sir Esparda with us...”

“Don’t ask for the impossible.”

Perhaps driven by their apprehension, the adventurers quickly began their preparations.

I wasn’t Lord Van. I lacked strategic skill, and I couldn’t stop myself from trembling.

So I had to do everything in my power to win. “Ortho! Please take command!”

“S-sure,” Ortho said, sounding surprised. “I can do that. But what are you planning?”

“I’m heading to the front lines!”

“Huh?!”

I turned away from him and looked up at the carriage nearby. In the driver’s seat was a member of Lord Van’s machine bow squad. “I need access to the puppets!” I called to him.

He smiled and opened up the wall of the carriage. “Understood! Which ones will you use?”

Resting in the back of the vehicle was a mithril puppet, but it required too much magic to operate. I wouldn’t be able to fight for very long if I chose that one. Next to it was a puppet made from wood blocks, clad in either iron or mithril armor; I could control this one for much, much longer. I could even wield two at once, though if I did that their movements would not be graceful.

“I’ll take two of these puppets! Please make their weapons as long as possible.”

“Two at once? Long weapons...” the man said, sounding thoughtful. “We have these long swords.”

I quickly thanked the surprised man and activated my magic. The two puppets moved a little more awkwardly than usual, but I managed to get them to equip their weapons and descend from the carriage.

“Thank you for your aid,” I said to the puppets. They gripped their swords and saluted me.

The man in the coach watched, looking stunned. I felt my face turn bright red. *How embarrassing. He saw me speaking to my puppets...*

“I’m off!” I turned on my heel and hurriedly led my puppets to the front of our formation, where I had a great view of the battlefield.

“Lady Arte!” Ortho appeared at my side, then glanced at the puppets behind me. “Now I get it. These ladies are headed to the front lines, right?”

“Correct!”

I got to work controlling the puppets then. They raised their swords and split off in opposite directions, one to the left and one to the right, disappearing into the enemy formation.

“Tear the enemy apart, my Aventador Doll Silver Knights!”

Yelenetta

A TENSE ATMOSPHERE GRIPPED THE INFANTRYMEN as they marched, their large shields raised. After all, the enemy they targeted was almost certainly a squad of mages. Two clashing groups of infantrymen were terrifying enough, but nothing was quite as frightening as being attacked at range by high-tier magic.

One might survive against regular foot soldiers, archers, and knights with a bit of luck, but magic was different. If you found yourself on the wrong end of a high-tier fire spell, there was nothing for it: you would burn to death. It all came

down to whether you could reach the enemy before that happened.

That was why the infantrymen, who saw how quickly the wyverns were neutralized, were tense as they approached the enemy forces at the top of the hill.

One among their number spotted something strange. “The enemy is approaching!” he cried in a bewildered tone. “Alone?!”

“Without even a horse? That’s impossible!”

“Is it a diversion?”

Despite their confusion, the soldiers raised their shields and spears. The commanders doubted their reports, but one raised a hand and issued orders regardless. “They are foolish to charge at us alone! Vanguard, impale them with your spears. Rear guard, be ready for any bow or magic attacks. They are trying to slow us down!”

The soldiers hastily prepared to comply. Without context, the two silver-armored knights certainly looked like diversions. It was a known tactic in open combat, and not an uncommon one: two easy-to-spot soldiers would charge erratically into enemy ranks, causing confusion that would provide an opening for their mages’ magic attacks.

But what the enemy truly intended with their strange knights could never have been anticipated.

The instant the silver-clad knight smashed into the wall of spears, it was Ylenetta’s soldiers and their heavy shields that went flying. The impact made a sound similar to that of a battering ram colliding with another object at high speed. The way the soldiers were blown away was almost comical.



Both sides of Yelenetta's army stopped in their tracks. They could not believe their eyes.

"Stop them!"

"What happened to the mages?!"

The commanders tried everything they could to stop the silver-clad knights. The soldiers who would have to do battle with them weren't exactly thrilled with their orders, but they nonetheless steeled their resolve and thrust out their spears. Their weapons bent in half on impact with the enemy. When they tried to block sword strikes with their shields, those shields were split in half.

"Th-they're monsters!"

"Damn it! They're coming this way!"

"Out of the way! There's no way we can stop them!"

One commander clenched his jaw against terrified screams filling the battlefield. Cold sweat drenched his body. "This is no war. This is a massacre at the hands of just two people."

As he finished speaking, a slicing sound filled the air. It was followed by an earth-shaking boom. A hole opened up in his chest, his armor having been pierced as if it were paper.

The commander's death was instantaneous. All will to fight drained from the soldiers who watched, horrified, as his body fell lifelessly from his horse.

"Damn it all! Let's get the hell out of here!" one soldier shouted.

"You idiot, don't push me!"

"Get out of the way, you bastard!"

These screams marked the end for Yelenetta's army. It no longer functioned as a military force. When Arte's team noticed this, they

changed tactics: where before they were stalling, now they attacked with magic, machine bows, and ballistae.

The silver knights continued to cut their way through the enemy, only now they had long-range support. Yelenetta's army was done for.

Exultant cheers rang from the top of the hill as the enemy fled, scattering like rats.

Arte

“ARE YOU REALLY OKAY WITH NOT SEEING YOUR mother?” Ortho asked.

I gave him a pained smile. “If I went home, it would only cause problems.”

He gazed at the carriage trailing us with a complicated look on his face. It had no hanging, and two beat-down puppets rested atop it. Their armor had been mostly peeled off, making them look completely different, and their bodies were covered in scars.

Ortho sighed. “It was thanks to those puppets and ballistae that we were able to save the city. Wouldn’t your people be pleased if they learned that it was you, the lord’s daughter, who came to their aid? I’m sure even your parents would...”

“I doubt that. Mother abhorred my marionette magic... The only one who accepted my skills was Lord Van.” I cast my gaze down at the ground, and Ortho went quiet.

I genuinely did not believe that returning home would make anyone happy. I was satisfied with having flown House Ferdinatto’s crest and pushed back the enemy. I had achieved my objective.

“Now then, let us return home,” I said in a happier voice. “Lord Van is waiting, and as far as I am concerned, next to him is where I belong now.”

Ortho blinked at me several times, then began to laugh a jubilant laugh. “Is that so? Well, if you’re fine with it, then so am I. Time to report back to Lord Van! He’ll probably celebrate with a barbeque.”

“Hee hee! Indeed! I cannot wait.”

With that, it was time to head home. Interestingly, I felt that a burden had been lifted from my shoulders. All the guilt I felt toward my mother, my self-hatred, my very reason for being... I felt so much lighter.

Some part of me did still want to see my mother. I wanted her to praise me. But mostly, I wanted to see Lord Van. I wanted to tell him that I'd done my best, that I'd accomplished my goal. And so, I headed straight for Seatoh Village without turning back.

Ferdinatto

A MYSTERIOUS ALLY HAD CRUSHED YELENETTA'S army, waving the crest of House Ferdinatto, and then vanished into thin air. When reports of this arrived, the castle exploded in an uproar. All throughout the castle, knights, stewards, and maids were abuzz over the topic.

"Who in the world were they?"

"Perhaps a nearby territory wishing to join our faction?"

"Foolishness. They took down Yelenetta's massive army and their wyverns. That is not something that could be accomplished by just anyone."

Elsewhere, Arte's mother and older sister stared out the window in a daze. They understood that it was a miracle to still be alive.

Eventually, Arte's sister opened her mouth and whispered, "Who could have saved us...?"

Arte's mother continued to gaze out the window and did not answer. Part of the castle wall had collapsed, and black smoke still rose into the air. This was a far cry from the peaceful city it had been.

A knight who'd witnessed the retreating allied forces arrived to deliver a report. "Approximately one thousand members of the Chivalric Order who were dispatched to defend the city have perished. A further fifteen hundred sustained heavy injuries. Miraculously, however, we believe that civilian casualties were minimal."

"I see..."

The knight saluted and started to leave the room, prompting Arte's older sister to turn around. "Don't we know anything about the allied forces?" she

asked.

The knight stopped, appearing to hesitate. Eventually, he faced Arte's mother. "We currently know four things. The first is that they flew House Ferdinatto's crest. The second is that their armor and equipment had no uniformity. The third is that they vanished in the direction of Marquis Fertio's territory. And the last..."

Arte's mother turned her gaze from the window and gave the knight a sidelong glance.

"...The fourth thing we know is that the person who appeared to be commanding from horseback at the vanguard was a young girl with white hair. That is all."

The last part of the report made Arte's mother's shoulders tremble. She looked back out the window. "That's...impossible..." she whispered, her voice unsteady.

She said no more. Arte's older sister looked quietly at her back, not saying a word either.

Chapter 4:

The Business Guild

Investigator

A BRAND-NEW, UNUSUALLY PROFITABLE COMPANY had emerged within Scuderia. Even more unusually, it was based not in the capital, but in a tiny border village. This was highly improbable, the guild staff concluded among themselves when they learned of this emerging company. There had to be something more to it.

The Business Guild received all sorts of information about companies located in different countries. If a group came under the umbrella of the guild, they received a catalog containing details and prices on import goods. Additionally, with the cooperation of guild staff, companies could send letters back and forth to distant countries or even be introduced to potential business partners in countries and cities they had never seen.

This kind of thing was impossible for all but massive businesses with roots in multiple countries. It was for this very reason that most companies joined the guild. There were many other benefits to becoming a member, but most signed up to acquire information on foreign goods and expand their markets. Of course, the price for these large businesses was that joining the guild meant paying not only an annual fee determined by the size of the company, but also sharing a portion of all revenue with the guild.

Historically, multiple companies had tried to cook the books because they didn't want to pay up. Businesses that broke the rules were decommissioned and forced to pay a penalty fee, but few such businesses wanted to play by these rules. In fact, there were some fools who tried to murder guild investigators to keep them from talking.

That was why, when the guild dispatched investigators like us, they sent along bodyguards. In other words, we moved in big groups.

Because Business Guild branches were present in capitals all over the world,

travel time was always kept to a minimum. Moving in such large numbers, however, still incurred significant expenses. This time around, the Mary Chamber of Commerce was lending their assistance, because we shared a destination and they had a branch in the capital city. We joined their caravan, but still opted to hire ten adventurers with ties to our guild.

We were headed for a village out on the border, so this investigation was going to be expensive.

“Lord Apollo? Is something troubling you?” someone asked, interrupting my thoughts.

When I raised my head, I looked at the two people sitting across from me. One was the owner of the carriage we rode in, the young president of the Mary Chamber of Commerce and the third child among the Triomphe sisters, Dyane Triomphe. She was a charming girl with bright red hair who was clad in a lovely green jumpsuit. Word of her talent spread frequently through the Business Guild.

Next to her was Rosalie, a woman approaching her thirties. She was the manager of the Mary Chamber of Commerce’s capital city branch. From what the two of them had told me, she was an outsider with no connection to the Triomphe family; she had started as an apprentice merchant and worked her way up to the manager position. That made her a rare beast in this industry. In short, both of the individuals in front of me had incredible business acumen.

Each woman was frowning for what I thought were different reasons. With a strained smile, I said, “Fear not. It’s just that, when you work as an investigator for the guild, you often find yourself having to think about things you would rather not. I apologize.”

Rosalie nodded. “We often find ourselves in very similar circumstances.”

“Is that so? Well, that certainly makes sense. Considering your positions, you probably deal with issues very close in nature to mine.”

This earned me two complicated smiles. To an outsider it might have looked like we were engaging in small talk, but it was clear to me that they were attempting to read my intentions just as I attempted to read theirs. Of course they were: we were heading out to the Bell & Rango Company, a brand-new

business started by a member of their group. Depending on how things went, it was possible that my investigation would turn toward them.

The Bell & Rango Company had made highly irregular gains for such a new business venture. Were they colluding with the Mary Chamber of Commerce? Was it Marquis Fertio's house? In the worst-case scenario, I might have to consider whether the kingdom itself was involved.

"My word," I whispered to myself, laughing dryly. "I really don't want to think about any of this."

Depending on how things played out, I could find myself surrounded by enemies. I had to prepare for the worst.

Seatoh Village

"THE CARAVAN'S HERE!"

"Hurry up and let Lord Van know!"

A member of the Seatoh Chivalric Order who was stationed atop the wall spotted a far-off group of carriages approaching the village and immediately dispatched a messenger.

Compared to how it had started out, the village was vast, full of all kinds of buildings. The messenger raced through its streets on horseback, finally spotting Van, who, by coincidence, was standing outside his manor.

At first, Van seemed puzzled by the flustered messenger. Then he noticed the urgency in the messenger's expression. "They're here?"

"Yes! The caravan will arrive shortly!"

"All right! Contact the Bell & Rango Company, and ready the ballistae and catapults!"

These orders were for Khamsin and Till, who looked thoroughly surprised by them. "Lord Van?!" Till said.

"Are we attacking the caravan?!"

They both looked pale. Van nodded gravely. “We’ll just say the guild investigators never showed up. That’ll be our story if anyone asks...” Then he gave them a wry smile. “Nah, I’m just messing around. Of course we’re not attacking them.

“I was just thinking that, instead of trying and probably failing to hide what’s going on around here, we should lay it all out bare so that we can dispel any misunderstandings. The ballistae and catapults are Seatoh Village military secrets, so if we show them how powerful they are, they’ll understand how we’ve been successfully slaying large monsters.”

Khamsin and Till both looked relieved. “We have been at war constantly as of late, so I thought for a second that you might have gotten drunk on the violence, Lord Van...” said Khamsin.

Till nodded. “I am glad you are the same Lord Van as always.”

Van’s face twitched. “There’s a whole lot I’d love to say to you guys, but the guild investigation comes first. Let’s get moving.” With a sigh, he led the two of them over to where the investigation team stood waiting.

Van

I SOMETIMES FORGOT THAT I WAS A NOBLE. IN GENERAL, whenever I was in the manor, I was stupidly busy with work. There was little doubt in my mind that little Van was the prettiest, hardest-working boy in all the land.

What a sad fate, I thought, like an idiot, as I arrived before the wall.

The members of the investigation team were standing before the drawbridge, looking stunned. The gates were already wide open, so I could see their delicious reactions.

I actually didn’t know which of them was the guild inspector. What I did know was that part of the caravan belonged to the Mary Chamber of Commerce, and that a bunch of adventurers surrounded it. In the coaches were a few middle-aged men who looked like merchants.



I took in their dazed looks as they stared up at the wall for a moment, then greeted them. “Good day. I’m the lord of Seatoh Village, Van Nei Fertio. Might I inquire as to your affiliation?”

Nobody answered me. Hell, it seemed like they hadn’t even noticed my presence.

Little Van is tiny; maybe that’s why they don’t see him. Quite a shame, considering I grew five centimeters in the last year. If I keep growing at this rate, I’ll be a whole two meters tall by the time I turn twenty, and two meters and fifty centimeters by the time I’m thirty. Little Van’s growth knows no limits!

As I floated on cloud nine, Dee shouted from behind me, “I am Dee, the commander of Baron Van Nei Fertio’s Seatoh Village Chivalric Order! This is the lord of Seatoh Village, Van Nei Fertio!”

This guttural introduction drew the attention of the investigation team. I cleared my throat purposefully and introduced myself a second time. A tall man emerged then from the large carriage at the center of the caravan. He looked a bit under forty years old, had a slim figure, and appeared rather dashing in his black suit.

Behind him, two women descended from the carriage. One was a younger, red-haired girl who looked to be in her midteens. She was dressed in a pretty jumpsuit, and you could see at first glance that she was both knowledgeable and confident. She seemed young, but I had no doubt that she was either an investigator or a higher-up from the Mary Chamber of Commerce. The other woman was very familiar to me. She was somewhere near her thirties, adorned in fairly revealing merchant clothes. This was Rosalie, the merchant I’d met at the Mary Chamber of Commerce branch in Marquis Fertio’s First City.

Rosalie quietly greeted me from behind the others. Then the middle-aged man at the front put a hand on his chest and smiled like an exhausted businessman. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Apollo, lead investigator of the Scuderia branch of the Business Guild.”

What a polite, reasoned greeting.

The red-haired girl behind him followed suit. “I am Dyane Triomphe. Contrary

to my appearance, I am the current president of the Mary Chamber of Commerce. It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Lord Van.”

Whoa, the president? The Chamber of Commerce was too big to be entirely a family business, so she probably had the talent to back up her position.

“Mister Apollo, Miss Dyane, and of course, Miss Rosalie. I have been awaiting your arrival. I figured you would be arriving soon.” Apollo and Dyane widened their eyes slightly. Rosalie, meanwhile, treated me to a happy smile. I responded with a smile of my own and added, “It is my pleasure to welcome you to Seatoh Village.”

Dyane

SOON AFTER OUR JOURNEY ENDED, BARON VAN offered to introduce us to some quality lodgings. Personally, I wanted to accept his offer, but Investigator Apollo gently declined. I glared at his back while Baron Van quickly backed down, almost as if he’d anticipated such a response.

Baron Van showed a great deal of consideration to us, leading us up the wall first. The whole situation left me puzzled. I leaned toward Rosalie. “Is Lord Van truly not even ten years of age? Are we certain he doesn’t have mixed blood from one of the long-living races? What if he’s actually fifty or something...?”

“No, Lord Van is undoubtedly the age he appears to be. I first met him more than two years ago, and even then, he was no normal child. He’s been surprising me ever since he purchased that young soldier boy as a slave.”

I sighed. “I read the reports, but seeing really is believing... There was a time when others called me a genius and I let it get to my head, which is terribly embarrassing in retrospect,” I whispered, watching Baron Van walk ahead of us.

I had sent the same reports to Apollo. From an early age, they said, the boy understood difficult concepts after having them explained to him only once. He was a genius who came up with unpredictable new ideas. While he was not a remarkable mage, he’d nonetheless led his village to prosperity after his expulsion from home, earning the title of baron. According to the reports, the

village was flourishing so much that it could hardly be called a village anymore. It was a *city*.

I thought I understood all of this. I knew that true geniuses were capable of doing what he had done. But reality easily eclipsed my expectations.

“This is one of our ballistae, the cornerstone of our village’s defense system. Please observe.” He issued an order to the young soldier standing next to the weapon. Apollo tilted his head. As far as I could tell, he hadn’t anticipated receiving a weapon demonstration.

The ballista fired its gigantic bolt. The boom that erupted from the weapon was ear shattering, causing me to shrink into myself a little. I followed the bolt’s path with my eyes, but I could barely keep track of it.

Eventually, I spotted a number of trees, far off in the distance, falling to the ground. *What?*

“Amazing. I can’t believe they have such an effective range,” I said, turning around.

Apollo looked far more stunned than either Rosalie or me. “Th-this is insane...” he whispered.

Rosalie and I exchanged looks.

Van

WHEN I EXPLAINED THAT WE DEFEATED THE dragon using our ballistae, Apollo’s face twitched around his wry smile. “Never in any of the nations I’ve visited have I seen such a devastating weapon. Who developed this?”

“Me.”

Apollo’s face twitched again. “What about this strangely shaped city wall?”

“I intentionally had it designed with corners. By doing this...”

I proceeded to explain the wall, the towers, and the various materials I used to build it all. Next, I guided the group to the Bell & Rango Company. I’d thought

Bell would join me along the way, but he had yet to show up, so I figured he was probably going over all the company documents one last time.

Despite my slight concern, I maintained my composure as I entered the store. As usual, things were busy inside; the employees were all tied up with customers.

“Is Bell around?” I asked the nearby slave-turned-shopkeeper. She replied with something noncommittal, her voice sounding odd. Then she bowed her head and ran off to the back.

Rosalie and Dyane seemed to have sympathy for the girl, who was clearly super busy. We had to stand there for a bit, but that gave them a chance to look wonderingly around the store.

“There are far more customers here than I anticipated,” observed Dyane.

“And they aren’t all adventurers,” said Rosalie. “There are plenty of normal citizens here as well. You don’t see things like this in destitute villages.”

While they talked, Apollo, apparently determining that he had some free time before Bell arrived, had a proper look around the store. Because all the clerks were busy with customers, the responsibility fell upon me to explain our products to him.

“This sword is incredible...”

“Ah, I made that.”

“This armor and shield are made of very strange materials.”

“Actually, they’re both originally made from wood.”

The more things I explained to him, the darker Apollo’s expression grew. *There’s no way he believes me.* With that in mind, I started looking for raw materials, thinking I could craft something in front of him.

“S-sorry to keep you waiting!” Bell finally appeared, sweat dripping down his cheeks. “I’m Bell, cofounder of the Bell & Rango Company!”

He greeted Apollo and Dyane more politely than usual, said a few words to Rosalie, and then turned to me.

“Lord Van. I believe we will be inspecting the paperwork at the inn tonight, so let’s head to the storage building together. I apologize, but without you present, it would be rather difficult to explain everything...” With that, he began to lead Apollo to our destination.

As we followed them, Rosalie called out to Khamsin. “How are things going?”

“Lord Van and everyone else have been very kind,” Khamsin replied earnestly. “Plus, every day I get to eat delicious food. The only problem is that, even though I train every day to protect Lord Van, I’m still so weak...”

It had been a good while since I last heard him voice any concerns. I watched from the corner of my eye while Rosalie gently ruffled his hair. “Seems like you’re happy. In that case, give it your all and get big and strong, okay?”

Khamsin nodded resolutely.

If he had concerns like that, I kind of wished he would come to me first. Since I was the object of his protection, though, that wasn’t going to happen. I had complex feelings about it.

When I looked up, I saw Till smiling like a loving older sister. This was all rather embarrassing.

“Okay, this is where we store all of our monster parts.” Without me even realizing it, we had arrived at our destination and Bell had begun to explain things. He looked tense. “Lord Van exterminated a forest dragon once, so we made sure this facility was large enough to fit two or three dragons’ worth of parts. Unfortunately, our main problem is that the number of monster parts we receive every day is on the verge of exceeding our maximum capacity.” Bell gave Apollo an exhausted smile, then opened the building’s enormous double doors, which had been designed to enable people to bring large monster parts in and out without having to squeeze them through a narrow entrance.

Bell showed the interior to Apollo, who was rendered utterly speechless. Dyane and Rosalie were no different in that regard. The huge mountains of monster parts lining both sides of the building left only enough space inside for two adults to walk side by side.

Oh, and the monster parts were almost exclusively of the rare variety.

“This is...” Apollo whispered, sounding hoarse. Bell nodded gently and led the way forward.

“Parts that are difficult to transport, like fangs, bones, and hides, are located near the entrance. We store the easier-to-transport stuff in the back.”

“Th-this is madness... I’ve never seen so many rare monster parts in one place in my entire life.”

It was impossible to tell whether Apollo was registering Bell’s words at all. He gaped at the mountains of materials.

“Have the people here really slain this many monsters?” Rosalie whispered, also looking up at the materials.

I jumped in. “Yes, they have. Recently, the adventurers in town have been acquiring unbelievable amounts of monster parts, and poor Bell here has gotten really worn out dealing with it all,” I said with a smile and a chuckle. Bell flashed me a haggard smirk.

Things went quiet for a moment. Then Dyane smiled at me. “The armored lizard hide over there has been cut up so cleanly. What sort of blade did you use?”

I grinned at her. “Well, we have a special large knife made from wood and iron that we use for that process.”

It was an honest answer, but all three visitors looked skeptical. *They might think I’m lying. Guess I’d better show them firsthand, huh?*

Just then, Till and Khamsin arrived with the materials they had been stealthily gathering for me. They both looked angry. I knew exactly what they wanted to say, so I just gave them a wry smile. “Now then, allow me to demonstrate.”

First, I focused my magical energy into the log I held in my hands. At that point I had made so many wood blocks that I could do it with my eyes closed; it took only a brief second or two to make one up. I heard Apollo and the others gasp as I dismantled the log and morphed it into a wood block.

Then, before they could say anything, I turned the wood block into a large, dagger-like knife. It lacked a guard but was still well honed and unnecessarily

decorative. I was sure that it would sell well if stocked at a gift shop.

I handed the knife to Khamsin, who reverently took it in his hands, quietly turned, and cut the armored lizard hide with it. A brief swooshing sound filled the air, and a corner of the hide fell to the ground.

Apollo and the others watched, wide-eyed, frozen in shock. Only Rosalie was able to make a sound. “Wha—?”

I proceeded to craft a wooden sword and an unnecessarily ornate iron sword, reveling in their reactions. If we were on a TV program, the way they froze up would’ve been bad for the ratings. Fortunately, in the real world, this was the ideal reaction.

Apollo was frozen for the longest. Dyane, the first to return to her senses, said, “W-wait a moment. What was that just now? Don’t tell me that was production magic?”

“Yes, it was. I made many of the things in the village, actually.”

Next, I made a spear and a shield, shocking the trio even further. I had to hand it to them: it took courage to ask a child of nobility what their magic affinity was.

“Let’s go outside so I can show you how I make ballistae. Khamsin, can you summon a few people to help us?”

“Of course!” Khamsin ran out of the building, looking pleased for some reason. *Did something good happen?*

Meanwhile, Apollo held one of the swords in trembling hands, making strange noises. “I-it is unclear how effective this blade would be in real combat, but as a work of art, it’s incredible... I can’t believe you can make a piece like this in such a short span of time.”

Till walked up to us with an impish look on her face and something in her hands: armored lizard hide. “Please observe,” she said.

Apollo looked confused. “That’s armored lizard hide, correct? What are you planning to... Gah! You cut it! Wh-wh-what just happened?! Please let me see that!”

Making no effort to conceal how shaken he was, Apollo took the hide and inspected its toughness and color. He stared down at the material in complete silence, then cut the surface of the hide with my iron sword.

The blade slid through the skin like butter. Apollo's eyes grew so wide I thought they were about to fall out of his head.

"Is this a holy sword? Am I looking at the holy sword from the legends...?" He whispered nonsense to himself, his eyes nearly rolling back into his head.

Dyane, for her part, was inspecting the spear I made earlier. "Even at the Mary Chamber of Commerce, I've never seen a blade as sharp as this. I also never thought I'd see a guild investigator so frazzled. It's clear to me that the weapons you make are of the finest quality. If you were to make something like this with mithril or orichalcum, it would be a national treasure..."

"A national treasure, huh? That's what His Majesty said as well." I pulled out my beloved orichalcum short sword.

At first, when the women from the Mary Chamber of Commerce laid eyes upon it, all they could do was blink. Then Rosalie looked up. Dyane slowly gripped her head in her hands, casting her gaze upward as well.

"Lord Van," Dyane said in an exhausted tone, "I think you would do well not to casually show that off. It is possible you could start a war over it."

I, on the other hand, was displeased. "But it cuts the best out of all of my swords."

"You use it often, then..." Her shoulders sagged as all the strength drained from her body.

Eventually, Khamsin returned with a few members of the Chivalric Order who were equipped with wood block armor. "I called for help!"

"Thanks, Khamsin. Okay, can you guys carry some wood blocks for me?"

"Yessir!" They began to haul the blocks out of the facility while I guided Apollo and the others outside.

It only took me two or three minutes to craft a ballista, thanks to Khamsin's help. I turned around to see my audience's reactions and found the trio looking

at the ballista with matching thousand-yard stares. They were almost entirely expressionless, as if they'd lost the ability to emote.

I turned to Till and Khamsin. "Is it just me, or are they reacting kind of weirdly?"

They exchanged glances and nodded. "Well, it has been one surprise after another for them," Till said.

"Anyone would react similarly after what they've been through," agreed Khamsin. They both seemed utterly exasperated.

Panamera and the king didn't react like this, though...

"Um, are you guys okay?" I asked reluctantly.

Apollo snapped to his senses and pointed at the ballista. "Were those materials you had brought here special?"

"Just wood."

"How powerful is this thing?"

"It has a range of about one kilometer. If you load one of the bolts I've made, you can easily piece a dragon's scales with it. By the way, my multishot ballistae can fire two bolts in a row."

Apollo's expression grew grimmer with each word I said. Before I could ask him what was wrong, Dyane gently raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Dyane?"

She cleared her throat, a strained look crossing her face. "Um, Lord Van... We are humble merchants. Not only have we been surprised by the incredible advances this village has made, its rare materials, and its brand-new weapons, we have also been deeply moved. But even with that context, this ballista is unbelievable. The fact that you could so quickly craft a weapon that can subjugate a dragon is, well..."

"Wait, I was planning on doing a firing demonstration. Are you telling me you already believe that I made this stuff?" I asked.

Rosalie grimaced and nodded. "After everything we've seen, no one here

would doubt that. If anything, it's a bit frightening to think about what other surprises might lurk around the corner." Behind her, Bell nodded emphatically.

"Lord Van," Apollo whispered, ashen faced, "this weapon has the potential to change the nature of war. And in a way that foreign nations could never hope to imitate."

Silence washed over us. Deliberately ignoring the grim vibe, I nodded and smiled. "Awesome! Then in that case, I should be able to protect my territory just fine. I plan on making this village even better, so please advertise us to the other towns and villages. We're always looking for new citizens!"

Apollo stilled again, his eyes wide. Then he started laughing loudly. "Is that so? Ha ha! In that case, please allow us to assist you in any way we can. Leave distribution routes to the other nations to us. The Business Guild would be happy to be good friends with you, Lord Van," he said with a respectful bow of his head.

Back in the manor's reception room, our three visitors sat on beautifully ornate sofa chairs, looking as though they'd had their souls ripped from their bodies.

They had no way of knowing this, but the reception room was actually the most luxurious room in all of Seatoh Village. Its lighting, furniture, and other various decorations were top of the line, but even the walls, ceiling, and windows were crafted with care.

There were currently no maids in the room. Next to each sofa chair was a side table holding fruit juice and pancakes. The eating utensils were all made of silver.

Still seated comfortably, Rosalie looked at the other two and whispered, "It's hard to believe that this place was once deemed worthless."

Dyane frowned and looked up. "Please don't say that; it only makes me feel like an idiot. The information we had on this place was dreadfully out of date. Once we get back, I'll gather information on all the developments since Lord Van took charge. I will also arrange for there to be regular caravan trips to

Seatoh Village. The Bell & Rango Company is clearly working very hard, but they can't keep up with everything happening here." She sighed and smiled self-deprecatingly. "To be frank, I'm more surprised at Lord Van's magic than I am at this village's unusual rate of growth. Not just how he uses it, but also his inventiveness. Even setting his age aside, how can he come up with such fresh and useful ideas so easily?"

Dyane's expression bore a tinge of regret and repentance as she spoke. Apollo folded his arms and tilted his chin down. "The structure of the wall and the number of defensive armaments are particularly astounding. Lord Van seems to be a very mild-mannered individual, but his talents are clearly suited toward warfare. If he wanted to, he could gain the support and backing of any country he wanted."

"Do you really think so?" Dyane asked. She and Rosalie turned to Apollo with strained smiles, but soon realized he was not joking. They fell silent.

Apollo cast them a sidelong glance and sighed. "A tiny start-up, teaming up with the noble lord of a border territory to earn some quick cash... If that was all this was, it would be no trouble. Instead, the results of this investigation cannot be disclosed. Not yet. We also cannot simply leave this be."

Dyane nodded. "Of course. However, if the Business Guild wants to put down roots on this continent, I don't think it has any choice but to foster a positive relationship with Lord Van. I also believe this to be the case for our Mary Chamber of Commerce." She smiled weakly.

Apollo smirked and shook his head. "I am not thrilled by the fact that things are going just as planned for the Mary Chamber of Commerce, but cooperation is the clear path forward. From what we've heard from Lord Van, Seatoh Village is largely self-sufficient when it comes to the necessities. What they currently need are spices, foods from other lands, and cultural goods. Given Lord Van's inventiveness, he'll desire things that will stir his imagination. That is perfect for the Business Guild." He put a hand to his chest. "Especially since we specialize in trade with diverse nations."

"And our Mary Chamber of Commerce possesses more distribution channels and caravans than anyone else in the kingdom, which means we can easily

provide aid to the Business Guild. That said, I imagine transporting Seatoh Village's goods to foreign nations might cost a bit more."

"...Understood."

There was a knock at the door, almost as if the person in question had been waiting for the right moment. Hearing it, Apollo and the others turned toward the source. The door opened and a former-slave-turned-maid entered the room and quietly greeted them.

"Pardon me for interrupting your discussion," the maid said, looking at the trio. "Lord Van would like to hear what you have to say."

They exchanged glances and quickly turned back to her. "But of course," Apollo said.

"We will speak with him," said Dyane.

Rosalie concurred with a nod.

The maid led the three of them to a pair of double doors on the second floor. She knocked, and it opened from the inside. Beyond the doors was a vast, open space reminiscent of a museum. At the entrance of the room was a pure white pedestal upon which was displayed an intricately designed straight sword. Other white pedestals were evenly spaced nearby, displaying all kinds of things.

The trio were at a momentary loss for words before their merchant instincts kicked in. They inspected each display item in order.

"A weapon, monster parts... Ore? Wait, no way..."

"I-is this orichalcum...?"

One object in particular drew their attention. Apollo and Dyane were both stunned into silence, but Rosalie stared straight at the orichalcum, wide-eyed. "So this is what orichalcum looks like," she murmured. "This is my first time seeing it."

Dyane shook her head. "For me as well. I heard the royal family of one of our neighboring countries possessed some, but..."

"This is my second time," Apollo put in. "Though the first wasn't nearly as big as this."

They fixated on the raw orichalcum as if they were possessed. Van appeared behind them with Till, Khamsin, and Bell in tow.

“Hello, everyone!”

The three merchants jumped, startled, then turned around.

“Ah, L-Lord Van!”

“We haven’t touched it, we promise!”

“That scared me!”

They reacted like thieves caught plotting their heist. Van simply smiled. “Since I knew you were coming, I quickly put together this little room for you. Cool, right?” he asked innocently.

They looked at the various displays and nodded.

“I see. So this room serves as a display for all of Seatoh Village’s local goods? What a fascinating idea. If one is to engage in business negotiations, getting to see the products firsthand is always a good thing,” said Dyane.

“Indeed,” said Rosalie. “And this is far more exciting than having them brought out one by one. How interesting.”

Apollo said, “Standard practices dictate that we inquire as to how much the local product’s condition and quality is regulated, but I doubt that is necessary in this case.”

Van was clearly pleased by their positive responses as he smiled and passed them to stand next to the orichalcum. Then he put his hand on it. “I received this from my apkallu friends. We don’t have many pieces, but they give me a handful of them every year.”

“The apkallu?!”

“I’ve heard rumors of their existence. Are you telling me you have active relations with them?”

The three merchants nearly tripped over their own words in their haste to respond, but before they had the chance to recover, Van stupefied them again. Just as they wondered why Van was just standing next to the rare ore, the

orichalcum began to gradually change form, shining even more brilliantly than before.

They watched in silence for a few minutes without moving. In that span of time, Van successfully refined the raw orichalcum, then turned it into a beautifully slender, curved sword.

Rosalie was the first to audibly react. “This is...”

It was unclear how Van interpreted her whisper, but he nodded deeply and took the curved sword into his hands.

“Orichalcum is extremely durable, so I tried making a katana, a sword that’s specialized in cutting. I think this is probably the best sword I’ve ever made. It should be sharp enough to cut through a dragon’s scales and fangs,” explained Van.

He swung the katana in the air. The blade wasn’t tempered, and yet it possessed a tempered pattern. It was not particularly ornate, but it had an intense presence regardless.

Bell, who had been silent up to this point, smiled as he looked over at Apollo and Dyane. They were both dumbfounded.

The young merchant cleared his throat. “Ahem. As far as I can tell, everyone present wishes to do business. As such, I propose we hold earnest discussions as to how we will proceed going forward. As fellow merchants, that is. With your permission, since the Bell & Rango Company has been doing business with Lord Van for some time now, we will host these discussions. Is that acceptable to everyone?”

Bell’s ambitious smile made his earlier exhaustion seem like naught but a lie. All Apollo and Dyane could do was smile.

“But of course,” Apollo said. “Going forward, whenever the Business Guild sells goods to Seato Village, we will first approach Lord Van, then the Bell & Rango Company.”

“The Mary Chamber of Commerce will also spare no expenses. We will permanently station several veteran merchants here; please use them how you wish.”

Rosalie watched as, before her very eyes, Bell successfully maneuvered himself onto an equal footing with Apollo and Dyane. She surmised that he wanted verbal agreements from them while Van was present, but even then, his actions seemed a bit forceful to her.

“I can’t believe that gentle Bell could change so much...” she said to herself. “He must’ve really pushed himself to get to this point.” She saw a look of relief wash over Bell’s face as he received promises of cooperation from both merchants.

She smirked.

Nobility regularly sought land, power, and wealth. Such things were both their sword and their shield. Lower on the priority list, but still important, were fame, military might, and personal connections.

Hierarchies of nobility were decided first by peerage, then by status, and finally by wealth. These were things that could only rarely be changed. As such, many nobles attended social gatherings and sought to establish connections in hopes of increasing their notoriety. There were also those who, lacking land or power but possessing business acumen, opted to gather troops and cultivate their military strength. There were even those who deviated from royal law in an attempt to get ahead. But the reality was that without a great deal of luck, there was rarely any change to the hierarchy.

When the last king stepped down, meritocracy became the norm in the kingdom. It was this change that resulted in Jalpa and Panamera’s rise in social status. While it was a net positive for the kingdom to have talented people rise through the ranks, not everyone saw it that way. There were only so many seats at the top. For someone to rise, someone else inevitably had to fall.

Jalpa and Panamera had brought their might to bear, silencing their detractors among the older, distinguished families. They had undoubtedly utilized their connections and accomplishments on the battlefield to make this happen.

But me? Little Van? I was built different.

I was sent out to the least viable piece of land in the marquis' territory and, despite being a child, charged with becoming the lord of a village on the brink of collapse. And as a child, I subjugated a dragon with only a small fighting force and was consequently granted a peerage. Then I quietly provided aid in the war against Yelenetta. There were some who were vaguely aware of my participation, but only vaguely. Quite frankly, to those without knowledge of my accomplishments as a new baron, all of this sounded dubious at best.

Most people likely believed that Jalpa was propping me up in a way that the other nobles wouldn't notice. At my current rate, it wouldn't be terribly surprising if the ones with superior peerages started picking fights with me.

Unfortunately for them, I got in a little over my head and accidentally showed off to the Business Guild—one of the largest guilds in the world. It wasn't my fault, really; Apollo's reactions (and the Mary Chamber of Commerce members' as well) were just so entertaining that I couldn't help myself. As a result, I got myself recognized by the Business Guild in an official capacity.

I would hear about this further down the line, but apparently there were several types of working relationships with the Business Guild. At the top were those conducted with first-class companies who maintained a certain standard recognized by the guild. The guild conducted business equally with these companies, and even left room for negotiation. On the other hand, when a regular company was welcomed into the fold, the guild usually conducted business from a position of power, preventing the smaller company from turning down their requests. Despite this, many companies were still happy to join, because the opportunity to expand their market into other countries or continents was worth being at a disadvantage with the guild.

Of course, the Bell & Rango Company and I had sealed the best possible working relationship with the guild. We would be able to do business with them on equal terms.

"We're going to draw attention. We're going to draw way too much attention..." With my head in my hands, I glanced sidelong at Bell and Rango, who were toasting each other merrily.

"We won, my brother!"

“We sure have, my brother.” They tapped their glasses together, sharing that odd exchange. I wasn’t getting involved in that.

I suppose they’re only looking at this from a merchant’s perspective. That makes sense, I guess.

I sighed. Apollo, who had been carrying on a discussion with Dyane, noticed and gave me an incisive look. “Is something the matter? If you have any questions about our deal, I would be happy to answer them. Better to hash it all out now than later,” he said cheerfully. “Would you like to discuss the frequency of our dealings? Or perhaps there’s something the Business Guild can acquire for you?”

I gave him a wry smile and waved him off. We were in the reception room, closing the deal, having made progress in our talks. Apollo, Dyane, and I were seated at the table; Bell, Rango, and Rosalie were also present, and I had Till and Khamsin on quiet, unobtrusive standby over in the corner. I meant to brush Apollo off, but unfortunately, his question prompted everyone to focus on me.

“No, it’s just a personal problem,” I hedged. “Things have been going a bit too well for me, and now I’m worried about how much attention I might draw.”

The others exchanged looks. It was Apollo and Dyane who caught my implication. “I see,” replied Apollo, rubbing his jaw. “If I remember correctly, you only just acquired a peerage, correct? Given your age, I’m guessing some surmise that you’re receiving assistance from somewhere.”

Dyane nodded. “Indeed. If I hadn’t seen this place firsthand, I likely would have come to the same conclusion. I heard plenty of rumors about you before I arrived, but I didn’t expect things to be like this.”

Rosalie listened intently, nodding multiple times. “I suppose even nobles have their own anxieties. For us merchants, promotions and celebrity link directly to profit, so we would never think to worry about such a thing...though we do sometimes put forward proposals that would benefit our business rivals as well.”

Her explanation made Bell laugh bitterly and shake his head. “Maintaining customers’ trust and striving to benefit related businesses and companies... Expanding horizontally to make the best use of new markets... The Mary

Chamber of Commerce is only capable of this because your merchants are a talented bunch. The average merchant might stumble onto such opportunities, but they wouldn't be able to take advantage of them."

"Oh, my. Are you trying to suggest that the Bell & Rango Company, with its tremendous forward momentum, isn't 'normal'?"

Bell scrunched up his face and hunched down in his seat. "C-cut me some slack, Miss Rosalie." Then he chuckled, setting his glass on the table and turning to me. "No... In the end we were lucky as well. Normal merchants who ran into such a blessed stroke of good fortune that even we were able to take advantage of the opportunities before us. That's all there is to it."

Rango nodded along as Bell spoke. Apollo beamed and said, "What an invigorating turn of events. You never have more fun than when you're on your way up. The work is just as difficult, but the excitement and accomplishment you feel as each new endeavor bears fruit has no compare. Heck, I'm tempted to quit my job as an investigator and join the Bell & Rango Company."

This was an astonishing thing for a member of one of the world's biggest organizations to say. Dyane turned toward him, speechless. Noticing her gaze, Apollo shrugged pleasantly.

"Just a little joke," he clarified. "Things at the Business Guild are shaping up to be equally exciting now that we'll be doing business with Lord Van and the Bell & Rango Company. Things will be busy, and I'm ready. I plan on making as much money as possible." He punctuated this declaration with a sip of alcohol from his glass. "If anyone gets in the way of our business, it won't matter who they are. Commoner or noble, I will repel them all...from the shadows, anyway."

With that, the audit came to a close without incident. From our perspective, it was a huge success. Sure, we'd stoked a fire in the heart of the Business Guild investigator...but that energy was being directed into something positive, so whatever.

The day after we finalized the deal, I resumed the merchants' tour of Seatoh Village. I even showed them where the apkallu lived, which shocked them all.

After that, they were on their way home. They had apparently intended to take a look at the dungeon, but now decided to beeline home instead, so as not

to let such a massive business opportunity slip through their fingers.

Personally, I'd wanted to see how they'd react to the rest area I built for the adventurers, but oh well. That could wait for the next visit.

Anyhow, it was undoubtedly a win for us to have attained the right to work with the Business Guild, especially considering their international influence. I honestly wasn't sure what I would have done if they decided we were being dishonest and prevented us from doing business with other companies or countries. It didn't matter, though, because we'd hit a game-ending grand slam.

With a Business Guild investigator showering us with attention, other nobles wouldn't find it easy to mess with us.

"Man, thank goodness," I said. "Things didn't go how I expected, but all's well that ends well."

Bell and Rango exchanged nods, enjoying our little celebration. Bell said, "Seriously. Now we'll be on equal footing with the Mary Chamber of Commerce. We got ourselves the highest level of trading authority there is."

"Despite being a brand-new business, too," added Rango. "Other companies won't be able to ignore us anymore."

After the close of yesterday's talks, they'd both managed to relax a bit. In fact, they'd come to my office in the manor this morning and had been chattering excitedly about the future all day. "Are you sure you should both be here?"

Bell grinned. "That shouldn't be a problem. We put a temporary customer limit on the store, and our employees are good enough to be apprentices at this point. They should be able to manage things for us just fine."

Someone knocked at the door. I turned, and Khamsin nodded and opened it. Till entered with a young man from the Bell & Rango Company in tow. If memory served, he was someone with valuable business acumen.

He lowered his head, unable to hide the disapproval on his face. Then he glared at Bell and Rango. "Mr. President."

The pair grimaced in tandem. "Is there still work to be done?" Rango asked, just as Bell said, "Did we screw up?"

The young man's frown deepened. "The adventurers are protesting, and we're getting complaints from the other villagers over it."

"What?"

"From a single day of customer and product limitations?"

Bell and Rango blinked, confused. The young man sighed and shook his head, one hand planted on his hip. "We get new villagers here every month thanks to the rumors circulating about us. Your product limitations meant we sold out of pretty much everything early this morning and stopped purchasing monster materials and ore before noon. The adventurers who've just arrived had no alternatives, so they're all complaining."

"Wait, we're still getting new adventurers?!"

"Didn't we just get some the day before yesterday?"

"We get more and more every month. There's nothing strange about this. We should have anticipated it."

Silence settled over the three of them for a moment after this back-and-forth. At this point, the two merchants were being soundly scolded by their employee.

I knew Bell and Rango were being too optimistic. I waved a hand, smirking. "Don't worry about me. The two of you should head back. Good luck!"

For some reason, the young man then turned to me. "Lord Van, we don't have enough of your weapons left. When do you plan to restock? We're sold out of your long swords, straight swords, katana, and spears."

"Wha...?" His tone was polite, but there was an undeniable hint of displeasure in his voice. Unable to help myself, I responded bluntly that I'd just restocked the store's supply last month. With over a hundred weapons, in fact!

My weapons were priced by size. Large ones ran anywhere from ten to twenty gold, mid-sized weapons were five to ten gold, and small weapons were one to five gold. Those were, to my knowledge, pretty high prices for iron weapons. I could also make mithril weapons, but those were order-only and were priced at the market value.

This young man was saying that they had nearly sold all of that. I hand-made

every one of those weapons; it's not like the adventurers would have needed to replace them. "...How many new customers are we getting each month?" I asked.

"Last month we had two hundred or so. About one hundred of them have since left the village. This month, we've had more than three hundred visitors, with about one hundred of them leaving to serve as bodyguards for traveling merchants or heading to neighboring nations as mercenaries."

"That's a fifty percent increase!" I replied, shocked.

New customers meant these were probably visitors who heard the rumors and came to check things out. To think there'd be a fifty percent increase in just a month... What were people saying about Seatoh Village?

I knew from the written reports that the village's population had seen an increase, but at our current rate, the adventurers' town would become overpopulated. The Chivalric Order was growing by the month, and if the population kept rising, it would only become more difficult to manage.

"This is bad! I need to make adjustments before the citizens' concerns become a massive issue!" I said to myself, standing in a panic. To Bell and the others, I said, "I'll have weapons ready by tomorrow! For now, everyone get to work!" Then, turning to Khamsin and Till: "I need the two of you to hurry and summon Esparda and Dee! We're holding an emergency meeting!"

"Yes, Lord Van!" They straightened up and sprinted out of the office.

My anxiety about the Business Guild had made me neglect my duties as the lord. Normally, Esparda would poke and prod at me to get to it, but this time he only gave me the usual written reports. He probably saw that I was too busy for multitasking.

After a short time, Dee arrived at my office. "What is this about an emergency?!"

"Meeting. An emergency meeting."

He visibly relaxed for some reason. "Hmm, an emergency meeting, you say..." he whispered before taking a seat.

Esparda was in charge of the newly created adventurers' town, so he was a bit tardy. As he swept through the door, he said, with a polite bow of his head, "I heard we were having an emergency meeting."

It felt like it had been a while since I last saw the two of them. Before the whole Business Guild thing came up, I had been practicing my sword work and studying every single day, so there hadn't been enough time for me to feel nostalgic...but I digress. "Thank you for coming, both of you."

I gestured and Esparda quietly took a seat. Till and Khamsin closed the door behind him and relocated to my side. Once I was sure everyone was looking at me, I spoke.

"As you are all aware, it is thanks to your hard work that everything with the Business Guild turned out as well as it did. I'm sure some nobles will shun me as a result, but I don't think we need to concern ourselves too much with that." Esparda and Dee both nodded. "Right now, our biggest problem is our ballooning population. I originally envisioned the adventurers' town as an inn town of sorts, but now I'm considering expanding it."

Dee and Esparda exchanged glances. Then, after a second of silence, Esparda nodded and Dee smirked victoriously.

I blinked. "What? What kind of reaction is that?"

My confusion made Dee laugh. "No, no. You see, last week, this old butler came to me about how he felt you needed more manpower. He said that he and the others had to do whatever they could to help. And you know what I told him? I said that there was no way Lord Van didn't understand the situation in his own territory," he said meaningfully.

Esparda frowned. "I did no such thing. I did, however, say that we should use the Chivalric Orders to gather as many materials as possible for when you decided on our direction going forward."

"You certainly seemed plenty concerned at the time."

"A misunderstanding."

It was unusual for Dee to tease Esparda like this, but Esparda just shrugged it off. It seemed they had discussed the issue with one another long before I even

noticed it existed.

“So you guys didn’t say anything because you feel like I’m capable of handling things on my own, huh? Thanks.”

They both blinked at me, and just like that, the atmosphere in the room lightened. Dee said, “Though you’re far from being the best swordsman in the country.”

“And you still don’t possess all the necessary knowledge of a lord, nor the foresight of a nobleman,” put in Esparda.

Chapter 5: More Shops!

I SET OUT TO INSPECT THE ADVENTURERS' TOWN. Well, it was less of an inspection and more of a leisurely stroll, except for the huge group of people I took with me. My vibes were positively majestic. I looked forward to seeing my citizens' shocked faces.

"Ah, Lord Van."

"Lord Van's here to hang out!"

"Lord Van! I finally got my hands on some mithril ore, so can you make me a short sword?"

"Out of the way! I'm first!"

For some reason, the adventurers who spotted me in town were clambering over each other to pal it up with me. Some people even approached me with ore and swords in hand, hoping to get me to craft them something.

Wait, I am the lord, right? I'm a baron, right? I was suddenly very concerned.

Dee, meanwhile, took a furious step forward. The veins on his head were bulging out. "Do you fools want a beatdown? There's a limit to how rude you can be!"

His roar echoed throughout the town. The ruffian adventurers fell silent.

I smiled wryly and looked over at Esparda. "Reading your reports and seeing things firsthand are pretty different experiences. It's clear to me now that we're short on stores, and we don't have nearly enough storage space to put materials in. That said, I doubt the Bell & Rango Company has the means to open a new shop," I lamented, looking around at the bustling town.

Esparda narrowed his eyes at me. "As I wrote in the report I gave you twenty days ago, there is an individual who wishes to do business with the adventurers here and would like you to craft a building for them, should you have the time

to do so.”

Cold sweat ran down my back. His tone was as scary as always, but his eyes concealed a terrifying amount of pressure. “O-oh, right. That report. Yeah. I know. Of course. For adventurers, their bodies are basically capital. Um, so they want to build, uh...an inn...?”

I squirmed. Esparda closed his eyes and exhaled. “Correct. They wish to build an inn that can serve meals as well.”

“Y-yeah, I know. This town only has the one Bell & Rango Company store, if I remember correctly, so that’s a good idea.” Somehow I’d managed to answer correctly based on pure instinct. I was so relieved that I could have died then and there.

Esparda nodded shallowly. “I went ahead and checked whether they were capable of running a business. I concluded that they had the necessary business acumen and culinary skills. They have a family, as well, so staffing is unlikely to be a problem.”

“That’s perfect, then. All right, I’ll get on it right now. Are they an original Seatoh villager?”

“No. A former adventurer. Kusala, a member of Ortho’s party.”

“Wait, Kusala? Seriously?! When did he become a permanent villager?” I couldn’t hide my shock.

Esparda frowned down at me again. “Had you properly read my report, you wouldn’t be so surprised.”

“Ah, sorry... I didn’t actually read it...” I decided to apologize before I made him genuinely angry. This was one of my forty-eight pieces of worldly wisdom. Not even a demon like Esparda could snap at me now!

Just as this battle of wits was about to kick off, the adventurers and the members of the Esparda Chivalric Order started buzzing loudly about something. A knight came running from beyond the main gate.

“They’re home!” the knight said, delivering the report even as he tried to catch his breath.

He hadn't said *who* was home, but there weren't many Seatoh Village residents who had left the region lately. "Arte and the others?"

The knight straightened up. "Yes! Lady Arte and the members of the Seatoh Chivalric Order have returned. Sir Ortho and the other adventurers are leading the way! They appear to have sustained minimal casualties!"

"Thank goodness. However things panned out, I'm just glad that everyone got back safely."

Buoyed by genuine relief, I made my way to the gates to greet them. When I arrived, the group had just entered the town. Seated in the cabs of the various carriages were the second squad members of my beloved machine bow force. They greeted me with big smiles and nary a scratch on them.

Ortho and the others were nearby, but they didn't come over to me, just smirked at me. Before I could ask them what was up, though, the carriage that had stopped in the center of the formation opened up, and everything became clear.

The elf mage, Pluriel, exited first. She smiled at me, then cast her gaze to the inside of the carriage. That was when Arte, clad in her light dress, stepped out, her beautiful white hair swaying with each step.

The horror of war. A long journey by carriage. And then facing the sight of her own home being invaded by an enemy force. Any one of those could justify her reaction, never mind all of them at once.

"...Ngh..." The moment Arte saw me, all the tears she had been fighting back rose to the surface. In full view of everyone, she ran to me and wrapped her arms around me. Not a single person present could blame her for it.

I didn't realize you could run so well in a dress, I thought inanely. Then I realized Arte was shuddering in my arms. I didn't know what to say, so I did my best: "Welcome home, Arte. I know you gave it your all out there."

Arte sobbed even harder and wailed, "Lord Van! I... I...!"

"Don't worry. You don't have to say anything. We can talk later." I smiled at the small girl, who was crying so hard she could barely put words together, and gently rubbed her back in order to calm her down.

“Aw, man. Lord Van made her cry!”

“Hey, no teasing.”

“Why are *you* crying?”

There we stood in the center of the village: the daughter of a count, sobbing, and a young baron trying to comfort her. This was bad. If we weren’t careful, they’d start adapting the story into an opera. With Arte still in my arms, I cast a pleading look toward Ortho and the others. Ortho gave me a dazzling smile and a thumbs-up, and Pluriel seemed to just be enjoying the display of heartfelt emotion.



They weren't going to be of any help.

Still, I wasn't going anywhere until Arte calmed down. I glanced around, uncertain what to do, but once I looked back at the crying girl wrapped around me, I gave up on trying to find an out. *Whatever. This is fine. I don't care if they make us the subject of a song or something. I will be collecting royalties, though,* I thought as I gently rubbed Arte's back.

Arte

THE MOMENT WE ENTERED THE ADVENTURERS' village, I felt tension release from my shoulders. Was I relieved? I was so focused on getting the job done that I hadn't noticed how tense I had been since we left. Now that the tension was gone, exhaustion rushed in to replace it.

I was traveling in the carriage, so I should have been less tired than the adventurers who were scouting things out on the ground. Yet I felt as though I would collapse.

"Just a little further. Soon you'll be able to sleep comfortably in your own bed again," Pluriel said, kind and encouraging. She was a grown woman who had experienced all sorts of hardships in her life, and not just because she was an adventurer, either. She had a sense of poise about her that I found tremendously dashing.

I couldn't help but compare myself to her. "I'm just no good."

Pluriel looked at me but I cast my eyes downward, unable to bring myself to return her gaze. *I'm truly pathetic. I know so little about the world, and I can't do anything without the aid of others. Even worse, I stew in my own self-pity. How could I not hate myself? What must Pluriel think of me? I bet she thinks me pathetic, even laughable.*

The embarrassment and shame were too much. I couldn't look up at her anymore.

"And why do you think that?" Pluriel asked, gazing straight at me.

I trembled at the firmness in her voice. My body often locked up when I thought someone might be angry at me. I clenched my trembling fingertips into a fist, trying to convince myself I was strong, then said, “I’m not like Lord Van. I don’t have the confidence to issue orders to others, and I can’t decide what to do without getting someone else’s opinion.”

She shrugged her shoulders and sighed. “Believe me when I say this, knowing full well I might be punished for it...”

“Y-yes?” She was angry. I froze up, and unthinkingly raised my face to meet her eyes.

But then she did something unexpected: she smiled warmly at me. “Frankly, I think you’re incredible. I find it hard to fathom why you lack confidence in your own abilities. I certainly didn’t have such a good head on my shoulders at your age.”

“I’m sure that’s not...” She was offering me affirmation, and here I was, already rejecting it. Why did I do that when she was trying to comfort me? The thought made me sad, but Pluriel shook her head.

“Look around you. Ortho, Kusala, the others... They’re all over thirty years old. They still act like kids, right?” She giggled.

“Yes, that’s true... Oh!” I had unconsciously agreed with her, and by the time I realized that, Pluriel was laughing outright.

“Lady Arte, I think you’ve probably always been surrounded by adults. Adults who were incredibly talented, adults who were skilled leaders... All sorts of adults. But those people didn’t start that way. Everyone put in the work and accumulated the experiences that made them into who they are now.”

“I-is that really true? I mean, Lord Van...”

Pluriel waved a hand. “We can’t count Lord Van. I mean, think about it. He has Sir Esparda and Sir Dee with him, right? Not only are they both older, they’ve also both gone through a ton of real-life combat. Lady Panamera is the same; I think she’s probably fought her way through some horrendous situations.”

“You’re right,” I said slowly. “But they’re all always so calm and confident. Can

I ever be like that?”

Pluriel nodded firmly. “Of course.”

My chest felt lighter. One day I would become an adult, and maybe, just maybe, I would be able to save Lord Van in his hour of need. Perhaps this was wishful thinking, but I hoped that someday I would be able to aid him. I lifted my chin up—and heard yelling from outside.

“Lady Arte! Lord Van has come to greet us!”

The moment I heard his name, my heart began to race. My body moved as if it weren’t my own, and when I opened the door and looked outside, I saw two taller figures in the town ahead of me. The slender one was Esparda, and the one with the wider frame was Dee.

Between them was Lord Van, whose eyes were open wide. He blinked a few times, then smiled kindly at me.

I leapt from the carriage and ran to him. I don’t remember much about what happened after that, but based on what the others told me, I clung to him and wailed.

My dream of becoming a wonderful, mature woman like Pluriel was still a distant one.

Van

THE GROUP I’D SENT WITH ARTE DISPERSED. When I told them to collect their reward from Esparda later, the adventurers laughed and scattered, their loud voices echoing behind them.

The machine bow squad stood at attention and delivered their combat report, then headed back toward Seatoh Village. It really seemed like they had worked their butts off. Before leaving, they quietly asked me to tell Arte she had done well. They must’ve grown quite fond of her.

For her part, Arte stayed by my side. “Are you going to make something here?” she asked unexpectedly.

I turned to her and nodded. “Yeah, that’s the plan. Pretty much all merchants and travelers pass straight through the adventurers’ town to get to Seatoh Village, so I wanted to build some shops, an inn, and a restaurant here.”

She flashed me a tired smile.

“Are you okay?” I asked, concerned. “You should really rest after such a long trip.”

But she just shook her head, still smiling. “Thank you for your concern, but I am fine. You indulged me, loaned me your machine bow squad, and hired adventurers for me, so now I want to help you as much as I can. That’s why I want to watch you work: so I can understand what you are trying to do and what you are thinking.”

It was rare that Arte expressed her thoughts so clearly and concisely. She even looked me in the eyes while she was doing it.

“I see... But if things get rough, let me know, okay? I can get someone to prepare a chair for you.”

“Thank you very much, but I am fine with standing and walking.” Arte clenched her tiny fist in front of her chest.

She certainly has the resolve, I thought. I noticed then that her expression seemed even more dignified than usual. Perhaps her experiences on the battlefield had led to a change of heart. That was pretty amazing for someone who was only ten years old, but she still couldn’t hide the fatigue settling over her.

I smiled and asked Till to prepare a small one-horse carriage. “Then shall we move by carriage? If you’re willing to help me think about work, I would love to have you with me.”

She blinked in disbelief. Then I stepped onto the carriage ahead of her, and she gave me a warm smile. “Thank you, Lord Van.”

I reached out to help her climb into the carriage. Till watched us with a peculiar smile on her face. With some effort, I ignored her. Honestly, though, the second Arte and I sat down in the carriage, everyone around us started grinning in our direction. It was all a little embarrassing. I ignored the smirking

peanut gallery, too, and recalled what I needed to focus on.

“As far as opening a new shop goes, the Bell & Rango Company is already stretched too thin, so I’ll have to handle things until the Business Guild and the Mary Chamber of Commerce send assistance. Khamsin, I want you to go to our newest villagers and find any former merchants among them.”

“Right away!” Khamsin replied succinctly and quickly went into action.

Not long after, Esparda chimed in. “In that case, I will loosen my standards somewhat and secure a few individuals.” With that, he trailed after Khamsin.

We should be fine with those two on the case. I turned my attention back to the street. “First, let’s prepare the new inn. If it’s going to offer dining services, then the first floor should be a cafeteria. I don’t know how many people it’ll serve, so I should probably err on the side of caution and make it big, huh? The adventurers’ town is relatively narrow, so the building should be three to four floors tall. The bigger the better.” Next I had to select a space in the center of the town. “Let me see... It would make sense to put it near the entrance.”

Just as I was trying to settle on a plot of land alongside of the town’s main street, a familiar face appeared from the rear of the carriage.

“Lord Van? What are you doing?”

It was Pluriel. When she arrived earlier, she was with the large group of adventurers I’d hired for the job, so I expressed my general gratitude toward all of them; I planned to hold a barbeque for Ortho and the others at a later date.

“I’m making an inn. Someone who wants to start a business requested one.”

Behind Pluriel, Kusala was standing next to Ortho. He looked puzzled. “Huh? An inn? I actually put in a request for one not too long ago...”

I nodded at him and pointed at an open plot of land. “Yup. You asked for one, so I’m making you an inn.”

Pluriel and Ortho whirled around to stare at Kusala. “Wait,” Pluriel said, “you are...?”

I nodded at Kusala as he stepped forward in a panic. His adventurer companions were staring at him. “Um, you’re really making me an inn? That’s

amazing, and I'm chuffed, but, uh, there's a lot about my current financial situation that I sorta gotta go over. I've saved more money in the last year than ever before, but I'm still not sure I can purchase a whole inn..."

I waved a hand at him, dismissing this. "I'll give you a good deal. Fifty gold. I'll even throw in the furnishings."

Kusala looked like he might pass out. Ortho and Pluriel's faces were twitching. Kusala said, "I-I'm sure that's how much it would cost to build a brand-new inn, but it's a little hard for an adventurer to come up with that kind of money."

"Even if the whole party chipped in, we could only come up with half of that," Pluriel put in.

As I listened to them discuss the matter, it dawned on me that my sense for this kind of thing was out of whack. This was going to be a problem, since it was likely that others would approach me about starting new business ventures too. If I did things for free each time, though, the orders would never stop coming in; I'd have no time to do anything else.

In that case, maybe I should drop the price by thirty gold? I thought. But Kusala looked at me then, sweat rolling down his forehead, and spoke up with a snort, like he was some kind of deviant.

"O-okay," he yelled, "I understand! I don't got the money on me right now, but I can save that much in five years!"

Ortho and Pluriel looked at each other and burst into laughter. "Lord Van, I'll contribute as well. Um, do you mind if we fill in the rest with a loan...?"

"Please."

I raised a hand and smirked. "That's no problem at all. All right, let me get started," I said, turning to the pile of wood blocks I'd had my people prepare for me.

I decided to go with a classic Gothic design for the hotel. It was going to be a large building, so it would take a bit of time. I wanted to craft a wine cellar, too, so I added a basement to the building. I loved this sort of thing.

"A nice big basement... I'll put the kitchen and the dining space on the first

floor, a front desk, then guest rooms on the second and third floors... I'm out of materials, so I haven't made any furniture yet, but the rooms should be plenty comfortable compared to any other inns."

I turned around to find Kusala bug-eyed and frozen solid. Ortho and Pluriel also wore distant expressions.

"...I bet," Ortho said, sounding exasperated.

"Are you sure this isn't going to cost fifty *large* gold?" Pluriel asked.

I tilted my head. "Oh, if you're okay with large gold, I could settle for five of them?"

Kusala reached over and slapped his hand over Pluriel's mouth to keep her from screaming. Instead, she made a weird noise and fell over. "F-fifty gold works just fine for me!" Kusala insisted. "Thanks!"

"Oh, okay. Pluriel, are you good?"

"Awesome! I'm going to make this the best inn in the whole damn world!" Kusala jumped for joy, failing to notice Pluriel holding her face in one hand and glaring at the back of his head.

"With a hotel this big, you're gonna have to hire quite a few employees. Cleaning this place will take one to two days, bud," Ortho explained, looking stern.

"I'll make it shine each and every day!"

Seeing Kusala brush off Ortho's concerns, I decided to offer a bit of advice. "The adventurers who stay in town make a decent chunk of change, so I suggest setting the price on the high side. You can use that extra income to hire some cleaners. I think that you should also keep your hiring standards high, personally. Keep it to people who'll make a good impression."

As I spoke, though, I realized that my proposal would require a heavy initial investment.

"I'll float you the initial capital. Do you want me to put out a notice that you're hiring?"

Kusala was visibly shaken by my question. "Oh, um, really? In that case..."

We were interrupted by someone from the street. “Pardon me.”

I turned around and was treated to the sight of a gorgeous woman with deep brown hair that swayed in the wind. It was Flamiria. She wore a gentle smile, even as she narrowed her sleepy eyes. “Lord Van, thank you for always taking such good care of my husband.”

“Miss Flamiria! What brings you here?” Her sudden arrival had taken me off guard.

She looked over at Kusala. “Well, it appears as though my husband is trying to start a new venture as a businessman rather than an adventurer. Likely in consideration of my own feelings...”

Kusala slapped his chest and nodded. “Leave it to me! I’m gonna be the best hotel owner in the world, and I’ll make sure you live a safe and comfortable life!”

Flamiria’s laugh sounded pained. She shook her head. “That’s not what this is about. I simply wanted to live a peaceful life away from the cruelty of war. A life together with you. I would have been thrilled with a small business that the two of us could run together. Not something as big and spectacular as this...”

“Flamiria...” Kusala looked surprised. Ortho, it seemed, was moved to tears.

This conversation seemed to be reaching a climax, but I was having none of it. “Nope, not happening. The Kusala Hotel exists now. I can’t put it back in the box.” Everyone’s gazes swiveled toward me. “I understand what you’re saying, Miss Flamiria, but frankly, I need all the help I can get. My goal is to create a livable town and increase jobs for the residents.”

My goal was for this place’s economy to stabilize itself without requiring anything from me, so the whole hotel situation was extremely important to me. That’s why I was so blunt about needing Kusala’s cooperation.

But Flamiria cast me a remorseful look. “My word, is that so? How could we ever ignore a request from you, to whom we owe so much? But living day to day with so much debt can be very painful. Could you show us some grace?”

She bowed her head deeply. Every adventurer and merchant in the vicinity turned to look at me.

Wow. Flamiria comes off kind of mellow and ditzy, but she picked the perfect time and place to initiate negotiations. My intent was to cultivate an atmosphere where people felt comfortable proposing business ideas to me. I had to handle this the right way.

Even more importantly, I would literally start sobbing if rumors went around that I was some sort of Scrooge.

“Sure, okay,” I said. “How much works for you?”

And so I asked her what her price point was, all while trying to keep the situation in check.

She blinked in surprise. “Thank you. I have no words for your kindness and generosity. Thank you so much.” Once again, she bowed her head deeply. Kusala, who looked like he could barely keep up with the conversation, quickly followed suit.

And just like that, our onlookers began to cheer. “That’s our Lord Van!”

“It’d cost platinum coinage for a snazzy new building like that anywhere else!”

Hearing the comments people were making, Flamiria’s smile grew even bigger. “In that case, Lord Van, if possible, I would like to discuss pricing while we tour the interior of the building...”

She was far shrewder than her appearance suggested. I had the feeling that she was orchestrating the flow of the entire conversation. If that was the case, she would make one hell of a politician.

“Fine by me,” I said, keeping my suspicion to myself. “Let’s all take a look together.” Till, Dee, and Ortho’s party all nodded.

I opened the front doors, which were a bit oversized, and entered the hotel. I had yet to install light fixtures, but the massive windows surrounding the cafeteria solved the lighting problem just fine.

“It’s so spacious,” Flamiria murmured in a surprised tone as she gazed up at the walls and the high ceiling.

“Wow! It’s huge!” Kusala sounded thoroughly impressed. His voice bounced off the walls and he smiled, looking around the room.

There was a door leading to the stairs and the toilet. I had also set up a counter, so they could open a bar if they chose to do so. Once they'd had a good, long look around the room, I said, "I'll be making tables and chairs later. Oh, and I'll hurry and prepare the lights for you guys. Let's see..." I pointed to the back. "How about we head to the kitchen next?"

I opened the door in the back of the room, revealing a long hallway. On the right was the kitchen, and on the left were stairs that led to the basement. The basement itself was still just an empty storage space, so I decided to lead them through the right-hand door first.

Passing through the door, we were met with a professional kitchen that could fit about ten people. "I'll prepare your cooking supplies later. All right, last but not least, here are the guest rooms."

This time I led them up to the second floor. I had gone out of my way to make the stairs and hallways wide. The second floor was populated with single-person rooms, while the third floor had rooms big enough to hold three occupants each. Each room had wooden flooring and its own toilet to go with it.

FYI, most hotels and inns in this world lacked baths. Large bathrooms just didn't really exist. But this hotel had working showers.

"There's no running hot or cold water right now, but eventually, there'll be enough to wash up with." I explained how to use the showers, and Pluriel's eyes began to sparkle.

"Depending on the price, this place could find itself fully booked on the regular!"

"Yup," Ortho agreed. "The adventurers who already live here won't use it so much, but folks who come to dungeon dive or visit Seatoh Village are going to need a place to stay. Plus, the people coming back from the dungeon are going to have lots of money to spend."

I acknowledged this with a little nod. "After this, I plan to build a public bath next door. That way, people staying at the hotel can also use it as well."

"What's that? Is it like the bathhouse next to the manor?"

"Yup! Though it'll be a little smaller than that one." I was already putting the

building together in my mind.

I'd made Seatoh Village's bathhouse large to accommodate the influx of citizens and set the entry price dirt cheap. But the adventurers' town didn't need something as grand as that. People would be off at the dungeon for days at a time, and if they took any guard jobs or bandit fighting gigs, they'd be gone for even longer stretches. As such, at any given time there were anywhere from three hundred to five hundred adventurers in town. There were potentially a thousand or so total adventurers operating out of Seatoh Village, but they wouldn't all be using the hotel at once.

That was why I planned to make a comfy public bath, not unlike the ones you found in Japan. The facility would be able to hold fifty men and fifty women.

"Oh, and while the Bell & Rango Company already has a store in town, this place also needs a blacksmith, a carpenter, and a clothing shop. Personally, I want a bakery and a pastry shop... Think there's anyone around who can bake?"

"I-I see."

Ortho and the others had nodded as I spoke at length about my ambitions for the town, but they didn't really seem to understand what I was saying. For my part, I'd already constructed a mental image of the main street, one lined with shops and businesses.

"Things are going to get really busy, but first I have to finish this hotel," I said.

With that, I got to crafting the rest of the windows. Once the interior and exterior were complete, I set up the water supply and drainage system.

"Okay, all I have left are the furnishings, lighting, and the workers," I announced, returning to the large cafeteria and facing the others. I looked at Flamiria's face and recalled that we had agreed to talk business. "Ah, right. Fifty gold was a bit high, right? After looking around, what would you say is a fair price?"

For a moment she seemed stunned, but she collected herself and flashed me that warm smile of hers. "Actually, Lord Van... I never intended on having you lower the price for us. It might take some time, but I promise we will pay you fifty or even a hundred gold, if necessary," she said, lowering her head.

Several of the people standing around us looked baffled. I smirked. “I thought that might be the case. After all, with how much Kusala makes, fifty gold shouldn’t be that difficult to come up with.”

Till seemed puzzled. “What is going on?”

I continued, “You picked that moment to bring up price negotiations specifically because of where we were, right? You knew I couldn’t afford to turn down your request to lower the price.”

Flamiria gave me a troubled smile. “I apologize for being so calculating. In my own foolish way, I wanted to help develop the town’s economy, so I took the liberty of trying to make this environment conducive to new businesses... But now I realize that was tremendously thoughtless of me. You have my sincerest apologies.”

I panicked and waved my hand. “No, no. There’s no need to apologize. More than anything, I’m worried that some folks will get the wrong impression of you.”

Flamiria put a hand to her chest and narrowed her eyes. “Thank you for your concern. I can’t help but doubt your age when we exchange words, Lord Van. Fear not, however; I have my husband with me, and even if people think poorly of me now, once we open the hotel, I will change their minds.”

Her strong, determined words belied her appearance. Even Ortho and the others looked surprised. Kusala, however, was nodding tearfully; Flamiria definitely had the power in their relationship.

“All right, in that case, you guys can pay me whenever. Just get everything you need together. Once they have a little bit of leeway, I’m going to have the Bell & Rango Company open another shop here, too.”

“Understood.”

“You got it!”

The couple lowered their heads in gratitude.

That was how Kusala the Adventurer career-hopped to become the owner and manager of the Kusala Hotel.

Chapter 6: The Dwarves

KHAMSIN AND ESPARDA WERE IN THE PROCESS OF picking out people who could start up new businesses in the adventurers' town, but it was taking some time and they hadn't come back yet. I also put in a request to the Bell & Rango Company for a new store, so Rango gathered some of his apprentice merchants and whisked them over to me.

"This store will primarily deal in groceries and daily necessities. We'll share a chunk of the main branch's stock, but for the most part, this store will have to manage its own inventory. The Mary Chamber of Commerce will conduct negotiations with both branches," Rango explained to his apprentices. "The plan is to have a shop set up across from here that will buy and sell materials. This branch will probably be busy all the time, but don't worry, we'll be sending help from the main store.

"Additionally, since we have more orders for cheap weapons and equipment, we'll prepare a shop here that can sell more of those. It will coordinate with the main branch, and half of the workers there will be from our store in Seatoh Village. Any questions so far?"

The apprentices, men and women of all ages, raised their hands. One asked, "About the store that will handle materials. How many employees will work there?"

"Five people for purchases, three for sales, one store manager, and one associate manager."

"Most of the adventurers in the area are in this town. Wouldn't it be wise to decrease the number of people at the main branch and focus on the stores here?"

"If the stores here find themselves understaffed, we can provide assistance, but there's no plan to change the number of employees. If someone's in a hurry to make a purchase and the stores here are too busy to handle them, we can

direct them to the main branch. Precious materials like dragon parts will also only be handled over there. The Adventurers' Guild is going to increase their staff so they can handle dismantling monster corpses, which will reduce the burden here as well."

Rango answered each question precisely and eloquently, every bit the capable working man.

"I have a question," I interjected. Rango turned, looking surprised. So did his apprentice merchants. "Whenever I'm sent out to battle, production of weapons and equipment grinds to a halt. Have you prepared things to sell in those eventualities?"

Rango's face twitched slightly. "We'll be sending supplies and food by carriage to the front lines, so if you could send the carriages back with weapons you've made..."

"What are you, the devil? You want me to make weapons while I'm out working? I'll die from exhaustion."

"In that case...what if you replenished the stock whenever you return to the village?"

I sighed, my shoulders sagging. "Is the only answer more work? Can't any of the new arrivals use production magic?"

"Sadly not. Also, I showed your goods to someone who used to be a blacksmith, and they said that your work would be impossible to reproduce."

I dropped my head in defeat. "I figured." My job as the lord now included carpentry, flood control, and even crafting weapons and armor, and there was nothing I could do to change that. It was...a bit much. And as if my schedule wasn't busy enough, I also had an ogre and a demon at my back, forcing me to study and train.

I had to put an end to this.

"All right. Let's set up a carpenter's workshop, a smithy, and a furniture store ASAP! The blacksmith, in particular, has to be highly skilled. If I remember correctly, there were a few experienced smiths among the most recent arrivals. What happened there?"

“Well, we haven’t been able to make a forge. We got a bunch of folks with carpentry experience together, but none of them had ever made a forge before, so...” Rango looked troubled.

Our stock was full for the moment thanks to some orders for high-quality equipment that we’d made with the Mary Chamber of Commerce, but going forward, I wanted our territory to have its own showpiece weapons and armor for sale. “Making a forge won’t be easy...” I muttered. I’d seen them on TV before, but I didn’t know exactly how they were made. If I had blueprints, I could probably make one, or at least the form of one.

An adventurer who had been watching from afar raised his hand. “Um, actually, Bacchus is in town right now. You know, that famous party of dwarf adventurers? I think they’re here to explore the dungeon...”

Rango was the first to react to this new intel. “What? Are they still in the dungeon?”

“Huh? Uh, no. I saw them at the guild this morning.”

“I can’t believe it!” He whirled on me. “Lord Van! Do you have time right now?!”

I had never received such a passionate invitation before in my life. I could only nod. “Yeah, I’m free right now.”

“Perfect! Let’s go!”

Never underestimate the power of forward momentum. The time I had set aside to construct the new buildings was ripped from my hands, just like that. That same momentum drove Rango into the town’s newly built Adventurers’ Guild Branch with such urgency I wouldn’t have blamed the adventurers if they assumed they were under attack and drew their weapons.

He crashed through the doors, making everyone in the large reception area (and bar) look in our direction. Among them was a group of shorter gentlemen.

“There they are!” Rango yelled, pointing. The dwarves frowned and turned around.

Dwarves were short and had scruffy black hair and long beards. The men

were stout and the women looked like young girls. At least, that was the image most people associated with them.

The other thing people associated with dwarves was their smithing talent.

Dwarves were called the citizens of the earth; they specialized in mining. There were a variety of theories on the subject, but one such theory posited that, historically, dwarves had been subjected to discrimination and persecution due to their appearances and ultimately driven off into the mountains. I couldn't say what was true, but that theory would certainly explain why dwarves tended not to be sociable, only trusting each other.

It was like how elves, often sought out for their beauty, or beastfolk, taken as slaves due to their usefulness in hard labor, were said to have fled into the woods and developed their own unique cultures. As a result, elves and beastfolk rarely involved themselves in the massive wars that engulfed the rest of the world, and dwarves didn't get along with the other races. I assumed that they still held a grudge over what happened in the past, because if nothing else, those dynamics between races were definitely real. So the dwarves stayed away from flatlands and woods, instead digging into mountains to create their own sphere of life.

However, according to common knowledge in this world, vicious monsters appeared far more frequently in the mountains than in other areas. The dwarves had no choice but to acquire better weaponry to protect themselves and their homes.

And here Rango was, eagerly approaching a group of dwarves. "A-are you guys Bacchus?"

The dwarves glared at him, putting up their guard. They spoke like a bunch of grumpy middle-aged men.

"And who might you be, young man?"

"What if we are?"

Excited, Rango closed the distance between them. From my perspective, he was acting like a total weirdo, enough to put the scruffy-bearded dwarves off. "I'd like to borrow your vast knowledge! We can't yet do any smithing in town!

Please, I implore you, teach us how to build a dwarven forge!" He bowed his head, pleading.

The dwarves exchanged glances. Then the one standing at the front of the group said gravely, "We're on a journey for the dwarven nation. I feel for your town, with your inability to smith, but we don't got no time."

Rango raised his head. "What happened? If there's anything we can do to help, we will! Please, just teach us...!"

"Fine, fine! Just give me some space!" Either the dwarf was overwhelmed by Rango's zeal, or he was genuinely scared of the young man. Either way, he was quickly backing up.

Once he was satisfied that Rango wouldn't approach again, the dwarf said, "It's pointless tellin' you folk, but...we can't find the materials we need for the dwarven king. Our current king is approaching the end of his life, so we have to make a weapon of orichalcum for the succession process. The problem is that, for the last twenty years, no matter how hard we've looked, we can't find no orichalcum." The rest of the dwarves nodded behind him, looking defeated. "We searched the mountains, volcanoes, and even the woods, but no luck. Human nations sometimes sell orichalcum at a high price, so we sent our allies all across the continent, but we still can't find any.

"It ain't all that surprising. The royal families all say they need the stuff, so they probably hide their shares for when the next king rises to power, like we do," the dwarf concluded in a low, sad voice. His brethren were frowning.

But Rango's eyes gleamed. "Lord Van! Orichalcum! It's orichalcum they need! If we get some, we can make a forge!" he shouted.

The dwarves sighed, exasperated. "Were you even listenin'?" asked the one who seemed to be the leader. "We just said that we can't find no orichalcum."

Rango turned to the dwarf again, smirking like a mischievous little boy. "Heh heh heh! As it happens, we have some! Right, Lord Van?" This time he turned to me.

"Vice President Rango..." said one of the apprentice merchants who had tagged along. "He's like a different person..."

“He really is...” agreed another.

The apprentices seemed to find Rango’s enthusiasm off-putting. I glanced back at my pal and laughed dryly. “Ha ha... Sorry. I already used the last piece,” I said, pulling out the two swords sitting at my hip.

They were twin swords that I’d made for self-defense purposes right after my return from the big battle, wide and only slightly curved. I’d gone a bit overboard decorating them, and they now most closely resembled thin scimitars or falchion swords.

Not to toot my own horn, but they were spectacular weapons; I’d taken advantage of the orichalcum by giving them thin blades that were hard and wouldn’t bend easily, with a sharpness that wouldn’t degrade over time. Their specs were higher than any sword I’d made before, decorative weapons notwithstanding.

But from what the dwarf man had said, their king needed to craft an orichalcum weapon for his son. What was the move here? I’d already made the weapons for myself. At a loss, I looked at Rango, whose expression probably mirrored my own.

I drew my twin swords from their sheaths and showed them to the dwarves. They looked at the swords, wide-eyed. One said, “Those are indeed orichalcum swords, and in a form I ain’t never seen before...”

“Havel, correct me if I’m wrong, but did a human make those?”

The one standing in front of the rest was named Havel, then. Havel nodded, looking at me. “Well, it’s clear they used a dwarven forge, but the smith was a human. If they had a forge that could refine orichalcum, there would’ve had to be a dwarf present. I’ve heard rumors of dwarves who lived in human nations and worked as blacksmiths, but weirdos like that are few and far between.” He was glaring now, and he spat out his next words. “In other words, those are fakes. They ain’t got no dwarven spirit in them. Even if you had a dwarven forge, without a dwarf, you couldn’t make no weapons.

“A second-rate blacksmith ain’t gonna get you anything worthwhile, even with orichalcum. Us dwarves have been refining metal since we were wee lads. Copper, iron, silver, mithril... We train to be able to temper all of it, eventually

allowin' us to hear the voices of the metal."

Havel drew his own weapon from its scabbard, a thick, long sword. It looked heavy, but he wielded it as though it were light as a feather.

"Then, and only then, does a spirit truly reside in the weapons we make. Among those dwarves, only the most gifted smiths can melt down orichalcum, temper it, and harden it, completing the process. Humans just melt the metal and pour it into the mold, right? I can't help but feel bad for the poor orichalcum." He traced his finger over the blade.

I nodded, raising my swords up to my face. "It's true that forging is typically better than casting. Iron that's been melted by a forge is free of any impurities. Moreover, you can discern which iron is suited for the job and which isn't, then melt it down again in the forge. The tempering process is repeated, then through trial and error the smith tests out the right amount of water and oil, and the right temperature... Only someone who's incapable of compromising can ever really make it as a blacksmith, I imagine."

I was repeating knowledge I'd acquired from a manga, trying to agree with the dwarven man in front of me. I always found katanas super cool, and I'd also read about how to make them in various manga and on the internet. I was trying to show him that I knew a thing or two, but the dwarves simply blinked at me.



“You’re scrawny, but are you a dwarf?”

“Nope. All human,” I said with a wry smile.

I’d managed to get them to acknowledge that I knew some things about smithing. Unfortunately, Dee had been watching quietly from the sidelines, and he was infuriated by Havel’s words. “How dare you speak so rudely to Lord Van! Do you want to be cut down?!”

Just like that, the Adventurers’ Guild was thrown into turmoil.

“Aw crap! Dee’s lost it!”

“H-hey, Bacchus! Hurry up and apologize!”

The dwarves didn’t heed the advice. They shrugged, and Havel snorted, provoking Dee further. “We’re from the dwarven nation. Why should we put up with some other country’s noble turning up their nose at us? And don’t underestimate us just ‘cause we’re short, big man. You really think you can beat us?”

Havel was talking like a character right out of one of those old school punk manga.

Dee wasted no time. He held his long sword up high and swung it down. The air resonated with the sound of metal slicing through metal, and just like that, the large blade was in front of Havel’s face.

Havel’s eyes widened as he realized that, in the span of less than a second, his own sword had been cut in half.

“Wh-what?!” He stared at his broken weapon, taking a few unsteady steps back. “What incredible skill! Wait, this cut... This wasn’t just skill! Hey, big man! Who tempered that sword?!” he hollered, pointing his broken weapon at Dee.

My sword instructor returned his blade to its rightful place and straightened up. He bellowed, “This sword is the creation of my master, Lord Van Nei Fertio! The very same man you just made a fool of!”

The dwarves looked shocked.

“What?! B-but he’s just a child!”

“There’s no way!”

“You won’t fool us!”

They were making a scene, so I plastered a smile on my face and said to Havel, “Hey, could you hold up your sword again for me?”

“Wh-what? What are you plottin’?” Despite his confusion, he raised his blade as I asked. I adjusted the position for him so that it was perfect.

“Nice and straight, right in front of your face. Ah, great. Now don’t move.”

“Huh? The hell are you people...”

Havel was so confused by what was transpiring that he seemed to be getting scared. Even the people around us had gone quiet; the tension in the room was thick.

I’d better wrap this up.

“Don’t move! Hiyah!” I shouted exuberantly, quickly swinging my twin swords.

I spun around, slashing both swords upward. The blades were designed to be like katanas in that the user had to pull them inward to cut properly. To best make use of their cutting potential, I had to wield them such that the blades slid along the surface of my target. For that very purpose, I had trained so that, when I twisted my body, I accelerated my shoulders, elbow, and arms to produce a sharp slash.

This time, there was barely a sound.

I made a full revolution and sheathed my swords, then turned to watch Havel’s sword fall to the ground in three pieces. Only the handle remained.

“...Huh?”

The dwarf stared blankly at his bladeless sword.

Havel

I HAD NO CLUE WHAT HAD HAPPENED. What I did know was that my trusty blade,

the one that had served me well over the years, through thick and thin, was in pieces.

Appearances be damned—I'd been named one of the Five Blacksmiths of the dwarf nation. Since I'd be using this sword throughout our journey, I went out of my way to make it extra sturdy, without compromising its ability to cut. It was a damn good sword.

Or it was supposed to be, anyway. Perhaps it had reached its limit over the course of our long journey. Otherwise, I couldn't see how it could be cut to pieces so easily, even by the dwarf king's orichalcum sword.

I checked the cuts and found an all-too-familiar sight: a smooth cross section. The kind you'd see when you cut a chunk of iron in two with a single strike. A chunk of iron that wasn't fit to be called a weapon, that is.

"Impossible. My sword, it..."

This was the gulf that existed between our two weapons. I didn't even know what to say.

"Uh, was that sword important to you? Would you like me to fix it?" the boy named Van asked, apologetic.

Normally I'd lash out at him, but for some reason, I just couldn't muster up the rage. "F-fix it? Boy, you..."

Once a sword was cut like this, it could never be returned to normal. Even if you used a mandrel and heated it up, the best you could hope to do was repair its form. Its quality would degrade as soon as it clashed with another sword, and in the worst-case scenario, it would break in the exact same spot.

Fix was the wrong word to use here. Instead, he probably meant that he would melt the sword down and rebuild it. But he spoke as if he were going to restore the sword to its prior form and quality.

I handed him the weapon, still a bit dazed. "Hey, what's the name of the dwarf who forged that sword? Please tell me. And don't even try to say it was a human blacksmith. I'm not even concerned about that orichalcum business right now."

I was babbling, trying to parse Van's movement. He wordlessly picked up the broken pieces of my blade, then held them next to the hilt. Closing his eyes, he seemed to focus—on what, I had no idea, though I was pretty dubious about the whole thing.

Then, to my surprise, the broken sword in his hands began to change form.

"Wh-what the—?!"

Mine wasn't the only voice to cry out; everyone else in the guild joined in. Well, except for the ones standing behind Van.

Ten seconds passed. The boy's eyes stayed closed. In those ten seconds, my sword regained its original form. I made another startled noise, barely even conscious of doing so.

"Could someone give me a sword?" Van asked the people behind him, who produced one for him. "Ah, thanks." He swung my blade down against the other sword, and with a clang of metal on metal, my blade broke the other sword in two.

"What?!" I cried again. I was astonished; my sword had cut through another like a knife cutting through a piece of radish. Was my blade really capable of such a feat?

"All right! Feels good, though it looks like this was already a great sword to begin with. It's thick but still really sharp." Van smiled, heedless of my confusion. "Okay, here you go. Sorry about that."

Reverently, I took my sword from him with both hands—something I hadn't done since my master presented me with his masterwork. The weight, the blade's heavy center of gravity, the thickness and length... All of it was the same. The guard, handle, and back of the blade, though, were more heavily ornamented than before. I had long since dismissed decorations as a waste of time, but now, seeing such an exquisite sword, I understood that even ornamentation was important to the process.

"H-hey..." said one of my party members.

Another asked, "Havel, what's up with that sword?"

They had probably already figured out that my sword was repaired, but they asked me about it anyway.

I looked up and saw Van standing there like nothing had happened. Still holding my sword, I gritted my teeth and looked up at the ceiling, making an inarticulate noise. I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to believe it.

But when it came to the business of smithing, I couldn't lie.

For long moments, I grappled with this inner turmoil. Eventually, resignation washed it all away. I directed the tip of my sword downward and stabbed it into the ground. Horrifyingly, the blade cut through the stone floor like it was paper.

"Ha! Ha ha ha!" I laughed a helpless, guttural laugh. "I give up! I could never make a sword this sharp! It rivals even the treasured sword of the dwarf nation! Any excuses I might make in the face of such a fine creation would be laughable!"

Recognizing my defeat, I collapsed, sitting down on the floor. Then I shot Van a sharp look.

"I'll do anything you want. Anything at all. Please help me make a sword like this."

It was shameful of me, but my words were heartfelt. I didn't care what form that sword took—it was the thought of its incredible power that had lit a fire in my smith's soul. All thoughts of the quest for orichalcum or the dwarf nation had left my mind. I was overjoyed by the new smithing possibilities that had been revealed to me.

Van

THE OTHER DWARVES WERE MORE STUNNED BY HAVEL'S declaration than we were. "H-Havel?!"

"What about the orichalcum?!"

Havel turned to the panicked dwarves and, with both knees firmly planted on the floor, lowered his head, rendering his comrades speechless. "I'm so sorry! I

know I'm bein' selfish! But I want to make a weapon like this with my own two hands! I want to forge the ultimate weapon!"

This was a cry from deep within his soul. His comrades could only stare at him. "Really?" one asked.

"If you're planning on making this your final resting place, then..."

Gradually, Havel's party accepted his determination. But then something seemed to occur to them; their expressions darkened. "It still doesn't change the fact that we have to find orichalcum."

"You're the most skilled member of our group. Without you, it'll be dangerous exploring the mountains of other countries."

"What are we gonna do?"

This discussion amongst the dwarves continued until I raised my hand. "Um... How much orichalcum do you need? You guys are in a hurry, right?"

The dwarf furthest away from me nodded. "Normally the sword is crafted before the king turns sixty years of age. But we've been searching for two years and still haven't found any orichalcum, and he's about to turn sixty."

"I see, I see." I nodded in sympathy. "I suppose when you get to that age, doing any kind of smithing would be rough on the body."

They shook their heads. "You misunderstand. The king won't be doin' it himself. The best dwarven blacksmith in all the land, L'ubor, is in charge of craftin' the orichalcum sword. I shouldn't say this too loudly, but the current king ain't much of a blacksmith..."

"Which is a shame, since the previous king was one of the Five Blacksmiths." These words were hushed.

Havel clicked his tongue and punched the ground. "He lacks passion. Passion, damn it! Every king before him was one of the Five Blacksmiths, but our current king can only make swords, and he's still not good enough with mithril!" he complained.

Sounded like he had issues with their leadership. I thought, *This is my chance. Maybe this is inconsiderate of me, but I want dwarven blacksmiths here. I need*

to do something. Rango observed quietly, his hands together like he was praying, and his eyes were gleaming.

I shot my shot. “That sounds rough. If you guys can wait here for a month, I can get you some orichalcum, I reckon—but you’re in a hurry, right?”

The dwarves all turned to me, loudly astonished. “A month?!”

“Truly?!”

They were awestruck, looking like their eyes might burst out of their skulls. I nodded at them and tapped my sheathed twin swords. “We’ve got ample resources, so we get orichalcum on the regular. I gave a piece to His Highness, but I’ve actually already made a handful of orichalcum weapons.”

The dwarves exchanged looks. “Orichalcum? On his own?”

“You saw what he did earlier. After that, I’d believe he could get orichalcum in no time.”

“I refuse to believe someone could acquire orichalcum so easily.”

For a private conversation, they were speaking really loudly. Clearly losing his patience, Havel argued, “How else do you explain his orichalcum weapons, things that no dwarf could have made?”

The other dwarves frowned. “True. And we’ve seen the dungeon; it’d be hard to find orichalcum on our own.”

“Yeah. Even if we searched elsewhere, ain’t no guarantee we’d find what we need. Couldn’t hurt to wait a month or two.”

Havel and the others turned toward me then. One of the dwarves standing in the back said, “All right. We’d like to stay here for a time. The Business Guild has orichalcum set at ten platinum a piece. Is that fine with you?”

I did the math in my head. A piece was usually about five centimeters in diameter. If I went to the guild or the Bell & Rango Company, they’d have scales I could use to check the weight. And if their plan was to make a weapon, they’d need at least ten pieces, which meant a total of one hundred platinum. The exact same amount I made from slaying the forest dragon.

I didn’t want to immediately agree, so I raised my hand. “I’m not well versed

in how orichalcum is usually priced, so let me speak to my butler about it. First, let's get you guys a place to stay. As it happens," I added with a smile, "I know of the perfect hotel. It's brand new, too." The dwarves blinked a few times and nodded.

Havel said he wanted to do his smithing in a peaceful location, so we decided to build the workshop outside of Seatoh Village instead of in town.

For his part, Rango took his apprentice merchants to go sell furniture to Kusala. I'd approved a payment invoice for Kusala, so he and his wife wouldn't have any problems paying for everything. When I told Havel I was going to build him a forge, he immediately wrote down everything we needed.

"Silica, saltpeter, red clay, and monster stones that're resistant to fire. The latter is a type of crystal that you can find in small amounts inside monster hearts. It'll be pricey, but I need all of this for a forge."

"Well, we've got plenty of monster stones."

"You do?" he squawked.

I'd told the Bell & Rango Company to prepare the materials for the workshop ahead of time so that we'd be good to go; the only problem was that I'd intended for the forge to be in the adventurers' town, so having them carried to the new location was a bit of a pain.

I showed Havel the pile of monster stones, and he boggled at them. "That should've been the hardest thing to acquire. And you have this many?!"

The other dwarves, who had tagged along with us, were looking around Seatoh Village curiously. "I've never seen buildings like these before."

"What kind of materials did they use to build all of this?"

I cast a sidelong glance at them while Havel looked around the outskirts of the village, solidifying his image for the forge. "If we're gonna be meltin' orichalcum, this thing needs to be big and tall," he said, drawing a simple blueprint on the ground. "Those two towers over there are huge, but a forge that size would be bigger than the largest forge in the dwarf nation. It'd

probably take a decade or two to make, though. I'll settle for a blast furnace three meters tall."

I examined the blueprint carefully. "Havel, could I have a moment?"

"Hm? What do you... Oh, right. Since I decided to craft a weapon even better than yours, that makes me a citizen of this land. You don't gotta be so polite with me." He scratched vigorously at his body as he spoke.

I just smiled and nodded. "In that case, about that massive forge you were just talking about... You said it'd take forever to build. Is that because of how many materials it'd require?"

Havel shook his hand and started altering the blueprint on the ground. He pointed at the upper and lower parts and drew something resembling a smokestack.

"No, that ain't it. It's pretty simple. Between this point and that one we gotta alternate blue coal and ore, but the lower section of the furnace has to exceed two thousand five hundred degrees or the orichalcum won't soften. Iron softens at two thousand degrees, and with mithril it depends on where it's extracted from, but orichalcum is different. Temperature is the most important factor, followed by pressure. That's why it requires a tall forge. Problem is, the bigger it gets, the more its structure needs to be adjusted—y'know, the thickness of the walls, the building's center of gravity."

Blueprint finished, Havel folded his arms. To my surprise, his schematic was excellently rendered—truly a perfect blueprint. I examined the drawing, looking at the cross section viewed from the side, then at the circular hole atop the smokestack.

The lowest section was wide and round, designed so that the melted metal would settle where the temperature would rise the most. Havel had drawn a straw coming out of the side, implying that it could be placed in from outside. There was also a hole in the lowest section leading out of the forge.

"This is where the flame goes, and here's where you extract the melted metals. This small stick is a wind hole; crushed charcoal and air need to be continually supplied through it." As he explained, he added elements to the blueprint. "Here, sitting snug against it, is an air box that you press down with

each foot in turn to send wind into the forge. You can have a maximum of four of these set around the forge, but two should work just fine.”

He was every bit the professional he proclaimed. Thoughtfully, I said, “In that case, I might be able to make this. Come with me and tell me if I’m on the right track or not.”

“Huh?”

Havel tilted his head as I turned away from him, shifting my attention to the mountain of materials nearby. I’d never dealt with this much stuff before, and there were also materials in the pile I’d never worked with; I couldn’t predict how things would turn out. Regardless, I was on a bit of a roll, and I had the feeling it would go well.

I touched the pile of materials and began to channel my magical energy into it. From all the experience I had under my belt, I knew I grew exhausted quickly when working with dense objects and things with poor magical conductivity. Monster stones, which were included in the materials for the forge, fell into that category, so I figured that I’d start out by building out the bottom section of the forge.

I ground down the saltpeter and silica, then mixed them into the red clay. Next, I ground the monster stones into powder and spread them around. Simultaneously, I drove pillars into the ground, building the lower section’s outer wall.

“Wh-wh-what in blue blazes...?”

I heard Havel’s shocked voice nearby, but I couldn’t afford to lose my concentration. I was already so exhausted that I was half-convinced the materials were sucking out my magical energy. The lower portion of the forge was only two meters tall, but its total diameter exceeded ten meters. I made the wall thick, like the one around the village, though I wasn’t sure whether that was the right move.

“Ugh, I’m dead,” I groaned. Pointing at the chunk of furnace I’d just constructed, I asked, “Havel, what do you think?”

Havel’s jaw was on the floor and his eyes were bugging out. “This is absurd.

But at this rate, I'll be able to start smithing in about a month!"

I smiled wearily. "Yeah, that sounds about right. I should be able to finish the forge in about a month." I still had to make the wind pumping device, so a month would give me some breathing room.

But Havel had other ideas. He grinned broadly. "Oho ho! Ten days to build the forge, two days for the wind pump, three for the fire pan. Once that's done, I can start testing the forge with iron, silver, and mithril! Then orichalcum after a month!"

"Um, aren't you getting a bit ahead of yourself?" Havel's timeline made me dizzy with terror.

While I focused on the forge, Khamsin, Esparda, and the others finally popped back up, a few dozen people following behind them. Khamsin said, "Lord Van, we picked out some individuals with business experience who want to start new ventures!"

I mustered up a smile and waved at him. "Thanks. Way more people than I expected, too. I didn't think there would be many people left after Esparda got through with them."

"Actually, we initially found more than a hundred people who were interested." Wow, these individuals must've been the lucky ten percent of the group to make it this far. They had to be incredible. Clearly, I wouldn't need to worry about them.

"All right," I said, sensing Havel's glare on the back of my head, "then let me build their shops first. This is enough progress on the forge for today."

"The forge is our first priority," Havel boomed.

"Look, we're going to get orichalcum in, but you'll be sending the first pieces off to your king, right?"

"Argh..." I'd thrown logic at him, and his response was to wave both hands around furiously. *What a unique way to express rage.*

"All right, then I guess I'll head back to the town. I bet Kusala's hotel is all

furnished by now.” And either way, I finally had a break from the hell that was making a forge. When I stopped and thought about it, there was no pressing reason to get this thing up and running in fifteen days. Good thing I’d realized that, too. If I hadn’t, I would have succumbed to Havel’s zealous demands and worked unhealthy levels of overtime.

Disgruntled dwarves in tow, I made my way back to the adventurers’ town, my step lighter for having been freed from such a heavy burden. It was already late in the day, so when we reached the main street, I turned to Esparda and Khamsin’s new prospects.

“I’m going to give you all assistance in the form of initial investments and start-up capital,” I told them. “You’ll all receive a tax exemption for the first year, and I’ll even help you procure materials. In the future, though, I expect more people will step forward hoping to start businesses, so to prevent the appearance of preferential treatment, everything I give you will be a loan. Obviously, the size of your business will determine the size of the loan, but I expect you to pay me back, even if it takes time. Do you all understand this?”

They all nodded resolutely; their passion was obvious. I returned the gesture and looked around a bit. That was when I noticed that apprentice merchants from the Bell & Rango Company were still going in and out of Kusala’s hotel. They were still in the process of moving furniture, then. Since they’d be opening another store here, I wanted them to be present so we could discuss the matter, but Rango was nowhere to be found.

Never mind. “Ah, Rango! Wait, Bell, too?”

For some reason, Rango was power-walking toward me with Bell close on his heels. As soon as we made eye contact, they both waved wildly at me. “Lord Van!” Bell shouted.

“Is it true you recruited a dwarven blacksmith?!” asked Rango.

Their eyes were sparkling like starved beasts’. Looked like they were thrilled that their request for a blacksmith had come through. Bell and Rango closed the distance between us, then darted looks back and forth between Havel’s party and me.

“Oh, yeah, I’m in the process of building a forge at the edge of the village. It’s

going to require two large chunks of orichalcum to complete, so I figured I'd build the new shops first, then take my time on the forge."

Bell and Rango exchanged looks, then flashed me identical, meaningful smiles. Bell said, "Worry not, Lord Van! I checked with the apkallu, and lo and behold, they had orichalcum on hand. We negotiated with them, and they gave us a chunk!"

"I really wish you hadn't done that," I said, my words coming out a bit more venomous than I intended. Dreading what was about to happen, I turned slowly.

Havel and his pals were all grinning. "Orichalcum, you say?!"

"Incredible! To think we would acquire a piece here, of all places!"

"Ha ha ha ha! Now we can go home!"

His buddies were cheering, but Havel said, "All right, time to build the forge!"

The others whipped around, eyes wide. Havel was the only one who seemed to assume that the forge project would continue.

"Havel, what're you saying? Our mission takes priority!"

"Did you forget what we set out to do?"

Havel raised his palm to quiet them. He appealed to their emotions. "I remember, and I'm aware of all your feelings on the subject. But don't you understand my perspective? My burning desire to temper burning hot metal?!"

They gave each other troubled looks. "Well, yeah... We wanna temper steel, too..."

"I haven't done any smithing in two years now..."

It all went over my head, but Havel's words clearly resonated with his friends. They discussed it amongst themselves for a bit longer, eventually turning to me with light in their eyes.

"All right, it's fine," one of the dwarves said, crossing his arms. His pals nodded along at his side. "We were already plannin' to search elsewhere, so what's another month or two?"

Another dwarf jumped in. “In exchange, when the forge is done a month from now, we want you to let us do some smithing as well.”

Havel nodded decisively. “Of course you damn well can!”

All around us, adventurers were nodding their heads, commenting on the heartwarming scene. I smiled too, watching Havel and his friends gladly join shoulders...until I realized that their negotiations all assumed the forge would be done in a month.

I gripped my head in my hands and turned away from the excited dwarves. I asked Rango and Bell, “Since I built Kusala’s new hotel, do you mind if I build your new store, too?”

They both nodded excitedly. “Are you sure?”

“We don’t have any carpenters ready, so that’d be a huge help!”

I smiled back at them and turned my attention to the open space on the street. “Then I’ll do a three-story building with a basement, okay? As far as aesthetics and size are concerned, I want it to match the hotel.”

Bell turned, wide-eyed, to stare at Kusala’s hotel. After a long moment, he turned back toward me like a robot in need of fresh oil. “Every merchant dreams of owning a store like that, but um, how many platinum do you want?” he asked, a tinge of concern coloring his voice.

I waved a hand at him. “Fifty gold, buddy.”

“F-fifty gold? For real?! In that case, could you also build one in the village?”

“Nope, not happening. Get your carpenters and have them whip up some fresh buildings. We have to start creating jobs so we can get the economy running healthily.”

Bell’s shoulders drooped.

“Oh, right,” I added. “The village’s aesthetic is important, too, so make sure that the new buildings match the current style. Including the color schemes.”

“That might be a touch difficult, but...”

I felt bad watching Bell struggle, but there wasn’t much I could do. We had to

consider the future. We had to train all kinds of tradespeople.

If we didn't, I would be stuck in odd job purgatory forever.

"A-anyway, the Bell & Rango Company would like our new store to be somewhere that's easily accessible for new customers."

"Right by the entrance works, then? Is one store enough?"

"Um, three, please—" Rango tried to answer first, but Bell desperately cut him off, causing some manner of confusion: "Four, if you will!"

"A store for buying materials, a store for selling necessities, a weapons shop... Isn't that enough?" Rango asked his brother, who shook his head.

"That was the initial plan, but we didn't know then that this might be the last time Lord Van ever makes us a building. You can never be too prepared, as far as I'm concerned. Let's have him make four buildings."

Rango tensed as he took in Bell's explanation. "I see. In that case, four buildings would make sense. Okay! Let's hurry and recruit some new apprentice merchants!"

He abruptly turned and ran off to Seatoh Village. Bell watched his brother exit stage right, then sighed quietly. "Just when I thought he'd finally calmed down... We haven't even discussed the floorplans."

"Eh, I'm sure he thought it'd all be fine since you're handling it."

"I don't know if he even thought that far ahead."

We exchanged smiles and I went back to surveying the area. "Assuming I have the materials I need, I can make the buildings right now. What do you want to do?"

"The sooner the better. You're sparing us your time, and that's going to be an increasingly rare commodity going forward."

"You make me sound like a villain."

Bell ignored my comment and jogged over to his employees. "Hey! Bring as many wood blocks over here as you can!"

He's got guts, I'll give him that.

While the Bell & Rango Company was getting everything ready, I talked to the folks Khamsin and Esparda had brought over. I wanted to know what sort of business ventures they were looking to start.

“I used to make furniture for a living, so I’d love to use wood to make big stuff, if that’s possible.”

“I worked in a clothing boutique, so I’d like to make the kind of cute clothes that I would love to wear.”

“I love baking bread. I only know how to make a few types right now, but I’m going to give it my all!”

I listened to ten different visions of the future from ten different individuals, then decided to assign them roles. The group included a person who was skilled at making things, a salesperson with a knack for communicating with customers, and even someone who was talented at inventory management and supply procurement.

I enjoyed how much it felt like a school culture festival. Of course, once the ball got rolling on all of these new businesses, everything would feel a lot more real and there would be new challenges to deal with, but I still wanted people to enjoy their new jobs. To that end, I began to make buildings while I talked with them.

Several of these hopefuls wanted to make eateries of one kind or another, so I created a building with a bakery and a sweets shop on the first floor, then a dining hall on the second. I turned the third floor into a storage space for things that needed to be preserved, and then made a basement suitable for storing food and alcohol.

After that, I made another building that would house a furniture shop, a clothing boutique, and a daily goods store. These three shops would all handle relatively bulky goods, so I made sure to allocate about half the area to storage space. The basements, meanwhile, housed a space they could use for product development.

“If you guys make cool stuff, fun stuff, or delicious stuff, I’ll definitely swing by to hang out. I’m counting on you all!” I laced my voice with anticipation. Their responses were all positive. They looked excited to begin.

Personally, I wanted to put the most effort into building the public bath. The adventurers were going to adore it.

Chapter 7:

Bathtopia

GOOD OL' SUPER BATHS. I'M SURE YOU HAD THEM IN your city. Praise thee, O Super Bath! Venerable bathtopia, how wonderful you are!

When I was a child, this was my Super Bath mantra. I owed a lot to those places. In retrospect, it was pretty sick. Who wouldn't want to visit a Super Bath after hearing that?

In all seriousness, I used Super Baths all the time growing up, so I really wanted to build one myself. First, though, I had to figure out what would be best for the adventurers. The priority had to be creating a place where adventurers could clean themselves off after they returned from a job. I decided to build five corner showers that could each comfortably hold one person, then make the same number of bathtubs. I also needed an open-air bath, a lie-down bath, and a waterfall shower.

With the surrounding area filled out by Kusala's big hotel and a bunch of other businesses, I'd need to put the open-air bath on the third floor's rooftop so that nobody would be able to peep. If I separated the men's and women's areas into the first and second floors, though, it would be difficult for either group to take advantage of the open-air bath. As such, I decided to turn the first floor into a relaxation space accompanied by a reception area, just like a Super Bath.

Once you passed through the spacious entrance, you would encounter a stall that sold bathing goods and cold drinks. Half of the floor would be a rest zone where you could lie down, though you'd have to take off your shoes to enter the space. The other half of the floor would have sets of tables and a place to store your stuff.

I designed the first floor so that the storage area was visible from the stall and reception area, to minimize the likelihood of people having their stuff stolen. That said, I still planned to make lockers, too.

To either side of the front reception would be easy-access stairs leading to the men's and women's bathing areas. I would cut the second and third floors in half, installing corner showers and tubs on the second floor for both men and women. The third floor would have lie-down baths and waterfall showers, and the open-air bath would be on the rooftop above that.

It would be nice and spacious. Oh, and I'd have hot water flowing at all times. Apparently, that was a privilege only royalty enjoyed in this world, but adventurers kept money pouring into the town and village, so I was happy to splurge on them a bit.

With my plan in mind, I started crafting, using thick wood blocks so that the facilities could withstand the adventurers getting a wee bit rough. Just like I did in Seato Village, I'd run this public bath as one of my own personal businesses. I'd hire someone to manage it all and leave staffing the place to them.

I was also weighing the benefits of a shopping district association. The Bell & Rango Company and the other businesses could select representatives and form it. That would certainly make Esparda's job easier. Considering this, I looked over the main street.

Most of the buildings were finished. All I had left to build were the Bell & Rango Company's new shops. "All right, let's do this!" I said to Bell. "Do you have any requests?"

He pulled out a set of blueprints that he'd prepared. "It struck me when I looked at the bathing facility you built that carrying things from the basement to the third floor would be difficult and time-consuming. It would be really useful to have a pulley that could lift goods from the basement to the surface."

"A pulley? Oh, you mean like an elevator?"

Bell cocked his head. "El-le-vator...?"

I'd have to explain. "You see them used often at water wells and at the castle gates in the capital city, but the type I'm referring to is specifically designed to carry people and things up and down. The more pulleys you have, the lighter the overall load gets. How about we try four to six of them?"

"I see. I was also picturing something along the lines of a system for drawing

water from a well. I didn't know that increasing the number of pulleys could yield such positive results." Bell sounded surprised.

In fairness, when elevator and crane systems were developed back on Earth, the technology didn't exactly spread quickly around the world. Maybe this country just hadn't done much research on the uses of pulleys yet.

Or maybe, just maybe, someone out there was monopolizing that knowledge.

"...Well, whatever." I had my theories, but there was no point in pursuing that line of thinking. I'd heard that this world had been using cranes to haul stuff and make boats for ages now, so maybe there was a maritime nation out there somewhere with uniquely developed pulleys. One of these days I'd have to ask someone from the Business Guild about it.

Arte poked her head out of the carriage. "Lord Van, what's this about a pulley that can carry people and objects?"

"It's kind of like the floor itself is moving and carrying things... Actually, you know what? Would you like to see it in action with me?"

"Oh, are you sure? If that's possible, I would love to."

We talked it over briefly and Arte decided to accompany me. I was in the mood to show off to her, but building my very first working elevator was a high hurdle to clear. *This might be a problem.*

"Okay, let's start with the building. We can figure out the floorplan later, so for now, could you just decide on a place for the elevator?"

"Ah, understood," said Bell. "In that case, could you build two entrances, then have the elevator pass through the storage areas on each floor?"

"Gotcha. Exits and entrances for bringing in goods. In that case, let's put them a little way away from the entrance that the adventurers will use. I'll put the stairs in the center of the building."

"That works for me."

With the layout decided, I built everything in one go. The Bell & Rango Company brought over a veritable mountain of building materials, so I didn't even have to take breaks. I crafted a single atrium going from the basement to

the third floor, but no other partitions. The stairs were wide enough to support four people walking up and down them side by side.

I made my way up to the third floor. Climbing the stairs was a bit of an ordeal, and even though Arte was keeping up, she was clearly exhausted. Till made sure to stay by her side. “Ah, I’m beat!” I said once we’d made it, smiling and looking over the spacious floor. The stairs acted as a pillar, so the whole place was spacious like a reinforced concrete building.

Meanwhile, Arte and Till looked down the hole leading to the basement, their faces pale with fear. “H-how terrifying,” Arte stammered.

“Lady Arte, it’s dangerous to look down there.”

Arte was crouching by the hole and Till was panicking behind her. Khamsin was on his hands and knees, too, peeking down through the building.

“Be careful not to fall in, guys,” I said with a smile before turning to affix the pulley system to the ceiling. I set four large pulleys horizontally at different heights. They’d taught me in school that four was the way to go, so I stuck with that for now.

Next, I made a large hanging box; this would be the actual elevator platform. To ensure it wouldn’t fall, I also built a temporary floor to fix it in place. After that, I had to craft the hanging cord. This thing needed to be strong, so I decided to make it out of metal wiring. I intertwined the thin metal wires, turning it into one super-strong rope. Mithril rope, to be precise.

“Man,” I huffed, “mithril really does sap the magic out of me.”

I sat down on the floor, gripped by exhaustion. Magic consumption by material went, from lowest to highest: wood, dirt, iron, copper, silver, gold, mithril, then orichalcum. I could work with wood all day without getting tired, but when I used mithril and orichalcum, an hour of consistent work bled me dry.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have time to chill out on the floor. I installed rails on the left and right sides of the box to increase its overall level of safety, then quickly crafted an antidrop railing.

“The wire rope coils around the pulleys alternatively, and I attached that nice

and tight to the large box. Honestly, I wanted to automate everything by installing a button that you could press, but I couldn't figure out how to do that on such short notice." I smiled bitterly as I removed the wood block that was keeping the box in place. I was holding the tip of the wire rope that the box was hanging from, so it wasn't going to fall. And since nothing was inside it, it barely weighed anything.

"Is it done?" Till asked, eyes sparkling, while I tugged at the wire to see how it worked.

"Well, let's see. Here, Dee, you hold this. Nice and tight, please." Dee seemed a bit confused, but he gripped the end of the wire rope with both hands.

I climbed right into the new elevator.

"Lord Van, wait!" Khamsin shouted.

"Eeeek!" Till shrieked.

They both dashed toward me, panicked. Dee wasn't faring much better; he lowered his center of gravity, still clutching the wire tightly. Arte, meanwhile, crouched against the railing and reached her hand out to me.

Arte's approach was fine, but unfortunately Khamsin and Till came at me with such force that we all ended up in the elevator together. "G-guys, we can't all be in here. Get out."

"You are the one who shouldn't be in here, Lord Van!"

"Please get out!" I repeated.

Arte and Bell cried out, seeing the three of us arguing inside the elevator. Finally, Arte said, "E-everyone, please get out for now," and we all did as she said.

Anyway, the elevator seemed to be functioning without issue, so I crafted a box that could hold a counterweight for the pointed end of the rope Dee was holding. Once it was attached to the rope, I adjusted the weight, effectively completing the elevator.

Till was pretty mad at me when all was said and done. I was turbo exhausted from my busy day, so I ended things there with the completion of the Bell &

Rango Company's new building.

By the next day, the main street of the adventurers' town was complete, at least from the outside. All that remained was to hire employees to handle the new shops. I smiled at my creations. "This is quite a sight. You know, at this rate, it might be kind of cool to redesign all the other Bell & Rango Company establishments to match the aesthetic."

Bell's eyes lit up so hard they practically glowed. "In that case, what about the branch and storage facility you first built in town?"

He was all worked up about this idea, but I just chuckled and shook my head. "*Non, non*, good sir. This is the perfect chance to train some carpenters. Feel free to have them whip up some new buildings for you."

Bell's shoulders sagged. I felt bad for him, but we had to improve our residents' technical skills. Only then would I be free of the burden of every single odd job that came my way.

Leaving Bell behind to mope, I went off to offer consultations to the new shop owners. Little did they know that young Van had patronized all sorts of public businesses in his other life; he would be more than happy to share his knowledge if it meant such services would be available.

Or at least that's what I intended, right up until a small man with a fuzzy beard shuffled out from behind the store like some kind of tiny gremlin.

"Only ten days left until the deadline. You must complete the forge in eight days, then the wind pump box in one!"

"What?! Am I losing it or is that an even tighter deadline than before?" I replied in shock.

Havel crossed his arms and snorted. "Of course it is! How could I not shorten the deadline after seeing you construct all these massive buildings?" He pointed furiously at the new structures around town. "If you really put your back into it, you could make the forge in three days! Am I wrong?!"

The other dwarves nodded in agreement. "I ain't never seen a town get made so quickly."

“This is cheating!”

The dwarves sounded angry, especially about the Bell & Rango Company’s new building. “That elevator thing is no good. Same with being able to just put things on the wall and take ’em off.”

“No good?”

My perplexed expression further infuriated the complaining dwarf. He began stomping on the ground and said, “When we make things, there ain’t no changin’ them when we’re done. Carpentry and blacksmithing are the same in that respect. When you finish a sword, if someone asks you to make it a little longer, there ain’t nothin’ you can do about it. Yet you and your magic make it possible. From our perspective, that’s cheating!” The others nodded.

I see. It is true that being able to modify finished products, wood, and metal is pretty darn useful. I could complain all I wanted about how exhausting it was to use magic, but it was still much easier than doing real carpentry or smithing. It was also faster in every respect.

I crossed my arms. “I get it. In that sense, maybe my magic aptitude was a blessing in disguise.”

Havel and the others nodded and moved toward me.

“Precisely. That’s why you’re gonna put your back into making our forge.”

“Especially since we could only do it the old-fashioned way.”

“Get a move on!”

They dragged me toward Seatoh Village, all of them voicing their unreasonable opinions at once.

“W-wait a second! You guys are being way too pushy!”

My complaints were utterly ignored. Little Van, the supposed lord of the land, was being forced to work overtime by evil dwarves. Talk about a toxic working environment!

While I was otherwise preoccupied, Esparda visited the new shops and did the consulting I’d meant to do. The consequence was that when the businesses opened, they operated at a much higher standard than they probably would

have had I been the one to handle things, and the adventurers had only good things to say. Damn it all.

Poor little Van, meanwhile, was forced to work from morning to night for multiple days in a row, all to complete the forge. According to the dwarves, the taller the forge, the more metals that could be made. *We really don't need that much metal, though*, I thought, keeping the forge's height reasonable in the interest of finishing the project sooner. Besides, ore and coal had to be inserted from the top of the forge, so the taller this thing was, the more annoying it would be to work with.

"The more materials we can make, the better!" Havel fumed, backed up by the other dwarves' heavy nods. I rejected their proposal and went on to explain the plan for Seatoh Village.

"With the number of knights, adventurers, and merchants currently going in and out of the village, I don't think we need that much metal. A twenty-meter-tall forge will work just fine," I said with a tone of finality.

The way the dwarves' shoulders sagged in response was, honestly, right out of a comedy flick.

Havel went quiet and thought for a moment, then spoke. "Well, I suppose if we need more, we can just have you build it later." The other dwarves seemed to accept this conclusion.

Considering the temperature and pressure required to melt down orichalcum, twenty meters would get the job done perfectly well. I wouldn't want to make it any shorter, but the dwarves seemed to expect the forge to be in constant use, like it would be in their homeland. None of our blacksmiths would require that, though. Twenty meters was enough.

With that settled, the dwarves kept quiet, kneading together materials and grinding down monster stones. It seemed like they were trying their best to help me so that we could finish the forge quickly. One of them said to another, "Apparently monster stones consume the most magical energy."

"Oh, is that so? In that case, let's grind them down for the lad."

"Aye!"

The dwarves kept their conversations to a minimum, working mostly in silence. They even forgot to take breaks sometimes. It was cool how stoic they were as artisans, but I needed to make sure I didn't get caught up in their flow. "I've already built five meters! Can't the rest wait till tomorrow?!"

"Nope. The forge's center of gravity is too far north. Adjust it, then add another two meters."

"Oh, come on." *Talk about a slave driver...*

In the end, I spent an entire day completing the hearth portion of the forge. Up next would be the upper portion, the hearth wind intake, and the wind pump box. I managed to complete the upper chunk in a day's time thanks to the powdered monster stones and the adjusted height—although, truth be told, I might've been able to complete the damn thing in half a day if not for Havel and his crew forcing me to make minute tweaks all the time.

That being said, their obsession with fine details proved fruitful. The finished forge was a real sight for sore eyes. The structure was perfectly symmetrical, and the smooth curves that ran from the hearth to the upper section were flawless. The cross section inside the furnace was also a perfect circle.

Havel and his men inspected every inch of the forge before finally offering their thoughts. "All right, not bad!"

"Mm, not bad at all!"

They seemed satisfied, at least, but it wasn't long before they started discussing the wind pump box. "There should be eight wind holes at the bottom, four in the middle, and four at the top. We'll open and close them depending on the state of the forge."

"We should keep all of the bottom ones open."

"There's a chance that too much wind flow could lower the temperature, but that shouldn't be a problem for the lower section, considering how hot it'll get. Let's keep the wind flowing so the wind holes never get blocked."

"How many wind pump boxes should I make?" I asked. "Four?"

"Yeah, that's right. If you make four of 'em, we can choose when we want to

use two of 'em and when we want all of 'em.”

Initiating combustion in a dwarven forge required manually pumping wind into it. I believe that in Japan, we called instruments that did that “bellows.” A dwarven wind pump box was a device that harnessed fluctuating air capacity to push wind outward, using an airtight container with an attached exhaust valve. The design was well-conceived, capable of sending gusts of wind alternatively to two sides. It was also weighted, allowing a single person to continue to pump wind for as long as their stamina allowed.



But in the end, it all still struck me as a lot of work. I listened to Havel's explanation and stared down at the blueprints, wondering if I couldn't make some improvements. Electricity, wind power, and hydraulic power were all options for automation; we were already drawing water from a river, so hydraulic power made the most sense.

"I think I'll make some tweaks," I murmured, making Havel and his men frown.

"You'll what?"

"The heck are you goin' on about?"

They stared at me blankly. Or perhaps their expressions were more accurately described as exasperated. One of them even gave me a look that said he thought I was a moron. If I didn't put my back into this, I could damage my honor as the lord of the land.

I decided to build a contraption that used the water we drew from the river, with a water wheel alternately operating two different bellows. Rather than stepping on them like pedals to increase and decrease the air capacity, a person could step on them to move a partition to the left or right, initiating the process. Essentially, the design was like the pedals of a paddleboat; it would use hydraulics to pump wind into the forge.

Once they had a chance to try it out, Havel and the others were shocked into bug-eyed silence. I left their frozen bodies alone and made the piping for the wind holes. After that, I created an airtight box that could hold the air drawn in by the water wheel. Several pipes came out of the box, all stretching around the forge.

"Where do you want me to put the wind holes?" I turned around to look at Havel. He and the rest of his men all had their arms folded, looking dead tired.

"This really is cheating," one of the dwarves grumbled.

"Absurdity," agreed another.

"I want that magic for myself."

Their muttering was put to a stop by Havel punching himself in the face. He

yelled, “You boneheads! We’re in the middle of making a forge! Quit your bellyaching and think about where to put the wind holes!”

His men punched themselves in the faces too, for whatever reason, then gathered around the forge. “Four wind holes for the lower and upper sections makes sense to me.”

“None in the middle?”

“That could work. The wind would be able to travel uniformly through the whole structure.”

“Hey, mark it out on the wall.” The dwarves started drawing circles on the forge to represent wind holes, still in heated discussion.

“All right, that should do it,” Havel said finally, looking up at the structure.

The other dwarves nodded, so I figured they must have reached a conclusion. One of them said, “All right, not bad.”

“Not bad at all.”

This shtick was getting old. Were they happy with my work or not? Irritated, I made an iron straw. “I’m supposed to fix this onto the wind holes, right?” I asked, just to confirm.

The dwarves’ expressions shifted rapidly. “No, no! You’ve got it all wrong!”

“The nozzle for the wind hole’s gotta be perpendicular! Otherwise it’ll get clogged!”

“You make ’em thin in the middle, then widen it at the ends. Prevents the flow from reversing.”

“Either way, the end’ll melt and need replacing after about half a year. Iron and stone both melt.”

I took this in thoughtfully. Was it possible to preserve the nozzle so it wouldn’t deteriorate? I tried again, this time making a larger straw. Then I used the same materials I’d made the walls of the forge from and hardened the area around it.

“Oho, interesting idea,” said a dwarf. “But it ain’t gonna work. If only the

metal part melts, it'll clog the air holes."

"I see, I see... In that case, what if we made the nozzle with the same materials as the wall?"

The dwarves groaned and rolled their eyes. "We tried that once, of course, but after long-term use it started to fall apart. Metal melts and comes out on its own, but when a part of the wall breaks, it doesn't melt, which clogs the whole thing up. When that happens, we gotta stop the forge and put out the flames, which puts the whole dang thing outta use for about two months."

Right. At the same time, though, having to stop the forge every six months to replace the wind holes was also a pain in the butt. "Okay," I tried, "in that case, why don't I look into making wind holes we won't have to replace?"

The reaction was immediate. "What?"

"You act like it's so simple."

"The dwarf nation has been looking into this for hundreds of years!"

"Well, I have the ability to conduct experiments that no one in the dwarf nation ever could," I pointed out.

It was enough to make them all freeze up once again. The only response I got was a quiet "Ah."

I continued, "I'm capable of making changes to the forge from the outside, even while it's operational. I can even attach new wind holes to it." I puffed out my chest to emphasize my brilliance.

Their jaws hit the ground. "Seriously?" one grumbled.

"Cheating!"

"We'd be lookin' at a dwarven forge revolution..."

One dwarf gave the others a serious look. "Everyone, listen up. I plan on staying—"

"Let me speak first," one of his buddies cut in. "Everyone, I'm going to stay in —"

"Hold on a second! I'm going first!"

To dispel this bout of bickering, Havel clapped his hands together. He chuckled. Bewildered, I asked, “Uh, what’s going on?”

Havel stifled another laugh and pointed at the forge. “Their blacksmith blood is burnin’ red hot. So’s mine. Ain’t none of us ever seen a village as exciting as yours. There are weapons all over the place and more materials than we could ever use up. It’s lively to boot, and filled with kind folk. Sure, it’s hardly the dwarf nation, but from what I’ve seen it’s still a damn comfy place to live.” This time he let himself laugh loudly. “This place is a blacksmith’s paradise!”

In that case...

I turned to the squabbling dwarves. “I recently lucked my way into a deal with the Business Guild, so I can entrust the task of transporting the orichalcum to the dwarf nation to one of their couriers. If you guys are feeling it, how about you put down roots here in Seatoh Village?”

That cut their arguing short. They exchanged silent looks, then faced Havel.

Havel exploded with boisterous laughter. “Ha ha ha! If we’re feelin’ it, he says! Fellas, wanna stay here with me and make the best weapons in the whole damn world?!”

His companions all grinned. “Ooh, I like the sound of that!”

“Don’t that sound fun!”

“Looks like we’re your problem now, Lord Van!” They engaged in a round of back pats, looking thrilled.

And that was how Seatoh Village became home to a group of dwarven blacksmiths, a race that so rarely interacted with humanity.

A few days later I completed the firepan, allowing Havel and his men to melt down mithril ore and craft it into fine equipment. A week later, the first set of arms forged by Seatoh Village’s new blacksmiths came into the world.

“Wow, amazing!” I cried, examining their work. On a white stone table before me lay six new pieces: a silver sword, a shield, a helmet, armor, gauntlets, and leg guards. “This is an incredible sight. The sales on these will blow all our other

stuff out of the water.”

Havel and his pals grinned.

“Damn right. And we’re gonna make even greater stuff!”

“But this set... It’s the first set we ever made here. There’ll never be another first set. So, Lord Van, we offer it to you.”

“Please use it with care.”

Touched, I accepted their gift. “Really? *Thank* you so much!” I looked over the sword and armor. They were works of art, clearly made with an attention to detail.

Smiling, I thought, *I’m really glad I made that forge.*

Havel crossed his arms, looking satisfied. “By the way, this territory of yours is incredible! I was so focused on smithing that I didn’t check it out ’til yesterday, but that public bath thing? Amazing! And Seatoh Village and the adventurers’ town both have one!”

“He’s right!” one of his pals chimed in. “Plus we can get our hands on any ore or monster part we could ever want! And the food’s delicious!”

Another dwarf said, “And this place has as many adventurers as a huge city, so there’s plenty of smithing to be done!”

They kept going, rattling off the merits of living in my territory. Along with ore and coal, I’d given them a decent chunk of change as start-up funds for their business, plus coverage for their living expenses. But because they’d flung themselves into their work as soon as the forge was ready, they’d only recently found time to take a look around the village and town.

“I heard dwarves like good booze, so the plan is to make a distillery soon,” I told them. “Get excited, gentlemen.”

They looked at me strangely. “You mean ale? You sure you don’t mean a brewery?”

“We prefer the strong stuff.”

I nodded and grinned. “I figured as much. Don’t worry, we’ll be making the

hard stuff. It's going to be distilled, so it'll probably be shochu or whiskey."

They smirked at my teasing. "Ain't never heard of those. They strong?"

"Now that sounds exciting."

I smiled broadly. "Yeah, it's gonna be great."

Chapter 8:

The Letter

WHILE I WAS POURING ALL THAT ENERGY INTO local development, I finally received a letter from the king.

The royal family confirms that Count Ferdinatto's territory was successfully defended, it read. Our forces have made great gains in pushing back Yelenetta's battle lines. In the face of their losses, they have retreated to their own territory, creating an opportunity for our forces to strike back. The northern nobility will join forces to invade Yelenetta in a short, decisive attack. However, as Baron Van Nei Fertio's Chivalric Order is small, he will not participate in the counteroffensive.

Reading those words, I exhaled a deep sigh of relief. *Thank goodness. The king understands that I really, really don't want to go to war.*

As I read further, however, I found some unsettling words. *"At the time of our counteroffensive into Yelenetta, the Chivalric Orders will convene at a predetermined location that will henceforth serve as the base of operations, with the end goal of reinforcing our troops'? Are we going to be okay if we thin out our defenses like this? Let's see, what else... 'The designated location is Baron Van Nei Fertio's territory'...?"*

Wait, what does that last line mean?

Uncertain, I read over the letter once more. *"Ah, there's a date written here. 'In precisely one week, our forces will gather at Seatoh Village in Baron Van Nei Fertio's territory.'"*

What? Am I missing something? Why would a massive army gather in a puny little territory with only a small Chivalric Order? Counting only the nobility with territory close to Yelenetta, we were tens of thousands of soldiers. Even if they left half their troops behind to defend their main cities, we were still looking at twenty to thirty thousand men making their way to Seatoh Village. And on top of that, the royal forces were heading here too.

“So at least fifty thousand people...?” I wracked my brain. “Uh, if they’re okay with camping roadside, that’ll work, but... Argh, I need to consider meals and commodities, too!”

Actually, this might be a good opportunity to do some expansion. His Highness and the other higher-ups were headed this way, so I needed to give them a warm reception. I groaned. *This is going to be a pain.*

“He got me good... He’s not making me leave my territory and I’m not on the front lines, but he still found a way to put me in the most annoying situation imaginable.” I set the letter on the table and found myself unthinkingly casting my gaze upward. *Not bad, Your Highness.*

Till, who was pouring me a glass of tea from the other side of the table, tilted her head at me. “Lord Van, you’re frowning. Is something the matter?”

I waved the letter at her and heaved a deep sigh. “Good old Dino’s making another wild request. Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day.”

“Good old Dino...? Wait, do you mean His Highness?” Till, who hadn’t initially registered who I was talking about, raised her voice in panic. “You mustn’t refer to him that way!”

I chuckled and summarized the contents of the letter for her. “His Highness is launching a counterattack on Yelenetta and, well, I don’t have to go to the front lines, but for some reason he’s decided to launch the attack from my territory instead of Scudet. We’ve got more than fifty thousand troops on their way here, to this tiny little village... Ah, crap! Dad’s probably coming, too! Argh, this is so annoying!”

Seeing me grip my head in frustration, Till’s panic amplified. “The marquis is coming, too?! This is bad! I need to hurry and clean everything thoroughly! We must also prepare the best foods we have!”

“Uh...that’s what you’re worried about?” How could she be fussing about those sorts of things at a time like this?

She turned on me. “It’s important! A full year has passed since you left home, and we need to demonstrate how much you have accomplished! Let’s show them what a wonderful place Seatoh Village has become!”

She was all fired up. I looked at Khamsin, who was standing guard behind me, out of the corner of my eye. “Looks like Till’s feeling pretty motivated,” I commented quietly.

Khamsin chuckled and nodded. “I understand how she feels. I want to show Master Jalpa how incredible you are, Lord Van.”

“O-oh, really? Well...that’s fine, then.” The sincerity of his words embarrassed me a bit. I redirected my thoughts, focusing instead on my plan of action for the next day. “In that case, I’ll start by placing large orders with the Bell & Rango Company and the Business Guild for provisions, spices, clothes, and weapons. I’ll also request lumber from the Adventurers’ Guild and select some delicious monsters for them to hunt for me. And then, let’s see... Hmm, maybe not a whole wall, but they’ll need some outdoor facilities if they’re going to camp roadside. Oh, and we’ll need a treatment center in case anyone gets hurt.”

I ticked these action items off on my fingers as I spoke, then wrote them out on the paper in front of me. The longer I looked at that to-do list, the more trepidation I felt about the size of this endeavor. A week wasn’t nearly enough time.

Normally the king would operate something like this from a place with plenty of resources and facilities, like one of Marquis Fertio’s huge cities. Hell, Scudet was right there. Why didn’t he pick that instead? I stared at the sheet of paper and sighed. “Man, this stinks.”

There was no use crying over spilled milk, though. I switched gears and sent out requests to the Bell & Rango Company and the Business Guild like I’d planned: rations that would be good for a few days, seasoning, clothing, weapons, medical goods, the whole package. The Chivalric Knights of the various orders probably had lots of arrows and magic tools, at least, so there was no need to order more of those.

Lastly, I had to speak to Esparda and Dee about the treatment center and lodgings for the soldiers. I summoned them and explained the situation, carefully watching their reactions. Esparda wore a small grin, and Dee pounded his chest.

“This is wonderful!” Dee declared. “We’ll show them how much development

you've done!"

"C'mon, Dee, not you too," I rebuked. "Provoking the marquis and making an enemy out of him would be the worst possible move right now."

Esparda raised his eyebrows in what might have been surprise. "Am I correct in inferring that you fear not mere discord with the master, but something more sinister?"

"Well, yes. Honestly, I'm fairly confident I could beat him if it came to that. I saw him use magic in the last battle, and I've already thought up a counterplan. If he came at me head-on, I honestly don't think we'd lose."

Esparda and Dee both looked momentarily dumbfounded, but they recovered and started laughing. Esparda, laughing! That was unusual. "Uh, what's so funny?" I asked.

Dee shook his head, his shoulders trembling. "My apologies. It's just that Esparda and I have often worried that you lack confidence in your abilities. You've never said as much, but it always seemed as though you thought yourself inferior to your father and brothers."

Esparda tilted his chin down slightly. In a rare display of feeling, he said, "Lord Van, you are the man I have recognized as my new master; I want you to feel confident that you are in no way your father's inferior. Hearing you say this has made both of us happy."

Seemed like he wanted a master who was a confident leader. Wryly, I thought, *Fine, you got it. Regardless of how strong I am, I know for a fact that Seatoh Village is unbeatable.*

With a shrug, I got to business. "I'm thinking of building lodging along the road just outside of the adventurers' town. If I limit it to only ranked knights and above, I figure space for about three hundred people should work. Thoughts?"

Dee nodded. "If you limit it to generals and above, space for one to two hundred will be fine."

Again, Esparda lowered his chin. "No matter the city, only one to two hundred people can expect to stay in any one inn at a time. The others will be fine

camping outside. You will need to prepare approximately twenty more luxury suites, though.”

“For the members of the upper nobility, right? In that case, I’ll prepare enough space for two hundred. As for the treatment center, would space for one hundred be fine?”

Dee was the one to answer. “Frankly, even a thousand wouldn’t be enough. If the fighting is fierce, though, no one will complain as long as they have a roof over their heads. A simple building, like a storehouse, should suffice. However...” He thought for a moment. “Why not really show your father what you can do?”

Esparda nodded. “Agreed. This is an excellent chance to demonstrate your abilities to other nobles. You would do well to convey that you are not someone to cross. To that end, you should make something impressive.”

“Aw, but we only have a week.” I frowned. “I was busy making the forge until yesterday, so I’d appreciate a bit of a break.”

Dee crossed his arms and groaned. He looked troubled. “That being said...”

With a gentle sigh, Esparda said, “Why not add a bathhouse to the facility? In fact, you could make that the main attraction, so that it is more like a rest area.”

“A bathhouse, you say?” That got my attention. Before I knew it, I was sketching out a design in my mind. The facility would be a spacious three-floor building, with the first floor a dedicated bathhouse and rest area. On the second floor I would build small single-person rooms, and on the third I’d build the bigger rooms for the noblemen. Oh, and I could put twelve toilets on each floor! Hmm, and if I made the bath larger, I’d need bigger water wheels, tanks, and scalders.

The process was so much fun that before I knew it, I’d completed the facility, putting together the lodgings and attached bath in only two days.

Murcia

“UGH, I’M SO WORRIED.”

I hadn’t slept in a week. My stomach was troubling me, so I hadn’t been eating much, and the lack of food was taking its toll. If I weren’t in a carriage on our march to Seatoh Village, I’d probably have collapsed by now.

Casting my gaze out the window, I realized that the view from the road had changed significantly. Three days ago, we’d been deep in the woods, but now we were surrounded by mountains. Like the deep woods, though, terrible monsters lurked around every corner on the perilous mountain road. It felt like nature itself was telling us that humanity was not yet ready to live in such environments.

“I can’t believe Van was sent here,” I murmured. “He must have been so scared.” Just the thought of Van’s feelings after his expulsion from the family made my heart ache. I had only been able to give him what money I had on hand, and I regretted not asking Father to send some of my men with him.

Guilt and sympathy washed over me, but only until I remembered my own position. “But Van managed to slay a dragon and acquire a peerage in a place like this.” No matter how I looked at it, I knew I’d never be able to achieve feats like those. I would struggle to take down even an immobile dragon. I could see myself now: at a loss for what to do, my magic running dry in the end.

Van had always been brilliant, even when he was a tiny child. He had probably come up with some kind of wild plan to take out the beast. Whatever had happened, though, the battle must have been fierce. And here I was, on my way to the village where this had transpired, wondering what, if anything, I could do to help my little brother.

Voices from outside the carriage interrupted my fretting. “Hey, is that...”

“Did we go the wrong way?”

Hearing the confusion in my soldiers’ voices, I looked ahead to find a large, square building sitting on the side of the road. It was attached to a large water wheel that seemed to be carrying water to its upper levels. White smoke billowed from the windows on the first floor.

As we proceeded, a wall rivaling the royal capital's came into view behind the building. What was the point of a wall like that if it wouldn't protect the building in front of it?

What if the wall is there to guard against powerful monsters approaching from the other side? I was still puzzling over this when the carriage came to a sudden stop.

Outside, someone was yelling, "Is this the party of Marquis Jalpa Bul Ati Fertio? I am Dee, commander of Baron Van Nei Fertio's Chivalric Order! We welcome you with open arms!"

I poked my head out of the window and followed the familiar voice to its source. Before the large building stood a bulky man clad in armor—this was unmistakably Dee—and two young knights I had seen before. Seeing them in good health, relief rushed over me. From behind them emerged Esparda and Till, followed by that one slave boy my little brother had purchased when he was younger and, last but not least, Van himself.

I was calling out to him before I even realized it. "Van!" Getting out of the carriage, I waved at Van, who happily returned the gesture. He appeared unharmed. They had slain a dragon, but Van, Dee, and Esparda looked no worse for wear.

"Murcia!" Van said, making his way over to me.

Father's Chivalric Order formation was near the center of the march, still a few hundred meters back. It wouldn't look good for Van, as the lord of the land, to greet and welcome me before he spoke to Father. To save Father face, I hurried back into the carriage and said from inside, "V-Van, go greet Father first. We can talk later, okay?"

But to my shock, Van grabbed the window with two careless hands and stuck his head into the carriage, smiling mischievously. I froze up, but he said, "Long time no see, Murcia. Thanks to you, my territory's gotten super strong. Honestly, I wanted to show it to you before anyone else."

I blinked back sudden tears. So often I had wondered whether my aid had made his future seem even more cruel. To hear his words of gratitude now was overwhelming. "I-it was nothing," I insisted. "You did this on your own. I

couldn't do anything for you. I should have asked Father to give you more funds or more people, but...I couldn't..."

It was pathetic of me to keep my head bowed, but I couldn't lift it; my repentance poured from my mouth. But Van kept his head in the window and let out a breathy laugh.

"Honestly, I probably should've died then and there. Even if Father didn't do it himself, if you hadn't given me help, I might've died before I even got here. Thank you, Murcia."

An innocent smile bloomed on his face. I could no longer fight back my tears but I did, at least, keep myself from sobbing, letting out only a single choked noise as I wiped the moisture from my eyes.

"All right, I'm gonna go say hello to the marquis. You can go on ahead to Seatoh Village, okay?" Van said.

"Huh? Isn't this Seatoh Village?" I asked through my tears, but my little brother was no longer there.

In Van's place, Dee poked his head into the carriage. "Oho! It has been some time, Lord Murcia! Have you been well?"

"Y-yes. And I'm glad to see you doing well, Deputy Commander Dee... Wait, you're the commander of Van's Chivalric Order now, right?"

"Ha ha ha! Indeed! I command the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order, and Sir Esparda commands the Esparda Chivalric Order! I implore you to come watch us train later; I promise you'll be impressed!"

Dee removed his head from the window then and issued orders to the soldiers near him.

"This is your resting space! The first floor has large baths, one for men and one for women, and the second floor has individual rooms for commissioned officers and higher. Additionally, beyond that wall is a town for adventurers and merchants, and further beyond that is Seatoh Village. General soldiers may not be able to go to Seatoh Village, but you are free to shop and eat in the adventurers' town!" Dee said, explaining what was in the vicinity.

The soldiers gaped at the building before them. They could barely believe what Dee was saying. The entire first floor of this massive structure was a bath? Not even the royal family possessed such lavish facilities. Not only that, but the wall behind it seemed abnormally strong...yet the town it protected wasn't even Van's main city? Dee made it sound like some sort of bonus town, which made things even harder to wrap my head around.

"Were my concerns just entirely off the mark...?" I asked myself. My youngest brother had been sent off to a nameless village on the border, an environment where he would, in all likelihood, die...or so I thought. The sight before me told a very different story.

Jalpa

I HURRIED AHEAD TO OUR DESTINATION, PRECEDING His Highness, because I needed to build temporary housing and tents for the men. His Highness had visited Van once, I had heard, and I assumed that he'd greeted the king inside some sort of crumbling ruin. Now that I was accompanying the king, though, that would be unacceptable; if nothing else, I had to prepare temporary lodgings suitable for His Highness to rest in.

With that in mind, I hurried our army along. As we drew near our destination, however, I noticed that the soldiers appeared shaken by something. The closer we came to the border, the narrower the roads grew, and our formation had turned long and narrow as a result. My position was slightly to the rear of the center, so information from the front took some time to reach me.

"What happened ahead?" I asked, leaning out my window. "Go and check."

A tall knight wearing black armor and a look of fierce determination nodded at me from atop his steed. This was Stradale, the young commander of my Chivalric Order; he was only in his midthirties.

Stradale fixed his blue eyes on me and said, "We are receiving reports from the front, but they do not appear to be accurate, so I have put a temporary stop to any further reporting. We are in the process of re-evaluating the situation,

but if you would like to hear the information we currently have...”

“That is fine. Tell me the details of these inaccurate reports.”

Stradale nodded and delivered his summary promptly. “Our forwardmost troops have come upon some sort of massive building. Geographically speaking, it is thought to be part of Baron Van’s territory. However, the wall meant to protect it is in fact behind the structure. The reports have also indicated that the wall is immense and strong.”

This man was as serious as they came, the very definition of honest. I assumed that he was having his men re-evaluate precisely because he did not want to make such a vague report. He was also correct that the details did not add up.

“The forward squad should have arrived by now,” I replied. “There is no need to wait for the re-evaluation. We will soon see for ourselves what lies ahead.”

“Yessir. Understood.”

Just as Stradale said these words, a commotion erupted up front. The stir reached us like a ripple running across the surface of the water.

“Apparently there’s a bathhouse that can fit over a hundred people,” I heard one nearby soldier say.

“I heard they built a rest station outside,” said another.

“Someone said there’s a second town on the other side of the wall. Wasn’t this place supposed to be on the verge of collapse?”

Similar such nonsense came from all around me. I leaned my head out the window and spotted an enormous building in the distance. The design was unfamiliar; it was perfectly square. Beyond it was something that looked like a wall.

I leaned further out of the vehicle. “What is that...?”

As if they had scripted it, that was when I heard Van’s name. “Lord Van?”

“Ah, Lord Van! He looks like he’s doing well.”

“Oh, and Sir Esparda is with him!”

I strained my eyes in response to the men's words and saw a childlike form approaching our formation from the top of the road. It seemed Van had come to greet us with a handful of his men; the group numbered in the dozens.

"Sir Dee is nowhere to be found, eh?" Stradale murmured to himself.

I had often seen Stradale and Dee exchange stern words. Stradale was exceedingly honest and Dee extremely broadminded, but ultimately, they both recognized and acknowledged one another's skills. He would never say as much, but I suspected that Stradale felt somewhat lonely after Dee's departure.

Now that I thought about it, Stradale had merely nodded when we first received word that His Highness had acknowledged Dee as a dragon slayer. That was the reaction of a man who well knew Dee's abilities.

"Lord Jalpa, Lord Van is here to see you," Stradale said, noticing that Van drew near.

"He has a peerage now. Call for me when he takes a knee before my carriage."

"As you wish," Stradale replied respectfully.

I waited a while, but no summons came. Instead, I heard Van's voice from outside. "Might I assume this is Marquis Jalpa's party? Is Marquis Jalpa present? I am Van Nei Fertio, the lord in charge of this land. Thank you for coming!"

I listened to the strange greeting, anger already bubbling up within me. He was a poor excuse for a nobleman.

Stradale called, "Lord Jalpa, Lord Van is here." His tone gave no hint as to how he interpreted Van's words.

"Fine," I said at length. I could not afford to look petty in front of my men, so I contained my rage as I descended from the carriage.

Stradale must have issued orders: the soldiers were split to the right and left of the carriage, leaving the front open. That was where Van and some twenty to thirty others knelt. Among them were archers I recognized from the previous battle against Yelenetta. Esparda was stationed behind Van as well with the usual peevish look on his face. The man always strove to be the best butler

possible, so he would not step out of line to speak to me as long as Van was present. Seeing him again made me feel nostalgic, but also a touch sad.

I looked down at the group before me and said, “I am Marquis Jalpa Bul Ati Fertio. Baron Van Nei Fertio, thank you for your greeting.”

Van raised his head, smiling. “No, no, it’s nothing! Home is just around the corner, after all. If anything, I should thank you for being the first to arrive. Welcome, Lord Jalpa. I am sure the journey must have been exhausting. Worry not, we’ll reach Seatoh Village shortly, and you can rest there.”

“Hmph. Lead the way,” I commanded. Van acknowledged this with a cheerful nod.

He guided us to the building in the distance, where Murcia’s forward squad was making camp. The men were putting up their tents as hastily as if they were in a race. I wondered why they were moving so quickly after the long march.

Apparently noticing my gaze, Van turned around and pointed at the building. “This is a rest area I put together quickly for the various Chivalric Orders. On the first floor is a large bath split into sections for men and women, and on the second floor are individual rooms for around two hundred people. I was thinking of having the lords and their bodyguards stay in Seatoh Village. What would you like to do, Lord Jalpa?”

He said all of this like it was nothing. I frowned and just managed to refrain from snorting. “I applaud you for building such a large structure, but you claim that the entire first floor is a bath? How exactly could you procure so much hot water? I doubt whether you could acquire a tenth of what you would need.”

With a troubled expression, Van pointed to the back of the building. “Right? It was a real pain getting all that hot water. You can’t see from here, but we have a water wheel in the back that carries water to the tank. From there, a portion of the water is boiled and sent to the bath. That way, once the tank fills with hot water, it can continually supply the baths with water at a set temperature. Feel free to take a dip, assuming you don’t mind sharing the space with the regular soldiers.”

“Regular soldiers using the bathhouse first? Child, even if this is just a

standard bath, can you not even remember that peerage takes priority?!" I yelled at the boy in anger. As if a noble would ever deign to bathe in a bathhouse used by those without peerage!

But Van only smiled and waved a hand. "Don't misunderstand. We have a separate bathhouse prepared for His Majesty and the other nobles. We also have a three-story bathhouse in that town over there that we built for adventurers and merchants, and another bathhouse in Seatoh Village itself. The facility here is for those without peerage or below the rank of baron."

"Impossible. You expect me to believe any of..." I trailed off, recalling that Van had crafted an immense catapult in front of me back in Scudet. I was not well versed in matters of production magic, but it seemed as though the boy possessed some sort of special power. I looked down at the child once more. "Fine. In that case, show me."

"...Right this way!" Van blinked at me, seemingly surprised by my response, but recovered quickly. He smiled a meaningful smile as he led me to the building.

The more I saw the structure, the more mysterious it seemed. Not only was I uncertain what it was made from, its very form was unfamiliar to me.

"Ah, Father!" Murcia was already inside, talking with the sergeants in a spacious room with some tables and chairs.

In the back was Dee, who noticed my presence and bowed deeply to me. "Oooh! Lord Jalpa! I am glad to see you in good health!"

"Mm, likewise. I heard you took the head of a dragon. You appear unharmed."

Dee pounded his chest and nodded. "Ha ha ha! Fit as a fiddle!" he said, laughing merrily.

I started to wonder whether this man remembered that he had defected from my Chivalric Order. In fairness, though, it was common enough for talented knights to be poached by other orders. I myself had done the same to orders in neighboring territories, so I had no ground to stand on.

While I was thinking this, Stradale stepped out from behind me. "Sir Dee, it

has been some time.” Dee was older and belonged to a different Chivalric Order now, so this was my commander’s way of showing respect.

For his part, Dee looked at Stradale and smiled. “Oooh! Commander Stradale! It has been too long!” He laughed. “I see you look as standoffish as ever!”

“And I’m glad to see you enjoying yourself as usual.”

While the two of them enjoyed their reunion, I saw, from the corner of my eye, Van pointing to the back of his building. He was saying, “There are toilets on either side of the building. In the back left is the entrance to the women’s bath; on the right is the one for the men’s. In the center is a changing room, and then beyond that is the bathing area itself.”

Van headed to the back of the building, leaving me no choice but to begrudgingly follow him into the changing room. A few soldiers who were in the process of undressing saw me and immediately corrected their posture.

“I’m just giving them a tour. Please be at ease,” Van said, passing through the changing room and opening the door to what he’d claimed was the bathing space.

Steam and hot air escaped through the open door, revealing a massive bathing area. The walls, floor, and pillars were all made from stone. The only windows were high and very narrow, so lamp-like objects adorned the walls, illuminating the room.

To say that it dwarfed the bath in my own home was an understatement. The combined size of the men’s and women’s baths probably exceeded even the royal family’s. I stood there staring, dumbfounded, until Van pointed at the exit.

“Shall we move on?”

“...Yes, of course,” I said stupidly. I had no idea what to say. It must have taken months to build it all. How could he do that with only Esparda, Dee, and a hundred or so residents of a rundown village? What had happened in the year since this boy left home?

We climbed to the second floor where, I learned, the private rooms were each equipped with their own beds, furnishings, and even toilets. My mind groped around for an explanation but came up short.

Van

MY OLD MAN MUST'VE BEEN SURPRISED, BECAUSE he went dead silent on me. Murcia, on the other hand, was looking around like a country bumpkin on his first visit to the big city.

"As I said earlier, we made this town after a nearby dungeon was discovered, leading to a huge influx of adventurers and merchants. On this main street we have a weapons shop, a clothing shop, a general store, a restaurant, and a hotel. That three-story building over there? That whole thing is the hotel."

"The entire building? Just how much backing did the Mary Chamber of Commerce provide...?" Jalpa said in a low voice, looking up at the Kusala Hotel.

Seemed like daddy dearest thought the Mary Chamber of Commerce had funded the thing. "Oh, no. The Mary Chamber of Commerce has its own store in the area, but half the stores here are Bell & Rango Company shops and the rest are individually operated. In the latter case, they basically took out loans from me so they could start their ventures, since they didn't have enough cash on hand."

A difficult look crossed my father's face. He was silent for a long, thoughtful moment, and then said, "Show me Seatoh Village."

"As you wish," I said, since I had no way to know yet what conclusion he had come to.

"This is amazing," Murcia said in a low voice. "I had no idea you had developed your territory so much."

Dee heard him, and his shoulders shook with laughter. "Oh, believe me, if the adventurers' town surprised you, you'll want to see Seatoh Village!"

"S-seriously?" Murcia yelped.

I was a bit concerned about Dee's unnecessary promises, though. *Man, if we're talking appearances, the adventurers' town is way more striking. Why did you have to go and raise the bar so high?*

With no other options, I guided Jalpa, Murcia, and Stradale to the village.

We stopped in front of the wall and the moat, prompting the ballista operators to take their positions. They weren't aiming for us or anything, but I could hear them loading the weapons; they were ready to fire if necessary.

"Surely they do not aim at us," Jalpa said in a low voice, but I pretended not to hear him.

Dee yelled, "Open the gate and lower the bridge!" His voice echoed around us, and before long, the drawbridge was down and the gate rumbling open. I watched this happen in silence, then turned to Jalpa.

"Welcome to Seatoh Village."

Jalpa frowned and tipped his chin down. "Van, what is this large tower?"

"Oh, that's Oligo Tower. On the opposite side is Grape Tower. I built them so that we can see threats approaching. Of course, we also have ballistae aimed in all directions, and I have at least ten members of my Chivalric Order stationed on the wall at all times."

"Ah, speaking of the wall, it's shaped rather...uniquely. Is there a reason for that?"

"From above, it's shaped like a star. The parts that jut out are connected only by a drawbridge up top. This way, anyone who launches an attack on the village will have to take control of the jutting-out corners first, then cross the moat to get through the wall."

"That does seem like a strong safety feature. If my memory serves, you used those ballistae to take down a wyvern in a single shot."

"They can one-shot wyverns and armored lizards, yes. Our ballista operators are more experienced now, too, so they don't miss anymore. Oh, and their range is about one kilometer, and they can fire twice in a row before they need to reload."

"Armored lizards?" Murcia cut in. "For real?"

We proceeded through the village like that, talking about my defense systems. Murcia did most of the questioning while Jalpa and Stradale trailed

behind us and listened silently.

Crap. I expanded the bathhouse in Seatoh Village and used the dwarven forge to circulate the hot water, but it's still smaller than the one outside. It's unimpressive! And the one at the manor is perfectly sized for me, so I haven't modified it. Where am I supposed to bring these guys?

Esparda interrupted my internal panic by clearing his throat and pointing to the far end of the village. "Lord Van, I believe you have yet to show them the dwarven forge or the lake."

I nodded and plastered a smile back on my face. "Right, right. I suppose I should take them there."

Behind me, I heard Jalpa whisper, "Did he say dwarf...?" I stole a glance at daddy dearest, but he was already staring off in the distance, where smoke rose from the forge.

Murcia asked, "Are you telling me that you have dwarves, who are notorious for hating humans, living in your village?"

"They're pretty stubborn, but they're all good guys at heart," I replied breezily, resuming the tour.

We passed the side of the manor and headed further back, toward the massive forge. I was a little nervous, given that the forge was a fair bit smaller than we'd originally planned to make it. (Remember, whenever orichalcum needed to be refined, we had to pack the materials and fuel in from the top of the forge.)

But when Jalpa and the others laid eyes on the forge and smithing workshop, they froze, stunned. I glanced at them, then peeked into the workshop. Amidst the waves of hot air stood Havel and the others, covered in soot and happily smithing away.

"Ho ho, look!" crowed Havel. "You guys could never make something like this!"

"Shut yer trap! I'm gonna learn how to forge a katana soon enough!"

"That's basically just a thin falchion anyway, Havel!"

The group of dwarves bickered as they worked, occasionally breaking it up with loud bouts of laughter. They honestly seemed to be having the time of their lives.

I called out to them. “Hey! I’m here! What’s up?”

Havel and his pals turned around. “Well, if it ain’t Lord Van!” Havel exclaimed. He held up a single-edged black sword. “What d’ya think? Looks like a katana, right?” The sword shone dully; it was impressive. As to whether it looked like a katana, however...

“It looks awesome. If you make it a little thinner and give it a bit more of a curve, I think you’ll have it down.”

“Thinner than it is now? But then it’ll bend too easily!” Havel stared in dismay at the sword he’d crafted.

The other dwarves gripped their stomachs, laughing away. “See!”

“You gotta fold back the plates over and over again! You only did it three or four times!”

“Shut up, all of you!” Havel spat back. “It’s about the form! And I folded the plates over five times, damn it! Doing it more times ain’t gonna make it any tougher!”

“It’ll get sharper after ten times, won’t it?”

“Say that after you’ve made one yourself!”

They were back to yelling at each other and obviously weren’t about to stop anytime soon. I reached into a nearby vase and pulled out a sword they’d forged; they must have chucked a bunch in there when they were done with them. The one I picked was, obviously, old enough that it was no longer hot.

Swords forged by the dwarves were way more impressive than those we’d imported into the village. The one I held was a pretty basic long sword. Made from iron, it felt heavier to me than mithril. I looked it over, held it up, and turned to Havel. “I’m taking this.”

“The swords over there are second-rate. Take as many as you’d like!” he said.

“Havel, you bastard!” complained one of his buddies. “I made the ones over

there! Oh, but feel free to take 'em, Lord Van!”

I smirked at the disorderly dwarves and left the workshop, sword in hand. Jalpa and the others had approached the entrance, and they were waiting there for me, wearing expressions of disbelief.

“As you can see, they make weapons and the like for us. Rowdily,” I added with a grimace.

The sword, when I held it up, drew their gazes. Dee and Stradale wore particularly grave expressions, but Jalpa merely looked stern, as befitted a landed nobleman. Dee mumbled, “This sword is of the finest quality I’ve seen yet,” and Stradale nodded his silent agreement.

Jalpa fumed, glaring at the dwarven forge. I glanced at him, then turned to Murcia. “Brother, does the fact that you’re here mean Marquis Fertio’s Chivalric Order was split in two?”

Murcia gave me a troubled smile. “Actually—”

Before he could continue, one of my knights emerged from the wall on horseback. “Lord Van! His Highness has arrived! He appears to have led the march here with his royal guard!”

“That was fast!” The royal capital was several times farther away than the marquis’s first city; why had he arrived so quickly? “He must’ve left the capital right after he sent those letters out to the nobility. All right, time to hurry over! Dee, Esparda, with me! Father, Murcia, you two—”

“You think I could stay here? You fool. If His Highness has arrived, then of course we shall greet him.”

“Oh, right. That makes sense. In that case, it’s time to pause the tour and go say hello.” Whoops, I’d unthinkingly issued orders to my father and earned myself a scolding. Honestly, it was all happening so fast that I just agreed with him and led them all to the gate.

We arrived to find my knights on standby, awaiting my orders. I said, “You’re good! Open the gates!”

Normally, Dee, Esparda, or I would confirm the identity of any visitors, but

given that more than half of our knights had seen the king before, I figured it was okay to skip that process for once. I waited as the gate slowly opened, revealing a four-horse carriage surrounded by knights on horseback.

Actually, all of the knights were on horses. Just how quickly had they rushed here?

As soon as the carriage's doors were open, the king descended and boomed out a greeting in his familiar, boisterous voice. "Baron Van! Long time no see!"

The citizens around us were so surprised by his straightforward manner that they forgot to kneel. The king was in a jovial mood, though, and paid them no mind, instead heading straight toward me. "I see you've gone and built something brilliant! That enormous bath shocked me, and the facilities in the town are so robust—I expect that you must have changed something here as well!"

Noticing who stood behind me, he added, "Ah, Marquis! I saw your knights out and about, and I was looking for you. Have you finished touring the village?"

With a deep bow of his head, Jalpa said, "Yes, for the most part, though I have yet to visit the so-called lake."

"Oho!" His Highness shouted. "Is that so? As it happens, I have friends there who I must greet. This is a perfect opportunity. Marquis, would you care to join me?"

"O-of course, Your Highness," Jalpa agreed, bending to the force of the king's personality. The exchange called to mind the nights of drinking shared between a salaryman and his boss. In that sense, at least, noble society was a lot like my old world. I watched Jalpa follow the king away, the image of the salaryman still lurking in the back of my mind. I might have been imagining things, but Jalpa looked exhausted.

"Baron Van, could you open the gate?" the king asked.

I was so lost in thought I hadn't noticed that we were already at the back of the village. I replied with a hurried nod and issued orders to the knights on the wall. They acknowledged my orders, and the heavy sounds of the gate opening rang out.

Jalpa had maintained his cool throughout the entire tour, but this proved to be too much. His eyes nearly rolling back into his head from shock, he cried, “A-Apkallu?!”

Murcia turned to look beyond the gate, his eyes settling on the massive lake surrounded by boat houses. On the surface of the water floated a handful of boats, and at the edge of the lake were tables and chairs where some villagers sat happily chatting and sharing food with their apkallu friends. Nearby, apkallu children joyfully tossed balls back and forth.

His Highness took the scene in. “If I’m not mistaken, there are more apkallu than before. Is their chief still the same? If I recall, it was Sir Ladavesta.”

I was surprised by the king’s excellent memory. Pointing, I said, “You remember well. The apkallu sitting over there is indeed Ladavesta.”

I led the group over to Ladavesta, who was seated in a chair, watching the lake. The king said, “It’s been a while! Have you been well?”

Ladavesta turned, saw the king, and nodded. “Ah, esteemed chief of humans! I am well. You, Sir Dino, look exhausted, however.”

“Ha ha ha! As it so happens, I rode long hours to get here quickly, but seeing you again has filled me with energy.”

“I see, I see. I am glad to hear it.”

Watching them chat, Jalpa groaned to himself. “How did he make a village like this?”

Final Chapter: Van's Territory

THE KING, JALPA, AND MURCIA ALL LODGED IN Seatoh Village. After he had a look at the star-shaped fortress, the ballistae, and the dwarven forge, the king called a strategy meeting to discuss our defense against an invasion of Yelenetta. Scudet and the other territories, I learned, had all sent Chivalric Orders and mercenaries to guard the borders. Only a small group of warriors, the cream of the crop, had been kept behind for the assault on Yelenetta.

Typically, it took a month or two to prepare for war, and especially to acquire the necessary provisions. Factoring in the time it then took to reach enemy territory, it was common for three months to have passed before the beginning of open combat. But the king's plan seemed to set the Yelenetta invasion less than a month out. He'd made no indication, for example, that he intended to stay in my territory in the long term.

News of the other Chivalric Orders' arrivals came fast and furious during my meeting with His Highness and Jalpa.

"Count Ventury has arrived! And Count Ferdinatto's Chivalric Order is right behind him!"

"Kay!"

"Viscount Panamera has arrived! Others bearing banners from the other houses are arriving as well!"

"Kay!"

Before long, we had some thirty thousand soldiers on standby outside of Seatoh Village.

"Long time no see, boy!"

The second she saw me, Panamera ruffled my hair and said hello. It was a little embarrassing, but I didn't hate it, so I returned her greeting in earnest.

"Long time no see, Panamera."

“That bath was something else!” she said with a joyous laugh. “And it seems you’ve prepared more than enough provisions! Thanks to you, I’ll be living in luxury while I’m here!”

She stuck out her chest as if to show off her dynamite bod. *What terrifying weapons those are...* I said, “We finished our dwarven forge, too. You should check it out later.”

“Your what?!” someone nearby cut in. Any time I said the word “dwarf,” people around me grew impatient. “I must see it as soon as possible!”

Coming up behind me, the king swiftly put everyone back in their place. “Retaliation against Yelenetta is our first priority. I’m sure you all understand.”

Hearing this, Panamera, the other nobles, and the members of the Chivalric Orders all knelt. “Your Highness, I had no idea you were already here.”

“No harm done. As luck would have it, I had business that brought me here earlier than the rest of you,” the king explained. His subjects, still kneeling, raised their heads to look at His Highness. He nodded at them, then folded his arms. “I am holding a war council. Our counterattack necessitates haste. I apologize for asking this of you all, who have only just arrived, but all commanding officers must come to Seatoh Village!”



“Yessir!”

The Chivalric Orders’ commanders and deputy commanders headed straight into Seatoh Village. Only Panamera did not follow suit. Clearly eager to see the new addition to the village, she sidled up to me and whispered, “Boy, where is the dwarven forge?”

Silently, I pointed to the plume of smoke rising from the back of the village. She looked over there, her eyes gleaming.

“Later, could you show me a sword they forged?”

“Of course,” I whispered back.

Jalpa and Ventury, walking ahead, glanced back at us. I felt like a kid who’d been caught doing something naughty.

I might have expected everyone to be on edge, what with war looming on the horizon, but for better or worse, everyone who’d been called to the war council seemed exactly the same as always. Well, except Count Ferdinatto, who kept fidgeting and stealing glances at me. It looked like he had something he wanted to say, but he refused to spit it out. Did he have unrequited feelings for me? Was he trying to silently send his affections my way?

I was still wondering what his deal was when we arrived at the manor and I led everyone into the spacious meeting room.

“Will black tea be acceptable?” Till asked one of our guests.

“Yeah. And pancakes, too.”

“Understood.” She was definitely putting on a bit of an act, playing the cool beauty while she took orders.

Ah, she just stumbled. That’s what happens when you don’t act naturally. I kept watching Till’s exit from the room until Jalpa loudly cleared his throat and glanced my way. I quickly corrected my posture.

Before me was a large round table, on the far side of which sat King Dino. On his right sat Jalpa, Count Ferdinatto, and Panamera, and to his left were Count Ventury and what appeared to be his faction of nobles. For my part, I was next to Panamera. Accompanying the eight of us who sat at the table were our

commanders and a handful of other relevant nobles, who sat in chairs behind us to observe the council.

Honestly, it was stuffier than a sauna. Dee and Khamsin, who were on standby behind me, didn't help. And Panamera's arrival brought us up to a grand total of three women. How sad.

Jalpa gave the people seated behind us a brief rundown of the talks so far, then asked, "Are there any questions?"

Panamera spoke up. "I'm well aware that this is a blitzkrieg and that we aim to avoid the territory facing Scudet, given the likelihood that Yelenetta is strengthening its defenses there. Yelenetta cannot afford to lose in its next attack, so we assume their forces will try to retake Scudet. This is a prediction, however: things might not pan out that way. I have heard that Count Ferdinatto's forces only barely withstood the attack on their territory. Rather than retake Scudet, Yelenetta might target Count Ferdinatto, Marquis Fertio, or even Baron Van's territory."

Hearing this alternative perspective, the king looked my way. "I have considered those possibilities, but I judged them unlikely after I received the reports about how Yelenetta's forces were repelled in our cities. Am I correct in this, Baron Van?"

Surprised to be passed the baton, I said, "Ah, yeah," without thinking. I looked around the table at everyone seated there in turn.

"First, we captured Prince Unimog, the commander of the military force that invaded my territory. We got him to tell us their plan: take Scudet, then use it as a foothold to take Marquis Fertio's territory. We also managed to apprehend Prince Freightliner during the battle to retake Scudet, and he gave us info on the current state of Yelenetta's military forces."

"You what?" Ventury cut in. "Did you not retreat? I recall you saying you were not going to the front lines."

Of course he'd remember something I didn't want him bringing up. I grimaced and explained, "We retreated but kept an eye on the battle from afar, spotting a fleeing enemy squad. As it turned out, Prince Freightliner was the squad's commander."

“Mm... And you defeated their squad with so few soldiers? No, that’s right, your ballistae inflicted fatal wounds on the earth dragon. With those...” Ventury trailed off thoughtfully, so I turned back to the others.

“With Prince Freightliner’s cooperation, we acquired a lot of useful intel. Firstly, the cornerstones of Yelenetta’s new armaments are what they refer to as ‘black balls,’ explosives they obtained from the central continent. They do not require magical energy of any kind, which means that, using them, non-magic users can produce attacks on par with a mid-level fire mage. Yelenetta has given these black balls to its standard infantrymen and split them into smaller groups that can each do a lot of destructive damage.”

“Black balls...” Panamera murmured.

“So that’s what those explosives are?” asked Ferdinatto. Both he and Panamera had participated in the last battle. “They are most certainly dangerous. That Yelenetta’s soldiers can produce what is essentially fire magic through the simple act of throwing a small projectile is alarming.”

Hearing this, the other nobles in the room grimaced and began to mutter amongst themselves. “A weapon like that...”

“It’s terrifying that anyone can use it.”

They were quicker on the uptake of the practical uses of gunpowder than I’d expected. It seemed like their fear of fire magic put things into perspective for them.

Now then, how was I going to get my hands on the stuff? There were all sorts of fun things I could do with gunpowder...

“What about the wyverns and dragons?”

“They’re controlled by marionette mages, no? In that case, if we strike at the mages...”

“We all know that a marionette mage’s abilities depend largely on the mage’s compatibility with the target and their total amount of magical power. It is unlikely that they have too many wyverns and dragons on hand.”

Before I knew it, the council had moved on to the next topic. While they

understood the threat of Yelenetta's new weapon, they didn't introduce a motion to discuss getting their own hands on the stuff. Maybe my appraisal of their understanding was too generous.

Gunpowder wouldn't just give us the ability to create firearms and bombs; it would also allow us to mine with explosives and make traps that were closer to modern-day equivalents. Depending on how creative we got, there were all kinds of ways to use gunpowder.

My mind raced as the council carried on. Eventually the king shot me a look. "That about sums up our plans. Baron Van, what do you think?" he asked, seeking my opinion on the matter.

Without me noticing, the discussion had progressed from the enemy threat to our invasion strategy. I cleared my throat once. "This is essentially a surprise attack. Our first priority is to pass through the mountain path as planned and dispatch Chivalric Orders into Yelenetta's territory. However, given that the mountain path is long and narrow and considering the number of soldiers we'll march through it, there's a strong chance that monsters will attack.

"As such, I believe it crucial to build safe, temporary bases of operations along the road. And in the interest of moving quickly and safely, I recommend using the war wagons that the Bell & Rango Company sells. I can lend you ballistae for free, too, so that you can bring them straight into battle with Yelenetta."

His Highness and Panamera both started cackling.

"Ha ha ha! Quite the salesman, aren't you?" said the king.

"If you made that your primary occupation, you'd be rich!" exclaimed Panamera.

My old man heaved a sigh, a sour expression crossing his face. Ventury took this interruption as a chance to speak. "You say Yelenetta has a fortress designed to seal off this mountain path, but should we really be basing our plan around information obtained from enemy royalty?"

The other nobles nodded silently, apparently also wondering whether our intel from Unimog was legitimate.

"Fear not," said the king. "Prince Unimog was not particularly bright, but we

pressed him hard. He was not lying to us.”

Several people went pale, while others nodded loyally. It seemed like the king’s interrogation methods were effective in more ways than one.

For the record, Freightliner had been cooperative from the start. In fact, he kept going on about how much he wanted to become a permanent resident of Seatoh Village, so Esparda was currently in the process of training him as a civil servant.

Using the large map spread out on the table, the king explained where the bases would be located.

“First we shall purchase those war wagons from Baron Van, enter the mountains, and create a base of operations. Since the path is long and arduous, we will be establishing three bases in three separate locations.

“When Yelenetta’s forces passed through, they did so with wyverns that kept the other monsters at bay. Unfortunately, we do not have that option. As such, we will build multiple durable bases in close proximity to one another. Doing so will require the skills of adventurers who have long experience working on roads like this.”

He pointed to the places on the map that were up for consideration.

“Now, about the bases. I would like your aid, Baron Van. You are capable of swiftly creating fortifications on site, and your structures are strong enough to withstand attacks from large monsters.”

All eyes turned to me.

Wait, this wasn’t the plan. Now I suddenly have work to do? And not easy work, either! It’s hard work being the guy who can make the impossible possible. Everyone wants a piece of little Van...

“As you wish,” I said promptly. Several of the noblemen in the room looked shocked at my response. *Heh heh, I better make something cool. Something that’ll really blow their minds.*

After only another thirty minutes, our war council came to a close. Whenever the king told us what we had to do, everyone started discussing how to make it

happen. Nobody could say no to the man. But maybe that was normal for a monarchy.

Ultimately, though, the king's relationship to the nobility was irrelevant. The first item on my to-do list was to come up with a base design that was easy to construct.

Let's see... How to make a base with minimal effort...

"Huh? Then you do not have to go to battle?" Arte posed this question to me in the office after the conclusion of the war council.

I nodded, smiling, and picked up a wood block. "Last time around, I told the king that I didn't have the manpower to send people into battle because my territory was still growing. So this time, I'm cooperating with the invasion by serving as a relay base of sorts."

"Is that so?" Arte sounded surprised. "I would not have expected the king to accept that, given how much he prizes military might."

I showed her the map, which displayed a winding mountain path and a Ylenetta fortress a short distance away. "In exchange, I have to help his army invade at full power. I've made a bunch of war wagons equipped with ballistae, which is all well and good, but the bases are the real issue here. I was thinking of crafting foldable containers..."

"Containers?" she replied with a tilt of her head.

There was a knock at the door, and Till and Khamsin entered. Khamsin said, "Lord Van, the tour of Seatoh Village has concluded."

I had asked them to give the war council participants a tour around the village. "Thanks a bunch. You guys did great."

"I'm exhausted," Till said. She sounded it, too. She must have been tense the entire time. It wasn't often that a maid had to deal with such important people directly. I shot her a wry smile.

"His Highness and Master Jalpa went to see the dwarven forge," Khamsin told me, "and Lord Ventury went to inspect the ballistae. The others are looking

over the campgrounds and handling supply procurement.”

“I see, I see.”

I was molding the wood block in my hand like clay while I listened to Khamsin’s report. The image I had in my head was of a foldable container, designed so that the walls could collapse inward. With each wall collapsed in the proper order, the box would end up as a neat stack of boards; when each board was raised in the correct order, it would form a proper container. In my mind, I made the box longer than it was wide, with a door attached to the shorter side of the container.

It was a simple structure. I turned the wood block into a small prototype, and Arte and the others observed with looks of glee as I unfolded and collapsed it.

“That is fascinating,” said Arte.

“And it won’t break?” Khamsin asked.

I pointed at the interior of the box. “There are gaps between the top and bottom boards, so if you snap them into place, they don’t go anywhere.” Khamsin nodded earnestly. “But it’s way too heavy right now, so they’ll have to be about the size of a carriage. Either I take out part of the side wall and make it so that they can connect to one another, or I divide them into skeleton frames and boards and have them put together on site...”

I groaned. Starting from scratch, I made a different type of container, one with a skeleton frame that you plugged the boards into. The foldable container was the simpler of the two designs, but the skeleton frame one provided the most on-site flexibility. I would definitely need to think this over.

“All right, let’s actually test this,” I said, standing up with the small prototype container in my hand. “Wanna try it out?”

My friends looked surprised. “You mean you’re already going to make a full-sized one?” asked Khamsin.

I held up the small box in my hands and nodded. “It’ll be easier to make a choice if we can mess around with a full-sized prototype.”

Arte blinked a few times. Till and Khamsin exchanged glances. But afterward,

everyone helped bring me the wood blocks necessary for the project.

In the end, it looked like someone had spilled a gigantic box of children's blocks all over the road. Not far away were the soldiers' tents.

"Okay!" I said. "Let's go with our first option, the folding container!"

"Hell yeah!"

Ortho and his people cheered loudly, raising their hands in the air. The king and the various orders had hired them as guides through the mountain road, guards against monsters, and even scouts. Luckily for them, they had also been hired to help manage the temporary bases. Even with the Chivalric Orders in charge of transportation, the adventurers were shouldering a tremendous amount of the work.

They were also being paid well for it, though, so everyone was super fired up.

With a total of thirty rowdy adventurers—counting Ortho—gathered nearby, the soldiers hanging out by their tents couldn't help but watch us curiously. The adventurers ignored them and gathered around my prototypes, and I began to issue orders.

"The people on both ends need to lift the top board! Right, right, like that! Next group, lift the second board and move it to the right... Ah, no, my right! Now push it in! Oh, keep holding the top board up! Right, right! Now raise the third board and push it into the opposite side! Once it locks in, you can let go!"

The multiple containers came together almost simultaneously, producing a freestanding box that acted like a corridor. The onlooking soldiers loudly expressed their admiration.

"Whoa!"

"That was so easy!"

"If that thing is sturdy enough, we won't be needing tents anymore."

Their comments were audible from my position, but I ignored them in favor of putting together more containers. "Okay! Now raise the last wall! In order!"

“Aaaargh!” The adventurers gritted their teeth and followed my directions. I made my prototype fairly big, figuring the bases would need to be spacious, but the trade-off was that the boards comprising the walls and ceiling were pretty heavy. Fortunately, the adventurers were made of tough stuff, so they managed to put the thing together with no real issue.

The final board already had a door attached to it, so once it was up, the container was complete. An adventurer poked his head out from inside. “Whoa, we already built a whole house!”

It was a scene right out of a commercial, the man’s expression and words included. The other adventurers were no less excited. “For real?!”

“Man, we could use these!”

Due to how simple it was to put the whole thing together, the adventurers were even more impressed than I had anticipated. Maybe they’d be happier if I paid them with container houses instead of cash?

Pleased with how things had gone, I moved on to testing out the skeleton-frame-type prototype. Let’s just say it wasn’t popular. Too difficult; easy to screw up; despite the effort required to construct it, the result was still too small... All sorts of complaints came my way. With no other option, I put my efforts into the first version of the base.

The next day, after significant trial and error, I completed my work on the modular container house project. That evening, I whipped up some container houses on the campgrounds and linked them together. Because I’d designed it so that a wall could be removed from each container, it was simple to connect them to one another, creating a fully enclosed space.

When I was done, the containers formed a small base the size of a community center—about forty tatami mats large, give or take. Reasonably big, but not big enough for tens of thousands of soldiers. The structure itself was made from wood blocks, which were very sturdy but much lighter than metal. The real test would be to see how many containers we could pack into a carriage.

I experimented to see how many I could link together, but once the structure

was more than ten meters long, I needed to install pillars to prevent its durability from plummeting. Rather than further complicate the design, I decided to instead link together two ten-meter-long bases. Connecting them with what was essentially a hallway allowed me to enlarge the base pain free.

“What do you think?” asked Ortho, impatient and clearly exhausted. I gave him a nod.

“I think it’s good to go. I could make a second and third floor if I wanted to, but that shouldn’t be necessary. Good work, everyone!”

The adventurers pumped their fists in the air. Smiling, I watched them explore the structure that they had put together with their own hands, then began to think about how I would solve my next problem.

Carrying all these container houses would require carriages much larger than those we typically used. It was already getting dark outside, but I decided to get back to work.

This time, I tried to craft a carriage with a truck chassis and large tires able to navigate ditches and uneven roads. I also designed a load-carrying tray for it that could handle large objects.

I was completely absorbed in my work when Till called out my name. She looked troubled. “Um, Lord Van? It’s about time for you to wrap things up.”

“Huh? Oh, my curfew!” A cold chill ran down my spine as I took in Till’s words. It was already dark outside. I had gone through the trouble of having my curfew extended from dinnertime to sunset, but still hadn’t managed to follow the rules. There was no question: I was in trouble. “I-I’m heading home! I’ll handle the rest tomorrow!”

“Good idea!” Till and Khamsin said seriously and in unison. Arte nodded with a pained smile.

A handful of adventurers noticed that something was going on. Frantically, they called out to me, “Lord Van, are you done for today?!”

“What about our reward?!”

Waving both hands at them, I yelled, “Don’t worry! Just come to the manor

later to collect it!" I turned on my heel, but then Ortho stopped me.

"Ah, Lord Van!"

"Hm? What's up?" I asked impatiently.

Ortho pointed behind me, his expression troubled. "Looks like some of the big shots are on their way over from the adventurers' town."

"Big shots...?" *What's this all about?*

I followed Ortho's gaze and saw somewhere around twenty people approaching from the road. Jalpa, Ventury, and the king led the charge, with the other nobles close behind.

Ventury walked ahead of the group, toward the container housing prototype. "Oh! Another building from nowhere!"

The other nobles began to inspect the structure. Amidst all of this, only the king approached me directly.

"I received a report that you had made something interesting, so I came to see for myself," he explained, looking excited. With a smirk, he turned his gaze on the container housing. "I have yet to see how defensible this will be, but it is certainly intriguing. Could you show me how they are constructed?"

"Ah, absolutely. Ortho, are you okay to build one for me?"

Ortho replied in the affirmative and, with the help of three other people, whipped up a finished container house. After all the practice they'd had, they were wizards when it came to constructing the things. The whole process only took them about three minutes, start to finish.

The king and the others watched it happen, wide-eyed.

"They're even faster to build than our tents. I can't believe it."

"They also look quite sturdy."

"This is more than enough for a temporary base."

I heard the nobles' comments, and because they happened to have their attention directed my way, answered them with a simple explanation. "You can connect these container houses together, allowing you to make bases that fit

the constraints of the terrain. If there's open space on the side of the road, you can also use them as safe shelter or places to rest. I imagine they would be difficult to transport with normal carriages, so I've prepared vehicles specifically for container transportation. A single carriage will be able to carry up ten temporary bases."

The king nodded, satisfied by my work. Some of the nobles who were impressed by the container houses turned their gazes on me, the creator. "What child could ever think up something like this?"

"I thought Baron Van was not even ten years of age."

"I heard he was sent off to the border because he lacked elemental magic..."

They kept their voices low, but those who overheard them turned to look at Jalpa, who frowned, clearly feeling their judging eyes. Things went on like this for a while, with the nobility gossiping about Jalpa and me.

Ha ha ha! Serves you right, Pops, I thought, smirking.

But then Esparda appeared from behind my father, wearing an even more troubled expression than usual.

"Ah, Esparda! I was just telling them about the plans for the temporary bases," I said, deeply grateful to the bigwigs for this reasonable excuse for breaking curfew.

Esparda nodded. "Yes, please feel free to prioritize your work. However, your curfew passed well before the king made his way here, so accordingly, an additional two hours of studies will be waiting for you when you are finished."

"You gotta be kidding me!"

Was it improper to whine like a child in front of His Highness and the rest of the nobility? Certainly. Did I care? Not really!

The next day, to raise morale, the king offered the troops words of encouragement. "Brave knights of our kingdom," his address began.

The foot soldiers were getting especially fired up, proving just how powerful a tool charisma could be. Personally, though, none of this resonated with me. I

just wanted to hole up in my village.

The king's address concluded with some violent words of encouragement, which he delivered with a ferocious smirk: "We will complete our preparations today! You are the elite! Rest well and prepare to march. Tomorrow, we deal a decisive blow to Yelenetta!"

The soldiers unleashed their battle cries. His Highness was awesome at handling his men. Made sense, considering how much he'd expanded his territory through warfare.

When the timing was right, I gave Till the signal to step forward. "Okay. Till, you're up."

"Right!" she said. Behind her were multiple girls wearing maid attire, operating in two-person cells.

The fire platforms we'd prepared on the road beforehand lit up. With the sun beginning to set, red flames illuminated the road, giving the whole thing a magical vibe. The soldiers seemed confused, but the king and the other nobles merely observed in silence.

The tradition in Scuderia was to treat soldiers to a lavish feast before sending them off into battle. It was a kind of departure ceremony, even if it differed from the ones I was familiar with. But because these feasts were held right before the soldiers headed into battle, they were usually limited to simple meals and a single glass of alcohol—the best that could be readied at a fortress or a campground on the front lines.

This time, though, they were here in Seatoh Village. I'd decided to give them the send-off of a lifetime. In fact, I was the one who made the recommendation to the king.

"Are you certain that you can adequately feed tens of thousands of soldiers in such a small territory?" Jalpa asked.

I only had one thing to say in reply to daddy dearest. "I've got this." After all, I had a huge surplus of monster meat to get through. There was only so much I could dry for storage, so this was the perfect opportunity to clean house.

By this point, we'd held dozens of barbeques in Seatoh Village, so everyone

knew exactly what needed to be done. Having confirmed that preparations were complete, I issued the order to Khamsin. “Ready the meat!”

“Yessir!”

Like Till before him, Khamsin stepped forward with a clear and concise response. Behind him, members of the Seatoh Chivalric Order pulled carts packed with monster meat. They dashed down both sides of the road while the soldiers watched, astonished.

Once everyone was in position, they began to load each barbeque platform with meat. A delectable aroma wafted through the area. Soon it wouldn't be only the soldiers fighting back drool; the nobles wouldn't be able to contain themselves either. After all, this was large monster meat, a rare delicacy even in the royal capital. On top of that, we used the best salt and pepper money could buy, plus my homemade sauce.

It was unfortunate that there was no rice, but we did have bread and spirits, offering in-development whiskey, grape wine, and even beer in large quantities. We had also acquired tons of alcohol for the occasion from the Mary Chamber of Commerce and the Business Guild.

Sidebar: my yakiniku sauce was made of wine, garlic, an apple-like fruit, an onion-like vegetable, black pepper, and salt. Personally, I was pleased with how it turned out.

With everyone transfixed by the sight and smell of the barbeque coming together, Till and Khamsin informed me that preparations were complete.

“Your Highness, we are ready,” I said.

The king nodded and turned to his men. “Loyal knights! Today's ceremonial feast is more luxurious than ever before! Normally I could offer you only plentiful rations, but today, Baron Van gifts you with rare delicacies! Eat to your heart's content!”

The nobles took this as the sign to tell their commanders to begin the feast. An instant later, tens of thousands of soldiers rushed the food.

If you told me that was what war looked like, I would have believed you. The men were tearing into their meat like hungry beasts.

“Please take your time!”

“We have more of Lord Van’s sauce here!”

“This sauce is incredible!”

“Yeah, but the meat is great too!”

The soldiers devoured their food, unaware that I had held back the best monster meat we had. I was glad to have finally cleared out our storage.

“Shall we indulge as well?” the king asked, turning around. But then his gaze caught on the feasting soldiers. “Baron Van, what type of monster meat is this? The soldiers look even happier than I anticipated.”

I could tell that Jalpa and the others who stood behind the king agreed.

“Hmm, if I remember correctly, we’re serving scaled wolf, armored lizard, black boar... Ah, and sanguine tiger meat,” I replied, thinking back on what we’d hunted.

The nobles couldn’t believe it. “Sanguine tiger, you say?!”

“Impossible. Only one sanguine tiger has been seen in the kingdom in the last twenty years.”

“It is said to be a powerful beast that even rivals the strength of a dragon...”

I simply nodded and gave them a pained smile. “Yes, the sanguine tiger does appear to be uncommon. We’ve only taken down five so far. That being said, they were each about ten meters in size, so they made for easy ballista targets. I will say, I was pretty surprised the first time I saw one.”

I was unable to discern how any of them felt about my response; even the king looked dumbfounded.

“The sanguine tiger managed to nearly annihilate an entire city before it was defeated by two first-class elemental mages and a thousand elite royal knights...” the king said before concluding with an exasperated chuckle.

An hour or so passed. The king and his followers all had beer or wine in one hand and large chunks of meat in the other. The foot soldiers continued digging into their food like starved beasts even then.

“I know we have lots of booze, but man, can these guys eat,” I whispered to Arte, who sat next to me, as I picked at my own meal. I was just about done with the meat and ready to move on to some cookies when someone abruptly stepped away from the group of nobles.

Slightly hunched over, he headed straight toward us. It was Count Ferdinatto, a man who never seemed to have much self-confidence. In the same way that Arte was an ephemeral beauty, so too was her father a handsome older man.

“Good evening. Might I have a minute of your time?” Count Ferdinatto asked, stealing a glance at Arte.

“Of course. What do you need?” I rose to my feet, but Ferdinatto raised one hand and shook his head apologetically.

“Forgive me. I, um, meant Arte,” he said quietly, looking at his daughter.

To call Arte’s relationship with her father complex would be a wild understatement. The young girl curled in on herself as soon as he said her name. She had already been looking down as she ate, but now her posture was even worse. Ferdinatto watched her sadly, then turned his gaze on me.

“I understand that it might be pointless, Baron Van, but there is something I would like to say to you,” he began. “I have never been able to be a father to Arte. When she was born, my own father was ill, and I had only just become the lord of our territory. At the same time, Count Fertio, who had become a marquis, was stripping part of our land from us.”

He glanced at Arte, who was completely still, before continuing.

“While it may seem from the outside that we noblemen and women live vivid and prosperous lives, there is a deep, shameful darkness that lurks below the surface of our society. When a noble begins to rise in power, other nobles, merchants, and even mercenaries are drawn to them. When a house is on the decline, however, things quickly become tragic. They’re driven down the pecking order of a faction, removed from important offices... It even becomes difficult to do business with merchants and mercenaries. And sometimes, vassals who had supported the house for years decide to leave.”

His tone and words were depressing, encompassing a mix of disappointment

in himself, anger toward others, and even jealousy. It must have been hard for him. From what he said, it sounded like his father may have passed away out of nowhere. The position of lord of a high-ranking noble house came with heavy responsibilities; to keep your house from falling, you had to stand out on the battlefield, in social spheres, and even in matters of business.

That kind of hardship was impossible to measure, and I'm sure he did everything he could to eliminate any factors that could potentially damage his house. Unfortunately, one such factor happened to be Arte, who possessed a magic aptitude unbefitting of nobility.

But that isn't Arte's fault. She did nothing wrong.

As soon as that thought ran through my mind, I found myself incapable of holding back. "I understand you have been through a great deal. However, just because you were busy, just because things were hard for you, that doesn't excuse ignoring your daughter. It was difficult for you. It was painful for you. But none of those things absolve you of the sin of neglecting a girl you should have protected. There is no walking back what you have done."

Even I knew how uncommon it was for me to speak so forcefully. Ferdinatto and Arte both seemed startled, but I had no intention of stopping now that I was on a roll.

"Lord Ferdinatto, you might think that my opinion is irrelevant because of my age, but as someone who cares about his family, I want you to listen. The scars on Arte's heart will never fully heal. She will never truly forget what was done to her. That doesn't mean that those scars can't be partially healed, however. It doesn't mean her pain can't be alleviated."

I looked at Arte, who wore a concerned expression on her face. Was this a mistake? In too deep to stop now, I continued.

"There is only one thing you can do as her father, and it is not too late. You need to look Arte in the eyes and listen to what she has to say. She might not have confidence in herself, but believe me, she is a tremendously kind, thoughtful, and wonderful young lady. You need to recognize and acknowledge that."

I took a breath and stared at him. He stared back with wide eyes and an

expression colored in deep regret.

“Those certainly were not things that a child, or even a new baron, should have said. However, your words are true. I...have been foolish.” He turned to his daughter. “Arte, if you do not wish to answer me, you need not say anything. Not long ago, when my territory was invaded by Yelenetta, a group of allies appeared and saved us. They possessed long-range arrows of the sort that Baron Van might have developed, and the enemy was pushed back by two knights who moved in ways that humans could not move.”

A complex expression crossed Arte’s face. I chose to remain quiet, and a moment later, Ferdinatto shook his head, then bowed deeply to Arte.

“I heard that this group flew the banner of House Ferdinatto. Only someone belonging to our house would do such a thing. Thank you, Arte. And I am so sorry.”

Hearing this expression of remorse and gratitude, Arte covered her mouth and began to cry, incapable of articulating her feelings in words. Her father watched as she sobbed, then shifted his gaze to me.

“As nobility, we have been so tied down in appearances and received knowledge about magical aptitudes that we have treated our children cruelly and unreasonably. In this regard, Marquis Fertio is no different. Yet here we are, being saved by those very same children... How ironic.” He heaved a tremendously heavy sigh, paused a moment, then resumed. “Going forward, I will provide you with aid whenever you require it. This is an official vow that I make as the head of House Ferdinatto. Even should your marriage with Arte fall through, I will never break this vow.”

Arte twitched in response to his words, looking at me with tears streaming down her cheeks. I gave her a sly smile and placed a gentle hand on her back. “Don’t worry, that won’t happen. As long as she doesn’t dump me, anyway.”

“I-I would never!” Arte squeaked, panicked.

Ferdinatto looked down at her with wide eyes. “Ha ha ha! I see, I see! I hadn’t realized that the two of you were already so close! What a relief!” He chuckled, then looked at Arte more gently. “Let us talk, if it isn’t too late. I do not care if you curse me or anything else. Please, just let me hear your voice.”

Arte nodded, the tears still flowing. "Yes, of course!"

I watched the two of them, feeling that they had truly become father and daughter for the first time.

Just before the departure ceremony, Arte and Ferdinatto had awkwardly met each other's eyes and smiled at one another. But after the barbeque concluded, they had a long conversation, trying to make up for lost time as father and daughter. In the end, they were finally able to offer one another earnest smiles.

The king, Jalpa, Ventury, Ferdinatto, and the rest of the upper nobility stood on the simple stage I had created. Accompanying them were members of the lower nobility who would command a portion of the troops, like Panamera. And for reasons that escaped me, I was on stage too.

The king gazed at the Chivalric Order members before him and praised their valor. Jalpa and the others also commended their skill and determination. Essentially, this ceremony was intended to raise the morale of each soldier and build their confidence. Since they'd eaten and drunk their fill the night before as if they were at a massive banquet, their motivation must have been off the charts.



I gazed, lost in thought, at the king's back right up until the end of the ceremony. That was when the king said, "My elites! If you wish to experience another feast like the one last night, then crush Yelenetta and return here alive!"

This was new. I'd never heard of a king using a banquet to motivate his troops, but to my surprise, it worked. The men cheered loudly, and the king flashed me a grin. Was this his way of telling me to go hunt some monsters and get ready for another barbeque? Either way, we'd find ourselves with a full stock of monster meat again after the next two weeks.

Aware that I would have no problem delivering on another feast, I smiled back at him. The king seemed a little surprised by my silence, but he recovered quickly, nodding and drawing his sword.

"We march!"

The soldiers cried out bravely. As planned, Count Ventury's Chivalric Order led the way as the march began.

A group of adventurers approached the stage: Ortho, Pluriel, Kusala, and the others. "We're off, Lord Van!"

"I'm counting on you guys."

Ortho and the others had been hired by the king to scout the path ahead and neutralize any approaching monsters, but despite that heavy responsibility, they were grinning. These adventurers had lived in Seatoh Village for quite some time, and each was equipped with weapons, armor, and shields hand-crafted by yours truly. Not only that, they'd also been fighting through the dungeon and the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range, places known for their nests of powerful monsters.

They were confident in their skills for a reason.

"I'll be up in the vanguard keepin' tabs on things. You can rest easy, Lord Van," Kusala said.

Ortho and the others looked bewildered. "You do realize you're a hotel owner, right? Should you really be here, big reward or not?"

“You’ve always been quick to gain weight. I’m pretty sure you’ve rounded out.”

Kusala responded to their jeers with boisterous laughter, making his round stomach shake. This was definitely a man who had gotten too big for his britches. “C’mon, really? Why are you guys being so mean? I know I chopped off a giant chunk of debt with all those noble folks staying at my hotel, but that ain’t no reason to act jealous.”

Yes, Kusala always did his job and did it well, but too much confidence and pride could be dangerous in his line of work. I whispered, “Kusala, I’m not sure you realize this, but people who talk about the future before heading into danger are usually the ones who get swallowed whole by dragons. Be careful, okay?”

His party looked at him. With stoic expressions, Ortho and Pluriel backed me up. “Oh, that’s right. Loads of folks who talked about getting married or opening a shop after a job have died during gigs.”

“That’s true!”

Kusala kept smiling, but he began to tremble. “N-now, now! None of that! Ha ha ha! You’re quite the jokester, little lord!” He fell silent, fear tightening its grip on him. I gave him a sympathetic look.

All right, now this is the right level of tension. With a nod, I saw the adventurers off.

When I looked to my side, I spotted Ferdinatto descending from the stage to speak to his commander, only to be stopped when Arte called out to him. “U-um... Please be careful...” she said.

Ferdinatto blinked, surprised by his daughter’s concern for him, then gave her a soft smile. “I will, Arte. See you later.”

The two of them still were acting kind of awkward, but I got the sense that they were being considerate toward one another in the way that fathers and daughters ought to. Panamera, who was watching their exchange with a look of relief, pulled up next to me.

“You did something again, didn’t you?” she asked. “Anyone who knew these

two before would be shocked to see what's happening right now."

I shook my head. "It wasn't me. I think Arte changed her father's thinking all on her own. She worked extremely hard to take back his territory without my help. She's the one who fought off Yelenetta."

Panamera chuckled. "My word. There is never a dull moment around you, boy!" she said, flashing me a jubilant smile.

Side Story: Fried Chicken

CHICKEN.

It was a sublime delicacy that had held humanity in its grip since time immemorial.

No matter the country, chicken dishes were included in its cuisine. There were places where people didn't eat pigs or cows, even countries that prohibited alcohol, but chicken was eternal.

Why? The answer was simple: it was delicious.

In Japan, when a person came of age and found themselves crushed under the wheel of the salaryman life, they came to love chicken even more, just as they discovered a fondness for beer. Fried chicken, yakitori, lightly roasted chicken sashimi, charcoal-grilled chicken, chicken steak, chicken cutlet, chicken wings, mature chicken, and even chicken rice were all scrumptious. Even in a supporting role, chicken ticked all the boxes. Whether it be curry, hot pot, or a stew...most dishes were only improved by the inclusion of chicken.

Oh, to indulge in delicious chicken with an ice-cold beer while chatting with friends! Few things in life were quite as fulfilling.

"I want fried chicken," I whispered without thinking.

"Fry yed chiccen?" Till cocked her head.

Khamsin repeated the words like they were some ancient incantation. "Furi ded chikin..."

They looked at each other, confirming that neither of them had a clue what I was talking about. "Lord Van, what exactly is this fry yed chiccen you speak of?"

"Is it some kind of food?"

I smiled painfully and nodded. "Right, right. Sorry. It's something that doesn't exist out here in the sticks. I was just thinking about how I'd love to have some

one day,” I said with a wave of my hand and a smile.

They shot me grave looks. “Please hold on.”

“We will acquire this furi ded chikin for you.”

I could feel the determination radiating from their words.

Um, guys? I appreciate your loyalty so much that I could cry, but you’re not going to find fried chicken through gumption and hard work. Besides, making others do something you know is impossible is basically a form of torture as far as I’m concerned.

“Aw, thank you guys,” I said aloud. “But you’re really not going to find any, so don’t worry about it. I can probably make something close enough; just give me some time to think up a recipe.”

My words failed to deter them. “We’ll find it!” they said in unison, wearing identical frowns.

Till added, “We have business arrangements with the Bell & Rango Company and even bigger companies!”

For some reason, these appeals were accompanied by tearful looks. Why did it suddenly look like I was bullying them?

How did it come to this? All I wanted to do was prevent them from going on a wild chicken chase! “Fine,” I conceded. “In that case, let’s do it together, okay?”

My loyal friends lifted their heads. “Of course!”

I held up a hand and offered them a defeated smile, then raised my index finger. “How about we pay a visit to the Bell & Rango Company first? Now that they’ve expanded their market, they might’ve acquired some rare recipes or something.”

“I’ve never heard of this dish you are looking for.”

“Neither have I.”

No luck with either Bell or Rango. My companions’ shoulders drooped.

“...You haven’t?”

“Really?”

The merchants gulped. In their minds, lacking knowledge of this “foreign” cuisine damaged their professional pride.

After a moment, I let out a small sigh and put my business smile back on. “I’m sorry to have bothered you guys. How about we go check with the Mary Chamber of Commerce? They have significantly more connections than the Bell & Rango Company.”

“We shall accompany you!” Somehow this added another two highly driven party members to our quest for fried chicken. Did all merchants have this sort of competitive spirit? Even Till and Khamsin were suppressing chuckles as they walked beside me.

I was the one who wanted to eat fried chicken, but I was the least motivated of us all. That was kind of sad.

“Here we are,” Bell said, looking up at the Seatoh Village branch of the Mary Chamber of Commerce.

Rango stuck his head through the entrance and took a quick gander, apparently looking for someone. “Rosalie? You there?” he asked.

The woman in question poked her head out. She was dressed as provocatively as usual. “What is it, Rango—um, what? Lord Van!” She closed in on us and asked sadly, “Do you have business with us? You always go to the Bell & Rango Company first, so I’ve been lonely over here.”

I suspected she was putting on an act, but I also felt guilty for doubting her. She was a merchant through and through. *Maybe I’ll swing by every now and then instead of always going over to the Bell & Rango Company...*

As I considered this, Bell and Rango stepped in front of me like they were protecting me from a predator.

“Rosalie, you’re only here for a special one-month stay,” Bell complained. “You’ll be headed back to the marquis’s territory after that, won’t you?”

“Besides, over half of the products we sell are from the Mary Chamber of Commerce,” Rango added. “Lord Van doesn’t need to come here directly; you

should be making more than enough money already!”

Rosalie merely smiled and tilted her head. Without a word, she lodged her fists into their stomachs.

“Gah!”

“Urgh...”

She ignored their grunts of pain and lowered her eyes, pretending to cry.

“How could they say such cruel things? Lord Van, you mustn’t believe their words. I just want to see you more frequently, regardless of business dealings!” she said, drawing close to me.

This was a true-blue veteran merchant, simultaneously putting pressure on those who defied her and making herself look like the victim.

Okay, maybe the act is a little too obvious. “Um, I’m here to do some shopping, actually,” I explained, pained.

Rosalie’s expression transformed swiftly. She corrected her posture and said, in tones of genuine curiosity, “My sincerest apologies. Are you looking for something in particular? Should I assume that since Bell and Rango are here with you, it’s not among the necessities and foodstuffs that we sell to them wholesale?”

I nodded earnestly. “Yup. It’s called fried chicken. Put simply, it’s poultry meat fried in oil. The problem is that I haven’t been able to reproduce the batter or seasoning.”

“I see. It sounds like fried ostrich might be similar to what you’re looking for.”

The specific dish Rosalie mentioned was the standard fried dish that was enjoyed even in the marquis’s territory. Ostriches were mid-sized bird monsters a little over two meters tall. As a trade-off for their tiny wings, they had powerful legs that made them good sprinters, and instead of feathers on their backs, they had flesh-colored scales. I found it hard to imagine what they looked like, but they were tasty. And because taking down a single bird yielded a ton of meat, they were something of a prized commodity when it came to foodstuffs.

That being said, fried ostrich tasted very little like fried chicken.

“Hmm... Ostrich meat has a tough mouthfeel, and it also has a peculiar taste. You have to season the meat pretty heavily to get rid of that flavor. It’s pretty different from fried chicken, to be honest.”

Rosalie put a finger to her jaw and looked up, thinking. “In that case, what about cockatrice meat?”

“What’s a cockatrice?”

Rosalie’s expression grew serious. “It’s a large monster whose meat is very hard to come by, and expensive at that. The meat can’t be preserved for very long, so it’s a precious food; you rarely see it even in the royal capital. It’s tender, and depending on how you season it, you can use it in pretty much any cuisine imaginable. I’ve heard it referred to as the ultimate meat.”

Bell and Rango stepped forward, their eyes wide. “H-hold on a moment!” yelled Rango.

“How’s anyone supposed to get their hands on cockatrice meat?” demanded Bell.

Rosalie frowned at them. “I am fully aware that it would be difficult, but cockatrices are said to live deep within the woods and inside dungeons. It might be possible for someone who’s operating out of Seatoh Village to take one down.” But Rango shook both hands in the air, having none of it.

“Cockatrices are said to have devastating combat abilities thanks to their large bodies, powerful talons, and beaks. But the most terrifying thing about them is that they can breathe out toxic mist capable of paralyzing your entire body,” he explained. Bell nodded along beside him. “The mist is so effective and acts so quickly that adventurers call it a petrification curse. In fact, whenever the guild receives a request to slay a cockatrice, it’s handled as an urgent quest. The area where the beast was spotted gets sealed off, and only a special party assembled specifically for its subjugation gets dispatched. Most parties have an archer or a scout, but because there are hardly any mages, fire and wind mages are summoned from the nobility and royal court just to handle them.”

Cockatrice-slaying quests, it seemed, were treated the same as dragon-slaying

quests: extremely dangerous.

“That makes sense,” I said. “And if they live deep in the woods and rarely leave, that would make it difficult for even Seatoh Village to take one down. If we could just lure it to the road...or, no, even the entrance to the woods would allow us to snipe it with our ballistae.”

Damn.

My shoulders sagged, but Khamsin shook his head. “Lord Van, you must not give up. I promise to deliver you furi ded chikin.”

“Huh? Yeah, but heading that deep into the woods would be tough for even Ortho and his party,” I replied, surprised.

He shot me a winning smile. “Fear not. I have a plan.”

With that, he ran off to find Ortho and his party. Rosalie was curious to know what he was plotting, so she joined us as we followed him to the Adventurers’ Guild. Another new party member for our fried chicken quest.

We arrived to find Ortho staring at the job board. “Oho, if it ain’t Lord Van! Need something?” he asked once he noticed us.

Before I could say anything, Khamsin stepped forward. “Ortho, I have a request!”

“Okay. What’s up?” Ortho tilted his head, wide-eyed at the abrupt request.

In fact, everyone in the guild was looking at us. Kusala and Pluriel approached our group. “Is somethin’ up?”

“What’s going on?”

“I want you to take down a cockatrice!” Khamsin declared at top volume.

Everyone stilled and blinked a few times. Then the spacious room collapsed into chaos.

“A cockatrice?!” Ortho echoed.

“Did someone spot one in the woods?!” Pluriel demanded.

“We need to hurry and evacuate the low-rank adventurers!” said Kusala.

As I watched them panic, it struck me that the cockatrice must be a truly lethal beast. “H-hold on, everyone. There haven’t been any sightings, okay? Khamsin, you need to choose your words more carefully.”

Khamsin lowered his head. “M-my apologies!”

Seeing Khamsin apologize, Ortho and his party realized that this was not, in fact, an urgent quest. Relief washed over Pluriel’s face and she flashed us a wry smile. “So a cockatrice hasn’t been sighted?”

“You can’t scare us like that,” Kusala said, also smiling.

The panic in the guild gradually faded. Ortho looked around the room, glanced at Khamsin, then turned to me. “I’m not really followin’. Is there a reason you need to take down a cockatrice?”

I hesitated. How could I tell him that it was all so I could eat fried chicken?

But Khamsin, unaware of my hesitation, blurted out our little quest’s true goal. “So I can deliver fried chickens to Lord Van!”

“You really just went and said it, huh?” I shifted my weight uncomfortably as Ortho tilted his head.

“F-fried chicken? What exactly is that?”

That I could practically see the question marks hovering over Ortho’s head only made me feel worse. Sadly, Khamsin’s rampage of terror could not be stopped. “The ultimate cuisine that Lord Van desires!”

Again, he just went and said that this was all so I could satisfy my appetite! *Stop, Khamsin. I’m begging you. This is so embarrassing I could die.*

Incapable of hiding my own shame, I covered my face and ran for the nearby wall. However, instead of cruel laughter, the guild rang out with surprised voices as people ruminated over Khamsin’s words.

“Th-the ultimate cuisine?”

“It’s for food?”

In fact, everyone around us looked...kind of excited.

“Lord Van’s eaten dragon meat, and he’s calling *this* the ultimate cuisine?”

“What could it possibly taste like? What sort of dish is it?!”

“You mean to say it’s more delicious than the meat we ate at the barbeque?!”

For the second time in only a few minutes, the guild was positively buzzing. Confused, Rosalie asked, “What’s going on?”

Bell and Rango sneered at her. “That’s right. You’ve never been to one of our barbeques, have you?”

“Well then... Ha!”

“Ugh, you two are so annoying,” Rosalie complained. Despite her irritation, though, she was clearly intrigued. Turning toward the guild counter, she said, “I’m Rosalie of the Mary Chamber of Commerce. Have there been any recent cockatrice sightings? Any places where one might be lurking?”

Behind the counter, a bespectacled man looked down at some documents he had. “Let me see... No sightings, but there is a river source deep within the woods north of Seatoh Village. Going by previous incidents, cockatrices have often been sighted near spring water deep in the woods. Such areas have been poorly explored due to the presence of other strong monsters, however. And this is all just conjecture based on the inclination of the land and the direction of the water flow.”

Ortho nodded. “Then I’d say there’s a good chance we’ll find a cockatrice there. Especially since that’d be on the opposite end from the dungeon, where it wouldn’t have to deal with monsters coming out of the dungeon—a perfect place for a cockatrice to call home. Not to mention that it’d wanna avoid going to the mountains, which are home to dragons.”

He was using the guild’s information to formulate his own theory, and the other adventurers seemed to agree with his logic. Pluriel’s shoulders sagged, though, and she put in, “But cockatrices are a real pain. They’d be easier to deal with if they popped up in grassy plains, but trying to take one down in a crowded forest would be such an ordeal.”

Her words made everyone else go quiet. Except for Khamsin. “Don’t worry!” he said confidently. “We have Lord Van with us, and we have ballista-equipped war wagons and the machine bow squad! As long as we spot it before it spots

us, we can and will win!”

The guild went quiet for a moment, then erupted with cheers.

“Ooooooooooh!”

“For real?!”

“In that case, we can take down a cockatrice, no sweat!”

The adventurers were acting like they’d already defeated the beast. I frantically waved my hands. “Everyone, calm down! If it was so easy to take this thing down, then adventurers would’ve done so already!”

But Ortho shot me right down, laughing. “Ha ha ha! Lord Van, the cockatrice’s hide is tough enough to easily repel an iron arrow. Its feathers are difficult to light on fire, and thanks to its large body, earth and wind magic are largely ineffective against it. But your ballistae are a whole ’nother story! I bet one shot would be enough to take it down, just like the armored lizards. If anything, large monsters should make for easier targets!”

I really don’t think we should underestimate this thing. Despite my concerns, though, Khamsin’s enthusiasm had lit a fire deep within me. In the end, I crafted a lightweight war wagon for the adventure into the woods.

Just like that, Khamsin assembled a team of adventurers and made his way into the woods to hunt down a cockatrice. The group members were happy for their reward to be a barbeque upon their return, but that didn’t sit well with me, so I decided to give them all the cockatrice parts aside from the meat. They were pleased with that proposal; apparently cockatrice parts were rare and fetched a high price.

“Are they going to be okay...?” I fretted from the safety of the manor.

Till and Arte nodded in tandem. Arte said, “They have the weapons and tools you prepared for them, Lord Van. Surely they will be fine.”

“We must concern ourselves with preparing for the fried chicken,” said Till.

Arte smiled and took a sip of her black tea while Till checked the ingredients she’d assembled for the dish. Apparently I was the only one who was concerned.

“Prototype number fifteen! What do you think?” Till asked.

I took a bit of the ostrich meat that she had prepared like fried chicken.

“Yeah, this is nice and crispy. Just the right level of salt, too. All that’s left are the spices. Pepper, garlic, ginger, chili pepper, nutmeg... I’d love to use all of it.”

Till seemed confused. “I... I’ve never heard of most of those spices. Lord Van, where did you learn about these things?”

“Ah, sorry, sorry. Seems like I’ve memorized all the spices under different names.” I pointed as I spoke. “It’s this, this, this, and this. Man, what’s that soy sauce-ish stuff again?”

“You mean fish oil?”

“Yes, that. I think if we lightly flavored the meat with some fish oil, it’d end up even more delicious.”

“Understood!”

I came up with the ideas, and Till put them into practice. We were also getting help from a chef, though, so Till was able to try out all kinds of seasoning without pushing herself too hard.

Just as I was inwardly expressing my gratitude for Till, there was a knock at the door. Had the chef already added the fish oil like Till asked? “Come in!”

A soldier opened the door, panting. “Lord Van, they’re here!”

“Who?”

Seeing me tilt my head at him, the soldier took a deep breath to calm himself, then spoke again. “Khamsin and the others have returned from their cockatrice hunt.”

“Uh, what?” I blurted out. I wasn’t expecting that report.

It hadn’t even been a week since the group set off into the woods, and according to the guild, it should have taken a month to track down the creature and then another week to slay it. Combined with the trip home, this was meant to be a two-to-three-month expedition.

And yet they were home after less than a week.

It was so absurd that I repeated myself. “Uh, what?” The soldier confirmed reality for me again, so I looked over at Arte, who then summoned Till from the kitchen so we could all go and greet Khamsin and his team.

We set out on the road outside of Seato Village only to be greeted with four carriages and dozens of adventurers. Khamsin and Ortho stood in front.

“We have returned!” declared Khamsin.

Ortho said, “We went and killed a cockatrice.”

I nodded in mute amazement. “Uh, what?”

For those not keeping count, that was the third time I said this.

The two of them smiled like little kids and pointed at the carriage. “It was a pain to track, but once we found it, we took it down in about five minutes.”

“Turns out that being able to snipe monsters from afar makes the whole process really easy.”

I couldn’t help but sympathize with the monster. “I-I see. Well, um, I’m glad nobody was hurt. Good work.” Having praised them, I went to check out the blocks of meat sitting on the carriage loading trays.

“Thanks to your knives, we were able to butcher the beast in half a day,” an adventurer told me. “Can we take the bones, hide, and monster stone?”

“Yup, they’re all yours. Divide them as you please.”

“Awesome!”

I gave the adventurers the cockatrice parts as their reward, and they jumped for joy. Pluriel, on the other hand, didn’t look so pleased. “We’ve been marching on a strict schedule, so nobody’s taken a shower. I’m hitting the baths.”

Imbued with an aura of exhaustion, she preceded everyone else into Seato Village. I watched her leave, praised the rest of the adventurers, and then got started on my fried chicken.

By that night, the preparations were complete. I gathered the villagers

together and held a fried chicken party. “Citizens of Seatoh Village, thank you for gathering here today! As luck would have it, Khamsin and a group of adventurers have slain a cockatrice—the fearsome beast said to paralyze all who approach it! Let us give Khamsin and Ortho a round of applause for slaying such a terrifying monster. In celebration of their courageous feat, today I am holding a fried chicken party!”

After I finished my opening speech, cheers enveloped the village. Khamsin looked a touch embarrassed but proud as he was showered with applause and adoration. I smiled at the sight, then took prototype number sixty from Till.

“This is fried chicken, made from cockatrice meat,” she said with a nervous edge to her voice.

I nodded, smiling wryly. “Thanks. It looks delicious. Don’t mind if I do...”

I brought the tasty-looking freshly fried chicken to my mouth as everyone watched with bated breath, then took a huge bite out of it.

I chewed down on the crunchy layer of skin, eventually arriving at the tender meat below the surface. Meat juice flooded my mouth. The flavors of umami, slightly sweetened meat, tingling spices, and garlic danced across my tongue. The quality of the meat was such that it fell apart in my mouth, and it had the perfect level of fattiness.

“Amazing!” I yelled, hamming it up and prompting the crowd to erupt into cheers once more.

I shared my thoughts, and then everyone else dug into their fried chicken. The villagers went on and on about how delicious the food was. “Oooh!”

“This is incredible!”

“The umami is something else!”

Amidst all of that, Khamsin happily took a bite of his fried chicken and smacked his lips.

“Hey, Khamsin?”

He turned to me, his cheeks stuffed.

“This is the most delicious thing I’ve ever eaten,” I told him.

Khamsin stilled for a moment, then broke into a huge smile.

“I agree! It’s delicious!”

I smiled warmly at the tears forming in his eyes, chewing my fried chicken.

By the way, once Bell, Rango, and Rosalie realized how easily a cockatrice could be slain, dollar signs (wha—?) formed in their eyes and they vanished. It went without saying that, days later, cockatrice-slaying quests appeared on the Adventurers’ Guild’s job board.

Side Story: Tea Time

A PICTURESQUE LAKE.

There was no wind, so the lovely, mirror-like surface of the water reflected the sky as boats floated across it. Children with beautiful blue hair played at the waterside, basking in the reflected rays of sun. Nearby, people relaxed at gazebo-esque rest spots that were set at regular intervals. Most were older men and women, but in one spot, a woman and a girl, each with different-colored hair, were sitting down.

The girl wore a simple but elegant white dress, while the woman sported a red dress that looked easy to move in. They sat in chairs on opposite sides of the table. The blonde woman in the red dress was Viscount Panamera Carrera Cayenne, the current head of her family. The white-haired girl in the white dress was Arte On Ferdinatto, daughter of Count Ferdinatto. Having both been born into noble households, it was not merely their attire that differed from the average person's, but also their gestures and mannerisms.

Each elegantly held a teacup in one hand, enjoying their beverage and their conversation with the other. It was a textbook example of a noble tea party.

However, what they were discussing was anything but.

“And that’s what Lord Van said...”

Arte had been talking about Van for nearly ten minutes straight, leaving little room for Panamera to do anything but occasionally toss in an interjection. When they first sat down to chat, Panamera had discussed recent affairs, but once Arte was finished talking about her own life in Seatoh Village, she shifted the topic of conversation to everything Van had ever said and done, making their tea party tremendously one-sided.

At last Panamera spoke up, a smirk on her lips. “This is truly unbelievable.”

Arte closed her mouth and gave the older woman a puzzled look. Panamera’s

smile only deepened.

“When I think back on how you looked when I first met you in Count Ferdinatto’s territory, this whole situation is unbelievable. Your standard of living might have decreased, but you are so much more expressive than you ever were before. Honestly, you’re a different person now. I suspect the reason for that is less your environment than it is Baron Van?” she asked, seeking confirmation.

Arte looked down, abruptly turning red as a cherry. She frowned and cast Panamera a troubled look.

Panamera simply laughed, her shoulders shaking uncontrollably. “I have never seen you look at me like that before! Worry not, you don’t need to give me an answer. I think I’ve already figured it out. But wow, eight years of age... No, was it nine? That boy will be a monstrous playboy when he gets older,” she said, still chuckling.

Arte shook her head. “Lord Van is tremendously kind, so he’d never... Wait, what if he’s so kind that he can’t turn down wedding proposals and ends up with multiple fiancées?” A dark expression crossed her face as she imagined the unthinkable.

Panamera snorted another laugh. “I would not call that kind, but indecisive. Though it is true that, depending on the position of the person putting forward the proposal, Baron Van may not be able to turn them down. It’s common practice for high-ranking noblemen to take three or more wives. I suggest you prepare for that possibility.”

Her expression as she explained this was teasing, but tears formed in Arte’s eyes. “B-but...! I...would not like that...but what if they were someone who’d been chased from their home, like I was?”

Perhaps her imagination was simply too vivid. She was now grappling with scenarios that had yet to occur.

Panamera could only laugh at it all, waving one of her hands. “Either way, that is far in the future. You should rest easy. Can you really imagine that boy attempting to seduce woman after woman? If anything, he would come to you for help... Hmm?” While Panamera attempted to soothe Arte’s fears, someone

new appeared at the lake. She waved to him and called, “Lord Van, over here!”

“Kay!”

The boy, hearing his name, trotted obediently in their direction with Khamsin and Till in tow. Having yet to notice Arte and Panamera sitting by the lake, he headed instead toward some apkallu children in a boat on the lake nearby.

“My dear fiancé, I want a small one of these. Five of them,” said the little apkallu girl.

Van narrowed his eyes. “I’m not your fiancé... Wait. You want small boats? Not big ones?”

The apkallu girl, Lada Priora, nodded. “Each person can use one, so there won’t be any fights. Dear fiancé, I will reward you with a glowing magic stone later. I want five.”

“Ah, I get it. You’re mediating for the kids. I suppose these are kind of like toys. Okay, I’ll make them for you. Also, I’m not your fiancé, okay?” Even as he cheerfully got to crafting the small boats, he made sure to emphasize that important point.

Panamera watched in silence, then turned a sympathetic gaze toward Arte. “If he is willing to wed an apkallu girl, then I wouldn’t be surprised if he had dozens of fiancées in the future.”

“Th-that’s not...”

In the end, Arte was unable to deny that it was possible.

Side Story: Educational Policy

ESPARDA THE BUTLER PILED THE THICK BOOKS ON the table.

“There is still so much knowledge that I must instill into Lord Van. He must be diligent in his studies until he comes of age,” Esparda declared to Dee, who stood across from him with his arms folded. A large work table separated them.

The large man shook his head. “No, no, Sir Esparda, don’t be hasty,” he objected. “Learning sword work is like nurturing a tree. Just as a tree requires water, proper nutrients, and a suitable environment before it can grow properly, a person must accumulate fighting skills and instincts. That does not happen overnight, but rather accumulates over every day of training. With Lord Van’s talents, his skills as a swordsman will one day surpass even mine. For that reason, we must focus on training him in the way of the sword.”

Esparda could only sigh. “No matter how skilled he becomes with the sword, that will not make him a good lord. The most important thing for him is an abundance of knowledge and history from which he can draw to lead his people to prosperity. To ensure that comes to fruition, he should focus all of his attention on his studies.”

“No, no, no, Sir Esparda. As you well know, Lord Van is a genius. Things that would take the average person a month to memorize take him, at most, a few days. He does not require that much study time...”

Neither was really listening to the other. They were simply throwing assertions back and forth. Eventually, leveling heated glares at each other, they came to the same conclusion.

“This is pointless,” Dee said finally.

“You took the words right out of my mouth.”

This was perhaps the only thing they agreed on.

“Fine. Then for now, I will settle for three hours of studying and three hours

of sword training daily. I presume that is acceptable to you?" Esparda asked.

"Not acceptable at all," I said. "Extremely not acceptable."

They exchanged looks. Esparda said, "See? Even Lord Van says as much. We should increase his study time to four hours and decrease his training to two."

"No, no. That is not nearly enough time to train the body."

The two of them had already resumed their dispute, so I raised a hand and stopped them in their tracks.

"Not what I meant. I have work to do as the lord, and I also have a ton of weapon and armor orders from the Bell & Rango Company that I need to fill. If possible, I'd like to reduce my studies and training to...y'know, an hour a day..."

I meant to use this opportunity to voice my own demands, but the more I spoke, the quieter my voice got. If you're wondering why, well, it's because the men in front of me were shooting me terrifying glares.

"Lord Van, I must reject any proposals that do not involve increasing your study time."

"Lord Van, when it comes to mastering the sword, the longer you wield a blade, the stronger you become. If anything, I would prefer for you to be training for eight hours a day or more!"

"I-I'd die," I replied weakly, but they smiled and shook their heads.

"Nobody has ever died from studying."

"You'd be exhausted, but it feels good to work up a sweat!"

They might as well have said, "where there's a will, there's a way!"

My shoulders sagged in disappointment. Just then, Till and Khamsin spoke up from beside me.

"Y-you will be fine, Lord Van," said Till.

"I know you can do it, Lord Van!" said Khamsin.

Their encouragement only made me feel more defeated. "Your words sting, guys. I feel like the hurdle's just getting set higher and higher..."

This made Till and Khamsin scramble to try to improve my mood. “O-oh, right! I’ll go brew some fresh black tea!”

“Lord Van... I... I’ll train with you!”

“You guys aren’t making me feel better...”

With that, my grand plan to reduce my study and training time ended in spectacular failure.

As my shoulders sagged even further, Dee raised his head, as if remembering something. “By the way, I heard you defeated Arb in combat!”

“Huh? Oh, well, just once out of dozens of times.”

“Ha ha ha! Even once is incredible for a boy not yet ten years of age! Tomorrow I will personally serve as your sparring partner. I cannot wait!”



“Yaaay, I’m sooo excited!” I said stiltedly.

Dee was so excited he failed to notice my tone. “Ha ha ha! I’m sure you are!”

I felt my cheeks twitch as I faked a smile.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR PURCHASING THIS VOLUME.

It's me, Sou Akaike. I can't believe it, but volume three is out. I know that this is only possible because you all gave this series a chance. And I know that I have Kururi's wonderful illustrations and H's proofreading skills to thank as well. I'd love to write a fourth volume, so I'd be pleased as punch if you grabbed volume three.

I believe I said as much in the last volume, but this series is fundamentally grounded in one of my favorite game genres: tower defense. I plan to write about the further growth of Van's territory, more battles, and his advancement through the ranks now that his skills have been recognized by the kingdom. A lot is going to happen in the future. Whether little Van can live a fun life as the lord of his land depends heavily on all of you!

Now then, I would once again like to express my gratitude toward everyone who has helped me. H, who always listened to my concerns and whipped my writing 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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