

EASYGOING TERRITORY DEFENSE

by the
Optimistic Lord

~PRODUCTION MAGIC Turns a Nameless Village

into the LONGEST FORTIFIED

NOVEL

2

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"I can't handle...
all the rocking...
Urp!"

◀ Khamsin ▶

◀ Till ▶

"What a
view!"

◀ Van Nei Fertio ▶

"The air is
so crisp."

◀ Arte ▶

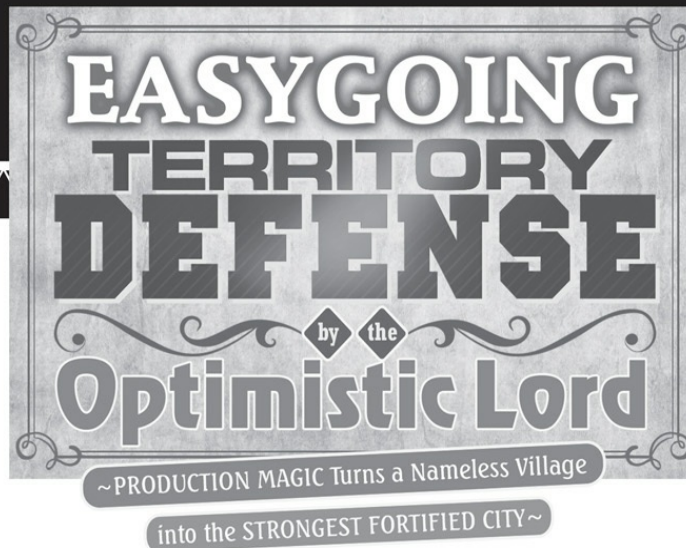


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~PRODUCTION MAGIC Turns a Nameless Village

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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. 2

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EASYGOING TERRITORY DEFENSE
BY THE OPTIMISTIC LORD



Prologue:
The Dragonslayers' Afterglow

Van

OVERWHELMING POWER.

Dee, the deputy commander of my father's Chivalric Order, was equipped with a Van-made long sword and armor. Esparda, meanwhile, had all the skills of a seasoned butler and great prowess as an elemental mage. Then there were the extra-large, mega-strong ballistae made by yours truly.

With our powers combined—and a lot of help from Lady Panamera and her knights—we defeated the forest dragon that ruled the land out here in the middle of nowhere. This conquest was monumental to the citizens of the nameless village, and it gave them more confidence in their abilities—although that was just an excuse to justify the awful state of the place.

Fires here and there warmed the village with their glow, and the celebratory mood was still going strong. The only problem was that the villagers, who should have been taking part in the festivities, were strewn on the ground like zombies, rocking side to side.

Corpses. They looked like corpses.

"When I told them to have fun, I didn't think they'd keep going for three whole days," I muttered.

Till, the maid with long chestnut-brown hair, offered a pained smile. "I do think it's about time they switched gears."

Khamsin, the butler-in-training with deep-blue hair, sighed and nodded. "This is because you're too soft on others, Lord Van," he said with a smile.

"You have some meat on your lips," I pointed out.

"Huh?!" He panicked and rubbed his fingers around his mouth.

I couldn't help laughing as I looked out at the village. "Well, I suppose we can all just work harder starting tomorrow. Skinning that dragon for materials was no small feat."

Till and Khamsin nodded in tandem, wearing identical forced smiles.

Chapter 1:

What Lies Beyond

IT ONLY TOOK US TWO DAYS TO STRIP THE DRAGON after slaying it, but storage space was a problem. I ended up building a giant storage facility along the back of the new wall, complete with a basement. Just one of those facilities could house multiple dragon corpses. Most of the village wall was complete by then, leaving only the ballistae and drawbridge.

Bell's eyes had moneybags in them the entire time the dragon was being skinned and butchered. Eventually, he cooled off enough to get business up and running again—but when his little brother, Rango, finally returned, so did the moneybags. I could relate, since there were plenty of things I wanted to buy and sell myself. Curious as to how many people Rango had brought with him, Bell and I ran outside of the village wall to see for ourselves.

Rango was flabbergasted by the new wall. To him, it must've seemingly popped up out of nowhere. Apparently, he'd personally pleaded with the president of the Mary Chamber of Commerce for a caravan, insisting he would take the fall if it put them in the red. Now here he was, entourage in tow, baffled that the huge wall had been completed in the few weeks he was gone.

As Bell and I approached him, however, I was the one most taken aback. The caravan consisted of five large carriages and three medium-sized ones, plus twenty adventurers to protect the merchants and their goods. Including Rango, a total of five merchants had come to the village, as well as five slaves to assist them.

Rango whirled on his brother and stammered, "Wh-what is all this, Bell? When did this wall go up?!"

Bell clapped his hands over Rango's shoulders. "The wall is absurd, but it gets worse."

"W-worse?!" A deep wrinkle formed on Rango's forehead.

Then Bell turned his gaze on me. “May I show him to the new storage building?”

“Sure.”

With that, Bell grabbed Rango and showed him the way. The rest of the caravan passed through the gate and trailed after him, with the adventurers and merchants greeting me as they passed.

Shortly after, I heard a shout from the direction of the storage building: “A dragon?!”

At the sound of Rango’s bewildered cry, all the merchants and adventurers rushed into the building. More screams followed. Given how many people were in there hollering like crazy, it sounded like a wild roller coaster ride.

“Wonder how much it’s worth,” I said.

Bell counted on his fingers, a devilish grin forming on his lips. “Well, we are talking about a forest dragon here, and a large one at that. Its scales, claws, fangs, eyes, and magic core are all in basically perfect condition, so I’d say about a hundred platiums. At an auction in the capital, I bet you could get at least 150 platiums, minimum.”

If a single gold is roughly a million yen and one large gold is ten million yen, then I guess a platinum should be a hundred million yen? So a single dragon...is worth over ten billion yen?!

“C’mon, what is this, the Mega Billions lottery? And what’s this auction stuff you mentioned?”

“Mega what now?” Bell asked.

“The auction,” I repeated, skating over my mistake. “What’s up with that?”

Bell’s wicked smile returned. “The auction is held in the capital. Companies affiliated with the Merchants’ Guild are allowed to participate, and when national treasures are uncovered, they almost always show up to bid on them. If we’re talking about parts from the forest dragon, you should easily get over 150 platiums.”

“Gotcha. So how much are you guys going to take home once you subtract

transportation fees, auction handling fees, and company profits?”

Bell’s eyes widened. “I hope you don’t take this as an insult, but I’ve never once considered you to be a child, and this conversation really confirms that for me. I’m sure there are people who’d trick a blissfully unaware noble kid into coughing up a commission of fifty platitudes. In reality, we should be making something like three to five platitudes. But even then,” he added happily, “that is far more of a profit than we could ever hope to make in our lives.”

I folded my arms, tilting my head to one side. “Why not start your own company? Is it that difficult to do?”

Caught off guard, Bell went stiff. A few moments later, he rejoined his brother and eagerly began to discuss the dragon and armored lizard parts. The other merchants, having finally calmed down a bit, approached me.

“My word,” said one. “I heard the stories, but I never thought a village like this existed. It’s a mountain of treasures!”

“I was doubtful when Rango delivered his report,” said another, “but now I find myself truly stunned. I’m so glad I came. The Mary Chamber of Commerce would love to purchase all of these parts.”

“Wonderful materials indeed. We must speak with the president and see to it that a branch is built here. The Mary Chamber of Commerce is one of the largest companies in the kingdom, and I have no doubt we can further the development of your village.”

They peppered me with comments in fast succession. I cocked my head, the way a regular eight-year-old might. “Are you sure you can afford to open a branch here? There aren’t many customers around.”

One of the merchants grinned wider and nodded emphatically. “For merchants, making good purchases is as important as selling our wares. I can guarantee that the Mary Chamber of Commerce will buy your materials at the highest price possible.”

“Wow. Then how much do you think I can sell that dragon for?”

“Let me see...I’d say about eighty platitudes.”

I folded my arms and exhaled through my nose. “And after buying it for eighty platitudes, how much would you sell it for?”

“One hundred platitudes at least. But of course, there will be certain expenses to cover on our end, so we hope you’ll sell us the armored lizard parts at a moderate price. Oh, and we plan on paying regular visits to this village going forward. When we do, we promise to offer you more favorable treatment than any of the other towns or villages in the region.”

The other merchants smiled and bobbed their heads at this roundabout answer; they must have coordinated their offers in advance. They clearly saw this dragon as a one-off and weren’t thinking of future business in the least.

If they had thought us capable of procuring more rare monster parts down the line, or that this village might make huge strides going forward, then these merchants would have purchased the dragon and armored lizard parts at a high price, even if it meant going home with less in hand. Unfortunately, they had no interest in our little border village—only in how much profit they could make in the here and now.

I smiled and nodded. “Thank you for the explanation. I’ll give it some thought.” With a wave, I walked back to Bell and Rango.

“Ah! W-wait a moment, Lord Van! Those two lack mercantile experience. They cannot handle A-class dragon materials! We would be able to—”

Ignoring the panicked merchants, I said to Bell and Rango, “Looks like I won’t be able to sell the dragon for as much as we thought. They said eighty platitudes was a reasonable price.”

Bell frowned. Rango glanced back at the dragon, incredulous. “That thing is in amazing condition!” he said. “Eighty platitudes? Are you sure they didn’t mean ninety to a hundred?” He shot a confused look at the merchants behind me, who flew over in a rage.

“You fool! There’s no way we can pay a hundred platitudes!”

“Imagine what would happen if we submitted it for auction and it sold for less than that!”

“And what if we were attacked by bandits on the way back to the capital?”

What merchant only considers the best possible result? Think of the worst-case scenario!”

Rango shrank back at this verbal assault, so Bell cut in. “Hold on just a minute. As merchants, we should provide an accurate assessment of value to our clients. As far as expenses go, even if we hired proper protection and transport, we would turn more than enough of a profit. Besides, we’re allowed to set a minimum buyout price on submissions, so if things didn’t work out at the auction, we could always resubmit the next time around. And when it comes to bandits, it’s our job as merchants to pick safe routes and avoid them in the first place. This is all common sense.”

The merchants looked at me for a moment, then grabbed for Bell.

“Y-y-you moron!” one of them spat. “What the hell is wrong with you people?!”

“No merchant in his right mind would come out to the sticks just to buy materials!” said another. “The boy has no choice but to sell it to us for eighty platitudes.”

“Just be quiet and listen to what we say. We’ll pay you a large handling fee for this. Once we get the eighty platitudes together, you’ll each get a single platinum for your trouble.”

They were whispering, but not so quietly that I couldn’t hear them. If one platinum was one million yen, I could see Bell and Rango considering it. They were only human, after all.

I studied the young merchants. Rango wore a stern expression. He gazed at Bell, who nodded and declared, “We brothers are not so hungry for a platinum that we would resort to such underhanded conduct. Trust is everything for merchants. No matter who we’re dealing with or what kind of negotiations are on the table, we want to keep things honest. That’ll make us more money down the line.”

One of the merchants hurled his bag onto the ground. “Idiots! Are you just going to let this opportunity pass you by?! If the president hears about this, we could be kicked out of the company!”

Without waiting for a response, he and the other merchants stormed off.

Uh, do they not realize their client just heard everything? My impression of the Mary Chamber of Commerce was plummeting to an all-time low. Regardless of the reason I was out here, I was still the son of a marquis. They weren't wrong to look down on me as the futureless outcast sent out to the sticks, but I could very well become one of their regulars. I wanted them to treat me with *some* level of decency.

I approached Bell and Rango again. "Are you sure about this? You guys might have lost out on earning a platinum each."

They snorted and nodded. "It's fine," Bell assured me. "I thought I knew them well enough, but I never realized how stubborn they are. It's in our merchant blood to be misers of a sort, but that kind of blatant greed is senseless. I don't need to be associated with the kingdom's largest company. We'll branch out on our own and do business the way we want to."

"We'll hire our own protection and carry the dragon parts straight to the capital," Rango said. "Unfortunately, we can't submit to the auction without being registered with the guild." His expression darkened, and they both looked at me.

"There are three conditions to setting up your own business," Bell explained. "The first is the guild registration fee of one large gold. The second is having an actual shop. The third is a recommendation from someone with a peerage."

Ahh. The first two aren't an issue for them, but that last one...Yeah, that's a problem.

Nobles had the authority to grant others rights. Someone with the financial power to start a company might pay a noble some amount of money in exchange for a recommendation. The nobleman or noblewoman would make good money as a "sponsor" without doing much of anything.

"I see. On average, how much is considered normal? Or does the noble take a 10 percent cut of every profit or something like that?"

The brothers blinked, wide-eyed.

"So you're aware of the system, then?" Bell said. "I guess it really is common

knowledge among the nobility. As you said, payment is required. Generally, the amount depends on how highly ranked the noble is.”

Apparently, that reward money was a high hurdle for most merchants.

“If I may ask, who sponsors the Mary Chamber of Commerce?”

Their faces twitched; they almost looked on the verge of tears. “The royal family. The Bellrinets.”

“Well, that’s not good,” I replied.

When it came to starting a business, a sponsor with ample territory could give you all kinds of perks: the ability to build shops in all the best towns and villages, having the local lords as regular customers, and first dibs on parts from creatures hunted by the Chivalric Order. To sweeten the deal, a business backed by such a high-ranking noble would enjoy powerful protections. In short, the bigger the noble, the stronger the company and the more it would grow.

“Man,” I said, “doing business with the royal family is *wicked* unfair.”

Bell and Rango let out identical sighs. I doubted they understood my Earth slang, but the message still seemed to come across.

“The reality is that the Mary Chamber of Commerce has branches all over the kingdom, plus access to prime locations for new branches,” Bell said. “And when the Chivalric Order takes down large monsters or captures enemy soldiers as slaves, the Chamber gets first pick of the goods.”

“By the way,” Rango added, “word has it that the first president of the company, Mary Trinoff, was the first king’s fenced flower.”

That’s definitely slang for “mistress.”

I frowned. “This is just getting more and more painful.”

If the brothers caught the attention of a company with nationwide authority, where could they even set up shop? And if it came to light that they had a bone to pick with a company backed by royalty, it was possible that *no* noble would risk sponsoring them.

Right then, something dawned on me. “The Merchants’ Guild headquarters are in another country, right? The guild’s got international roots, so as long as

you fulfill the right conditions, they should recognize your company.”

“Uh, true enough. That’s how we were able to get a shop, and we don’t have any issues with money. But when it comes to the recommendation...”

They peered at me, clearly desperate. My father was of no use here; I was totally cut off. I loved my eldest brother, but he didn’t have a peerage. And while it would be great for everyone if I did, that wouldn’t happen unless something crazy went down.

I sighed. “Anything involving my family is a nonstarter. Let’s see if we can get Lady Panamera to recommend you. She’s the one ally I have, so I’ll talk to her.”

The merchants exchanged glances, then leapt into each other’s arms.

“I only said I’d *talk* to her! Hey! Hello?!”

No matter what I said, they went on rejoicing. I didn’t think our chances were particularly good on this one, but...

“Hmm, a recommendation? That’s fine with me.”

Despite my fears, Panamera immediately agreed to back the company. Apparently, she’d overheard our earlier conversation.

“Huh?! You sure?” I asked, forgetting any formalities.

Panamera laughed and placed a hand on her hip. “Think about it. I’m a new member of the nobility. I have nothing to lose by signing off on a small business with only two merchants to its name. If the royal family pressured a tiny enterprise like that, their dignity would be called into question.”

“Ooh, that makes sense.” The royal family had to save face, basically. Then again, there *were* ways to harass others covertly...

Pretty sure that’s the former commoner in me speaking.

“Besides, for someone like me—with no land or Order detachment to speak of—to move up in the world, I need to get the common folk buzzing with some shocking moves. This plan benefits me as much as it does you.” She smirked, then let out a shoulder-shaking cackle. “I’m going to enter the capital having

defeated a dragon with merely a hundred-man army. I'll be the talk of the town!"

She was right; no one would guess a village out in the sticks had the facilities to take down a dragon. "That's great, actually! If we give you all the credit, I can avoid catching my family's attention." I was thrilled by this idea. If I sold the dragon, my family wouldn't know any better.

Panamera snorted, looking exasperated. "You are dense in the strangest ways, boy. We're talking about the extermination of a *dragon*. This is a rare feat. People are going to pry, theories will run rampant, and word will reach the nobility. Even if I announce that I defeated the dragon, it won't take much digging for someone to uncover your role in it."

There would be questions about how the dragon was slain, how many people were involved, where it took place, and what the resulting damages and casualties were. Additionally, if Panamera were truly some strategic military genius or goddess of war, there'd be invitations for her to join the Chivalric Order or become a military advisor. In fact, there were multiple historical instances of heroes with titles like "War Goddess." Whenever such skilled individuals appeared, they had all kinds of unique titles heaped upon them.

"This isn't good," I muttered to myself. "My family chased me out for being useless. What if they call me back? I'm having too much fun building this village to just leave!"

Lady Panamera's accursed ears caught my mumblings, and her lips curled into an evil smile. "You sound like a child who's run away from home—though I suppose you *are* a child. If you'd like, I can teach you how to avoid such a fate."

"Uh, really?"

Panamera laughed, radiating an air of invincibility. "Get yourself a noble title. Simple, isn't it? If you receive a peerage, you can simply strike out on your own as a noble. Begin a new house." She made it sound as easy as renting a new apartment or something. I nearly said as much, but Panamera was dead serious. "You can take credit for defeating the dragon. All I did was stall for time, anyway."

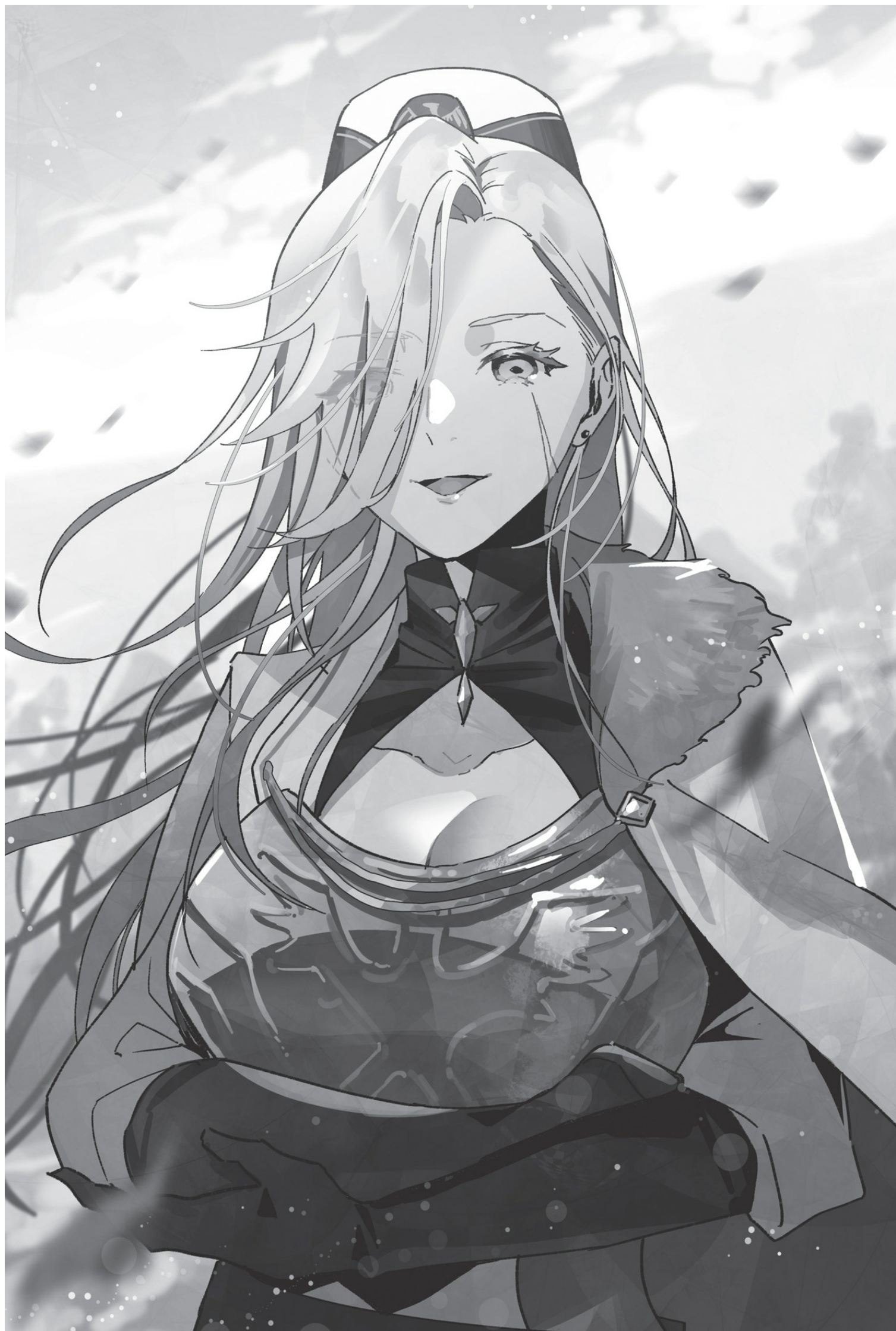
"No, no—then everything will change! I'm going to stick out like a sore

thumb!”

Panamera crossed her arms over her voluptuous chest, making it stand out even more. “Are you dissatisfied?”

Not with those!

I *was* deeply concerned by the peerage suggestion, though. I had no idea how Father would react, and I had the feeling my jerk brothers would start trouble. Plus I felt guilty about becoming a proper noble before my big brother Murcia. I was sorting through all these conflicting emotions when Panamera placed a finger on her chin, suddenly full of mystique.



“You slew a dragon at the tender age of eight. There is little doubt you will be granted a peerage for your accomplishments. Moreover, you will acquire significant wealth *and* a start-up business in the form of Bell and Rango’s new company. I think you have plenty to gain from this and nothing to lose. That said, I do understand your concern. When I received my peerage, I gained numerous enemies—fools who sought to take advantage of me.” She stopped there, then narrowed her eyes and grinned. “But I reduced them all to ash.”

“Say what?!”

“You heard me. If any fools make themselves your enemies, take them down with your ballistae. Once you have ten or eleven corpses to your name, people will stop giving you trouble.”

What a terrifying way to get on in the world. I offered a noncommittal nod, then realized something. “Wait, if I take all the credit, you’ll lose your stepping stone to upward mobility.”

Panamera uttered something between a laugh and a sigh. “Are you actually concerned about *me*, Panamera Carrera Cayenne? I do not recall living life in such a way that an eight-year-old should worry about my well-being. I must be hearing things.” Her grin turned beastly.

“No, not at all! I’m not worried in the slightest. If anything, I’m worried about myself. Please don’t eat me!”

“Ha ha ha! You always react in such fun ways! Fear not—you have at least five years to go before I’ll bite. I shall bequeath this accomplishment to you so that you might grow into more delectable prey!”

I only have five more years to live... How tragic.

Two days later, Rango approached me with a final number after assessing everything. “Would you sell this to us for 130 platnums?”

I agreed immediately. *Great success!* Judging by how relieved he looked, Rango must have been nervous. Bell, for his part, beamed at the thought of their future profits.

I hadn't yet received a peerage, but Panamera or I would receive 10 percent of every sale as a condition for sponsoring their company. This was for all earnings made after the founding of the company, so any profit made at the auction would technically count. However, I was such a kind and generous soul that I told them they could keep my cut of anything they sold there. That had them throwing themselves at my feet.

With that settled, Rango would return to the capital to sell the dragon and assorted monster parts. There was only one problem: the adventurers and merchants that Rango brought with him had all left on their own.

"Are you kidding me?" Bell muttered. "How do they plan to explain coming home empty-handed?" The merchants would arrive without a single item in their large carriages.

"They're waiting for us to come crying for help, I'm sure," Panamera said. "If you can't carry the goods, you'll have no choice but to seek their aid. And when that happens, you'll have to do as they say and sell the haul for eighty platinum pieces."

Considering that they'd only just departed and were moving at a leisurely pace, we could catch up if we ran. But after I heard Panamera's explanation, I didn't really want to rely on them. *Little Van is only eight years old, but he holds grudges. Sorry, guys.* "Okay, then I'll make you some carriages and you can use those to carry the stuff. If I ask Ortho and his guys, they'll probably do the job."

Panamera shook her head. "No, my troops and I shall escort them to the capital. I must appeal for your peerage, after all. Don't you worry about protection or manpower."

"Whoa, seriously? Thank you so much! If you and your men go with them, there'll be nothing to worry about!" I held her gaze as I expressed my earnest gratitude.

Her cheeks flushed, and she averted her eyes. "It's embarrassing hearing you express your trust so earnestly..."

At last, Panamera reveals her sweet side. This calls for a celebration! Every year, we'll have a harvest festival, a meat carnival, and a jubilee to celebrate Panamera's bashfulness!

“Um, are you certain?” Bell asked anxiously. “We’ll need large carriages and multiple horses to carry all these materials.”

I flashed him a smile. “No worries. I’ll get you set up right now.”

Two short hours later, the large carriages were complete. They were made with wood blocks, so they were light and sturdy. Once we got the goods on board, I installed a hood-like structure on top. I also made the wheels big so that they could handle uneven roads.

“I shall prepare the horses,” Panamera said. “Not the type that usually pulls carriages, but well-trained warhorses. They’re in a league of their own when it comes to stamina and speed.” Panamera sent her soldiers to fetch the animals.

Having acquired much more lavish transportation and protection than what he had before, Rango left the village smiling ear to ear.

Greedy Merchants

The three merchants slowly proceeded down the road, using a slave as a coachman and the hired adventurers as guards. In the back, the merchants discussed their plan among themselves.

“Are they still not pursuing us?” one asked, prompting a frown from another.

“Why aren’t they coming? Is this really going to work? What if those brothers are too stubborn and end up doing something stupid?”

“Then they truly are fools. Just think about it: that village might as well be at the end of the world! There’s nowhere to sell dragon parts, and they certainly couldn’t prepare a caravan without asking Chamber affiliates for assistance,” said the oldest of the merchants. “They’ll realize how foolish they’ve been soon enough.”

A momentary silence fell inside the rocking carriage. Then they heard a surprised shout from one of the adventurers walking outside. The three merchants turned to look and spotted several large carriages farther down the road, headed their way. Their eyes widened in shock.

“Wh-what are those? I’ve never seen carriages like that before!”

“Who cares?! Look around them! Knights? Why would knights be in such a remote village?!”

They pulled hurriedly to the side of the road to let the knights pass. Their gear was uniform and their formation spoke to a high level of training. It was clear as day that they were part of a Chivalric Order. The carriages were in the center of the formation, so the merchants struggled to see whom they belonged to, but it was an immense group regardless.

“Wh-what order are they?”

“Surely they’re not from House Fertio, right?”

“Of course not! Whatever the rumors say, it is a fact that the fourth son was chased out of the house.”

Bewildered, the merchants took stock of the situation from inside their carriage. Something felt off about the number of carriages and their peculiar

form. They weren't the sort of carriages the nobility rode in. They lacked family crests, and they were simply too big; even the wheels were twice the size of those the merchants used. The vehicles were irregular in other ways too. It took four horses to pull a single carriage, and there were ten of them—all chock-full of goods.

“W-wait, look!” cried the youngest merchant. He pointed at Rango, who was driving one of the carriages.

“No, it cannot be...”

The merchants watched in shock as the carriages and soldiers passed. After five of the carriages went by, they caught sight of a beautiful female knight astride a horse. Accompanying her were two knights holding flags that bore the crest of a unicorn and a shield.

“This is...absolutely absurd. Lady Panamera? That new noblewoman should be in the count's territory! Why is she with Rango?”

“Newcomer or not, if a noble is cooperating with them, Bell and Rango could start their own company!”

It was then that the three merchants flew into a panic. Their leverage over Rango and Bell had been transportation for the dragon and a place to sell it. They'd assumed that the upstart brothers possessed neither, and they were shocked to be proven wrong.

While it stung to have come out all this way for nothing, they were even more pained by the lost profit. Had they dropped their games and simply paid the one hundred platins asked of them, each man could have walked away with one to two platins—a massive profit.

“I can't believe this...”

“What should we do? Given the number of carriages, they've likely split the shipment in two. Shall we apologize and ask if we can carry the goods together?”

All three blanched. Losing status terrified them more than anything. These three were veterans even among the merchants of the Mary Chamber of Commerce, and Rango had approached them with an impossible story. Fully on

board, they'd begged the president for a caravan. The condition? Forty armored lizard carcasses—no more, no less. Yet because of their greed, they would return empty-handed. None of them wanted to explain this to the president.

“No,” murmured the oldest one. “We’ll tell the president we requested the caravan with good intentions, and those two scoundrels trampled all over them. We’ll say they tricked us.”

The other two blinked at him.

“Erm, is that going to fly?”

“Shouldn’t we at least carry back the armored lizards?”

“Remember, the current president is Lady Dyane,” the eldest replied. “I doubt she will penalize us too harshly.”

Both younger merchants relaxed when their cohort namedropped the Mary Chamber of Commerce’s new president. “B-but Lord Cactus still serves as her advisor,” one protested.

The oldest merchant nodded. “He would never allow this to pass, but he is also weak when it comes to his daughter. If Lady Dyane makes a decision, he will not overturn it. Besides, Rango and Bell may have quit, but they are still former members of the company; if they deliver the dragon, he’ll find a way to force himself into negotiations.”

“I see. Then if we get Lord Cactus to help...”

The three merchants opted to watch and wait as the dragon was transported down the road.

Panamera

AFTER TRAVELING FOR HALF A MONTH, I FINALLY set foot back in the capital. I was born there to a long line of knights, but once it was discovered that I had an aptitude for one of the four elements, I received a summons right away. I was passed over to Ferdinatto County, since they offered the best conditions.

I left home at eight and underwent grueling training that made me yearn for death, studied so much I barely slept, and eventually became a platoon commander. My first real battle involved repelling a group of bandits. I reduced most of them to ash.

In recognition of my achievements, I was made a commanding officer at the tender age of sixteen. In Ferdinatto County, anyone at the rank of viscount or below—but who still possessed land—had to create Chivalric Orders of their own. They also had to be prepared to rally under the count's Chivalric Order when called upon to cut down his foes.

I sliced my way through two or three more battles as part of the count's Order, piling up my achievements, until I led my own platoon in the battle against the Kingdom of Yelenetta. It was a tremendous success, and we triumphed over the enemy. As such, I became a noble.

Six years later, I received another promotion—this time to viscount—and I was fortunate enough to have two audiences with the king. He was pleased with my accomplishments and said he would recommend me for entry into the royal guard, the strongest knights in the kingdom, should I desire it.

My impression of him at the time was that he ascribed great value to military might. I requested a third audience with him, dragon parts in hand—the dragon being a symbol of might, as it were. I was told that it would be at least a day before we could meet, but when I mentioned that I'd slain a forest dragon, I was granted the audience in only two hours. Someone else had probably been bumped to the next day to free up the slot, but that was of no consequence to me.

"This way," said the knight escorting me.

My men and Rango were waiting outside, and I figured the city was already in a tizzy. I grinned as the knight guided me through the needlessly wide and ostentatious hallway toward the throne room. The double doors to the room were made of mithril and silver; one hesitated to touch them. The beauty of this ornate design was one thing, but the ceiling was so tall that the doors themselves were massive and overbearing.

“I take it you know the etiquette for an audience with the king?”

“Correct. This is my third time.”

The knight dipped his head and placed a hand on the door. “Pardon our intrusion,” he said, giving it a light knock. The gigantic doors slowly opened with a loud groan. “After you, my lady.”

I was immediately struck by the chamber, with its sky-high ceiling, immaculate row of knights, immense chandelier, and flickering magic lamps. The thick red pelt of a sanguine tiger, a giant beast said to be on par with a dragon, was spread out on the floor. Surely royals from smaller nations would hesitate to enter.

I marched across the tiger pelt and made my way to the center of the room. It felt good having all of the knights’ eyes on me, but I wasn’t exactly thrilled about taking the knee some fifty meters away from the king.

King Dino En Tsora Bellrinet reclined in his large throne made of dragon bones, fangs, mithril, and sanguine tiger parts. He was in the prime of his life, having become the king at only sixteen. Over the next two decades, he pulled off massive military reform, acquiring might far beyond what his earliest ancestors had accomplished. The king placed great importance on recruiting officers with great martial prowess and abilities.

The only way to keep the chain of command strong and avoid betrayal was to appoint certain members of nobility as commanding officers. Given that requirement, the next logical decision was to make sure that any officers serving under them were veteran warriors; this was the king’s way of reforming the military, and it took a great deal of time, effort, and bloodshed to accomplish.

Up until then, it was understood that *anyone* of noble blood could and would

become an adjutant or officer in a Chivalric Order. It was their birthright, and that was precisely how our military force ended up with so many useless leaders.

As a result of His Majesty's reforms, a great deal of young noblemen ended up losing their jobs, but that served to reflect how many of them were ultimately incompetent. Needless to say, the nobility did not take this lying down.

Behind the scenes, the king identified which of the houses he would use and which he would reduce in power. The houses that were cooperative and specialized in combat swiftly made great advances. House Fertio was one such example. While the marquis had numerous accomplishments in battle, his promotion was motivated more by the king's expectations of him going forward.

Around this time, Lord Ferdinatto learned that his two sons had been demoted from their positions as officers, but he did not retaliate. As such, he did not receive a demotion, though he did lose some territory. In the hopes of securing what land he could, the count put me—a warrior—to use, petitioning the king to grant me a peerage. The king seemed to be in favor of this, and I progressed to the status of viscount with irregular speed.

Thinking about all of this, it felt accurate to say that the king often doted on those to whom he himself had granted a peerage. I took advantage of that when I made my plea. "I am most grateful that you've granted me an audience on such short notice, Your Majesty. To put matters plainly, I have come to ask you to grant someone a peerage."

Normally, one would exchange formal greetings with the king and await his response before launching into conversation, but I got straight to the point. The royal guards and court mages wore grave expressions, and the elderly chancellor beside the king cocked a brow.

As for the king, well, he simply tilted his head. "I assumed you had achieved some new feat and wished to petition for higher status. Yet here you are, asking me to promote someone else?" He spoke in a low, rumbling voice. Clearly he was not as amenable as he had been in our previous meetings. He was likely on guard, thinking I was strategizing to acquire power and social influence.

Before I could answer, the chancellor stepped in. Normally such behavior would be unacceptable, but this man was an old acquaintance of the king's, and he was famously unconventional. "I do not see anyone else present," he said.

I smiled. "The person in question is a lord charged with protecting a remote region in the far reaches of the nation. No local governors can be dispatched to oversee it in his stead, so he could not travel to the capital himself."

The king frowned as his chancellor replied, "A remote village, you say? Why would you, of all people, back a lord from a place like that?"

"He has achieved great things, and his future looks even brighter."

The imperial knights stirred. The chancellor stroked his chin and glanced at the king, who nodded. "Hmm. Considering your many triumphs, this fellow must show serious promise to have you staunchly in his corner. That said, if this village is so remote that we cannot even station knights or guards there, how did he accomplish so much? I am curious, but you must understand my doubts."

I dropped the smile and looked the king straight in the eyes. "He slew a dragon."

That sent the audience into a clamor. Had this been any other room, it would have been even louder.

The chancellor's eyes widened. "He vanquished a *dragon*? Quite a feat, if true. Don't tell me this remote lord is an elemental mage who was born and raised there?"

I shook my head. "No. He uses production magic, long said to be useless, and was chased out of his own home for it. Yet he continues to pull off astonishing feats with his skills."

"A *production* mage did such a thing?" The chancellor tilted his head.

The king sat up, visibly irritated. "Who is this person?"

"Lord Fertio's youngest son, Van Nei Fertio. Despite being less than ten years of age, he is a hero who felled a dragon."

Everyone's breath caught.

"Lord Fertio's youngest?" the king said in a low voice. "The marquis has said

nothing of this.” His eyes burned with a perilous light. He must have been weighing the odds that Lord Fertio was plotting a revolt.

The atmosphere in the room changed, but I didn’t care. “I know nothing of any reports from the marquis, but the boy was sent to a nameless village with only a hundred residents. All they had for protection was a makeshift wooden fence.” I paid close attention to the reactions of those around me. Most were obviously interested in learning how Van had defeated a dragon under those circumstances. “Most surprising of all, the village was being attacked by bandits upon his arrival. With the few men he had and the adventurers he’d hired for the trip, he managed to annihilate the threat and protect the village.”

The king leaned forward. “Oho, he joined and won a field battle at his age? Few can say that.”

Perfect. I managed to hold back a smile and continued, “In his first act as lord, he strengthened the village’s defenses. He used dirt and stone to build an earthen wall around the village, dug an enormous moat, and fixed all the villagers’ dilapidated homes.”

The more I spoke, the louder the gasps around us became. Unsurprising, given that we were speaking of an eight-year-old child. Either he was a one-of-a-kind prodigy or this was all made up.

I raised my voice. “He also defeated forty armored lizards with only a hundred people.”

The crowd’s shock reached a fever pitch, and people began to question the truth of my story.

“I-Impossible. Even the capital’s Chivalric Order couldn’t do that so easily...”

“Did they fight them one at a time?”

“No. I cannot imagine armored lizards moving in such an organized fashion. Perhaps she means they defeated forty over the course of several years?”

While the crowd chattered, I waited for things to quiet down. The chancellor clapped his hands, forcing the crowd to go silent. “Give us the details of the village’s fighting force and the number of armored lizard attacks,” he said.

I straightened up. “Approximately one hundred villagers, the deputy commander of the marquis’s Chivalric Order, and two knights. That, plus an older butler—who is also a mage—and five adventurers. There was a single armored lizard attack of forty beasts at once.”

Stunned cries rose up throughout the room.

“Realistically, you’re talking about a fighting force of three knights, one mage, and five adventurers...No matter how you slice it, that’s not enough men to fend off forty lizards. How strong were those adventurers?”

“First-rate, but not mind-blowingly talented,” I answered, prompting the king and the chancellor to exchange glances.

The chancellor turned his gaze back to me. “This is extremely hard to believe. Do you have evidence?”

“I have the dragon and armored lizard parts. All of them are in near-perfect condition, and there are almost no scars from the offensive spells. I participated in the fight against the dragon, but all I did was stall it once or twice. Lord Van and his forces were the ones who killed the beast without any casualties.”

Having clearly decided my tale was exaggerated, the chancellor grimaced. *I can’t fault the man. Were I in his position, I’d find it hard to believe too.*

“I’m sure there are those present who doubt the veracity of my words. However—”

The king raised a hand. “I believe you. You have nothing to gain from spouting lies here. If a dragon was slain, there would be no way to hide it—the parts would circulate in the marketplace, and I could easily trace them back to the source. As far as the achievement itself is concerned, it would be one thing if you were trying to take the credit for someone else’s work, but you’re doing the opposite. Who stands to gain from that?”

“It *is* possible someone else did this, and she’s giving a controllable child the credit so she can indirectly gain his territory,” the chancellor said, but the king waved it off.

“Do not test me,” the king warned. “She would sooner ask for someone to turn over their land than jump through these hoops. In a few days, we will send

someone to verify the situation. She cannot fool me.”

The chancellor looked at me, wearing a pained smile. “As you can see, His Majesty trusts you. Should this all prove to be some sort of ruse, your status will be revoked and you will be severely punished. Is that understood?”

“Of course. If anything, I’d love for you to see for yourself what the boy has done with the village in such a short period of time. In all your wisdom, Your Majesty, I expect you’ll make him the lord of a larger territory in the name of defending the nation.”

The crowd started buzzing again, and both the chancellor and king smiled at me.

I left the castle and walked through the gate, joining back up with my men and Rango. Citizens clustered around them as they explained things in detail. It had only been about two hours, but I figured rumors of the dragon’s defeat had spread throughout the capital already. We’d chosen not to close the roof of our frontmost carriage so the dragon’s head would be visible. It had certainly caused quite a stir.

Rango noticed me and cut his conversation with the soldiers short. “Oh, Lady Panamera!”

This prompted the curious onlookers to turn my way. Murmurs rippled through the crowd. It didn’t matter what sort of looks they gave me; it was clear that all eyes were on me.

Ignoring them, I announced the results to my men: “Lord Van Nei Fertio has been awarded the status of baron!” My bold declaration caused the gossip to grow louder as well. “He will be rewarded for slaying the forest dragon and armored lizards at a later date. Bell and Rango can now start a company.”

The marquis was famous among even the commoners, so my little announcement was more than enough for them to understand that Van had been exiled from his house. To further impress upon those gathered that a new company was being established, I turned to Rango and said, “I will head to the Merchants’ Guild today to deliver the news. What will you do about the name?”

“The Rango Company!” he answered proudly.

“Um, are you certain you want to leave out your brother’s name?”

Rango nodded, his eyes sparkling. “If my big brother were here now, I’m sure he would be proud to see his little brother’s name stand out.”

Despite his unwavering confidence, I was convinced his name choice would only cause problems later. “I’ll register you as the Bell & Rango Company.”

The merchant solemnly agreed, pouting all the while.

In the coming days, rumors about the newly founded company and the new baron whizzed through the capital until they were the only thing on everyone’s lips. Most of the gossip had to do with the heroic tale of how the dragon was slain. The characters in this little story were Lord Van, his knights, and me. For some reason, the dragon was added to the narrative of the field battle, and the climax was changed so that the boy chopped off the beast’s head in front of his mighty swordsman. Rumors often changed things to make the details as flashy as possible. My own deeds were spectacularly dramatized, so I was actually pretty pleased.

“Now then, boy,” I said under my breath, smiling, “things are about to get interesting. You had better be grateful.”

Chapter 2:

The Village Situation

Van

THANKS TO THE QUICK CONSTRUCTION WORK, creating the village wall and ballistae went off without a hitch. By the end, we had one hundred ballistae facing each direction. The village only had a hundred residents in the first place, so activating every ballista at once was never going to happen.

“Care to take a break, Lord Van?” Till asked me, holding a lunch box and water bottle. It was already noon.

I nodded, then looked up at the fifty-meter towers we’d built—one to the north and one to the south. “Good idea. How about we climb the tower and enjoy the view from the top while we have lunch?”

“Hey, we should climb Oligo Tower! You can see the road from there!” Khamsin cried. He was fond of high places.

Till forced a smile and nodded. “Personally, I like Grape Tower. You can see the whole lake.”

I beamed, watching them chat in front of Oligo Tower. During this peaceful moment, Dee, Arb, and Lowe arrived in full armor. Arb and Lowe looked like they were on the verge of death, but Dee seemed thrilled.

“Oh, if it isn’t Lord Van! Are you about to climb Oligo Tower?” Dee asked. “I thought we might climb it as a training exercise, but we can do Grape Tower instead. By your leave!”

Without waiting for a response, he dashed off to the tower on the opposite end of the village. Arb and Lowe ran after him, yelping in pain the whole time. I had to hand it to them—despite their moaning and groaning, they had guts.

We laughed among ourselves as we opened the doors to Oligo Tower and started up the spiral staircase. It took about ten minutes to get to the top, assuming you didn’t stop to rest. It was a real test of stamina, but Khamsin was skipping steps even as he carried all our things.

“He’s so energetic,” Till said.

“You’ve got plenty of stamina, too, Till.”

“Well, once I get to the top, I can barely move.”

Till and I had average endurance, so we took our time, chatting as we went. Once we emerged at the top, powerful gusts of wind brushed our skin. There was little in the way of shelter aside from a single rooftop over four pillars, but the view was wonderful and the air felt great.

“Finally!” Till said, leaning against a pillar and gazing down below.

I had made the handrail thin so it wouldn’t get in the way of the panoramic view. The sights were breathtaking: tall mountain peaks, lush forests, endless fields of green, the roads stretching beyond the village... You could also see the wall in all its hexagonal glory, the villagers on patrol, and the apkallu swimming in the waterways.

“Maybe we went a bit too hard for a village of a hundred people,” I said, smiling as I leaned on the handrail.

As Till unpacked our lunch, she replied, “Maybe so. But I would argue that no village has buildings or facilities like this. Perhaps it’s time for you to name this place and make it a proper town.”

“Aw, but then everyone’s gonna try and give it some ridiculous name, like Van Town or something. I already turned down Van Village, and people refused to give that up.”

Till chuckled. “And what’s wrong with that? I think Van Town is wonderful. Van City as well.”

“This is funny to you, I’m sure. You’re just messing with me!”

“I-I swear I’m not!”

When I cast a doubtful gaze at her, Till panicked and shook her head. *No, it’s totally obvious that if I let my guard down, they’re gonna slap some weird name on this place. In that case, why not go all out with “Van Land” or something?*

Khamsin had his eyes fixed on the road. “Lord Van, look...”

“Hm?” I followed his gaze and could just barely make out something in the distance. Even if I squinted, the best I could see was some sort of line.

“Khamsin, your eyesight has been weirdly good recently. You must be going

through the same evolution as the villagers. I'm not quite there yet." It was enough to make me question my physical abilities.

He nodded. "I doubt they're soldiers or adventurers, but they also don't look like merchants. The group has lots of children and elderly folks, but they don't seem like slave traders either..."

I was stunned. "Wait, you can see all that?! Just how sharp are your eyes now? You've totally become a citizen of this village."

Down below, near the base of the tower, I heard someone else point out that a group of people was approaching. *Seriously, how good is their vision?!*

Still reeling, I turned back to Till and sat down. "Well, it'll take about an hour for them to get here, so should we eat?"

"Huh? O-oh, right! Yes, let's. I made your favorite: fried egg sandwiches! Thanks to Bell, the quality of our bread has improved, so it should be delicious."

"Yay!"

With that, the three of us enjoyed a wonderful lunch.

Arte ran toward me as I came back down from the tower, her hair swaying and shining in the sunlight like beautiful silver thread. Though she hadn't been sure what to do with herself when Panamera left the village, she'd ultimately opted to stay—thanks in no small part to the viscount's advice. Actually, Panamera had pretty much made the decision for her.

"Lord Van!"

She called my name as she ran, adorable child that she was. Arte was the kind of kid you wanted to coo over while you ruffled her hair.

"What's wrong, Arte?" I actually *did* ruffle her hair without thinking, making her face turn cherry red. She was suddenly lost for words.

How is this little critter so darn cute?

"Um, w-well... Some people have come to the, um...village? And..."

She clearly wasn't sure whether to call it a village. I guessed it was time to

finally start calling it a town, which meant it needed a proper name.

I encouraged Arte to continue. "From the road, right? Big group?"

"Uh, yes." Arte managed to collect herself enough to explain things clearly. "Like you said, there are quite a few of them coming down the road. What should we do? There's nothing between the wall and the village, so would you like to meet them at your manor?"

These days, she seemed to find it easier to have normal conversations. Maybe she was getting used to me. She still had bouts of nervousness, but her overall approach was definitely more optimistic, and she even got along with the kids in the village. It put a big ol' smile on my face to see them chatting every once in a while.

I grinned at Arte, nodding. "Great idea. It would be weird to talk to them out here, so I'll meet them at home. First, I need to see if they're friendly. Ortho and his party are still off in the woods, right?"

"Correct," Till chimed in. "They left just before noon, so I imagine they won't be back until nightfall."

I crossed my arms. "In that case, call Dee and his men back. Have Esparda come as well."

"Got it! I'll be right back!" Khamsin said promptly. He dashed off to Grape Tower on the other side of the village.

He's a real ball of energy. Maybe it's all the muscle building he did while I was doing construction. It sure seems like he got a stamina boost.

"Khamsin is incredible," Arte said, lashes fluttering as she blinked over and over.

Hmm. Even in this world, the athletes are the real heroes. Well, whatever.

I decided to head back to the manor and wait there in as dignified a manner as possible. If our visitors were just travelers, I had to show them what made our village great.

A knock came at the door while I sat in the reception room. "You may enter,"

Esparda answered in my stead.

“Pardon us!” It was Arb. He opened the door for our guests.

Standing on the other side was a thin, elderly man with hardly any hair left on his head. His posture betrayed his lack of self-confidence, and judging by his attire, he wasn’t wealthy. I surmised that he came from the neighboring village.

With a smile, I motioned for him to take the chair across from me. “Please, have a seat.”

The old man glanced around warily before lowering himself onto the edge of the seat. I couldn’t blame him. While I was the only one seated on the sofa before him, Dee and Esparda were behind me, and Khamsin and Lowe were behind him. It must have been a bit intimidating.

Doing little to mask his confusion, he said, “Um, I assumed this was Seatoh... What is this place?”

I was equally confused. “Seatoh?” I turned around. “Esparda, do you know what he’s talking about?”

Esparda offered a self-possessed nod. “According to the village elder, the people who lived here before this place was built were called the Seatoh. Some called the place itself Seatoh as a result.”

It does have a name! I almost complained, but Esparda’s expression was defiant. *I’ve been completely had. The pure-hearted eight-year-old Van has been taken for a ride! Esparda kept his mouth shut so we’d end up naming it something like Van Village!*

In awe of the cruel machinations at work, I did my best to stay calm. “It looks like this *is* Seatoh. Do you have business with us?”

The elderly man gaped, then scanned the room again. “No, um, things are just so different that I couldn’t believe it,” he muttered, shocked. “I haven’t been here since I was a child. To think that so much has changed...”

This wasn’t good. He wasn’t hearing a thing I was saying. To snap him back to his senses, I yelled, “Why are you here?!”

It worked.

“Hrk! R-right, right. Well, I am from a village not too far from here. There are fewer young men and women than ever before, and now we’re starving. Yet our lord claims we haven’t paid enough in taxes.” He cast his gaze downward, visibly angered.

I studied him, crossing my arms. “Depopulation, huh? So are they going off to the big city to make money, then refusing to go home to the sticks because they’re having too much fun?”

Fury flickered in the man’s eyes, and he shook his head. “They aren’t leaving of their own accord. They’re being conscripted into the military.”

“Wait, why?”

“The count is preparing for war.” The elderly man glared at me. “But a village without workers can’t pay taxes. The nobility care nothing for those who live under them. Not one bit!”

“Oh, this is about one of Lord Ferdinatto’s villages? Thank goodness.”

A deep crease settled on the man’s forehead. “Are you saying you don’t care because it isn’t your territory?” His fists trembled.

I flapped a hand. “No, that’s not it at all. The only person it’d be a pain to bump heads with is my old man. Things sound pretty rough for you guys, so do you want to move here?”

“Y-you would take us in?” The man suddenly looked like a puppy caught in the rain, except he wasn’t particularly cute.

If I wanted to be considerate to the count, I wouldn’t take them in. Snapping up his citizens was tantamount to saying his territory had issues; he wouldn’t be too pleased.

“Eh, why not?”

I wasn’t particularly concerned. Father and the king were the only people I hesitated to act against. There was no way the count would invade Father’s territory. If he did, I could just play the age card and pretend I didn’t know any better.

“Anyhow, until everyone’s settled in and living a proper life, I’m not going to

tax you. We've got food here, and if you work for the village, I'll build you and your people houses to live in."

The elderly man nearly collapsed. "My word! Have I died and gone to heaven?!" At least he was happy about it. His reaction was so old-school it tickled me.

"How many of you are there?" I asked.

Tears streamed from his eyes. "About three hundred."

"Okay, then it's going to be one generation per house, and each house is going to be one story high. Don't expect too much from me."

"This is a dream come true! Are you absolutely certain? Oh, I know! If you'd like, I'll offer you my granddaughter to be your servant. She is only three right now, but she will surely grow up to be a cutie!"

"Hey, don't just offer up your granddaughter like that. She isn't a cat or dog," I replied, exasperated.

I knew it was customary for people to offer women or children to their lords, but it just made me feel icky. Learning about royal customs outside of the country, I heard all kinds of stories about things that would be unthinkable in modern-day Japan. When it came to nobility, people were passed around like New Year's presents. Honestly, there were tons of things I wanted to point out as absurd, but if I got started, it would never end. I decided to stop thinking about it entirely. It was too late for me to be surprised that human life was given way too little value here.

Upon further questioning, the man told me that it would take about two weeks on foot to get back to his village. When I asked him why they came to us instead of a town, he explained that they feared punishment for not paying taxes if they stayed in their lord's territory.

"I'll lend you some carriages. As for horses, the only ones here are mine. Are you okay with just two?"

"P-pardon? You would lend us carriages?! How can I ever express my gratitude? We have about ten cows grazing the fields, so once we get back to the village, we'll use them to pull the carriages and deliver your horses back to

you in pristine—”

“Wait, cows? Seriously? Do they produce milk?”

The elderly man looked perplexed, but I didn’t have time to worry about that.
He said cows!

He started sweating, perhaps concerned that he’d made some misstep. “Uh, yes. The count’s territory is graced with plenty of pastures, so we have cows in our village. Even though we’re out in the country, we’re often visited by border knights stationed at the nearby fortress. We always make sure to have at least ten cows on hand every year.”

“They breed annually? Isn’t that kind of incredible?! How many do they produce?”

Despite his confusion, the man continued to answer my questions. “Five to six every year. Cattle typically take a year to mature, so we wait a year to give those cows to the knights. Most villages operate the same way, as far as I am aware.”

I wondered if the cattle here differed from those on Earth. If these villagers could breed livestock in an environment like this, then I would gladly ask them to bring that practice over here.

“All right,” I said, giddy at the prospect. “Let’s move the cows here and breed them. Now, about the travel... I’ll get Ortho and his guys to keep you all safe. Mayor, you must be terribly exhausted from your trip. Feel free to rest in our village for today. We have lodging and food, though not much.”

The man blinked, wide-eyed. “I’m not the mayor.”

“You’re not?!”

Apparently he wasn’t. I slipped down off the sofa in disbelief.

The shabby-looking group from Ferdinatto County stood gaping at the lodgings I’d prepared for Panamera and her men. They were of all ages: one elderly couple, three middle-aged folks, three young women, and five children. Thirteen in total. They said they felt unable to live in their village any longer, so

they'd done everything they could to escape.

"Amazing," one of them said, gazing up at the building. "I can't believe we get to stay in such a nice place..."

"Isn't it bigger than the lord's manor?"

"Don't say that, dummy!" one of the kids cried. "The lord might make us swap buildings!"

How rude. Size isn't everything, kiddo! My manor is also luxuriously furnished! Bwa ha ha ha!

With that in mind, I called out to the group. "Hey folks, we're gonna hold a welcome party, so gather in front of the manor in half an hour."

"A-a welcome party?"

The elderly man was confused again, but since I had prep work to do, I left it at that and made my exit. "Till, Khamsin—let everyone in the village know that we're preparing for a barbecue."

"You got it!"

They ran off, and Arte—who'd been watching from a distance—trotted over to me. She was worried about our guests. "Um, what will happen to these people?"

Oh, I almost forgot she's the daughter of Lord Ferdinatto himself. While this wasn't exactly a hostile move, it wouldn't leave a good impression on him. It was a bit too late to fret about that, though.

"They're from the next village over, but they ran away because it's falling apart. I'm going to give them food and a place to live."

"Really? That's wonderful! I am sure they'll have a great time here." She sounded genuinely elated, probably because I had strategically left out some details. Being only ten years old, she wasn't thinking about where their village was—otherwise she might have realized it was within her father's territory.

"Do you want to live here as well, Arte?" I asked.

Arte flushed and bobbed her head. "Well, um... I imagine it would make me

rather happy.” Her reply was a product of her honed noble etiquette.

“Don’t worry. I’m not thinking about marriage or anything. We’re both still kids! That sort of thing is way off for us.”

Arte shook her head. Tearily, she said, “I want to get married, but, um, I...”

“Wait, you do?”

She froze, blushing till her cheeks were red as apples.

“Want me to pretend I didn’t hear that?”

Arte looked down. “Yes.”

Why, Van is a gentleman who would never do anything to make a young lady feel embarrassed! I kept my face composed as we walked on in silence, but on the inside, this gentleman was pumping his fist into the air.

“Um, Lord Van? You are walking kind of weirdly...”

“Just your imagination.”

She shot me a puzzled glance, then nodded.

Come on, let a man (or boy) skip with joy every once in a while! I can’t believe I’m finally popular with the ladies!

A half hour later, the village’s party planners had finished preparing the meat. They were more than used to this process by now.

“I’m having mine with salt and lemon today.”

“So refreshing, right?”

“I like it fried, personally.”

Lately, villagers had started chatting about topics usually reserved for nobility—like the aspiring gourmands I’d just overheard. Meanwhile, our visitors from the next village over acted like they were in a whole new world. Their eyes were vacant little dots staring into the light of our big barbecue.

One of the children approached us, bursting with excitement. “A-are we allowed to eat?”

I turned to Till. “Can you cook up some lightly salted meat without too much fat?”

“I’m on it! Right this way!” she said to all the kids, who let out a big cheer. Till smiled warmly at the children running toward her, then looked at the adults who were nervously watching. “Come on over! Feel free to cook up some meat and eat the night away! You can pick which one you’d like from the dishes on the side. For seasonings, we have salt and lemon. We have a little bit of pepper and ginger, so please only use a pinch of those when you cook your meat, okay?”

She then demonstrated how to cook the meat, and the adults rushed over to cook and season their own. Few could resist the urge to sample the meat before it was ready. Even then, they shed tears of joy, grinning ear to ear as they gushed to one another about the delicious food. That got the residents of Seatoth smiling too. How could we not be delighted by such a heartwarming sight?

After about an hour of everyone enjoying the meal, Ortho and his party returned from their expedition.

“Whoa, a barbecue?!”

“I had no idea we were having a barbecue today.”

“Boss, I told you we should’ve hurried home!”

They were drenched in blood as they bickered among themselves, a shocking sight to behold. Till and I spoke in unison.

“A-are you guys okay?”

“You’re all covered in blood!”

Ortho glanced down at his blood-soaked armor and forced a smile. “Uh, sorry.”

I tilted my head, unsure why he was apologizing. “For what?”

He laughed dryly. “We accidentally found the dungeon entrance.”

“Huh?”

Did he say “dungeon”?!

Time stopped for everyone as we all exchanged glances. A dungeon! One might see big yellow birds, jolly round merchants, or tiny monsters in such locales. Amazing riches lurked deep within.

While my mind drifted off into daydreams, Esparda appeared from nowhere. “Lord Van, if a dungeon has been located, we must report it immediately. We need to dispatch an envoy to the capital.”

“And if we don’t hurry, Daddy Dearest will take all the credit for this, right?”

Esparda nodded. “Almost certainly. Our best move is to go straight to the capital and report to the king without letting anyone else know.”

Ideally, I would’ve become a baron—officially granting me this village as my territory—and *then* reported the dungeon. There was no use crying over spilled milk, though.

I only knew what I had heard, and that was that dungeons promised immense profit. There were treasures, for example, plus materials and ore only available in dungeons. The guild would undoubtedly build a branch here once word got out, which meant weapons shops and inns would pop up as well. With all the men flooding in, a brothel and a gambling hall were bound to go up afterward.

As far as the latter two went, we’d be better off building them a decent distance from the residential area—similar to what we did with the apkallus’ lake. Building a second settlement between here and the dungeon seemed like a good solution to head off any issues. But for that, we needed manpower.

Normally, this would be something to celebrate, but Ortho and the others hung their heads. “Sorry, little lord.”

“Hey, what’s done is done. I’ll lend you guys a horse, so if one of you could report back to the capital for me...Kusala, you’re perfect for the job.”

Kusala sprang up in surprise. “On my own?!”

“I figure you’ll be fine by yourself, and let’s face it: since you’re a scout, you’re probably the one who actually spotted the entrance. Am I right?”

Kusala groaned. “How’d you know?!”

Ortho furrowed his brow. “He *is* the right man for the job, but shouldn’t we go with him?”

“Actually, I was hoping you guys would handle guard duty for some folks from the neighboring village. It’s a two-week gig, give or take. The payment’s one large gold.”

Ortho, Pluriel, and the others whirled on Kusala and nodded deeply. “Good luck in the capital!”

Outraged by this betrayal, Kusala shouted, “You guys suck!”

“Okay, fine.” Feeling bad for the guy, I threw in some precious equipment as a reward. “I’ll give you a mithril short sword. How does that sound?”

Kusala beamed. Ortho and Pluriel closed in on him, their eyes wide and hungry.

“W-wait, Kusala! Swap with me, man! I’ll go to the capital instead!”

“This is utterly unfair! I should be the one to go!”

Kusala placed a hand on each of their shoulders and let out a raucous laugh. “Hey, this is my quest. Sorry, guys.”

Kusala

I LEFT THE VILLAGE ON HORSEBACK AND IN HIGH SPIRITS. My cohorts were green with envy over the short sword hanging from my hip. I just laughed as loud as I could.

Take that, suckers! What goes around comes around!

I drew the short sword from its sheath as I headed down the road. The little lord had made a seriously flashy blade. He had one heck of an eye for this kind of thing. It was as ornate as the blades royals passed down like heirlooms, except this one was way more comfortable to wield. Its short length made it light and easy to swing, and it had a great form for thrusting. The fact that it barely had a guard was another benefit.

For adventurers, short swords were either a reserve weapon or a hidden tool to be used as a trump card. My primary weapon was something partway between a long sword and a blade of this size. You'd rarely use regular short swords or knives against monsters in combat, but having a light blade at the critical moment could change everything. This one wouldn't get snagged because it had almost no guard, and it slid easily into gaps.

Now that I had my new weapon, my trip to the capital breezed right by. In just a few more kilometers, I'd see the sprawling cityscape. I was riding at a leisurely pace toward my destination when I noticed a strange carriage. It was rolled over on its side, just off the road, its door facing the sky. A bunch of creatures with bumpy, dark-green skin were gathered around it. They had bald heads, pronounced facial features, and deep wrinkles around their fearsome yellow eyes.

Orcs, the ugliest of dudes. You didn't see their kind near roads like this one very often.

There were three of them. Two were hauling up the legs of a horse—presumably the one that had pulled the carriage—and chowing down on its belly. Its guts dangled from their mouths when they glanced my way, but they soon returned to their meal.

It seemed it was feeding time for them. Orcs were faithful to their desires: eat, sleep, mate, and kill. All orcs abided by the desire driving them at any given moment. If those two desired a feast, then it was easy to imagine what drove the one trying to enter the carriage: either lust toward the individual inside or a primal urge to kill.

“Normally they’d be a bit much for little ol’ me to handle,” I said to myself. “But right now? Heh, they ain’t ready.”

I drew my mithril short sword. Before they went on alert, I slipped close and sliced the arms off the orc trying to climb into the carriage. The thing let out a bloodcurdling scream. I grimaced, then immediately slashed its neck. The sword was unbelievably sharp—with a single strike, the orc was half decapitated.

When the wounded one lost its balance and fell from the carriage, its allies finally realized what was happening. They let out bellowing roars.

“You want some?!” I shouted. “Honestly, I suggest you guys call it a day for your own sakes.”

I raised my sword in warning, but the two orcs kicked off the ground and charged me. I let out one long breath, then ran diagonally at one orc that was about to pummel me. I cut off its arm as I passed, swung around behind both orcs, and took position behind them.

“You guys got no teamwork, huh?”

I thrust my sword and pierced both their skulls. *Damn, this feels way too good!*

As I stood there, grinning like some adventuring hero, someone climbed out of the toppled carriage. At first, her slim and elegant form led me to believe she was a child, but she was actually a petite, slender woman with long, dark-brown hair and half-lidded eyes.



This lady's cute. Is she traveling all by herself?

After a moment, she found her footing and looked at me. "Thank you so much for coming to my aid. My name is Flamiria Stratos. You must be a man of great significance! Might I ask your name?"

I cleaned off my bloody sword and looked back at her. With full honesty and a smile, I said, "The name's Kusala. Just your average insignificant adventurer. I ain't got no fame to speak of."

Flamiria shook her head and smiled back. "That is clearly untrue. One look at that ornate sword of yours tells me that you are an individual of high status. Are you keeping out of the public eye to carry out some monumental task, then? Worry not, I shan't pry."

"Uh, no, seriously. I'm just—"

"Hee hee! Oh, I understand. Now then, I will have to walk to the capital from here, so I hope you'll allow me to show my gratitude in the coming days. Of course," she added in a murmur, "if this had happened a year ago, I would have been able to do more for you. If you'll excuse me..."

She was about to leave. Before I realized it, I called out to stop her. "Wait! I'm on my way to the capital myself. C'mon, I'll give you a ride. It'll be faster that way."

"Oh, but I couldn't possibly cause you more trouble..."

"Now, now. I'm sure this horse here would be much happier carrying a young lady such as yourself."

I persuaded her to get on the horse and she sat with practiced posture, flashing me a bashful smile. "'Young lady'...? It's been quite some time since anyone called me that. I'm already thirty years old, I'll have you know!"

"Ha ha ha, surely you jest! You don't look a day past twenty."

"Oh my. You're quite the flatterer."

And so, for a brief time anyway, I no longer traveled alone. The two of us laughed together, in high spirits as we entered the capital.

“Where are you off to, Flamiria?”

“Well, I... My guide ran off on me, you see.”

I tilted my head. “What brings you to the capital?”

“Um... My house has fallen to ruin, so I came here looking for any noble families seeking a maid. Oh, goodness! I didn’t plan on telling you this... How embarrassing.”

Seeing her shoulders droop, I said something entirely unlike me: “Oh, then you’re a free spirit like me! There ain’t nothing to be embarrassed about. Heck, if you’d like, come with me. I’ll protect you myself. I promise you won’t regret it.”

Flamiria looked dazed for a moment, then put a hand over her mouth, her cheeks blooming red. Then she smiled radiantly. “It would be my pleasure. I look forward to accompanying you.”

With a beautiful woman in tow, I dropped into the Adventurers’ Guild to report the dungeon business to the receptionist. It kicked off a real commotion, and the guildmaster summoned me immediately.

I made my way to the second floor, where he asked me all kinds of questions: where the dungeon was located, whether it seemed like any monsters were present, and so on. While I was there, I also reported the dragon and armored lizard attacks, only to learn that the parts had just been submitted to the auction.

Once our conversation wrapped up, the guildmaster stood in front of the reception counter and announced that he was gathering a group of adventurers. “A dungeon has been discovered on the border of Lord Fertio’s territory. Even though it’s out in the middle of nowhere, this is the same village that reported slaying a dragon *and* a horde of armored lizards. The lord of the area, the new baron Van Nei Fertio, is the talk of the town. The guild will now prepare to build a branch there. As usual, all materials gathered will be purchased at twice the regular price for a limited time after the branch has been completed. Any adventurers who map out the dungeon will also receive

special rewards.”

Excited chatter broke out among the adventurers. Those hoping to strike it rich would probably head straight to the village.

Welp, that’s my job done. Now we can finally do some dungeon diving. I’d better hurry back, I thought. But before I could do anything, some nearby adventurers accosted me.

“I heard you guys defeated a forest dragon out there! Who actually did it?!”

“Is it true that Lord Van took it down?”

“How far is the dungeon from the village?!”

“Calm yourselves!” I told them. “I’m busy, got it?! I’ve done my business, and now I’m going home!” I grabbed Flamiria’s hand and fled the guild, but when we turned around, we saw the guys running after us.

“Wait! You’re planning on getting first dibs on the dungeon, aren’t you?”

“Ain’t happening! We’re gonna follow you the whole way!”

I rounded on them. “We’re staying the night in an inn before heading home! Following me ain’t gonna get you nothing!”

Wait, did I just tell them I’d be spending the night with Flamiria?

I turned to my side and found her smiling warmly.

Huh, I guess it’s fine!

Flamiria

MEETING SIR KUSALA CHANGED MY LIFE. The gallant knight and heroic adventurer strode into the guild—that den of ruffians—and reported discovering a dungeon and slaying a dragon as though it were nothing. He was straight out of the storybooks!

When we stayed at an inn for the night, he booked a room for me before I could protest and even took me to dinner. The next day, he bought a large carriage and two horses, along with some food and clothing, before we left the capital. He drove the carriage down the road, apparently not the slightest bit concerned that a throng of adventurers were following us.

“What a shocker. I can’t believe that dragon sold for 180 platinius! I guess it helped that it was in great shape. I bet those armored lizards’ll sell well too.”

“What an astonishing amount of money,” I said. “I cannot begin to imagine having such a fortune.”

Sir Kusala looked my way with a smile and a nod. “It’s all thanks to the little lord. He’s still a kid, but he’s something else, lemme tell you. He expanded the village in no time, and we’ve been pulling off some ridiculous things on the battlefield thanks to the weapons

he made us. You’re gonna be amazed, Flamiria. The village we’re headed to is incredible.”

His expression was worry-free as he told me all manner of unbelievable stories. Strangely enough, I believed every one of them.

After my father, the baron Lord Stratos, died in battle, our house had steadily declined until it was absorbed altogether. It seemed like the end of the world, and the despair I felt at the time left me scarred. But thanks to Sir Kusala, I could smile with all my heart for the first time in years.

“I simply can’t wait!” I said, and Sir Kusala smiled bashfully in return.

Ortho

“**Y**OU THINK KUSALA’S ARRIVED AT THE CAPITAL by now?” I asked no one in particular.

My party members chuckled.

“Who knows? He does have that shiny new mithril short sword. Maybe he’s cutting down weeds along the road to try it out.”

“I can see it. If it were me, I’d take all kinds of detours.”

We shared a laugh just before Pluriel cut in, “Hey, could you guys please pay more attention to our surroundings? Last time you fooled around, a damn forest dragon attacked us. Or did you forget?”

“Hey, that wasn’t our fault!”

“Don’t talk back. Get into position.”

“Yes, ma’am...”

Pluriel sure was becoming more and more proactive about sharing her opinions.

I raised a hand in acknowledgment and walked forward, scanning the area. We had ten carriages, with the elderly folks, the children, and their bags loaded in. Two-hundred-plus men and women—young and middle-aged—walked alongside the vehicles. The carriages themselves were pulled by thirteen cows and two horses.

We’d been pretty surprised when we arrived at the neighboring village; we hadn’t expected so many people. It was even more shocking when the elderly folks told us that *all* of the villagers were moving.

I mean, Lord Van’s village was amazing. I would’ve recommended it over any other town or village, easy. But most folks born in villages like that typically lived out their life there. It was like their entire world, and making the decision to leave was never an easy one.

Over and over I had seen entire populations of villagers try to tough out bad

situations, and they were always wiped out. “That just goes to show how bad things were,” I said to myself, thinking of how they must have felt.

The occasional mooing or swishing of the cows nearby lent a pastoral feel to the place, but the area was filled with grim-faced villagers on their guard. It didn’t feel right to give them a pep talk when they looked so down.

Next to one of the carriages was a thin girl who looked like she’d missed more than a few meals. She walked on unsteady feet; just watching her had me worried. Then again, she had more stamina than the people riding in the carriages.

“You okay?” I asked her. “We’ll be at the village soon.”

The girl hung her head. “Thanks,” she replied in a shaky whisper. “I was against this, though. Why move from one middle-of-nowhere village to somewhere even more remote...?”

I didn’t know what to say. When someone reached the depths of despair, shallow words of comfort were meaningless. I just nodded. “Yeah, I know. We definitely are going out to the middle of nowhere.” She groaned, so I patted her on the back and added, “But, listen, *this* middle-of-nowhere village is like paradise. Better than any town you could possibly go to.”

“Huh? That doesn’t make any sense.”

I waved it off and kept walking, leaving the girl puzzled. There was no point trying to explain when it would be faster for her to see for herself.

One day later, we made it back to the village. Spotting the towering wall on the horizon, I raised my arms and stretched out my back. “Ahh! Home sweet home!”

We’d hardly had any monsters to deal with along the way, but moving as a group with slower folks was exhausting in its own right, so I was pretty tired. Having to camp outside on a trip for the first time in ages also really took it out of me. *There’s no place like home*. Considering most adventurers were nomadic, thinking like this was crazy. But it was true for me, anyway.

“Just a li’l farther, everybody!” I turned around to wave at the crowd, only to find them frozen in their tracks. They gawked at the village, murmuring among

themselves.

“Th-this is our destination?!”

“That’s no village...”

“Did we take the wrong road?”

Needless to say, we hadn’t made a mistake. “Come on now, folks. Just a bit more! Once we arrive, there’ll be food and water!” I announced, but nobody moved.

That was when Pluriel jumped in. “All right, everyone. Don’t you worry your pretty little heads! Things are going to be a-okay, so let’s head to the village!” She used a cheery, angelic voice that sounded nothing like her usual self.

Surprisingly, that got the kids to take the adults by the hand. “Let’s hurry.”

“I wanna go over there.”

The adults traded looks and nodded at one another. Someone said, “Well, um, we’ve come this far. It’s all or nothing.” With that, the group started walking again.

It wasn’t long before we heard whoops and hollers from the direction of the village. Pluriel ran up to me and whispered, “Awesome! Looks like we’re having a barbecue today.”

I scowled. “Don’t say that. I’m already starving as it is.” I was less annoyed than I sounded, though. Pluriel burst out laughing and slapped me on the back.

Once we made it past the gates, the villagers welcomed the newcomers and kicked off the festivities. Everyone enjoyed seasoned meat and bread along with water and booze. The adults cried, patting each other on the back, while the children relished their hunks of meat.

As for us, we laughed among ourselves and dug into our first freshly cooked meal in ages.

“Hey, nice work out there,” Lord Van said warmly, waving one hand while holding fruit wine in the other. “You guys saved their lives.”

“Aw, please,” I replied. “This is normal work for us adventurers. If anything,

the reward was way too good.”

Pluriel walked up to us, munching on a meat skewer. With her mouth full, she said, “Lord Van, is this monster meat different from the usual? It seems very fresh.”

Maybe I was imagining things, but it felt to me like Pluriel was opening up to the people around her. I peered at her through one half-open eye while Lord Van grimaced and nodded. “Monsters attacked yesterday. This time near the apkallu. I’ve got to say, it had me sweating.”

“Whoa. What attacked?”

“These huge triclops boars. Ten of them, actually.”

“Augh, they’re more annoying than armored lizards! When they get up close, they use magic, which is a real pain. You get stunned and can barely move.”

“That does sound annoying. Fortunately, they went down with one round from our ballistae.”

We shared a laugh. I was beginning to think I’d become desensitized to all this, but maybe it was just my imagination.

Chapter 3:

Expanding Facilities

Van

NEW RESIDENTS WERE INCOMING, COMPLETE with livestock. And a dungeon now, too? Who thought this was the time for that?!

All the new houses popping up in the village were built by yours truly. Though I was eight years old, going on nine, I worked harder than anyone else. *What's up with that? I'm not even ten yet!*

Whatever the case, I ended up building fifty one-story houses with three bedrooms and a small kitchen, perfect for four people. I then built another fifty two-bedroom, one-story houses for pairs. Bam, homes for three hundred people.

I also went out of my way to secure space on the main street for the inevitable Adventurers' Guild branch and any inns. That way, we'd be ready for them. "All that's left is to build a base so we can accommodate lots of adventurers whenever they show up."

"A base?" Till parroted.

"Basically, a little town for adventurers. I've got no problem with it if they decide to settle here permanently, but if they're only going to stay for a bit while exploring the dungeon, I figure I'll have them stay over there. Think about it: Ortho's party is different, but there are some rowdy adventurers out there, right?"

Till's brows lifted. "And, um, you're going to make a whole town for them?"

"It's gonna be a pain, but we'll be better off. Don't worry about it—I'll just whip up a little town in a month. That's not too big a deal."

"Is a town something you can build in a month?" Overwhelmed by confusion, Till tilted her head at me.

I simply smiled and got ready to begin the town-making process.

"So I'm thinking something big enough for three or four hundred people would be good. Like the sort of inn town you see for travelers and adventurers.

The buildings should be tall, with a five-meter wall around the perimeter. I'll set up ballistae on three sides—so not the wall facing the village. These'll be attached to the floor and locked with a key so they can't be misused."

"How big will the buildings be, and how many people will they accommodate?"

"Three stories, I think. I'll build the main street as a giant cross, then put the buildings along the road. If ten people can stay on a single floor, each building can handle thirty people. I'll build ten of those, then five additional buildings for shops. Two inns...No, maybe three would be best."

Esparda glanced my way. "Since the guild will soon build a branch here, we should prepare a place for them. I hope this does not come across as impertinent, but if you are going to construct shops and inns, you must either lease them out or run them yourself."

"Well, running them myself would be more profitable and allow for more flexibility, but it'd be such a pain."

"In that case, I believe you should appoint a local governor to the new town. Since you will remain in the village, you need someone to manage the town."

"And if I choose to run the shops, I won't need a local governor? Oh, I get it. You'd have the shop owners and innkeepers run the town themselves? That would be pretty efficient, and it's better than just leaving things to a single person."

Esparda nodded deeply. "Precisely. That, or you could found your own Chivalric Order. Fortunately, we have Dee on our side, so everything from recruitment to dispatch would be eminently doable."

Rather than getting fixated on profits from the new town, we had to focus on making it safe and secure. Villainous sorts out to hurt or steal could pop up anywhere. Having knights around as law enforcement would be good, but it wasn't that simple. Fortunately, we had an ample budget.

"Let's do it all," I declared. "We'll hold off on store management for a bit, so leave that stuff to Bell and Rango. We can recruit adventurers and mercenaries into our very own Chivalric Order. I'll leave the local governance to you,

Esparda.”

Esparda thought for a moment, then nodded his approval. “Understood. In that case, I shall look for people to manage the town. As for our knights, I take it one Chivalric Order for the village and a separate one for the town would be best?”

“Yeah. Dee and his men can be the Seatoh Chivalric Order here in the village, and the new town will have the Esparda Chivalric Order.”

“Is this retribution for the issue of your name, my lord?”

“No idea what you’re talking about. I’m only eight!”

Esparda side-eyed me, and I grinned. Quite the tender moment between the two of us.

The residents of the neighboring village arrived about three weeks later, while we were doing measurements and prep for the new town.

“Thank you so much for taking us in. I am Superv, the mayor of Fabia.”

“Pleasure to meet you! I’m Van Nei Fertio. Looking forward to having you from today on.” Pleasantries exchanged, I turned to the folks behind him.

“Welcome to Seatoh! We welcome each and every one of you. I know you must all be exhausted from your travels, so we’re holding a barbecue to celebrate your arrival and deepen the bonds between us! Then you can all go to sleep in your own houses. Let’s get this party started!”

The residents of Seatoh cheered as they handed out drinks. The meat was already cooking; we were more than ready to handle three hundred new faces. Our newest residents were still disoriented, but they couldn’t resist the tantalizing aromas of sizzling meat, and they soon dispersed throughout the grounds.

Now then, how’s first contact going? Hopefully no fights... I surveyed my surroundings, preparing to patrol the area, when Arte jogged over to me.

“Um, Lord Van?” she asked, red-faced. “W-would you care to eat together?”

“Well, I’m kinda curious as to how everyone’s getting along. I know it’s bad

manners, but do you mind if we eat on the go?”

“Oh, th-that’s fine! Let’s do it!” She flashed me a beautiful smile.

I smiled back, then noticed Till and Khamsin watching with identical grins on their faces. They looked like they had something to say. “Shall we all go together?” I asked.

“Yes, Lord Van.”

“Indeed!”

With that, our merry group of children walked around the village, chaperoned by Till.

“Hmm, we don’t have enough chairs.” I whirled toward a passing villager.

“Hey! Excuse me, sir! Could you run and get three more chairs?”

“Whoa! It’s Lord Van! Ch-chairs, you say? I’m on it!” The man hurried off and brought back some more chairs for the elderly folks from Fabia. *He sure is quick on his feet!*

“Thanks, sir. By the way, I hope you join our upcoming Chivalric Order.”

“Huh?”

“Just think about it.”

“Er, will do! Thanks!” he replied, loud and determined despite his obvious confusion.

One knight secured!

If I didn’t recruit enough personnel before Esparda got to all the best candidates, we would find ourselves with an Order full of leftovers. I intended to invite anyone who looked like they could fight.

I cast my gaze around the area some more, then noticed a group of folks from Fabia looking our way. I tilted my head as they approached. “Did something happen?”

“Um, Mister Lord, sir? Do you have jobs for us as well?”

“We have no way to make a living.”

“None of us have any savings...”

They appealed to me in turn, sharing their concerns. Unfortunately, the original residents of Seatoh were already doing things like fieldwork, monster butchery, and material transportation. We hadn’t gotten around to mining or anything yet. “Lemme see... How about you manage the new shops and inns we’re building? Oh, and you can cultivate the new fields as well.”

The villagers frowned. “We can handle the fieldwork, but we’ve never done any kind of sales before,” said one.

“No worries! There are all sorts of things involved in managing shops and inns: keeping the goods in order, speaking to customers, cleaning... Anything money-related will be handled by people who can do the math.” A wave of relief washed over the crowd.

Excellent. Now I can start recruiting tons of villagers into our Chivalric Order. The more folks we get, the more stuff we can do. I can’t wait!

It was time to hurry up and build the new town!

Judging by their unmoored expressions as they went off to sleep, the new residents never imagined that they would be given homes. The next morning, not yet knowing their left from their right, they all had the same breakfast as me: soup, salad, and bread. I regretted not preparing a few different foods and making it into a buffet.

After breakfast, it took me only minutes to switch gears; I left to go build. Along the way, I kept my eye out for any tough-looking youngsters who could help with the construction and join the future Seatoh Chivalric Order.

“You there, pull that rope!”

“Aye!”

“It’s leaning a bit. More to the right!”

“To the right, he said!”

“Aye!”

With the way people were calling out to each other as they pulled at ropes so I could check angles and lengths, it really did feel like a proper construction site. The whole endeavor was a piece of cake.

“This is where the residential area will be,” I said, pointing. “So that would be the entrance?”

“For ease of use, that spot would be the best,” Esparda agreed. “The shops will be lined up here, so there’s no reason to put the entrance on the opposite side.”

“Right, right. Are the materials being transported...? Ooh, they’re already at it. Folks around here have gotten fast.”

While Esparda and I conversed, the residents of Seatoh were hard at work. They all carried wood blocks, and our newest arrivals were chipping in—even if they *were* pretty confused. I had the elderly taking care of the cows and procuring space to breed them, since they were skilled at that. They picked an area near the lake where the apkallu lived, so I got to enjoy their flabbergasted looks when they met their new neighbors.

“Cows, I see?” said an apkallu.

“Y-yes,” one old man replied.

“They’re adorable!”

“Erm, are they...?”

“Mm-hmm! We’ll help take care of them.” The apkallu responded positively to the new arrivals and the animals that came with them, paying no mind to their bewilderment. They fed the cows grass and gave them water. It was a fascinating sight. Perhaps old people and apkallu were especially compatible?

On the other hand, the children from Fabia were thrilled by their new homes and even more excited about the giant wall. They joined up with the kids of Seatoh and explored every which way. I was delighted by how lively the village was with this influx of people. The destitute village I came to was a thing of the past.

“Do you still need more logs, Lord Van?” Dee yelled. He and the others were

walking to a carriage they'd been using to haul in lumber from the forest—lumber I'd make into wood blocks.

“Hmm, let's see. I'd love at least a hundred more. We've finally used up all our blocks.”

Dee beamed and propped the giant axe I'd made for him over his shoulder. “Leave it to us! We can certainly get you a hundred today! Come on, folks,” he said, turning around. “Ready the carriage and let's head for the woods!”

Arb, Lowe, and a bunch of tough-looking villagers raised their voices in response. *Wait, does Dee already have a bunch of men ready to join the Order? I had no clue we had all these Viking types sitting around!*

“Dee?”

He spun around quickly. “Yes, Lord Van?”

“Think you could make a Chivalric Order with those big guys you got with you?”

“Now *that's* an interesting idea! Let me ask them!” Dee checked with his men, but the response was unexpected.

“Um, sorry, but Esparda already invited us,” said one of the young men, all apologetic. “He had us sign this enrollment contract thing...”

“Huh?!” I blurted out.

Seriously, Esparda? He already has his eyes locked on potential targets. Cut me some slack here!

Annoyed that I'd screwed up the first leg of the race, I asked the rest of the group and found that only about a third of them had been invited by Esparda.

Thank goodness. Now, if I name Dee the commander of the Order, Arb and Lowe will be adjutants, and we'll be a dozen knights strong.

“So small!” I cried, playing the straight man to myself.

Esparda's order would have something like forty knights. If we combined them both into about sixty-ish men, that would at least be presentable. *Not terrible for a brand-new town.*

“All right, then! I’ll make the Seatoh Chivalric Order as unique as Seatoh itself! I’m gonna freak Esparda out!”

As Dee and his men resumed their lumber duty, I made my resolution.

I was working and thinking about the Chivalric Order when I noticed something coming from down the road. “Probably a carriage...”

It was still so far off that I wasn’t super confident about it, but Khamsin nodded firmly. “It’s a single midsize carriage with one horse. I don’t see any escorts.”

“Uh, gotcha. Thanks.” *How does everyone have such good vision?!* “If there are no escorts, then is it Kusala? It’s unusual for someone to come out here alone.”

Still gazing in that direction, Khamsin went wide-eyed. “Oh, there are other carriages behind it, though they’re quite far away...”

He had done nothing wrong—my eyes were the problem—but I couldn’t keep my complaint about his abnormally good vision to myself any longer. “That front carriage is *extremely* far away, yet you’re telling me you can see even farther than that? That’s not normal!”

Till and Arte looked at me.

“Don’t worry, my lord! I can’t see in that much detail either.”

“Likewise.”

“Thanks. You ladies sure are kind.” *At last, I can find hope in this world once more!* Having no idea who or what was approaching us, I collected myself and got back to work on the new residential area.

It took me an hour to put up another building, by which time the first carriage had arrived. The driver was our favorite portly adventurer, but I didn’t recognize the beautiful woman looking out from the carriage.

“Who is that?” I asked.

Till gasped. “Oh, gosh! What if he saved that lady on the way to the capital,

and then they fell in love?!”

“How wonderful,” Arte said, latching onto Till’s conjecture. “Just like the heroic tales of old.”

I was doubtful. This was Kusala we were talking about. “Would he actually do something that cool?”

Khamsin tilted his head, considering this. “In all honesty, Kusala is impressive in his own way. He’s fast, quick to detect others, and unmatched among his cohorts at finding and disarming traps. He practices a unique style of swordplay, and he’s exceptional. He’s also good at throwing stones and knives, and well versed in archery to boot.”

“Wait, *Kusala* can do all that?!”

This launched a heated discussion in which Khamsin, Till, Arte, and I debated Kusala’s special skills, his personality, and whether he was cool. Eventually, the man of the hour cut in: “Pardon me, Lord Van, but could you please not talk about me so loudly?”

Quick! Change the subject! “Heya, Kusala! Welcome home. Who’s the lovely lady with you?”

Till and Arte leaned forward, eager to hear the answer. Being the center of attention seemed to make it hard for Kusala to speak, but at last he pushed through. “Well, y’see, some stuff happened and we happened to run into each other. Since she had nowhere else to go, I brought her with me. You okay with taking in more residents?”

“No problem at all. We’ve got three hundred newcomers, and we still have plenty of space.”

“Three hundred?! You mean the folks from the other village? Man, talk about a population boom!”

Till shot Kusala a sidelong glance before greeting the woman behind him. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Till, and this is the lord of this land, Lord Van Nei Fertio.”

The woman in question, having lost her earlier chance at a formal

introduction, let out a sigh of relief when I gave her an opening. “I am Flamiria Stratos. I was attacked by orcs near the capital, but Sir Kusala saved my life. I’ve been traveling with him ever since.”

Till and Arte’s eyes sparkled as they peered at Flamiria’s face. For my part, I took one glance at Kusala and thoughtlessly let my true feelings be known: “No waaay.”

Kusala blushed. “Er, well, I didn’t really do anything that cool.”

“Please,” said Flamiria with a gentle, ladylike smile. “Don’t be so humble. Despite what Sir Kusala says, he was even more impressive than *any* hero in the tales of old.”

Kusala turned his face away, embarrassed, even as Till and Arte cried out in joy.

I still couldn’t believe any of it. “No waaay.”

My doubt over Kusala’s heroic exploits aside, the real problem was the huge group of carriages headed our way. It was much larger than a standard caravan. The group included all sorts of people, from rough-looking bald dudes with weapons to mohawked guys in animal furs. There were youngsters clad in full armor with axes, and even more suspicious folks. If that weren’t enough, they had a plethora of carriages and people on horseback making all kinds of hoots and hollers.

The end of the world! The end of the world is here!

“Sorry ’bout this, little lord,” Kusala said. “When I reported back to the guild, a bunch of idiots looking to get rich started following me. But don’t worry—they knew this place was out in the sticks, so they’re ready to camp outside. It’d be bad if they scared the villagers, so just make them stay out there for the night.”

I wasn’t having any of it. Adventurers would be our repeat patrons going forward; we needed to give them a positive impression of us and our facilities. “Hold on a sec. For the time being, we have room and board for sixty people. I’ll build a section of wall around the area just for today so they can rest in comfort. Kusala, you can head back home. Good work out there.”

Flamiria elegantly curtsied behind Kusala. *If she's not from a well-to-do family, I'll eat my hat.*

Kusala seemed to remember something, and he glanced around. "Where's the party?"

"Ortho and the rest are exploring around the dungeon. They still haven't made a base yet, though. I guess it's kind of in a bad location."

"Huh, then that sounds like a job for me. Tomorrow, that is! I've gotta get some good shut-eye." Secure in the knowledge that the others were struggling, Kusala contentedly made his way to the village.

Arte's eyes were locked on Kusala and his new friend. "That woman is Lord Stratos's daughter," she whispered.

"You know her?"

"Yes. I heard that the house went into rapid decline after the baron passed away. They must have fallen into ruin."

"That's awful," Till said, holding a hand over her mouth. "She looks about the same age as me, and she's gone through so much suffering..."

"Oh." Arte tilted her head. "Um, she's Baron Stratos's only daughter, and I believe she is already thirty or so."

"What?!"

Everyone turned their eyes toward the village. Solemnly, Khamsin said, "The world sure works in mysterious ways."

No comment! It was unwise to discuss a woman's age.

"Now then," I said, "back to building the town. Shops aren't gonna be up and running for a while, so I guess we can make do with a temporary protective wall—one good enough to stop your average monster. If something really awful turns up, I can just have folks flee into the village."

"Right!"

"It might be wise to make sure the carriage parking area is located within the walls as well."

A few adventurers who'd arrived ahead of the pack noticed us chatting and walked over. "Hey, hey! You kids sure are playin' in a dangerous place!"

"You little brats! You may be close to the village, but it's dangerous outside!"

"Heh heh heh, ain't you a beauty? Better watch out, pervs love girls like you. Hell, even *we'd* love a taste, if you get what I'm sayin'. Hurry home now."

The men spoke the sort of tasteless, nasty crap that you'd expect from villains thriving in a postapocalyptic world. *Actually, wait a second. They might sound like gross jerks, but...*

"Are they worried about us?"

"Seems like it," Khamsin said.

"They're a bit awkward, but they appear to be kind people," Till agreed.

"Their faces are kind of scary, though..."

Arte wasn't crazy about them, but I was pleasantly surprised. The three postapocalyptic adventurers leading the pack were quiet and stoic. It made it all the more humorous when the smiling adventurers behind them stepped up.

"Did you guys scare them?"

"Hey, sorry about that. The guys in White Oath all look terrifying, I know."

"But they're damn talented!"

Apparently the postapocalyptic bros were a party called White Oath. *Why did they pick a name like that?* I wondered, sizing them up.

A slim man in shiny silver armor said, "Seriously, what *are* you kids doing out here? You'd be in a bad way if some monsters showed up."

"Thanks for your concern, but once I find what I'm looking for, we'll be headed back to the village. No worries." With that, I turned back toward the village.

The man furrowed his brow. "That's the border village, huh? From what I heard at the guild, the lord is some young baron. Kid seems to have quite a bit of cash and personnel, which means the marquis definitely values this location as a stronghold." He punctuated his point with a smug smile, and I tilted my

head.

Wonder who this young baron is supposed to be. There aren't any young and talented barons in the marquis's faction, at least as far as I know. But rumors were rumors for a reason. There was little doubt in my mind that the facts had transformed wildly in their journey from the borderlands to the capital.

"So, what kind of game were you kids playing?" one of the men asked, jogging me out of my thoughts.

"Er, lumber carrying?" I said.

"And what kind of game is that?"

This is definitely a "show, don't tell" situation.

"Khamsin, please get me a wood block."

As instructed, Khamsin grabbed the remaining three wood blocks and brought them over to me. I solidified an image in my head and created about ten meters of simple fencing. It was grated, so I'd used as few materials as possible, but the end result looked like I'd made a large dog park or something. "It doesn't look great," I said, facing the adventurers, "but it's only meant to be temporary. When I'm finished, the whole town is going to be enveloped in a five-meter-tall protective wall."

They gawked at the fencing, mouths hanging open. One of them pointed at it, tripping over his words. "Wh-wh-wh-wh..."

I totally get it. I'm not satisfied with the finished product either. "I know, it doesn't look reliable at all. But I promise you, it's tougher than it looks. And in about a week, I'll have a real wall installed for safety."

A few of the adventurers shook their heads slightly.

"No, no, no, no."

"That is *not* the problem."

"What's with your crazy-ass magic?!"

That opened the floodgates, and the adventurers rushed at me like a blast of water. Right as I was floundering for a response, Dee and his men came by with

their load of logs.

“Lord Van! We’ve brought thirty logs for you!” Dee said, stacking them in front of me.

The adventurers were once again left stunned. “D-don’t tell me this brat is...*the* Van Nei Fertio!”

The moment this disbelieving murmur reached Dee’s ears, he drew his sword. “Who said that?! Step forward! The commander of the Seatoh Chivalric Order will cut you down!”

Oh man, Dee is seriously angry. How scary! If he got that mad at me, I’d probably pee myself. I applaud your tenacity, brave adventurers.

While Dee’s rage made most of the adventurers back away, a few of them jolted upright and stepped forward. “You old fart! You think you can cut us down? Give it a try, c’mon!” One of these brave yet foolish men brandished a long, weighty iron sword and pointed it at Dee.

Dee glared at the blade. Then, lightning-quick, he dropped his hips and swung his sword. The shriek of metal on metal filled the air, and the adventurer’s iron sword was cleaved in two. The pointy end flew up into the air and back down, planting itself in the dirt. This sight was enough to convince the remaining adventurers to silently back away, their faces pale with fear.

Rumors of Dee the Dragonslayer, the most powerful of knights, spread through the adventurers like wildfire. They trembled with excitement and awe, greeting him as they always did when they saw him.

“Hi, Sir Dee!”

“Good work out there!”

“Howdy!”

What are you people, baseball teammates? Part of me wanted to point out how silly this all was, but if it meant a safer town, who was I to complain?

“You fools better not get up to any trouble, or I’ll step in personally,” Dee warned them.

“W-we won’t! We don’t want to be cut down!”

His words had a tremendous effect on them. Unfortunately, they still struggled with me being the “little lord” of the village.

“Hey, Lord Van, is there anywhere around here I can buy weapons?”

“Go talk to Bell in the village. He’s a merchant.”

“Thank ya kindly!”

Most of the new adventurers spoke to me with this sort of light and casual tone, and some asked prying questions.

“Why did you get sent out to the sticks?”

“I got chased out of my home,” I said.

“What? That’s awful, bud.”

“I know, right? The world of nobles is a miserly one.”

“You sure know some big words!”

“Well, I am the lord, after all.”

Through such overly familiar conversations as these, the adventurers quickly adapted to the village and our way of doing things. Ortho and his party had a front-row seat to this process, much to their dismay.

“Just like that, we’ve got a ton of competition,” Ortho grumbled.

“Oh! Hi, folks.” I turned to the group. “When did you get back?”

Ortho groaned, stress etched onto his face. “Just now. We got too enthusiastic about exploring the dungeon’s perimeter. Based on all these adventurers milling about, I’m guessing Kusala’s here?”

“Yup, he’s back. He even brought a beautiful woman with him.”

“Wait, what?” The whole party looked shocked.

Pluriel leaned over and shot me a perplexed look. “Kusala? Brought a woman?”

“No freaking way.”

Just as the party went off, the man of the hour appeared, driving his carriage. “Hey, guys.” He grinned. “It’s getting late, so I was about to go check on y’all. The guild researchers and staff’ll arrive in a few days, so I guess I’ll go dungeon running tomorrow.”

Flamiria poked her head out of the carriage. “Um, Sir Kusala?”

Kusala’s smile turned bashful at the sound of his name in her elegant, tinkling voice. “Oh, right! This is Lady Flamiria Stratos. She joined me on my journey from the capital. My lady, these folks here are my adventurer pals.” He introduced each one to her in turn while the *pals* in question watched, wide-eyed and petrified. When he was done, he smiled wryly. “I was thinking of lending you guys a hand, but since you’re back already, I’ll just stay here. Let’s kill it out there tomorrow, eh?” He steered the carriage around. “We’ll be stayin’ at the inn tonight. See ya tomorrow!”

“Ah, excuse us!” Flamiria said politely, waving farewell.

Ortho’s party watched them leave, dumbfounded, then looked at me. “Uh, little lord...?”

“Are we dreaming?”

“What the heck was that?!”

I thought back to what Till, Khamsin, and Arte had said earlier. “He charged in and saved her from an orc attack, so it’s not crazy that she’d latch on to him as her hero.”

“Hero?”

“Kusala?!”

I nodded. They all looked baffled, but the truth was the truth; they had to accept it. “I was thinking of building a little house for the two of them. Do you mind if I build it next to your place?”

“F-for the two of them?!”

“Damn it, I should have gone to the capital instead!”

I ignored the men and turned to Pluriel, the most composed of the bunch. “How was the dungeon?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, the dungeon. Didn’t seem like many monsters had surfaced. It’s in a pretty dangerous place—the entrance is located near a steep cliff.”

“How big of a dungeon are we talking?”

“Extremely big, I think. The entrance is a lot like a cave, and wide enough for two people to walk side by side. To make sure it was a dungeon and not just a cave, we checked inside and confirmed the presence of stairs, multiple levels, pillars at the entrance, walls, glowing magic stones on the ceiling—the whole package. It is most definitely a dungeon.”

I folded my arms and groaned. “That sounds tough. Is it far from the village?”

“An hour by carriage from the village, then another two or three hours once you’re in the woods.”

“Whoa, that’s far!” I blurted out.

Pluriel nodded, smiling bitterly. “Most dungeons are like that. Powerful monsters tend to spawn nearby, so locals typically steer clear.”

That made sense. Nobody would go out of their way to build a village somewhere dangerous on purpose. Still, I got the sense that it could be a good idea to build a settlement close to the dungeon after the fact. I didn’t voice this thought, but Pluriel seemed to sense where my mind had gone anyway.

“In addition to the dangers posed by monsters, most dungeons are in nearly inaccessible areas. That’s why people have built small bases of operations near dungeons but never any proper settlements.” Eyes glittering with hope, she added, “So far, that is.”

Hmm, what could that possibly mean?

“I think you could do it, Lord Van.”

She went and said it! Even if she had the thought, she wasn’t supposed to say it out loud. I tried to politely decline. “Yeah, but the forest is dangerous, right? I can’t bring my ballistae out there.”

Pluriel stepped forward and brought her face close to mine. “We’ll protect you. We’ve gone dungeon diving tons of times, so you won’t be in any danger.”

Whoa, she’s really motivated. Nevertheless, I wasn’t planning on caving to her

here. I just wanted to stay at home.

“You’ll have to take me straight to the entrance of the dungeon, naps and dessert included.” I counted off my conditions on my fingers. “As for attendants, I’ll be bringing Till and Khamsin. Arte, too. Dee and Esparda have to work on the town, so they’ll stay behind. And I’ll probably need lots of guards.”

Heh heh heh, now what? How will you react to my naivete? I’m underestimating the woods, right? I bet if I weren’t an eight-year-old, she’d have slapped my face off by now. Just thinking about it gives me the shivers!

Pluriel was unfazed. “All right, I shall see to it. We leave tomorrow.”

“Say wha...?” Unthinking, I responded in a decidedly unlordly manner, but Pluriel was already on her way over to her party to start preparing. “Say what?” I repeated to nobody, like a total idiot.

I squinted against the bright sunbeams piercing gaps in the forest canopy. Enduring the constant jostling back and forth, I took a deep breath.

“What a view!” I said.

“Indeed,” Arte agreed. “And the air is so crisp. It feels wonderful.”

Khamsin moaned. “I can’t handle...all the rocking... Urp!”

My companions each experienced our trip in their own unique way as we edged along the cliff.

I really wish this place would stick to one type of terrain. Is it a forest, a valley, a cliff, or the Blyde River Canyon? Whatever it was, the massive scale was like a scene straight out of a movie.

About an hour had passed since we entered the forest, and the landscape had changed way too frequently. One minute we were drowning in annoying animal cries, and the next the stench of blood filled the air as we found ourselves staring at monster corpses.

“I had no idea it’d be like this,” I said.

Nobody sympathized with me. Not even Till, who treated me to a pained

smile that said *Now you realize?*

“Y-you’re the one who said...let’s go to a dungeon...” Khamsin stammered.

“You all right over there, Khamsin?” He was being more critical of me than usual, maybe because of his motion sickness. I didn’t love him looking at me like that.

Anyway, being carried by six strong adventurers like we were in a portable Shinto shrine was rough. I understood that they had it worse than we did, truly. But the road wasn’t great, so we were shaking and rattling all over the place. Khamsin asked multiple times to get off and walk, but he was told to stay on board—his absence wouldn’t lighten the load that much for the adventurers, and he’d just get in the way. Now he was leaning against the window, looking like Death was coming for him.

The little shrine-like palanquin I’d built for us didn’t weigh much, but it was heavy with four people inside, so adventurers were swapping in and out every half hour to carry us. The bumps and jumps were bad, but the shaking was horrible too. If I let my guard down and focused too much on looking out the window, I felt like I’d get launched out of the thing.

Despite our situation, the women were holding up well. They were so excited, you’d think they were on a sightseeing tour.

“This cliff is incredible, Lady Arte!”

“It’s so steep, and the view is so grand. Those mountains off in the distance are beautiful.”

“They’re even bigger than the clouds. Oh, look! A flying monster! See it up there?”

“Wow, amazing!”

Terrifying.

What would we do if we were attacked? Our little Shinto shrine would become our tomb. I had one of my bowguns on hand, so we’d probably be fine, but I preferred *not* to deal with an ambush.

I ventured a glance outside to see how things were going. Some of the

adventurers were patrolling the area for monsters. When Ortho and his people put out word that we were hiring escorts, some fifty people had volunteered for the job. Maybe they thought it was a good chance to check out the dungeon, but however you sliced it, we had way too many people.

Still, about ten of them were equipped with weapons purchased from yours truly, so we had a formidable fighting force.

“Woohoo! There’s a giant troll in the woods!”

“I’m gonna hunt that thing!”

“Whoa, how’d you split that thing in two? What the hell kind of sword is that?!”

Though things were pretty rowdy outside, it meant that neither of the girls was particularly scared.

By the time Khamsin’s face changed color again, we were nearing the dungeon. One path we took was so tight and steep, I couldn’t believe we managed to squeeze along in our little shrine. When I peered out the window, I couldn’t see the ground—it looked like we were floating in midair. I decided then and there that I wouldn’t be going home without expanding the cliff road.

“We’ve arrived, Lord Van!”

Hearing this, I looked out to see a steep drop-off directly ahead. “Stoop! Stop right here!” I screamed.

“Huh? But we’re almost there.” One of the men carrying our carriage eyed me with great curiosity. He was an idiot. He must’ve been.

“Let us down somewhere a bit more spacious! Hurry!”

The adventurers were puzzled but nonetheless followed my orders.

“Something happen?”

“What’s wrong?!”

Ortho’s party, which was leading the way, hurried back to the carriage. The forest was to our right, with steep cliffs dropping off to the left and front of us. The one ahead had two logs extended from the edge, forming an extremely

questionable bridge to the next cliff along.

This is madness! What happened to “safety first”?! This sort of thing would cause a scaffold constructor to stage a coup.

Even after I was safely out of the palanquin, I couldn't contain my rage. The opposing cliff was at least ten meters away, and the adventurers were coming and going across the logs like they were acrobats. Even Kusala ran across them like it was no big deal.

“Okay, see that? One mistake and we're all dead, so how about we fix it? Danger foresight, risk management. Get what I'm saying?”

The adventurers exchanged confused glances. A bald guy who looked to be in his twenties said, “I don't see what's so dangerous.”

“All right. Sit on your heels, my good man. Right there. Reflect on your words.” He complained, but the folks around him forced him down. Once he was down, I pointed at the logs. “Kusala, try crossing that.”

Kusala had no idea what was happening, but he stepped out onto the logs as instructed.

“Khamsin, kick the logs.”

“Roger that!”

“Um, Lord Van?!” As soon as Khamsin ran forward to kick the logs, Kusala desperately scuttled to the other side. “Were you trying to kill me?!”

He hopped up and down on the other side in a fit of rage, but I just jabbed a thumb toward him and turned to the adventurers. “Kusala is nimble, sure. But if the logs rolled to one side or broke, he could still fall to his death. Do you get it?”

“Yes, sir!”

There we go. “Then that means we either make sure the logs are locked in place or look for a safer route. Got that?”

“Yes, sir!”

Another reassuring reply. *I knew they could learn!*

“So,” I said, “what do you think we should do with these logs?”

“Put a bunch more down all in a row!”

“Sit down.”

“Yes, sir!”

Just like that, I was faced with a big group of adventurers sitting on their heels. “You don’t just lay them down! You make a sturdy bridge! Bring me lumber!”

Thus, before we reached the dungeon, I built a *real* bridge. The whole process took only ten minutes, and the bridge itself was ten meters long. It was sturdy enough for a full carriage to cross with no issues.

“See? This is how you make sure things are safe,” I said to the whining adventurers.

“That’s impossible!”

“It would normally take days to build a bridge like this...”

“We don’t have that kind of time.”

I shrugged. “If all you’re going to do is gripe, then I guess I won’t build a base of operations for you guys.”

The apologies came fast.

“We’re so sorry!”

“We’ll build bridges!”

“Forgive us!”

Fine. Van is a magnanimous young man. I looked at the entrance to the dungeon. “All right, about that base...”

The entrance was about three meters wide, and the tunnel descended at an angle. A faint light emanated from deep within. The cave’s surroundings were rocky, and the area in front of the entrance wasn’t particularly spacious. If you left the dungeon and proceeded in the direction of the village, you’d come to a cliff very quickly—followed by a supremely beautiful, awe-inspiring bridge leading to the other side.

Building a base was going to take some work.

“What’s the matter, my lord?” Till asked.

“Yeah, uh...” I faltered, then raised my head. “First, I’ve got to know what you guys need in terms of facilities. What do you want?”

“A brothel.”

“Not happening. Sit down.”

This wasn’t going to be easy.

I started off with the bare necessities for the adventurers’ base: a rest area, a dining hall, a restroom, a storage space, and a gate for the dungeon entrance. I also installed a pulley to the cliff for acquiring water, and along the way I rejected many requests for a brothel or gambling house.

At this point, we were looking at a maximum of sixty or seventy people using the space at any given time, so I decided to construct the building with some leeway in the event that it filled up. Something like the barracks I made for the soldiers before, basically.

Since the area was on a cliff, I used the unique qualities of the space.

“Are you certain about the shape?” Arte asked me, a note of concern in her voice.

“Sure am!” I replied, installing a floor between the pillars and a set of stairs.

The building style was a bit unique, so I’d saved the outside wall for last. I made the windows on the small side, and since the cliff face along the dungeon’s entrance was perfectly angled, I built right off of it. The problem was adjusting my construction to match. The cliff face wasn’t consistent all the way down; it had a slight slope to it. While my idea was great, actually exerting my mental power to build the thing was trickier than I expected.

Nonetheless, I managed to complete a Japanese-style, retro-looking hotel that sat along the edge of the mountain. If anything, it resembled Jiufen in Taiwan. On the first floor were the lounge and storage facilities, while the second floor housed the dining hall and three rooms that could each

accommodate four people. On the third and fourth floors were six rooms each, for a total of fifteen. I installed four toilets on each floor and a water tank on the roof for gathering and storing rainwater; as long as the filter was maintained properly, the base would have flushing toilets. Finally, I added iron bars and sliding doors over the windows for safety reasons.

Finished at last, I admired my unique creation.

“I’ll keep this short, since you guys saw the interior while I was building it,” I said. I turned around to find the adventurers staring at the building, dumbstruck. Till, Khamsin, and Ortho’s party were all smiling, and Arte’s eyes were practically sparkling. “It’s at an angle because I drove stakes deep into the stone wall and the ground to make it sturdier. I gave it a terrace to help with its center of gravity, so feel free to use that extra space. Toilet-wise, as long as you change the water in the tank on the roof at least once a week, you’ll be able to use that water for cleaning and flushing. Just be careful not to drink it, okay?” I scanned their faces and added, “Raise your hand if you understood all that.”

“I-I did!” said one adventurer, and the rest followed suit.

I had my doubts as to whether they’d *actually* listened to what I said. Left with no alternative, I turned to Ortho. “I’m leaving you in charge of this place. Make sure to teach them well.”

“Ha ha ha...” Ortho grimaced. “You got it.”

“Also, I put a gate at the dungeon entrance. You should probably keep it closed when it’s not in use. In the interest of safety, it might be a good idea to decide on open and closed hours.”

“Ah, right. Probably can’t set that in stone till I talk with the others. There are folks who like to go dungeon diving at night. But you’re right, it should be closed when no one is around. If something nasty shows up, the closed gate’ll buy us time.”

“The gate is made of a mithril alloy, so it’s pretty tough. I think that the forest dragon we killed would take at least a day to break through, for example.”

“Seriously?”

Ortho was rattled, but I just smiled and nodded. As an afterthought, I said,

“Oh, and everyone can use the building now. It’s good to go.”

The adventurers didn’t need to be told twice. They dashed into their temporary new home, and cheers erupted from inside as they explored.

“Whoa, what is this?!”

“Hey! We can sleep in the dining hall!”

“Are you an idiot? We have a place to sleep! Use that!”

Amid the joyous chaos, a face popped out of the fourth-floor terrace. “Whoa, what a view! You can see everything in the area from here!”

“Yahoo! The terrace is mine!”

One after another, the adventurers poked their heads out of the small windows I’d installed for natural light, looking like spotted garden eels peeking out of the sand. *I should tell them to close the small windows before they go.*

I realized then that it was already time to head home. Raising both hands, I called, “Oh, guys! We should get going! I’m counting on you all to protect us!”

The spotted eels popped up again.

“Already?”

“But it’s still bright out!”

“I wanna take a nap before we head back!”

The complaints piled in, one after another. “Curfew is sundown!” I shouted. “We’re going home! Esparda’s gonna get mad at me!”

There was a moment of silence, and then laughter trickled out from all over the base. For a second I entertained the idea of demolishing the building. Instead, I folded my arms and waited the two minutes or so that it took for the adventurers to line up in front of me.

Once they were assembled, I said, “C’mon, we’re going! If you don’t hurry up, you’re not getting dinner!”

The group chuckled. “Roger that!”

“We’re running home, lads!”

These noisy adventurers were underestimating me like crazy, but I held my tongue. Annoying as they were, they meant well. Till and the others offered me sympathetic smiles while they climbed back into the palanquin.

Once we were on our way, I brooded until I heard someone outside call my name: “Lord Van! There’s another cliff!”

I looked out of the window and recognized the geography from earlier. *That’s how big it looks from far away?* A shiver ran down my spine. “Okay, everyone stop. It’s time to make some changes!”

To make a long story short, I built another bridge. It was simpler than the one from before, but good enough for a carriage to cross. In fact, by the time we left the forest, I had been forced to make two additional bridges.

As a result of these delays, we arrived at the village just after sunset. The main gate was open, and Esparda and Dee stood just beyond it. Dee had his arms crossed, stone-faced, but Esparda was even scarier—he was smiling. The man who never made any facial expressions was *smiling*.

If that weren’t bad enough, it was dark outside, and Esparda held his lamp in a way that illuminated his creepy smile from below. He looked like a serial killer.

“Lord Van,” Esparda said simply.

I flinched and screeched despite myself. “Eeek!”

“I have something to discuss with you. Come.”

“S-somebody help! Say it’s dinner time, quick!” I had my head on a swivel, seeking a hero in my time of need, but everyone averted their gazes. “Till!”

“I-I shall accompany you.”

That’s not what I’m asking! “Khamsin!”

“Not happening.”

What?! “Arte!”

“Huh? M-me?!”

Crap, wrong move! “Ortho! This is all because I wanted to help you guys!” I whined.

Perhaps feeling responsible, Ortho stepped forward. “Uh, Esparda? We’re responsible for what happened today.” *Wonderful, Ortho. Van did nothing wrong!* “So, um, how about we—”

“Silence.”

“Aye.”

A single cold word from Esparda was enough to make Ortho retreat. I was doomed to spend the entire evening being lectured by my butler.

Chapter 4:

All Sorts of Arrivals

THANKS TO ESPARDA, THE NEW WALL WENT UP without a hitch. That meant it was ballista time. Just as I started to contemplate the task ahead of me, Rango returned.

The adventurers were astonished. “Yo! Caravan incoming!” said one.

“Bull!” said another. “There’s no way a caravan would come all the way— whoa, what the hell?!”

A third adventurer added, “There are so many escorts! Way too many!”

Still standing atop the newly completed wall, I yelled to Khamsin, “Could you go get Bell for me?”

“Of course!” he replied before running off.

Khamsin was so full of life that day. I watched him until he was a speck in the distance, then turned to Till and Arte. “Should we go greet them? There’s lots to talk about.”

“Let’s!” they replied in tandem.

The two of them followed me along the wall. It was connected to a nearby building, and a passage ran from the top of the wall to a veranda on the building’s third floor. We had to go through the building to get down to the ground, and we ran into some adventurers along the way.

“Hey, it’s Lord Van.”

“I heard the caravan’s arrived?”

“Yup!” I replied flippantly, waving as I descended the stairs. Due to my status as the resident lordling, the adventurers who came to town found me fascinating, so they were always striking up chats. *Same old, same old.*

At last, we reached the ground floor. When I exited to the street, the caravan was already close—but one look at the people and carriages had me perplexed.

The carriages were fine; in addition to the ones I'd let Rango borrow, there were two large ones that he must have purchased himself. He seemed to have bought some more horses, too, based on the twenty or thirty I was estimating at a glance. A hundred or so young men and women stood around the perimeter, decked out in basic armor and holding spears. From what I could see, they looked unaccustomed to wielding weapons like that. At the center of the caravan was Rango driving a big carriage, surrounded by twenty or so adventurer types.

While I surveyed these newcomers, Bell and Khamsin came running from the village. For some reason, Dee and Esparda were also power-walking my way.

"Rango's back?" Bell asked excitedly. He raised a hand to greet his brother in the distance.

They hadn't seen each other in some time. I was certain it would be a heartwarming reunion for all involved.

But when the caravan came to a stop in front of us, the first thing out of Bell's mouth was "How much did you sell the goods for?!"

Rango responded in kind. "A hundred and eighty platitudes! I also bought carriages and horses since I knew we'd need them later, and a hundred fifty slaves—mostly ones with debt!"

"I see! Wait, a hundred and fifty slaves? And they're all young. If one person costs anywhere from one to two gold, then you spent...somewhere between one and three platitudes?!"

Bell reeled at Rango's heavy spending, but the younger merchant flashed him a proud smile. "One hundred slaves under twenty years of age with no physical issues or illnesses, plus another fifty around the age of ten, all for a total of eight large gold. When the auction wrapped up, I went to the Mary Chamber of Commerce to tell them about our withdrawal and what happened with those three jerks, but they actually apologized! They said it'd be a big problem if they couldn't do business with Lord Van going forward, so they would sell us anything we wanted at half price."

"The Mary Chamber of Commerce? For real?" Bell's brow wrinkled in thought. "But only the president or vice-president can make a call like that..."

Rango pointed inside his carriage. "I've also got spices, crop seedlings, and a gift for Lord Van."

Bell narrowed his eyes. "A gift? Better be something good."

I poked my head around the side of the carriage. "Welcome back!"

"Hey, Lord Van! Long time no see!" Rango dipped his head. "Glad to be home!"

"Good work out there," I said. "You sure brought back a lot of people."

"Fear not!" Rango held out a leather bag with both hands. "I haven't touched any of the profits that belong to you. Here, 130 platitudes. Please check them."

"Whoa, thanks." I accepted the bag, then passed it along to Till.

My maid quivered from head to toe. "Aaah..."

I totally get it. Holding that much money is enough to make anyone freak out.
I gave Till a reassuring smile as Rango handed me a smaller leather bag.

"This is a portion of our profits from this transaction. Two platitudes."

"Oh, gosh." I accepted the bag, not yet understanding.

"From now on, we'll give you a portion of the profits for every transaction we make." Rango beamed. "Here's to doing business with you!"

"Wow, thanks! In that case, you'll be the first folks I sell monster parts to." This sounded like a real win-win relationship; I wasn't about to hide my excitement.

Then Rango pulled out another, even smaller leather bag. "I hope this isn't too bold, but I'd also like to buy the carriages you made us for five gold. Five large gold for each, that is, for a total of two platitudes and five large gold. Is that all right?"

"Absolutely! But I'd be happy to give you the carriage for free, you know."

Bell frantically shook his head.

Rango said, "I appreciate the thought, but you shouldn't offer these sorts of things for free! People are going to crawl outta the woodwork to take advantage of you, and you'll have to deal with all sorts of jealousy and

prejudice. Please, take the money.” He bowed his head, and I accepted the large sum of cash from him. I was starting to feel like a repeat lottery winner, even as Till trembled beside me. Politely, he added, “Going forward, I’ll present you with any fine goods I happen to find in the capital.”

He lifted a large box from the carriage. Behind him, Bell was all nerves. It was pretty funny to watch, but I was curious about my gift too. I loved surprises!

Rango opened the box to reveal a large crossbow with a square, boxlike attachment. “This right here is the best new model in the capital.”

“W-wait, is that what I think it is?!” I cried.

Rango grinned, then pointed the weapon toward the forest. There was a grip on the side of the box; when Rango moved it up and down, the bow was drawn back with an audible creak. He readjusted his grip to the bottom of the crossbow and fired a bolt toward the wall of trees, then repeated the motion and fired another.

There was almost no interval between the first and second shots.

“This magnificent piece of work is called a rapid-fire machine bow. It can fire up to ten bolts in quick succession. And by swapping out the box at the top, you can reload your bolts in no time at all. They had a few available, so I bought three of these and three different types. I also picked up ten boxes of bolts.”

“You’re the best!” I threw my arms up in joy and leapt at Rango, snatching the crossbow out of his hands. *Oh, I get it now.* The bottom grip was there for support, but it also functioned as a trigger. This was closer to a bowgun than a crossbow. Since Rango had set it already, all I had to do was pull the trigger to fire off a bolt. “Oooh!”

I whirled toward the forest and rapidly fired off shots. *This is a total blast!* I was so excited I literally jumped for joy. “I’m gonna make ballistae with these! Thank you so much, Rango! Yahoo!”

“Lord Van, you’re happier about the new weapon than the 130 platitudes...”

“I’m so happy for you, my lord!”

“Let me try!”

All these voices were coming at me, but I could only think about the rapid-fire ballista concept unfolding in my head. Even picturing them all lined up next to one another was thrilling. “I bet if I gave these to the whole Seatoh Chivalric Order, they’d be a proper fighting force, huh?” That wild idea got my heart pumping.

Slave City

THE SO-CALLED “SLAVE CITY” WAS JUST OUTSIDE of the capital. Here, newly enslaved people and those who’d failed to attract buyers at storefronts were bought and sold.

New slaves received the bare minimum of an education, but their primary selling point was that they’d been born free. They had never belonged to anyone else, and so they had yet to be ground down to figurative dust. Conversely, the slaves who went unsold in stores were sold in Slave City for their technical skills. In stores, clerks didn’t go out of their way to introduce each and every slave to potential buyers, but in Slave City, their skills were openly advertised.

I was in the latter category. My skill was hunting; I could track and take down small monsters on my own. But that was not a talent people looked for in their slaves. As a woman, I was expected to do housekeeping, music, dancing, or even magic. If a female slave had those abilities, she would find a buyer even if she wasn’t physically attractive.

In the slave world, our new “owners” sometimes treated us so badly that we wished we were back with the slave traders—but I didn’t have much time left. I considered myself an average-looking woman, but my muscular build meant I wasn’t perceived as feminine or amiable. Sometimes men would look at me with curiosity despite my lack of traditionally attractive qualities, but I would thoughtlessly return their looks with glares and scare them off before a purchase could be made.

I was surrounded by other people who had been bought at one time or another but wound up back on the market. They invariably looked like they had lost all will to live; no one would even consider purchasing them. It was at that point that they joined me among the leftovers. Regardless of why any of these people found themselves back on the market, they repelled buyers even more than I did, and those poor souls lost themselves in the depths of despair. Even their desire to carry on had left them.

So here I was in the corner of my cage, in the city of slaves. If I was passed

over for another two months or so, I would probably be sold off for a deep discount as a slave with “issues”—the same descriptor given to people who were injured or sickly. If that happened, there was no telling how I would be treated. Knowing this, I was sitting calmly with a smile plastered on my face when a commotion erupted somewhere in the center of the marketplace.

The excited voices of merchants and customers rose up in a clamor, and it wasn't long before the whirlwind reached me. Curious onlookers flooded the streets, closing in like some sort of giant, pulsating creature. Smack-dab in the middle of the throng was a young man who made his way to the slave store where I sat. “Please show me your healthiest slaves!”

The merchant donned his best customer-service smile and ushered us leftovers into a line out front. Once he confirmed that we were in place, he arranged the fresh faces in front of us. “Th-these are our wonderful slaves! Not only are they in good health, but we also know where each one comes from...”

He went on to introduce each person in turn. A young man, formerly a knight of an enemy nation. The daughter of a fallen noble family. Famous adventurers, talented mages. All sorts of people were present. Even from my perspective, they were such catches that I couldn't bring myself to feel bitter. It also meant they were expensive, and in all likelihood the young man would only be able to afford one, plus maybe two or three of us cheaper options.

At least, that was what I thought. Without the slightest change in his expression, the young man spun to an older man standing nearby. “This slave with magical aptitude. About their commission fee...”

“We'll waive the fee,” the merchant said. “It's fine, but normally the commission would cost anywhere from one to three gold. Make sure you inform the new baron, Lord Van Nei Fertio.”

“Thank you very much. How about two large gold for the whole bunch?” the young man asked, smiling as he turned back around.

The merchant froze, and so did all of us. As someone from a tiny village, I had never seen a large gold in my life. There was no way I would *ever* sell for a gold; perhaps he offered that much because there was no commission fee or whatever.

Though the merchant was shaken, he quickly switched gears and grinned. “Oh, r-right. It seems the Chamber of Commerce has taken quite a liking to you. I’m envious! For the five high-tier slaves, two large gold is a fine price, but I would have to request an additional large gold for the ten in the back... Truth be told, they’re quite talented. Some of them are also rather young, so I must ask for fair compensation. Normally you would have to pay the commission fee to the Mary Chamber of Commerce, which would increase the price, so this is still a great deal.”

The young man nodded, still smiling. “Well, you have my apologies. I have no intention of buying out and crushing a slave trader under the Mary Chamber of Commerce.”

The merchant looked relieved, but it was all an act. The young man didn’t have to worry about commission fees, so he would be able to buy at a much cheaper price than usual. There were no drawbacks to the deal.

I watched carefully as the young man turned on his heel. “How unfortunate. I have already purchased more than a hundred slaves—I’m sure that’s more than enough for now. I wouldn’t want to be in debt to the Mary Chamber of Commerce, after all.” He flashed a troubled smile and dipped his head to the merchant. “Should the opportunity arise in the future, I will gladly peruse your group again. I imagine we’ll have more dragon parts to sell sooner rather than later.”

“Huh?” The merchant’s eyes bugged out, and he flew into a panic. “Er, wait a moment! Let me give you a discount! How about five gold and two large gold?”

The older man cast an exasperated look at him and sighed. “You let your greed get the better of you, fool. Raising your profits isn’t everything. The president will be hearing about this.”

The merchant paled and choked, thwarted in his attempt to turn a large profit. “P-please don’t!”

Glee welled up within me as I eyed the merchant from where I stood; he cradled his head in his hands, near tears amid the comings and goings of the crowd. A small smile formed on my face. That rat bastard routinely starved us “leftover slaves” and beat us in ways that he knew wouldn’t leave visible marks.

I knew I wasn't the only one pleased to see him in anguish. Once again, however, I had failed to sell. The bastard would undoubtedly take out his frustrations on us.

Just as this thought settled over me like a dark cloud, the young man spun around again. "Five gold and two large gold, you say? But you see, I've already spent four large gold, and my budget for slaves is fairly small. What say you give me however many slaves I can get for two large gold?"

Hearing this offer, the merchant whipped his head back up. "A-actually, since you've done so much for the Mary Chamber of Commerce, I would gladly sell all of my slaves for two large gold! And, hell, I'm happy to sell you anything else at a 10 percent discount!"

The young man clasped his hands in front of his chest, his smile bright and innocent. "Really? That's wonderful! I'll never forget the bargain you gave me for the Chamber of Commerce today. Thank you so much!" He paid the two large gold and purchased all fifteen of us in one fell swoop. I didn't know the going price for slaves, but I was certain the young man had landed himself quite a bargain. The uproar around us was intense.

Once the requisite documents were signed, we gathered in front of the young man. The former knight bowed to him and said, "It is a pleasure to serve you, Master."

The young man bobbed his head pleasantly. "The pleasure is mine, though most of you are going to end up being sold to someone else. Don't worry, though, you'll be in good hands and a good environment."

Concern washed over me—and I wasn't the only one. Hesitantly, someone asked, "Where will we be sold off to next?"

The young man smiled. "A village out in the boonies. It's about as far as you can get from the capital while you're still on this side of the border."

I despaired, and I felt certain that everyone around me did too. Most likely, every last one of us would spend the rest of our lives in a mine or quarry.

There were still many young children among us. I feared for their ability to

make the trek to the village on foot, but to my surprise, they were permitted to ride in carriages. I also worried about the dangers that would face us on our long road ahead, but our new master had hired skilled adventurers to protect us along the way. Again and again, my concerns were assuaged, but even so we wore dark expressions as we walked. After all, our biggest fear remained unchanged.

I'd quickly learned that the young man had purchased some 150 slaves at once. There were only a few things for which a person might need that many slaves; I figured there was a metal or mithril mine where we were headed. The country hid the locations of such mines from the public, so it wouldn't be surprising to find one way out in the borderlands. Faced with that prospect, I could do nothing to ease the fears of those around me.

Our group included former bards, blacksmiths, merchants, and daughters of lords from our own land as well as enemy nations. Of *course* they were concerned. All of us were headed to the same place—even those who would normally be taken on as mistresses. The only ones who weren't worried were those skilled in combat. People with their talents were needed everywhere, and since they could imagine that they were being brought somewhere to wield their strength, they weren't nearly as pessimistic about the situation as the rest of us.

The young man who bought us, a merchant named Rango, treated us generously. Perhaps this was why so many clashes occurred on the trip to the village. Despite Rango's best efforts, the gloomy atmosphere followed the caravan right up until we reached our destination.

When we arrived, the gloom gave way to universal bewilderment. One of the kids peeked out of a carriage and asked, "Um, is that it?"

The man to whom the kid had spoken didn't know what to say. "Er, I don't think so..."

I couldn't blame him. We were staring at a giant wall, the kind that belonged exclusively to fortress cities. It wasn't quite as big as the one in the capital, but it was beautiful. Buildings were visible beyond the wall.

What a strange town, I thought. Are we taking a break here before we move

on?

That was when I saw Rango happily conversing with a young, impeccably dressed child. He gave the boy a gift—a bow of some kind—which made him hop up and down in excitement. The boy took it off toward the woods and tested it out multiple times. The sight of a child having fun brought a smile to my face, frightening implications aside. If my hunch was right and he was a noble, then perhaps Rango was selling him the bow.

Before I could ponder it further, the child made his way over to us and spoke in a calm, cheery tone. “Welcome to Seatoh and Espar Town! You’ve come a long way. I am the lord of the land, Van Nei Fertio. I’ll be interviewing each of you later and hiring those of you who are able, so I’ll be relying on you from here on out! Now then, I’m sure you’re all tired after your long journey, so once you’ve enjoyed a barbecue in the village, feel free to rest in your lodgings and heal your weary hearts. Come on now, we’re almost at the village! Right this way!”

Whispers reached my ears from all sides.

“The lord?”

“You mean that Van Nei Fertio fellow I’ve heard so much about?”

“That new baron who supposedly took out a dragon? No way.”

I frowned at the boy ahead of us in disbelief, but when we passed through the walls and onto what I thought was the village road, I was amazed by the sight before me. The town suddenly seemed like a dollhouse compared to the structure looming in the distance. It must have been somewhere between one and two kilometers away, but its presence was awe-inspiring even from here. It was a gigantic and powerful—yet elegant and fantastic—stronghold, with walls jutting out to the left and right and a front gate every bit as marvelous as the one in the capital. There were also towers on either side.

We found ourselves in something like a trance as we approached the gate, where we learned that the structure was surrounded by a moat which could be crossed via a drawbridge. The child and Rango walked ahead of us with the villagers, passing through the open gate. The rest of us followed soon after.

Shock and awe hit us in equal measure. “What’s going on here?” someone asked, clearly as confused as the rest of us. I understood exactly how they felt.

No sooner had we passed through that magnificent gate than we encountered a vast expanse of land riddled with buildings. Farther back was yet another wall, this one smaller than the last. Nonetheless, this new location looked much larger than the first town we had passed through. Once we arrived, the child said something to the villagers that got them moving in a hurry.

That was when it hit me: this boy really *was* the lord.

“We’ve arrived!” Rango announced. “Well done!” All the tension drained from my body, and tons of us sat down on the spot.

Before I even had time to think about my situation, an elderly gentleman and a child approached me holding a chair. “Now, now. Please, sit down and rest. We’ll be having dinner soon.”

I shot to my feet in a panic. “Oh, um, we’re slaves, so...” My tone was polite, but the older man shook his head.

“Don’t you worry about that. We only just arrived here ourselves. We plopped ourselves on the ground just like you folks, and the original villagers brought us chairs,” he explained, setting it down.

I dipped my head in thanks and sat in the chair. The elderly gentleman laughed, then chatted with me for a bit before taking his leave. I glanced around and found similar conversations happening all around me: hesitant slaves and excited villagers talking away while other villagers prepared for something. If I got to come home to a place like this every day, I might even be okay with working in a mine.

There was real kindness here. For the first time, I thought maybe—just maybe—things would work out.

Just as the sun was beginning to set, the villagers told us that it was time for dinner. As slaves, we weren’t sure whether we were allowed to sit down, but it appeared we were the stars of this welcome party, so we had to be seated. I

was grateful but also confused by all the pomp and circumstance.

Once dinner was ready to go, none of us had room for anything in our minds besides the delicious aroma of sizzling meat that filled the air. If the adults hadn't held the children back, they would have leapt at the food.

"Right over here, folks," the villagers called out to us amid the popping sounds of hot oil. We lined up in front of a bunch of thick pieces of meat overflowing with juices over roaring flames. At this point, if someone had told us they'd changed their minds and we weren't allowed to eat, I was certain all of us would have broken down and wept.

While I contemplated our strange fate, the young lord stepped up onto a pedestal, causing the rowdy villagers to go quiet in moments. "Um, good work today, everyone. And truly, to those of you who made the long trek here from the capital with Rango, you have my sincerest gratitude. Today, I want you all to have a great time and drive off those feelings of exhaustion and concern with some delicious meat and drinks. My good villagers, if any of our new friends need

the restroom, I trust that you'll show them the way. Let's get this barbecue started!"

The villagers cheered, and soon we were offered skewers loaded with meat. "Here ya go. Eat up! It's delicious," enthused the elderly man who had brought me a chair earlier.

"Th-thank you," I replied, bringing the meat up to my mouth. The surface was crispy, with the interior perfectly cooked. The more I chewed, the more I relished the meat's melt-in-the-mouth texture and strong savory flavor. Since it was straight off the flames, it was still piping hot, but I couldn't stop myself from eating now that I'd tasted it. I had never eaten meat like this before, but even then, it seemed unnaturally delicious to me.

"It's amazing!" a joyful child cried out nearby.

The villagers watched us with warm gazes and gentle smiles.

"Ngh!" My eyesight turned blurry, so I used a free hand to wipe away my tears, still chomping on my meat.

“Ungh!”

“Hrk...”

Amid the pops of meat and cheerful voices were the sounds of people furiously fighting back tears. Personally, I had hit my limit, so I openly sobbed while I ate. As I thought back on the long, painful years I’d endured as a slave, the tears wouldn’t stop.

Van

“LORD VAN, YOU’VE BEEN PROMOTED TO BARON.”

“For real?”

“Yes. The documents and official announcement will be delivered by messenger within a month.”

I was a baron. Now, no matter what Father said, he couldn’t take my territory from me or dismiss me from my post. “Heck yeah!” I said, holding up a V for victory.

“Congratulations!” Till said, elation plain on her face.

“Will Lady Panamera ever come back to the village?” Khamsin asked sadly.

Rango nodded. “The viscount said she would report this back to the count, then take care of some things before her return. To put it bluntly, it appears to me that she thinks it will be more interesting to team up with you, Lord Van, and develop the territory, rather than remain affiliated with the count.”

“Wait, so she’s going to live here?” I was the lord, but she outranked me, which could make doing things around here difficult. I liked her a lot, but I wasn’t fond of having a boss.

Seeming to sense my trepidation, Rango shook his head. “No, she plans to obtain the territory neighboring ours. I have no idea how she plans on negotiating this, but she said she’s going to build a town adjacent to our village.”

“Can she really just get territory that easily?” I wasn’t sure if that was okay for me to say, but it tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop it. My gut feeling said that Panamera of all people could get it done.

Khamsin chimed in with his own stamp of approval: “I’m sure Lady Panamera will get that territory sooner than later!”

He wasn’t wrong. She was the sort of person who would end up queen before you even realized it.

“Oh, and about the armored lizard parts,” Rango went on, “I let anyone who mattered know that they were acquired with the help of your brother, Lord Murcia. As far as they’re concerned, you fought off the bandits yourself, then defeated the armored lizards with your brother’s aid, then slew the dragon alongside Lady Panamera. Once the materials are ready, the royal family would like to buy them from you.”

“Right, we did say we’d give Murcia the credit,” I replied. “Hmm, is there anything else? Ah, I know! Let’s give him the credit for hunting the wild boar and wolves. Surely that will nudge him closer to being chosen as Father’s heir.”

Esparda was having none of it. Having listened to the conversation in silence up to that point, he shook his head. “I would advise against that, Lord Van. Had you not been promoted or slain a dragon, it would be of no consequence, but the capital has dispatched an investigation team. Their job is to examine the battlefield, assess the status of the territory, and gather intelligence on the combatants. They will uncover and scrutinize every last detail of what transpired. It would be unwise to bring Lord Murcia into things when he is so far away.”

“You think it’ll raise questions?” I asked.

“Correct.”

“That *would* be a pain. Okay, we’ll stick to the plan.”

As I enjoyed the barbecue with Rango and the others, I thought, *Murcia’s a hard worker. I bet he’ll be the head of the house on his own merits soon.*

The day after our welcome party for Rango and the slaves, I summoned the merchant brothers so that I could interview the newcomers. It seemed Rango already planned to do so, and he was happy to run off and call them over.

Bell said, “We’re dealing with 150 people, which means he probably ended up buying more than half the slaves in Slave City.” He grimaced. “Man, he really went all out.”

I grunted. “I’m curious why the Mary Chamber of Commerce axed the commission fees.”

“You don’t think they were trying to get back into your good graces after insulting you?”

“But that was all harmless! The Mary Chamber of Commerce holds absolute power within the country, and I’m just a new baron out in the middle of nowhere. How I feel shouldn’t matter to them at all.”

Bell seemed no clearer on things than I did. “Well, I think they value you quite highly, Lord Van,” he said, much to my confusion.

I would be honored if they thought I’d continue to acquire status and power out here, but that still had little effect on them, given that they were backed by the king himself. Whatever the reason, I was grateful that they were being considerate of us. Next time around, I would make it a point to prioritize doing business with them.

A little while later, Rango returned with the first ten slaves. We had opened up the lake early in the morning so they could wash themselves. The apkallu were initially surprised by their presence, but the children had grown used to humans, so they helped make separate bathing areas for the women and so on. And because we gave them clothes after they bathed, the men and women standing before us looked nothing like slaves.

“These are the slaves who would normally cost anywhere between three and ten gold,” Bell explained. “Please feel free to purchase them, should you require their services.”

He introduced each of them in turn. The daughter of a former baron. A former knight. The daughter of a knight. A man with wind magic. A woman with earth magic. A former B-rank male adventurer. The daughter of the president of a defunct major company. A former enemy soldier. Normally, these would have been wealthy individuals of a higher status than commoners.

“How good are the two mages?” I asked.

“I can take down a wolf or an orc in a single strike,” said the man.

“I can craft earthen walls,” said the woman. She was twenty years old and her earth magic was especially useful; she could be Esparda’s assistant.

“You’re both hired. Now, I have a question for the woman coming from a

business family. Have you ever done any finance or trade work yourself?”

“Y-yes. When I was a child, I managed a store...”

“Oooh! Wouldn’t she be great for you guys at the Bell & Rango Company?”

Bell glanced at her. “With your permission, Lord Van, we would love to leave a store in her hands... But are you sure?”

Oh, is it because she’s so beautiful? “Fine with me. She’s super pretty, so I’m sure you’d sell like crazy if you opened a weapons shop at the entrance of Espar Town or Seatoth.”

“Thank you! In that case, I’d very much like her to run Espar Town’s weapon shop.”

The young woman, who had listened to our back and forth with great confusion, moved over to the spot where Bell was standing.

“Now then,” I said to the slaves, “for you folks who can fight, we’re in the middle of assembling a Chivalric Order, so we’d love to bring you into the fold. That said, don’t get a swelled head just because you’re strong, okay? Around here, even folks who used to be villagers make splendid knights. Make sure to treat each other with respect.”

The former knights and adventurers beamed. Opportunities to go from slave to knight weren’t exactly typical, so I could imagine that they were relieved.

“All that’s left is the former noble girl,” I said, glancing at the daughter of a former baron. She was a beautiful girl of about fifteen, and clearly the most anxious person in the group. The girl gripped her long skirt in both hands, her shoulders trembling. “Let’s see. The proprietress of an inn, the Chivalric Order, or a helper at the manor? Which one of those sounds good to you? If you were to join as a helper, you’d have the honor of being shown the ropes by a kind and adorable maid named Till.”

“O-oh, Lord Van,” Till said from behind me, sounding bashful. *I’m not wrong. She is adorable.*

The girl raised her head at last. “In that case, I-I’d like to work as a helper.” She sounded relieved; she really was cute.

Actually, maybe I should make her my secretary. Wait, no. Till already fills that role perfectly. Hmm, Esparda's secretary? No way. He'd put her through some insane training regimen and probably leave her in tears. Well, it might be fun having such a cute maid around, so whatever.

I assigned jobs to the slaves and ultimately purchased all of them aside from those who possessed math and trade skills. It cost me a total of eight large gold.

"Are you sure about this? Isn't this 10 percent of your profits?" I asked Bell and Rango. "It must've cost you a lot to bring them all the way here." The merchants just smiled at me.

"Your kind words are more than enough for us," Rango said. "Besides, in addition to the adventurers we hired for security, it was a total of five gold. We made a profit."

You also had to spend money on food and shelter, no? But if they said it was fine, it was fine. "Thanks a lot. Now they've all got jobs to do. You guys are hiring more than ten slaves for your place—do you want me to hurry and make those stores for you?"

"Good point," Bell replied. "For now, we have two people with business experience, so we're going to split the carriages into three groups and expand the market. The adventurers we hired are heading back to the capital, so I'm going with them."

"Gotcha. Then it's your turn to watch the shop, Rango?"

"I'll be training the slaves and running business in the village for the time being."

The Bell & Rango Company is already off to a strong start, I thought as I studied the giddy pair. Capital and manpower really are important for this sort of thing, huh?

"All right," I said then. "I'm gonna go build up the Seatoh Chivalric Order, okay?" I figured I'd check up on all the slaves I'd purchased while I was at it.

"Yeah, sure thing. Let's talk about stores and living quarters later."

“Roger that!” I grabbed Till, Khamsin, and Arte, then left the manor and went out into the village.

I sent the mages off to Esparda and the former knights, mercs, and adventurers to Dee. Others—like bards, dancers, and musicians—were booked as staff for the pub and theater I planned to build near the entrance. That seemed like a fun way to make use of their unique talents. Some of those with farming experience went to help in the fields around the village, and I sent the children under ten to our newest residents from the neighboring village. I wanted them to take care of and educate the kids.

That left us with about fifty people, give or take. Those folks would be trained as Lord Van’s super powerful rapid-fire machine bow squad—or “machine bow squad” for short—a special unit within the Seatoh Chivalric Order.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha!”

I cackled loudly as my squad and I made our way to the entrance of the village where the rest of the slaves were waiting. As soon as they noticed me, they stood ramrod-straight.

“Sorry about the wait!” I said. “As I’m sure you’ve heard, you are all now members of the Seatoh Chivalric Order’s machine bow squad. We’ll start with the basic armaments: how to use the ballistae on the wall. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?” Two people raised their hands. “How about you, miss?”

I selected the wild-looking redheaded woman first. Her face was pulled taut, her strong will evident as she took a step forward. Her exposed arms were slender but toned; she reminded me of a track-and-field girl. Frankly, she was pretty damn cool. “I have experience with a bow, but many here have never even touched one before. Might I ask your reasons for selecting this group of individuals?”

“Um... You’re Paula, the former hunter, right? Great question. As for why, I picked people with experience, then people with good vision, then people with small builds who would find it difficult to fight with a sword or in armor. I want you and our resident hunter, Inka, to be squad captains.”

Paula let out a groan. “Bows require more strength than you might expect. I

see a lot of thin folks here. This might be difficult for them.”

Oooh, she can speak her mind! And she’s right. She’s a helluva find. I nodded at Paula and raised the rapid-fire machine bow I’d brought with me. “You’re exactly right. And that’s why we’ll have the weakest person here—this eleven-year-old village girl, Porte—give it a try first.”

When I called on the petite red-haired girl, she took a hesitant step forward and inexplicably dropped into a kneeling bow. I smiled at her dramatic gesture, then positioned myself next to her and placed my hand over hers. She was extremely nervous.

“Come on now, let your shoulders relax,” I instructed her. “Aim for the woods off to the side of the road. Yes, yes. Hold right here. Oh, you don’t have to grip it so tightly. Okay, now pull that stick next to the box. Good. You set it perfectly.”

Porte turned bright red as everyone present focused their attention on her, but she managed to set the machine bow without making any mistakes. I placed my hands on her shoulders, helping support her as she aimed.

“All right, now try gripping the bit poking out of the stick below. Pull it tight...”

Porte gripped the trigger area of the handle, and the *thunk* of metal meeting wood rang out as a bolt shot from the weapon. It cut through the air, flying toward the woods.

“Perfect! Great job, Porte!”

“Th-thank you!” she replied bashfully, still cherry red. She handed the machine bow back to me with a certain reverence, after which I returned it to its original spot.

Paula watched all of this in stunned silence, so I turned to her. Quirking a little smile, I said, “I present to you the latest and greatest machine bow. Want to give it a try?”

Paula wobbled toward me and picked up the bow. She took to it immediately.

“Ah ha ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha ha! Amazing! This is tremendous!”

I had only just taught Paula how to wield a machine bow, and already she was

so thrilled that I feared she might be one apple short of a bushel. Before I could even blink, she fired off the remaining nine bolts into the woods and gaped at the weapon's amazing capabilities.

"Lord Van, I could fight a giant monster with this!" she cried, eyes sparkling as she closed in on me. She did it with such intensity that I took a couple of steps back.

"I'm sure you could...but we have ballistae for the big ones."

"Right! I forgot about those!"

"Uh, yep. Let's go take a look at them now. We can head up from over there," I said, guiding her.

Behind me, Paula's loud panting rose up over everyone's footsteps. *For the love of all that is holy, someone please stop her! She's going to attack me!* Despite my fears, we climbed the wall without incident and arrived at one of the ballistae.

I turned to face her again. "Now then, this is the double balli—"

Paula was right on top of me, eyes blazing. I froze, at which point Khamsin and Till grabbed her from behind. They had seen enough. I glanced at Paula, who looked like a chained beast, then resumed introducing the ballista to the group.

"...Anyway, this is the double ballista, which we used to take down a forest dragon."

The group was flabbergasted.

"A-a dragon?!"

"I mean, it's big, but isn't it still just a bow?"

"Surely he's joking..."

I simply smiled and searched for the little girl again. "Ah, there you are. Porte, come right this way, please."

"O-of course!" she responded, trotting over adorably.

"This is a bit heavier than the bow from before. First, pull this stick here. If

you put your body weight into it, you should be able to pull it. Yeah, just like that. Like you're clinging to it."

"Um, okay!" She let out a cute grunt of effort, and then the ballista made a mechanical *kachunk*, signaling that it was set.

"For the first shot, let's use this metal bolt. When you load a bolt, make sure nobody else is touching the ballista, okay? Otherwise, you might get sent flying." She hurried to put the bolt in and return to where she was. "Good, now aim and drop that stick down."

Porte followed my directions, aiming the ballista toward the woods and pulling the stick. A sharp whistle reached our ears as the bolt tore through the air, leaving gusts in its wake. A moment later, it landed in the woods with such force that we could hear it all the way from where we were.

From what I could see, about three or four trees had toppled over. *Heck yeah! I'm really glad I strengthened the ballistae and the bolts.*

Those who had never seen the ballistae in action were too stunned to move. Paula was the exception; she was so excited that she let out a long, loud "Whoooooa!"

I left the machine bow squad to Khamsin and took Till and Arte with me to take a closer look at the ones I had received as a gift. Paula was asking endless questions, but I was certain Khamsin would be able to handle her. *Good luck, Khamsin!*

Little Van, meanwhile, strolled jovially through the village with two beautiful girls at his side. Where was he headed? The storage facility for village materials, of course! Feeling decadent, I picked out some mithril once we were there and got ready.

"Here, Lord Van. Take a seat," Till said, placing the chair she had readied for me.

"Thanks!" In front of me was a low table, on top of which lay the amazing mechanical bow from the capital. I proclaimed, "Let's get this party started!" and started dismantling its parts.

The more I scrutinized the device, the more impressed I was. The weapon was made up of various gears and chains, far more sophisticated than anything else I'd seen in this world.

"Hmm, so when this turns, the stick draws the bow while the next bolt drops down," I said to myself. "Using this same concept, we could equip the stationary ballistae with way more bolts. Maybe a hundred-shot ballista isn't just a pipe dream? No, wait. It'd be really bad if they got jammed. In that case, I can redesign them to fire five shots, machine-gun style, and make the rounds swappable..."

Eventually, Till interrupted my muttering with tea and cookies. I munched while I analyzed the machine bow's boxlike structure.

"You look like you're having so much fun," Arte commented.

"Hm? Do I now? Well, you'd be right!" I turned to her, grinning. She offered her own gentle smile. As I recreated the bow's parts with mithril, I said earnestly, "You know, the systems that make up the world are so complicated. Politics, mechanical design, all that stuff. The first person who ever thought this up must've been absolutely incredible."

This goes here, that goes there... Bam! Done.

"Incredible," Arte said. "You're...already finished."

Triumphant, I tested out my new creation—minus the bolts, anyway. But it wouldn't rotate. Or move. It seemed to be getting jammed somewhere. "What the...? Ah, I see. The bow isn't the only thing that needs to be elastic. The part connecting the box to the weapon itself has to be made from stretchy materials too. The stick is supposed to rotate 360 degrees, but it won't even budge..."

Damn. A total failure. I need to look into whether the hard parts can be remade with metal.

"Even Lord Van fails sometimes," Arte said under her breath, sounding surprised. Her voice was low, but I flinched anyway; she then panicked and hung her head. "Oh, m-my apologies! I didn't mean it in a bad way."

She looked like she was on the verge of tears, so I let out a deep sigh and smiled, shrugging. "I fail all the time, you know? Outside of my magic, I've got

nothing to be proud of.”

Arte shook her head. “That is not true at all! I heard from the others that you have tremendous talent with the sword and that you’re extremely studious... I, on the other hand, have nothing to boast about. I’m actually quite jealous.”

“Talent, huh?” I turned toward Arte in all her bewildered glory. “I can introduce you to a demonic butler and Chivalric Order commander if you’d like. Stick with them for three to five years and you’ll be just like me.” I sighed again, and Arte graced me with another kind smile. Studying her profile, I finally asked a question that had been on my mind for some time: “By the way, what kind of magic do you have?”

I didn’t mean anything by the question, and I certainly didn’t intend to pry, but Arte stiffened from head to toe. Her expression was as sad and pained as if I had handed her a death sentence. She looked down at her feet, preventing me from saying anything else.

The air around us grew so tense that Till couldn’t handle it anymore. In a warm, comforting voice, she said, “Um, Lady Arte? Lord Van isn’t forcing you to say anything if you don’t want to, okay?”

Arte shook her head, opening and closing her fists over her knees. At last, she came to a decision and looked up. “I’ll tell you,” she said, taking a few deep breaths. Her eyes were grave and her voice a whisper, but her words were clear nonetheless. “I have...marionette magic.”

Till covered her mouth with her hand, looking quite sorrowful. Among the nobility, magical aptitudes like Khamsin’s thieving magic, illusion magic, and marionette magic were deemed criminal. Mages who possessed such aptitudes often found themselves the subjects of discrimination. They certainly put up a good fight against my so-called useless production magic.



I, however, was thrilled by the revelation. I grabbed Arte's hands. "That's amazing, Arte! I would love to see your magic in action!"

Panic crossed her face. "Huh? Um, y-you want to see my magic?"

"Yes! There are so few marionette mages! I'm sure there are plenty of folks out there hiding their abilities, but even then, you're the first person I've met with such rare magic!" In my excitement, I gripped her hands harder. *I mean, this is marionette magic we're talking about! I'd be crazy not to get excited!* "This must be fate, Arte! All right, let me make you something."

I whipped up a simple humanoid puppet out of wood. It was about as big as me.

"Can you move this?"

Arte tentatively used her magic, and the puppet stood up.

"Whoa! Now try making it move!"

"O-okay." The doll performed an intricate dance, one so beautiful that it could not have possibly been improvised; it must have been something Arte had practiced herself. The puppet danced for several minutes without interruption, and at the end, it bowed.

I applauded, showering its puppeteer with praise. "Amazing! What incredible magic! I can see unbelievable potential here, Arte!"

Not knowing how to respond, Arte simply nodded. Off the top of my head, I could come up with all kinds of applications for this magic. It could help us reach dangerous areas that humans couldn't enter, or it could even become a powerful fighting force against dragons. If we put suits of armor up in the manor instead of other types of furnishings, they could eventually serve as troops for Arte, should they be required.

I realized this magic could also be used to commit assassinations, but I chose not to tell Arte about it. This seemed to be a huge sore spot for her, so I only wanted to tell her about the positive applications.

Arte glanced over at us, still baffled by our reactions. Once I caught her gaze, I gently slapped Till on the back; the maid snapped to her senses and clasped her

hands in front of her chest.

“W-wonderful! I would expect nothing less from you, Lady Arte! I’ve never seen such amazing magic before. Can you also perform that dance?”

“Ah, yes. I can, um, dance. But I’m better at making puppets larger than me dance,” she responded bashfully.

“Please, that in itself is incredible. Let’s have Lord Van make you a cute puppet! I bet the villagers would love it if you made it dance during one of our festivals.”

“Really?” Arte asked, voice tinged with doubt.

Till stayed on the attack, but I could barely focus on anything. I kept thinking back on what Arte said about being better at moving a large puppet. *This is truly amazing.*

She could make a subject move exactly as she desired. We could potentially make powerful, weaponized humanoid puppets. “I think it’s time we start saving up mithril ore,” I said.

A mithril puppet over two meters tall would be the ultimate weapon in her hands. *Well, making someone as shy as Arte fight isn’t gonna be easy, so all I can really do is prepare for the occasion.*

Chapter 5:

Arte's Power & War

TO TEST THINGS OUT, I MADE A MITHRIL PUPPET ABOUT two meters in height, with long, thin limbs. The material made it extremely tough despite its body shape. It held a sword in one hand and a meter-plus tower shield in the other.

Normally, large shields were constructed with wood or monster hide, but since this was a mithril puppet, I decided that it should have a mithril shield and sword. *Whoops! I accidentally used almost all the mithril in the village. Tee hee!*

"Um, Lord Van? I have a few questions. Why does it have a sword and a shield, and why is it wearing a dress?" asked Till.

I nodded firmly, oozing confidence. "She's a female puppet, so a dress will look best when she dances. But I also figured I might as well arm her properly. Now if anything were to happen, she could fight!"

Till narrowed her eyes at me, but Arte continued to stare at the puppet in stunned silence. Abruptly, she burst into laughter.

"Pfft... Hee hee... Ha ha ha!"

Tears flowed freely as she laughed up a storm. It seemed as if some of the darkness looming over her had been blown away. Till and I exchanged glances.

"Should I at least take the shield off?"

"That's not why she's laughing,"

"Hey, let's have her fight with an umbrella!"

"Lord Van, please..."

While Till and I perfected our comedy act, Arte nodded, still laugh-crying. "I also think an umbrella would be nice."

"Huh? Lady Arte, there's no need to indulge him!" Till responded, a dash of concern in her voice.

Arte and I just smiled at one another. This was the first time I had seen her laugh from the bottom of her heart, and her smile was impossibly innocent and pure. It made genuine warmth blossom inside me.

Pulling myself together, I asked, "How about some practice?"

Arte hesitated at first, then nodded. "O-okay." Turning to the newly completed mithril puppet, she took a deep breath and said, "Time to get started." Then she moved the puppet's hand.

Its arm slowly rose as each joint between the fingers and wrist bent in turn. It was a beautiful, smooth motion. Next, Arte made it step forward with its right leg, then spin with both arms raised up in the air. When the rotation came to a finish, it bowed. This might have seemed simple, but it was a dance in and of itself. It was superb despite its simplicity, each and every movement so deliberate that it looked completely human.

Since the puppet was holding both a sword and shield, it resembled a sword dance as well. *That's pretty cool in its own right, really.*

"What a beautiful dance," I said, glancing at Arte beside me. She was panting and sweating profusely. "Whoa, you okay, Arte?!"

"Lady Arte, are you all right?"

Frantic, I grasped her shoulders while Till supported her from behind. Between gasps for breath, Arte replied, "I think I used...too much magical power...Maybe because it was made of mithril."

"Magic deficiency," Till explained. "Come, lie down. Let me get you some water."

Arte flashed the two of us a weak smile. "Thank you very much. Even though I feel weak, I'm also in a wonderful mood thanks to you both. I-I've lived my life believing I have no value. But now I want to look for something that only I can do."

Her heartwarming realization gave me an idea. "I'd like to study your magic, if that's okay. I think it will help us figure out what kinds of things you can do with it."

Arte nodded happily.

I wound up building two powerful new weapons. The first was the mechanical bow made from Van-approved mithril, monster bones, and monster hide. I was able to boost the bow's power and durability by leaps and bounds, but that made it heavy, so I only gave this version to men. For the women, I made mechanical bows with wood blocks and monster hide, which were much lighter and easier to use.

The moment I showed the new bow to Paula, she lost her mind and started firing blindly. I began to doubt my decision to make her a commanding officer, but oh well.

Sitting in front of me in our storage facility was a humanoid puppet made of wood blocks. I turned to face everyone behind me, then paused for a moment. Since it was already evening, the group was a mix of slaves, villagers, and adventurers. "Hello, everyone. I would like to unveil Seatoh's newest weapon, courtesy of Lady Arte. Let the fun begin!"

I shuffled off to the corner and planted myself next to Arte, who took a deep breath and raised her hand toward the puppet. It stood up gracefully and greeted the crowd, dexterous as a human. The dress, shoes, and round hat it wore made it seem even *more* humanlike.

"Wow! It's almost like it's alive."

"But wait, isn't this...?"

"Marionette magic? Isn't there a story about how someone used it to revolt against the royal family?"

Surprised murmurs flitted through the crowd—and not all of them were positive. Arte must've heard them, as her hand trembled. Royalty and nobility alike spread all kinds of cruel tales about forms of magic they didn't accept. Some of these tales were born from the magic's poor reputation, while others were things that truly had happened in history.

Take, for example, Khamsin's thieving magic. One reason thieving magic was blacklisted was that, in the past, a former slave became a thief and used their

magic to form a gang of notorious bandits. There were all kinds of similar stories, including accounts of merchants who used thieving magic to engage in all kinds of nastiness.

Marionette magic had the same sort of history. When the topic of assassination came up, marionette mages were usually mentioned in the same breath. Even worse was the fact that, when an event had no apparent relation to marionette magic, people would speak as though the culprit was secretly brainwashed or controlled by it behind the scenes. They drew their own conclusions based on marionette magic's negative popular associations. Discrimination against those with marionette magic ran deep.

Even at the tender age of ten, Arte understood this; she knew how others would look at and interact with her once they learned of her magical aptitude. In this moment, that awareness was likely painful.

As doubt and fear spread through the crowd, I clapped my hands together. "You haven't seen anything yet! This puppet can do more than just greet a crowd, my friends. Lady Arte can make it perform an amazing dance the likes of which you've never seen!"

I turned to Arte, who pressed her lips together and looked up. The puppet crouched and spun in a slow circle. It maintained its low posture, twirling again and again while moving to the side, then leapt gracefully into the air. The skirt of its dress fluttered, and its slender limbs created a gorgeous arc. The crowd watched in awe, taken by the elegant dance unfolding before their eyes. The puppet's delicate movements continued for a few more minutes before it knelt down and lowered its head, ending the performance.

The audience was breathless. Some of the villagers had never even experienced true "entertainment" before. I studied their reactions and applauded the show. "What a beautiful dance! As you can see, Lady Arte's wonderful magic allows her to breathe life into the lifeless! It pains me to ask someone as kind and gentle as her to fight, but should the time come, this puppet will stand at the front lines—and even confront a dragon without cowering!"

Arte looked at me with tears in her eyes, then turned and curtsied to the

crowd.

Smiles rose to the spectators' faces.

"The way it moved was incredible."

"Y-yeah!"

"And if Lady Arte's the one controlling it, I'm not worried."

In one final push, I clapped my hands again. "Let's give her a round of applause!"

Those who'd initially been hesitant began to cheer. Within ten seconds, the building was echoing with the crowd's hoots and hollers.

Arte, overcome with emotion, wrapped her arms around me and sobbed.

We threw another barbecue and had Arte's puppet dance atop the makeshift stage. The stage was lit with four torches, with the puppet dancing beautifully in the center. All the concern and anxiety from before had vanished; now everyone was enjoying meat and refreshments while they watched the performance.

"How's your magic power holding up?" I asked Arte.

Despite the beads of sweat rolling down her chin, she nodded and gave me a huge smile. "I'm okay. Compared to the mithril puppet, this one is practically a paper doll!"

That explains why its movements are so crisp and full of life.

"So the materials do make a difference," I observed. "If metal is a struggle for you...maybe the denser the material, the more difficult it is to use magic on?"

I had loads of questions, but for the moment, I was satisfied to see her happy. Wanting her night to end on the highest possible note, I spent the rest of the evening guiding the conversation toward fun and lighthearted topics. We smiled and laughed until the break of dawn.

The next day, the partygoers dragged themselves to work and ruminated on

their poor choices from the night before. Soon enough, I received a report from one of the villagers keeping watch on the road: “Lord Van! There’s an *incredible* carriage coming our way!”

“Say what now?”

Ortho and the others happened to be passing by as this exchange took place. They turned around. “Ah, probably the envoy from the capital,” Ortho said. “They were a bit slow this time around, but normally they’d send an emissary right after a dragonslaying to confirm the situation.”

Pluriel stepped forward. “Oh, and since you’ve become a baron, there’s probably some paperwork for you.”

“And they’ve gotta take a look at the dungeon!”

So much to do.

I nodded. “Gotcha.” Under my breath, I added, “So this isn’t a bad visit.”

Ortho raised a hand, grinning deviously. His party members wore identical smiles. “This looks like it’s gonna be a good time. Can we watch?”

“Er, is it? I mean, I’m okay with that, I guess.”

Some nearby villagers and adventurers listened to our back-and-forth with keen interest. “Oooh, what’s happening?” one villager asked his compatriot.

“I heard Lord Van’s gonna have a peerage ceremony.”

“What’s he going to be?”

“A baron!”

“Wasn’t Lord Van a marquis already?”

“Heck no, you idiot!”

I groaned. *Is it just me, or have they stopped trying to be respectful? I’m fine with it, but a normal noble would probably be furious about this behavior.*

“Hey, Lord Van,” an onlooking adventurer chimed in. “If you become a baron, are we gonna hold a barbecue?”

“A morning barbecue sounds awesome!” said another adventurer.

Ahh, to be young again, I thought with a sigh. “If we have one, it’ll be at night.”

That was enough to get the adventurers excited. “Hell yeah!”

“I’ll get the mesh grill for the meat ready!”

“Where’s the charcoal?!”

“It’s too early for that!” I shouted, but the berserk adventurers paid me no mind. They were already recruiting villagers to their cause and getting ready for a late-night party. I could only watch, resigned to my fate. *It’s over. These people are BBQ junkies. Maybe I should build a rehab center that only serves fruits and veggies?*

The approaching carriage was close enough to make out in detail—and it bore the royal family’s crest. That meant I had to greet our guests personally, so I begrudgingly shuffled down to the front gate. With the star-shaped wall complete, it was a straight shot to the entrance. We had yet to install the rapid-fire ballistae, however, so the ones lining the wall were still double-shot models.

“Lord Van, I think it would be wise to take all of your men with you,” Esparda said.

He was right. It would look bad for a single child to come out to greet a member of the royal family; I would come off as weak. I signaled for everyone to gather, put Dee at the front, then positioned the Seatoh Chivalric Order behind him. This made for a total of one hundred people who would accompany me to the entrance, including the fifty members of my OP machine bow squad. Then, on top of that, we had thirty members of the Esparda Chivalric Order. *Whoa, we look pretty powerful. Especially with these numbers!*

All 130 soldiers were equipped with Van-made armor, making for a magnificent spectacle. Their helmets, armor, and shields were made mostly from wood blocks. Depending on their individual levels of strength, they were equipped with swords made of either wood blocks or iron.

Honestly, wood block equipment would be sufficient against some rando Chivalric Order, but it wouldn’t cut it if we went up against a group of true

powerhouses. The group's current equipment standard was Class A. The iron shields and mithril swords were Class B, and the long-range spears, tower shields, and machine bows were Class C. I would have liked to prepare a cavalry for increased mobility, but that was still a difficult task.

"All right, shall we go greet the envoy?" I said before turning on my heel and walking to the main entrance.

The envoy had nearly arrived by the time the gate was raised. Four cavalymen led the carriage at the front, and a group of armed soldiers followed behind it. "Heavily guarded" was an understatement. "Why are there so many strong-looking guys?" I wondered aloud. "Is it because of the dragon sighting?"

A cavalryman from the front ran ahead. *Is he trying to secure an appointment with little Van? Fine, I suppose this baron will give you some of his precious time.* I stood with my chest out and back straight as the cavalryman approached me, dismounted, and removed his helmet, unleashing a cascade of long blonde hair.

"Yo, Baron Van Nei Fertio." This was no man; it was Viscount Panamera Carrera Cayenne. She flashed a bold smile as she looked down at me.

"Oh, Panamera! Long time no see, eh?" I was so shocked by her presence that, once again, I thoughtlessly responded in a casual tone.

Panamera wrinkled her brow, clearly displeased. "What's this, boy? I was hoping to see more excitement from you. Don't tell me you've found another woman?"

Her wit was sharp, but I didn't laugh. I was too busy wondering how she'd squeezed her dynamite body into that armor.

"Well, I *am* much closer to Arte than I was when you left," I replied. Panamera looked behind me at Arte, who dipped her head with a sunny smile.

"It has been quite some time, Lady Panamera," Arte said. "How have you been?"

That carefree smile was enough to freeze Panamera in place. She blinked her wide eyes over and over, then cast an admiring gaze at me. "What magic is this, boy? Don't tell me you've acquired some magical brainwashing technique. How could she have changed so much in just a handful of months?"

“Well... That’s a good question,” I said. *I honestly don’t have an answer for you.* “I guess if we’re talking specifics, Arte lacked confidence in her magic, so I told her all the ways she could potentially use it—and how amazing she is.”

“I bet you did. That all lines up,” Panamera responded, an odd look on her face. Then she let loose a cackle. “Ga ha ha ha! You’re quite the playboy, you know that? I cannot wait to see what else is in store for you.”

At that moment, we were interrupted by a loud and purposeful cough from the carriage behind her, which had rolled to a stop at some point.

“Oh my,” Panamera said. “It seems I let myself get carried away.” She turned to the carriage and dropped to one knee. “Bow your head, Baron. You stand before His Majesty.”

I automatically knelt down and lowered my head. *Wait, did she just say “His Majesty”?!*

I had little time to process this information before a low, majestic voice reached my ears. “You must be Van Nei Fertio. I am Dino En Tsora Bellrinet, King of Scuderia. As a baron, you now sit upon the lowest seat of nobility. Work hard and contribute to the growth of our good nation. With your power and knowledge on our side, I expect that this country will reach new heights.”

The king was here. Why was the king here?

If you’re the king, what are you doing leaving the capital? And to visit some lowly baron who only just received his peerage?! This is crazy!

The King

THINGS WERE SHAPING UP TO BE EVEN MORE entertaining than I'd imagined. *How fascinating.* For the first time in years, I could not contain my jubilation.

It began before I left to visit the mysterious village and its lordling I'd heard so much about.

"This will be good for you, Sergio," I told my eldest son. "For three months, you will rule the nation in my stead."

"An excellent idea," Chancellor Aperta agreed. "Opportunities like this are quite rare."

Aperta and I looked intently at Sergio, who had turned seventeen only a few days before. Sergio took after me in that he was clever and handsome. If raised correctly, he would be a very wise ruler...but he lacked ambition. He sought peace and stability, with no desire to fight neighboring nations.

In a peaceful world, that would be fine. However, the reality was that our nation did not have some incredible, invincible power to call its own. To survive the violent era in which we lived, we needed to be aggressive. We could not afford to stand idly by as other nations increased their might by seizing territory from one another, or else we would be swallowed by the waves of war.

To be strong means to protect oneself.

Sergio looked troubled. "I-I understand well enough, Father, but why are you *both* leaving? If you need only to confirm that this person is useful, then wouldn't either one of you be more than enough?"

I was certain that he already knew the answer to his question and was merely anxious at the thought of ruling alone. I snorted and stripped off my mantle. "Fear not. I have dispatched spies to both our borders and enemy territory."

"Yes, but it is entirely possible that the enemy is secretly plotting to invade us."

"If they were to invade and catch us completely unawares, then it would be too late for us. We rely on the lords to protect our borders, so we need skilled

nobles, talented Chivalric Orders, and powerful mages. Hence I must meet this little village lord myself, especially if it's true that he took down a dragon."

Sergio seemed displeased, but he closed his mouth nonetheless. I smiled, watching him out of the corner of my eye.

"In most cases, the lord would be summoned to the capital, but I'm told that his village has a population of only one hundred. If I brought him here, the village might well collapse. My only option is to go to him."

"But why do you need to bring Aperta as well?"

Aperta shook his head, stoic and expressionless. "I shan't allow His Majesty to enjoy such a strange set of circumstances all on his own. If he is to leave the capital, then so will I."

"Hey, wait!" I shouted, objecting to Aperta's terms. "I have nothing to do with this!"

Aperta merely shrugged. *Nothing is going to convince him. When he gets like this, he's unyielding.*

After a moment, I turned back to my son. "I have no choice, Sergio. Can you understand that? We will be gone for three months or thereabouts. Serve the nation well as interim king. Oh, yes—I will also be taking Pista with me. If memory serves, he and this little lord are close in age. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Aperta said. "Pista will turn nine this year."

"Nine already, eh? Then this should be a good learning experience for him."

With that, I left the capital for the first time in many moons. Sergio continued to sulk, but I was already king when I was his age. He could survive for three months.

It had been so long since I last traveled that I felt like a young man again, eager to be on the road. I donned armor for the trip and walked alongside the carriage as we went. That was enough to surprise Lady Panamera, who had accepted the job to guard us en route, but the rest of my royal guard appeared

utterly disinterested.

Boooring.

Though I wore a disguise, we could not hide the fact that we were envoys from the capital. That prevented me from seeing the towns along the way from a commoner's perspective. As soon as anyone saw the royal family's crest, they knelt and bowed their heads. Even the few who remained upright and looked directly at us were forced by those around them to bend their knees. I understood why, but it was no fun at all.

As a show of power, royals and nobles had to behave in a severe, often hostile manner, binding the nation's citizens with the law. Things had to be that way; should those bindings loosen or slip, someone might start an insurrection. The capital also functioned that way. In a country like ours, where we were always seeking to expand our territory, there was little to be done about it. One undesired consequence of that policy was that citizens were always vigilant, bending their knees to demonstrate their deference whenever they saw the crest of a lord or the royal family.

I gazed out the window of the carriage. "I do not strive to rule by fear, but that is certainly what it looks like from the outside," I murmured.

Aperta nodded. "It's unfortunate, but it's necessary to maintain the stability of the nation. A line must be drawn between royals and nobles and the common folk—a qualitative difference. This difference must be strictly monitored and enforced by law, and those who deviate from the law must be punished. By doing this, you can keep the nation prosperous, strong, and stable for a long time."

When he finished this explanation, Aperta glanced at Pista, who sat off to his side. Focused as he was on the view outside his window, Pista did not notice Aperta's gaze.

Unlike Sergio, Pista—my earnest and docile fifth son—was always on the go. He hated studying and sitting still, and while he was interested in swords and horses, he cared little for politics or governing. Given his aptitude for wind magic, I thought I might leave the Chivalric Order in his hands someday. Aperta was of a different mind: he wanted to make Pista the lord of some large city.

The idea was interesting, to be sure, but I did not think the boy was suited for the role. Still, I imagined our trip to meet the lord of this remote village might provide a good shock to my son's system, what with the lord in question being only eight years old.

"Your Majesty?" said Aperta, interrupting my train of thought.

"Hmm?"

He pointed out the window. "There's the village. Our long journey is almost at its end."

"I see. I did spot a few other villages along the way, but I doubt those with three hundred or even a thousand residents could take down a dragon... Hrm?" I squinted at a large structure down the road that seemed to have popped out of nowhere. "What is that?"

"Well, sire, it appears to be...a wall?" Aperta's voice was devoid of its usual confidence. "It can't be a town wall, can it?"

"What an amazing wall!" Pista remarked.

Children were always unafraid to speak their minds. My son was right; it was definitely a town wall. It couldn't possibly belong to a mere village, though.

"Shall I call for Lady Panamera?" Aperta asked me.

"No, at ease. The viscount had no reason to lie. She could not have foreseen our desire to visit the village in person—surely she means no harm."

"Be that as it may, this is not the small village she told us to expect. Even if the construction commenced before she came to the capital, this structure could not have been completed in a mere two or three months."

"You make a good point," I said. "All right. Summon the viscount."

Aperta issued commands to the soldiers, who brought forth Panamera. She knelt before me, a troubled expression on her face.

I spoke to her from inside the carriage. "Is that the village you told us about? It looks nothing like your description."

She looked up, her expression grave. "I am just as surprised as you are. I did

not think he would go and build a whole new village while I was gone... No, given the size, this must be a town.”

“A whole new village?” I gaped at her. “You mean to say he created that from *nothing*?”

Panamera nodded. “Indeed. The actual village is farther in. I helped build the walls around it, so I am certain of that much.” She was acting so nonchalant about it all.

“I don’t follow. Are you saying the baron did this? You said before that Van Nei Fertio himself developed the village, did you not?”

“That is correct,” Panamera said. “Even so, I have never seen the town that lies ahead, so I cannot speak to how it came about. I humbly ask that you accompany me into town—I think that would be ideal for all involved.”

We passed through the gate and entered the well-structured town, our soldiers organized into four neat rows to stay out of everyone’s way. The town was divided into districts, and the architecture felt like something from a foreign nation. I found it difficult to believe that a child could have designed it. *Does he have a foreign designer in his employ?*

Equally curious was the citizens’ imposing air. Their attire lacked any kind of uniformity, and they brandished well-worn weapons. All told, they appeared to me like a gathering of ruffians. I surmised that they were likely mercenaries or adventurers, but while I had seen towns full of adventurers before, it was rare to encounter a place with so few normal citizens.

At the very least, people were stepping off to the side of the road to allow us to pass, but many merely sat around watching us. Having encountered nothing but deference in other towns throughout my journey, I found this fascinating and refreshing. Several of our soldiers were shooting the commoners aggressive looks, but the ruffians paid them no mind; they had guts.

The town was rather small, and we soon arrived at its end. Since I’d expected a village with only a hundred residents, it still felt plenty large to me. It was developed enough to be a fortress city of sorts. For villages this far out in the

country, any settlement big enough for two or three stables was thought to be a big deal.

Panamera led the way, passing through the town without stopping. A gate opened at the back, and she brought us to another road before dropping back to our carriage. “The village should be this way,” she informed me. “However, much like the town we just passed, none of this is particularly familiar to me.” She was trying to hold back a smile.

I peered out the window. “Hmm? Wait, is that a fortress?”

Pista couldn’t contain his excitement. “Wow! It’s so big!”

It pained me to admit it, but even I was overwhelmed. I already thought the town we’d just left was impressive, and now I was faced with an enormous, unique wall complete with towers. Anyone would have been rendered breathless by the sight.

Aperta, it seemed, felt the same. “This is something else. Quite frankly, it’s even more impressive than Personam Fortress, the linchpin of our protective forces in this area.”

“Don’t say that, Chancellor,” I admonished. “We may be speaking informally here, but it would be disastrous for rumors to spread that a middle-of-nowhere village is more heavily fortified than Personam Fortress, especially since Personam was one of the previous king’s great achievements.”

While I was entirely serious, Aperta’s shaking shoulders told me he found humor in the situation. I glared at him as he covered his mouth with a hand and chuckled. “I couldn’t help myself,” he said once he had regained his composure. “You were being so sensible for once.”

I crossed my arms. “How rude.” Aperta and I went back many years, even before I was king, so he did not hold me in such high esteem as others did. He was, in fact, the only person who would dare to laugh at me; that made him an important figure in my life.

Returning to the topic of the town, Aperta said, “Your Majesty, this would have been a normal village when the marquis took over this territory. I don’t mean to doubt the viscount’s assertions as to how this landscape changed, but

the entire stronghold must have been built with astounding speed.”

“What are you trying to say?”

The corner of Aperta’s mouth quirked up. “Isn’t this positively fascinating?”

That was when I finally understood the feelings taking shape within me. I was hopeful, even expectant. I wanted to head straight toward that structure in the distance. I acted the calm and composed king in front of Pista, but in my heart, I wanted to tour that massive man-made structure and figure out how its walls had been crafted, how the dragon had been defeated, and everything else about this place.

Now that I was aware, I burst out laughing. “Ba ha ha ha ha! You are correct! This is getting good! Now then, the stronghold is right in front of us. Let’s ask its makers how it came to be. I’m certain there are useful insights to be gained!”

Aperta grinned. “It’s good to have you back, Your Majesty. I thought for a moment that the stronghold had intimidated you.”

“Nonsense! I was merely deep in thought over this unexpected turn of events.” Aperta looked forward again, still smiling.

The wall was just ahead of us. From this distance, we could tell it was a bit shorter than the capital’s walls, but it was well made all the same; the craftsmanship was evident in the consistent stone color and the near-total lack of visible seams. The towering front gate was adorned with fine detailing, too. Even putting the cost aside, it would take a ten-thousand-person workforce at least a year to produce something of such fine quality.

“What a strange shape.” I swept my gaze over the wall from inside the carriage, taking in all visible sides. “Why does this section protrude outward?”

A surprised voice coming from the stronghold interrupted my thoughts. “Open the gates! Open them!”

The gates in front of us opened inward with surprising speed, revealing a large group that resembled a Chivalric Order—and a well-equipped one at that. A butler, a maid, and three children were front and center. The child in the middle was likely Lord Van. Panamera, being familiar with the baron, rushed out to meet him, and for a few minutes they exchanged words.

Actually, it was much longer than a few minutes. They made me, the *king*, wait while they carried on a full conversation. Lady Panamera was daring, I had to give her that.

Eventually, Aperta loudly cleared his throat, and Panamera dismounted from her horse to take a knee. Everyone nearby followed suit, so I exited the carriage and padded forward, trailed by Aperta and Pista. The crowd was brimming with excitement. Panamera must have said something, but it was fine with me. I just wanted to get the formal greetings over with.

“You must be Van Nei Fertio,” I said, looking down at the boy in question. “I am Dino En Tsora Bellrinet, King of Scuderia. As a baron, you now sit at the lowest seat of nobility. Work hard and contribute to the growth of our good nation. With your power and knowledge on our side, I expect that this country will become even stronger.”

I had a list of important things to tell the new baron as his king. Next was the report from the Adventurers’ Guild.

“I hear a dungeon has been found in your territory,” I went on. “An investigation team from the guild will arrive shortly, and I trust you will tell them the complete truth regarding its discovery. A report to the guild is a report to the kingdom itself. Take care that your words are honest and true.”

And finally, the main event.

“Last but not least, I’m told you slew a forest dragon and put up its remains at the kingdom’s auction. Spectacular accomplishments. Normally, knight investigators would be dispatched to confirm the situation, but because this location and these events are so abnormal, I chose to come see things for myself. I expect you to answer all my questions. Any objections?”

The young baron raised his head. “Absolutely not. I promise to speak only the truth. However, I would like you to promise me one thing in return.”

Surprised by his mature handling of my question, I replied, “And what might that be?”

He looked straight into my eyes and offered a half smile. “I will show you everything there is to show, but you may not believe me because it will all seem

like a pack of lies. I would be grateful if you made an effort to trust in what you see and hear.”

“You are a fascinating young man,” I responded after a pause, ignoring the sounds of Aperta fighting back laughter. “I promise you I will.”

Van

MY FIRST IMPRESSION OF KING DINO WAS THAT he emanated power even though he was getting up there in years. The man behind him, Chancellor Aperta, was slender and gave off a sadistic vibe. He was always grinning for some odd reason, which was kind of frightening. And they had one more person with them: a boy so ethereally beautiful he could be mistaken for an elf. He surveyed his surroundings with great interest, and it was obvious at a glance that he was the king's son. His name was Pista En Tsora Bellrinet.

A prince, eh? I thought as I showed the king around the village. *Damn it all. He would look completely at home on a white horse.*

The first stop on our little tour was Oligo Tower, the watchtower at Seatoh's entrance. "It is quite tall," the king observed.

"The taller it is, the easier it is to survey the entire village," I explained.

"Is it now?" He fell silent, following me.

Along for the ride were Aperta, Pista, a fierce-looking man I assumed was the commander of the royal guard, and Panamera. For my part, I brought Till, Khamsin, Arte, and Dee with me. Esparda might have died on the way up the tower, what with his terrible lack of stamina, so I had him wait at the bottom. Even I was panting heavily by the time we arrived at the observation deck on top of the tower.

The deck allowed for a 360-degree view of our surroundings. It was a clear day with barely a cloud in sight, so the view was awesome. We could see the roads, fields, woods, and even the mountain range in the distance. Plus the recently completed town, of course.

Also visible from up top was the beautiful star-shaped wall and the square-shaped stronghold in the center, with the apkallu's lake farther back. *Wow.* Now that I was taking it all in, I thought the observation deck could be a great sightseeing location. *Maybe I should introduce it that way to King Dino?*

Pointing, I said, "The tiny village over there is Seatoh, the place I was put in charge of. When I first arrived, it was all broken-down houses and wooden

fencing, but now it has quite the defense system. The wall, gate, and moat are its primary forms of protection, and then we have the ballistae on the walls to strike back against assailants.”

“Ballistae, you say?” Dino looked intrigued. “We have them in some defensive castles and fortresses, but they aren’t particularly convenient.”

Aperta, who was as breathless as I was, agreed. “Indeed. Ballistae can only hit an enemy of a particular size and distance, and it takes a long time to ready them for each shot. They are a struggle to use.”

They were badmouthing ballistae even as they eyed me with interest. *What do you guys want from me, exactly?*

“Allow me to show you how these work.” I looked down the parapet and ordered, “Paula! Fire one into the woods!”

Paula raised a fist in response, then shot two consecutive bolts into the forest. Even from where we were standing, we could hear the projectiles whizz past and smash down a bunch of trees. They collided with the ground, their heavy thuds reverberating through the air.

As presentations went, it was plain and boring. I found myself wishing we’d been attacked by some armored lizards or something; that would have been a great way to sell them on the capabilities of these ballistae. Sadly, things didn’t always go according to plan.

Or so I thought, anyway. The gallery of new onlookers was surprisingly giddy.

“That thing has astounding power and range!” said Aperta. “I certainly did not expect it to fire two shots consecutively.”

The king agreed. “This is fascinating! The fact that you can launch an attack that powerful without relying on a first-rate archer or mage... Brilliant!”

Not only were both men excited over the potential applications of my ballistae, but little Pista was thrilled about the view *and* the weapon itself. *Perfect! I’ve got them in my clutches.*

“What else is there?” the king asked.

Unthinking, I blurted out, “Say what?!”

I mean, that's it. This is how we defend the village. What more do they want?

Aperta cleared his throat and pointed downward. "From our perspective, this six-pointed wall of yours is rather mysterious."

"Ah, the star wall. Right. That was an idea I came up with to maximize our use of ballistae. The six areas jutting out form wide triangles that allow us to provide cover fire from both the left and right sides. If invaders try to ignore them and attempt to strike at a spot where the walls are thin, they'll be faced with a concentrated attack from three sides. Unless they take down a whole section first, they'll never actually get in."

King Dino and Aperta shared a glance before looking down at the wall from above. Finally, the king said, "I see. The mere thought of those bolts raining down from three directions sends a chill down my spine."

"And the walls of a triangular structure would be much harder to destroy than your standard wall. Even if one were to get out from the shadow of the triangle, you would be faced with bolts from other directions."

"Hmm... This is a very useful form indeed. Now that I think about it, is it not the perfect defense system for everything but attacks from the sky?"

They went back and forth as I crossed my arms and groaned. "The sky, huh? I have several prototypes built to deal with that, but I haven't tested any of them yet. Eventually, I would like to unveil my anti-air weapons."

Both Aperta and King Dino furrowed their brows at me. Aperta said, "You speak as though you made them yourself, Lord Van."

"Indeed," said King Dino.

I nodded earnestly. "That's exactly what I'm saying."

Aperta snorted, and King Dino coughed pointedly with a grave look on his face. "I told you to speak only the truth."

"I promise you I am." He wanted to know everything, so I answered him. I wasn't a fan of getting chewed out for following orders, so this dubious response had me a bit peeved.

As I stewed in my anger, the pair turned to Panamera with troubled

expressions. She nodded, confirming what I'd said. "I understand how hard it is to believe, but I ask that you listen to what he has to say. There are more surprises in store for you."

Perplexed, King Dino and Aperta looked between me and Panamera.

I already showed them the wall and the ballistae. What's left? With that question looming in my mind, we descended the tower and made for the village.

"Who designed the wall?" asked King Dino. "It is rather unique."

"I did."

"Hmm... Then what about the layout of the village? No matter how you slice it, this must have been a large-scale development project that took multiple years. How did you accomplish this?"

"I worked super hard. The villagers and Lady Panamera's men helped me gather materials."

With every answer, King Dino and Aperta's expressions darkened. Pista, by contrast, was over the moon about it all.

Yeah, they don't believe me whatsoever. With no other choice, I had some wood blocks carried to the front of Seatoh.

"What is this?"

"Don't tell me it's some kind of new material from the dungeon...?"

I ignored the men's puzzled asides and focused on solidifying my mental image. I pictured the new machine bow, capable of firing multiple bolts consecutively. My ultimate objective was a device with even more firepower, but this was our best weapon for now.

The last issue to hammer out was that its durability declined as I scaled it up. The bolts got heavier, and because it fired them faster, the burden on the whole system was dire. To solve that problem, I planned to modify its construction by thickening each part so that the drawstring, the device for loading the next bolt, and other parts would hold up against the constant firing impact.

That said, I couldn't locate the stress points without adequately testing the weapon. I also didn't know if the modified parts would affect the untouched bits. Creation was all about trial and error; I just had to keep brainstorming and trying things out.

I went ahead and built a ten-shot ballista. Unloaded, obviously. "There we go," I said, then turned around.

My little entourage had wry smiles planted on their faces, but King Dino and the others were speechless.

Starting with the wall and the ballistae, our visitors peppered us with all sorts of questions. They asked Dee how he cleaved off the head of the dragon, and they even asked about our swords. We answered everything, and soon they requested to see the houses we built.

I gave them a tour of the houses, apologizing to the residents as we went.

"What are the walls and roof made of?"

"Modified lumber," I explained. "It's a unique material, only available here in Seatoh."

"And how durable is it?"

"Think of it as something like an iron that never rusts."

"Is the furniture made from normal wood?"

"Generally speaking, it's all made by the villagers themselves."

"And what of this moat?"

"We all worked together on that. My butler, Esparda, handled the moat, the river, and the basic structure of the wall."

"How many years did it take to build these structures?"

I mulled it over. "Five months? No, more like four months, really."

Finally, King Dino stopped in his tracks and held his head in his hands. "Are you following any of this?" he asked Aperta.

“Not at all, Your Majesty. At this point, it would be faster for him to simply show us, would it not?”

Esparda and I exchanged glances. “Is there anywhere that’s still a work in progress?” I asked him.

“Perhaps the lake in the back that we spoke about before?”

“Oh, that. Perfect.” After this brief strategy meeting, I spun over to King Dino again. “Shall we head to the lake in the back?”

“A lake, you say?” The king raised a brow. “I remember seeing it from above. It must be quite a sight to behold.”

We cut through the center of the village to the back gate leading out to the lake. I had my people lower the drawbridge and open the gate, revealing a tranquil scene: a picturesque lake and a series of boathouses and farms equipped with outhouses. At the bower of the rest area to the side of a boathouse were a bunch of old folks drinking tea.

As I gazed out at the peaceful view, shocked cries rose up behind me.

“Wh-what in blue blazes?!”

“It cannot be!”

King Dino wasn’t the only one reeling—everyone was for some reason or other. Fifty or sixty adult apkallu sat by the waterside, and a hundred or so younglings played in the center of the lake.

“They’ve multiplied!” I said, shocked. Our apkallu population had clearly increased. *Are they one of those races where the young grow at an exponential rate?*

I approached Ladavesta, and the apkallu finally noticed us.

“Well, if it isn’t the groom,” said one.

“Ooh, Lada Priora’s man?” said another.

“You haven’t been by in a few days.”

I frowned. “Um, Ladavesta? I’m not her groom. I’ve told you this before.”

“Is my daughter not good enough for you?” he asked.

“That’s not it. I just think that she would be happier marrying a promising young apkallu.”

The king and his people cautiously approached from behind. King Dino said, “If my eyes do not deceive me, they appear to be the fabled race known as apkallu.”

“What a coincidence, Your Majesty,” Aperta said dryly. “They appear that way to me as well.”

Ignoring them, I asked Ladavesta, “So, uh, there are a whole lot more of you, huh? Are they relatives or something?”

He shook his head. “No, they are the Aft Clan. They live further up the river than we did. They came here to visit us, but they grew rather fond of the location once they arrived. They decided to bring the whole clan here, which occurred last night.”

“And they plan on staying?” I said.

“Correct. Is that all right?”

“We’ve still got room in the lake, so that works for me.”

A rather rotund apkallu swam up to us as we discussed the details. “You must be Lord Van, Lada Priora’s groom and the patriarch of this land, yes? I am Avtovaz, patriarch of the Aft tribe Ladavesta told us all about this wonderful place, and we’ve decided we want to live here as well.”

“Right, right,” I said. “That’s fine. Just be sure to bring us fish and ore from underwater when you get the chance. If you do, I’ll build you guys some more boathouses.”

“Really?” Avtovaz replied. “That is more than a fair trade. We shall bring you ore immediately.” With that, he swam off.

If we’re going to get an uptick in apkallu, it might be a good idea to build an island at the center of the lake. Let’s see... If the water level rises, the whole system makes the water return downstream, but we can also make the lake bigger... Depending on how things pan out, that might be the best option.

“Lord Van.”

I turned around to find King Dino with his mouth hanging open and cheeks twitching.

“Yes?”

“You have relations with the apkallu? Are they among your citizens?”

“Yeah. It just kinda happened.”

Aperta nodded in wonder. “I see. So you just happened to become engaged to an apkallu girl...?”

“Nope. Not at all.” I cut that misunderstanding off at the pass. If I didn’t do so immediately, rumors might spread to the capital.

“I cannot believe the apkallu are allowing themselves to be so vulnerable. I have never seen anything like this,” remarked a stunned King Dino.

As someone who had no idea what apkallu were normally supposed to be like, I was curious to see the more mysterious, humble side of them. *Anyhow, I need to expand the lake and the wall!*

I turned to my butler. “Esparda, I was thinking about expanding the lake and building a taller wall in the back. For the wall, I want to stack another star shape atop the one we already have. It’ll take about two or three months to complete, but...”

Esparda’s brow creased in confusion. “Stack them, you say? Apologies, but I don’t quite follow.”

I grabbed a nearby wood block and modified it on the ground, making a simple model. “Right now, it’s like this. I want to expand the lake to the outside, then wrap it up like so...”

“Ah, I understand now. It does look like you stacked another star wall over the original. The corners are... I see, I see. So you can aim in all three directions from this corner and that corner... Should we not add on to the rest of the wall as well?”

“Good point. My end goal is for this to be an overpowered, invincible fortress city. The only issue is that we don’t have the materials. If we did, we could wrap this up within a year.”

I kept adding to the model as we talked things over, eventually ending up with a giant star-shaped city with seven layers of star walls. King Dino chimed in from off to the side. “Hmm, the more I look at it, the more mysterious a design it seems. It’s so beautiful and refined...”

“If you were attacked from here, would it not be difficult to defend the corner jutting out?” Aperta chimed in.

“Our ballistae have a long attack range,” I replied. “Even if the enemies go for a corner, we can still hit them from three directions. And if a single corner were to be destroyed, they’d still have to go through the next wall.”

I continued using the model to explain the defensive capabilities of the star-shaped city. Although this was all a bit of armchair theory, King Dino and Aperta seemed to follow what I was saying.

Aperta murmured, “Even a first-class elemental mage would not be able to do anything about the range of those ballistae.”

“If anything, they would make for an easy target considering they have to chant their spells,” King Dino said. “They also have no means by which to defend against ballista bolts. This is essentially an impregnable fortress.”

Having finished their discussion, they turned back to me.

“We hope to have this complete by next year, because we have further plans for its final form,” I went on. “If I were to attack *this* fortress city myself, I am fully confident I could bring it down. The final form of Seatoh will be a city that even I could not conquer. Only then will it truly be complete.”

King Dino and Aperta treated me to identical wide-eyed, slack-jawed stares.

“Should we even be calling this place a village?” King Dino asked.

“I am sorry to say this, sire, but the defenses of this village far exceed those of the capital,” Aperta frowned. “No, forget I said anything.”

“Fool. We mustn’t speak like that here. Still, we need to send our country’s planners here to learn... Though they’ll have to call an eight-year-old their mentor.”

Once their back-and-forth was complete, they went back to quietly observing.

Meanwhile, since I'd promised to show them everything, I started building a wall. *I'm pretty sure there are very few nobles who work as hard as I do.*

"Okaaaay! Pull the rope!" I called. "Is it straight? What's the angle? A little to the right. Right! To the right! Yes, perfect!" I was acting more like a director than a baron, guiding the construction and getting us ready to build the wall. "Did you draw it out? All right, everyone, step back! Esparda, you're up!"



“Yes, my lord.” Esparda cast a spell, creating an earthen wall about ten meters tall and five meters wide. He seemed to have gotten the hang of this process; the structure he built was much easier to work from than before.

I placed my palm against the dirt and altered its properties. I wanted to use more stone and ore in our constructions, but this was fine for now. I could always add that stuff later if I wanted to. “Hmm, it wouldn’t be good to make them wait too long. What should I do next?”

When I turned back around, my audience was petrified. King Dino had moved well past surprise, looking more exasperated than anything. He pinched the bridge of his nose, shaking his head. “I’m exhausted from all these surprises. I think I need to rest for a bit. Is there anywhere I can take a breather?”

“How about the bower over there?” I suggested. “It’s right on the edge of the water and plenty comfortable.”

“You have my thanks.”

I led King Dino to the bower, where the villagers prepared a chair for him. The apkallu watched quietly for a moment, exchanged glances, and came over to me. “Is he the patriarch of some other land?” one asked me.

I corrected them with a smile. “He’s more like a grand patriarch who leads the other patriarchs. He kind of rules over hundreds of other patriarchs, if that makes sense?”

Ladavesta’s face stiffened. “I had no idea... I must express my utmost respect to him. We show honor to all who lead.” He proceeded down to the edge of the lake where King Dino sat, sipping a fruit drink. “Great Patriarch, I am Ladavesta, patriarch of the Lada Clan.”

“Mm. I am Dino En Tsora Bellrinet, king of this nation. For me, this is a day of great importance, as it marks the first time you and I have exchanged words, Lord Ladavesta. I hope that in the future I might look back on today as the beginning of our friendship. What do you think?”

“I have no objections,” Ladavesta replied to this amazing show of respect. “It would be my pleasure.”

At a glance, it was nearly impossible to tell who had the higher standing. But since this new bond was between an apkallu and a human, maybe nobody outranked anyone.

“Hey, Ladavesta,” I called out. “Do you have anything interesting that might serve as a gift?”

He tapped his chin, then raised his head. “There is a stone that even we consider rare.”

Ladavesta produced two mysterious, fist-sized chunks of stone from nowhere. They were reddish and had a golden shine. With fluid movements, he set them on the edge of the lake. Fascinated, I picked one up to take a better look, but the king and his chancellor shouted in shock.

“I-It cannot be!”

“Orichalcum?!”

Stunned, I looked back down at the stone in my hands. Orichalcum was a strange material often referred to as the “Metal of the Gods.” In terms of magical energy transmission, mithril was higher up the food chain, but for pure solidity, elasticity, and stretchiness, orichalcum was on another level entirely.

Orichalcum did not transmit magic well, which might’ve been why it was so durable against magical powers. Warriors equipped with orichalcum shields could defend against all magic attacks and tear down entire armies themselves—or so the stories went. And that legendary metal was in my hands.

“Orichalcum... This is amazing,” I said.

King Dino picked up the other piece and started conversing with the chancellor. “I did not expect to see such a rare material out here...”

“The only place where orichalcum can be processed is in the dwarf nation, and we do not have much of a relationship with them,” Aperta pointed out.

“Shall we send an envoy to the Volks Union?” the king asked. “If we do that, surely we can make an order. Dwarves are natural blacksmiths. Once they know we have orichalcum, they won’t be able to resist.”

“Perhaps, but if we used this orichalcum to create a blade, we would need

more than a hundred platitudes to pay for it.”

“Who cares about expenditures? Any sword made with this material would become a national treasure. Money is meant to be spent.”

Things grew heated between the two of them as I sent my own magic through the chunk of orichalcum in my hands. Since it was resistant to the transfer of magic, this process required a lot of effort on my end. No matter how hard I focused, it only shifted ever so slowly. I was able to shape lumber, stone, iron, and mithril as I liked, but orichalcum was a tough cookie.

Maybe it'll be easier to work with if I stretch it really thin first?

I stretched the ore out, ridding it of any impurities. The result was a beautiful piece of metal with a superb shine. Unfortunately, while it was pretty and all, it was even more difficult to modify without those impurities. “Grr...” I channeled more magic into the orichalcum in an attempt to alter its shape.

I don't exactly have a ton of this stuff, so maybe I'll make a knife. Hmm, I could also just craft a blade and pop it on the end of a spear. Eh, I'll make something first and then figure it out.

This thought process led me to craft a blade that was sixty centimeters long and ten wide. Glamorously, the blade was constricted in the middle and a unique pattern ran from there to the base. In the center, I etched the kanji characters for night, nine, and sword. When read in Japanese, it sounded the same as saying “Baseball Sword.” I was in a playful mood.

I reveled in my creation all alone until I heard gasps behind me. “Wh-what is that?!”

Oh, right. Didn't they say something about only the dwarf nation knowing how to do this?

“Uh, pardon?” I quickly hid the blade behind my back, but nobody was fooled.

“It looks to me as though you just used that piece of orichalcum to make a sword,” said Aperta.

“Lord Van, what did I say about not lying?” said King Dino. They both glared at me with bloodshot eyes. “You can make swords, can't you?”

“And you used a clump of orichalcum to do so.”

Hoping to avoid any trouble, I tried to play it off. “Sorry, I don’t understand a word you guys are saying!”

King Dino scowled. “What do you want? I shall offer you *anything* to keep you honest.”

Fortunately for him, these were the words I most wanted to hear. “In that case, I’d like permanent residence here. I want your promise that I will never be forced to move elsewhere, no matter what. Please.”

My request stunned everyone, not just the king and chancellor.

Frowning, King Dino said, “But why? If you came to the capital, I could promise you favorable treatment in all manner of things, regardless of your peerage.”

Bullet dodged. I was about to get summoned to the capital and worked to the bone! I just want to make this place nice and live a slow, easygoing life.

I rejected the king’s offer without missing a beat. “If I left this place, who would protect these people? As the lord, I have a duty to ensure they can live peaceful lives with food to eat and a roof over their heads. It’s up to me to make this land prosper.”

My words left the king dumbfounded.

Chapter 6:

A Surprising Village

FORTUNATELY, THE KING AND THE CHANCELLOR took my cliché declaration entirely seriously—maybe in part because some nearby villagers were tearing up.

King Dino said to Aperta, “I firmly believe that I’ve given my children the best education possible, yet this boy is wise beyond his years. Is this what true genius is like?”

“Honestly, he’s more talented than most of the current lords,” the chancellor replied. “Still, his choice to defy you is a point of contention. Now that Lord Van has peerage and control over this land, he likely sees everyone around him as a potential enemy. Given this situation and what would happen should he make an enemy of you, I imagine obediently moving to the capital would be the safest choice for him.”

What a terrifying scenario Aperta painted. *Everyone is a potential enemy, huh? Well, I am a lord with territory.*

Until this point, I’d been under Marquis Fertio’s protection—whatever form it took. And for better or worse, he’d never reached out after putting me in charge of this village. But things were different now. If I made a single misstep, my father might do something; in fact, he almost certainly would. It wouldn’t surprise me if my two pesky older brothers antagonized me, at the very least.

Even if I were summoned to the capital, not much would change. I would be an eight-year-old with a title who was treated favorably by the king, but I would be inadvertently picking fights with other nobles. If I didn’t play my cards right, I could get poisoned. I could totally see some evil nobleman or woman thinking it was fine as long as they didn’t get caught.

Man, this sucks. This village really is the safest place to be—I only ever need to be cautious of visitors. But wait, what if someone has already infiltrated us...? Meh, all I can do is make sure I’m prepared for the worst.

After about ten seconds, I managed to switch gears. “Pardon my saying so, but if my only option is to abandon my citizens, then I will find another way forward.”

It seemed that the king and the chancellor had already given up on trying to convince me otherwise. They both sighed deeply before the king acknowledged my insistence. “Fine. Your abilities are genuinely precious. If you were to turn against the kingdom and defect to another country, it would be disastrous for us. Even if you can’t come to the capital, we are still capable of sending envoys here to request your aid.”

What kind of aid is he talking about? I wondered, politely bowing my head. “Of course, Your Majesty. I will do everything within my power to assist you.”

I made sure to really hammer home the loyal subject act, and King Dino made a sound that was somehow both a laugh and a sigh. “You’re not fooling me anymore. I no longer view you as just a child.”

Aperta nodded and showered the king with praise. “A wise choice indeed. Lord Van is likely a half-elf or some other breed. I would not be shocked if he was fifty years old or more!”

“Ha ha ha! Really now? You might be right. In that case, we’re almost the same age!”

Aperta’s frivolous conjecture was enough to please King Dino, but I wasn’t laughing. *How can anyone think cute little me is fifty?! Hey, I see you laughing over there, Panamera!*

“Then that’s settled,” I said, trying to redirect the conversation. “Shall we return to the manor? You must be exhausted.”

King Dino approached me, laughing again. “Bwa ha ha ha! Turn that frown upside down, Baron! I only mean to compliment you! You truly are amazing. So much so that I would love to have you handle my son’s education.”

“But we’re the same age.”

“Nonsense! I know you’re really fifty-something, old man.”

He was getting all up in my business. *Who slipped this old dude alcohol?*

There's no way he's sober right now!

At my narrow-eyed scowl, he finally took it down a notch. "Ahh, it has been quite some time since I last laughed like that. Thank you."

"It is an honor," I replied in the flattest tone imaginable, which only made him grin wider.

"Unfortunately, I cannot be away from the capital for too long. If I am not to bring you home with me, then I need to wrap up my investigation and return posthaste. If it won't take too much time, I would like to inspect the dungeon you discovered."

"Oh, um, it's real far from here," I said bluntly, forgetting formalities yet again. "A full day even if you're going round trip. Should probably hold off till tomorrow."

King Dino frowned. "Am I imagining things, or are you getting more and more casual with your king?"

Aperta, Panamera, and the nearby royal guard snickered. Their laughter proved to be infectious, and soon Till, Khamsin, and even Arte were giggling. Eventually *everyone* was grinning ear to ear. I started to get the sense that, barring any unexpected disasters, I would be able to maintain a positive and friendly relationship with the king. As long as the two of us got along, my chances of being harassed by other nobles remained low.

My secret relief didn't last long. Frantic cries from the road yanked me right out of the moment. *Something beyond the wall?*

I looked to see one of the watchmen on the wall looking down at me in consternation. "An ashen dragon!" he shouted. "It's not that big, but it's flying quite close!"

I leapt into action. "Everyone, take up defensive positions! Alert the adventurers!"

Having received their orders, the villagers all moved at once. Dee and Esparda gathered their respective Chivalric Orders and took up combat positions.

"Do you require my assistance?" Panamera asked me, wearing that invincible

smile of hers.

I responded with a smile of my own. “Much obliged, but...is it just me, or do dragons always attack when you’re around? Is there some trick that makes you attractive to dragons?”

Panamera arched an eyebrow. “You dare say that to me, a young woman of marriageable age who has yet to find a fiancé?”

Sensing that Panamera’s low voice signaled something far more dangerous than a dragon, I broke out in a cold sweat. “All right, folks!” I called to the others, breaking into a run. “Hurry to the front gate! The adventurers’ town might have already been destroyed!”

I cut across the village as screams and angry shouts filled the air. When I reached the front gate, I called out to the men and women on the wall. “Where’s the dragon?!”

One of the villagers pointed to the sky. “It’s above the adventurers’ town now! They just shot a cluster of bolts at it, so now it’s cautiously circling in the air!”

“Did any of the bolts hit?!”

“Two in the arm and leg! I can’t confirm any others!”

I groaned. If the beast had received any lethal wounds, it would have collapsed to the ground like the forest dragon and charged us from there. That meant this ashen dragon was still largely unscathed, which was bad news. A wounded dragon was a fierce, crazed beast. If it attacked now, it would be difficult to handle.

“That’s it. We’ve got no other choice—time to bust out the prototype! Till, Khamsin—can you help me get it ready?”

They nodded firmly. “Of course!”

Arte, meanwhile, looked quite worried. I tried to think of something to say to her, but I was interrupted by Dino, who came at me with a serious look on his face. “Allow me to lend you my assistance. Even a powerful fortress city like this will have trouble against a flying dragon. With our help, you should be able to

repel the beast.”

I nodded right away. “We’d greatly appreciate it. The people who can’t attack at long range will have to handle reloading the bolts, though. I’ll show them where to go.”

I led the group up the stairs to the top of Seatoh’s outside front gate.

The King

WHAT A STRANGE BOY. FAR BE IT FROM ME to compare him to my own son, but not once in my several interactions with Lord Van did it feel like I was speaking to a child.

He wasn't a bad person, nor did he bear ill intent toward our kingdom. And though he was the same age as Pista, he was a shockingly talented individual. Going out of my way to make an enemy of him would be pure foolishness. I would give him exactly what he wanted so he would be in my debt. Given his personality, doing so would also make him emotionally attached to our country. If his power to build a fortress in minutes ever fell into enemy hands, our nation would be in grave danger.

Having heard his almost refreshingly earnest determination as a lord, I highly doubted he would do anything as daft as launching an invasion into enemy territory. Nevertheless, it would be prudent to make an ally of him.

"My word. Lord Fertio has quite the son," I said aloud, prompting a quick response from Aperta.

"Actually, I heard that the marquis chased him out of the house. Among the nobles you've appointed, the marquis is one of those who value distinguished service in combat over all else. The young baron's lack of elemental aptitude is undoubtedly one of the reasons he was chased out."

"That...pains me to hear. In the name of building a strong nation, I opted to change the nobility's fundamental philosophy. Perhaps I, too, am partially to blame for the boy's fate."

I would have to rethink our beliefs about different types of magic. I had put elemental magic at the top and divided the rest into mid-and low-tier rankings, yet here we were with a lord whose "low tier" magic gave him the power to perform incredible feats. When I returned to the capital, I would need to restart my research into the various magics.

"Well then," I said, "all that's left is to drive back this dragon."

Aperta grimaced. "Moving in a small group to disguise your trip outside the

capital has backfired on us.” He sounded exhausted. “I imagine that we should be able to drive back a midsize dragon with the people here, but...”

I smiled at him, following Van as he proceeded up the wall. “We might get to see something rather fascinating.”

“I think I’ve had my fill.”

“Ha ha ha, understandable!”

“Y-Your Majesty!” the royal guard cut in. “These are the front lines! You mustn’t—”

“Fear not, I can fend for myself.”

I gently brushed him off as we finished our climb and emerged atop the wall. I surveyed the surrounding area and found people clad in strange armor standing by the ballistae, waiting for orders. *This must be the Chivalric Order that Lord Van recruited from his villagers.*

When I looked up in the air, I saw the silhouette of a small dragon flying high above. “A wyvern flying alone...?” Only a single creature was visible from my vantage point, soaring through the sky. This gave me pause. “Chancellor, what say you?”

Aperta bowed his head low and lifted his staff with one hand. At the end of the rod sat a magic crystal that had been crafted to the highest purity. He pointed it at the sky. “First and foremost, wyverns do not fly solo, nor do they attack alone. There is another threat nearby.”

That confirmed my gut feeling. “Agreed. Yelenetta, then?”

“Geographically speaking, that’s the most likely option. We would detect a massive armed force, so this is probably a small group—perhaps the Chivalric Order of a neighboring land.”

Wyverns were fairly small dragons that usually flew in groups of five or more. In the worst-case scenario, you would find yourself dealing with a group of a hundred beasts hunting together. They couldn’t use breath weapons, their species’ most fearsome attack, and they weren’t particularly graceful on land. They were treated as a low-end subspecies, but even one still posed a threat.

With marionette magic or the brainwashing powers of illusion magic, one could capture a wyvern and turn it into a familiar. The former made the wyvern your ally, whereas the latter enabled you to control it. This was how some of the nations to the far north utilized them. Was Yelenetta doing the same?

Either way, it was safe to assume the wyvern overhead was being ridden by a marionette mage. The problem was that using a wyvern to cross borders was hardly stealthy. What was the enemy's objective?

"Why would they target a village in the middle of nowhere instead of a strategic point like a fortress city?"

"Scudet, the nearest fortress city, has successfully stopped Yelenetta's invasion forces three times," Aperta told me. "They might intend on using this village as a foothold. They probably didn't expect this place to be...what it is now."

"I don't imagine so. I heard the reports and even I was stunned. I'm betting that Yelenetta's information network didn't grasp the full situation." I looked around. The splendid wall and the breadth of the defensive facilities made me hesitate to call this place a village. But the Chivalric Order was more difficult to appraise; they had a unique look, but there was no way to know yet how skilled or well trained they were. "On the other hand, this could be an excellent opportunity."

"Indeed. Hmm, it looks like the enemy's giving orders from atop the wyvern. Which means..."

I listened closely to Aperta's words and made my move. "Lord Van! That wyvern is not your only enemy! A small, elite force is likely headed this way. Tread carefully!"

"Got it! The adventurers' town isn't set up to defend against an attack just yet, so I'm going to send everyone our way!" Van replied. "Dee!"

"Yes, sir! I'll alert them immediately!"

Van acted on my advice, quickly issuing orders to all his men. He had a good head on his shoulders, and he was decisive. His troops also trusted him enough to follow his commands without pause. It felt like I was watching a seasoned

Chivalric Order carry out training exercises; the sensation was enjoyable.

“How do you plan to defend against your attackers?” I asked.

Van’s answer was prompt. “Normally, the Esparda Chivalric Order would set up our first line of defense in the adventurers’ town, but we haven’t had the chance to practice that. Instead, they’ll lead the adventurers back here, and we’ll put up our actual line of defense in the village.”

“Isn’t this your first time fighting against humans?”

“It’s no problem. I’ve already thought things through.”

“Hmm... Be that as it may, things are not so simple when your enemies are other humans. If the opposing side possesses a wise and talented commander, they might come at you with unforeseen tactics.” I offered him guidance like I would my own son, but Van replied to me readily, barely taking the time to think.

“Agreed. That’s why I’ve considered everything: long-range attacks with siege weapons and magic, destroying our wall, storming the village without any other attacks... Depending on how things go down, I’m also prepared to abandon the village if necessary.”

It was an answer not unlike that of a veteran Chivalric Order commander. He considered every possibility. It made me want to press him further on the details, but time was of the essence.

“We’ll be providing cover fire, so please don’t rush,” he told his people. “Stay calm, collect your valuables, and evacuate!”

Van’s orders were not panicked, but they were just tense enough for the adventurers to respond immediately.

“Aye!”

“Ah, I forgot my coins!”

“Where are they?! I’ll get them for you!”

“Like hell you will, jackass!”

In tumultuous fashion, the adventurers hastily evacuated as instructed by the

Esparda Chivalric Order. After everyone was safely within the village walls, the main gate was closed and the drawbridge pulled up. The evacuees had apparently been assigned duties ahead of time: everyone who fled took up a post without waiting for further orders.

Even if this village were a normal fortress city, it would be exceptionally difficult to bring down. There weren't many citizens to speak of, certainly, but they were all loyal to Van—and ready to think on their feet to save the village.

"I may not be able to bring him back to the capital with me, but I will have to give this some thought," I said to myself, grabbing the crystal staff in front of me.

Yelenetta's Army

"WHAT? A FORTRESS CITY? NONSENSE! There's no way something like that has been built already," I said.

The officer frowned. "It's not as large as Scudet, but it is definitely fortified. There are two villages in this area. Would you like to go to the other one?"

"You idiot! We came here to take down Scudet! Like hell we'll change our objective now!"

"Right! My apologies, sir!"

The officer who received the scout's report knelt and apologized. I looked down at him and clicked my tongue. "I heard they were building a fortress city, but I would never have imagined they'd finished it already." What had our intelligence unit been doing while I—Unimog Yelenetta, the eighth prince of Yelenetta—went out of my way to lead the charge myself? I chewed my right thumbnail. "Curses! Is everyone out to make a fool of me?!"

I was already thirty-two, yet my orders were to take down some border village in enemy territory. Sure, it was a part of a greater plan, but my brothers had all been given important roles and positions, so I was thoroughly displeased. At the very least, I thought I'd be assigned to a more significant location. My father, the king, was already getting old, and he would soon step

down—but here I was, given no opportunities to prove myself. I ground my teeth as I looked over everyone.

“There hasn’t been enough time for them to complete a brand-new fortified city,” I said. “Which means they focused on building up the walls to make it look more difficult to conquer than it actually is. We will proceed and take them down!”

The kneeling knight lifted his head to offer his opinion. “P-please, wait! Regardless of how it appears, taking their city will be difficult now that they have a wall! We only have three hundred troops! Attacking with those numbers is just—”

Scowling, I kicked him in the head. He stumbled back like a fool, blood pouring from his nose. “How insolent. Were you not listening to me? That wall is just for show. In fact, we should destroy it before the fortress is fully functional. Are you too stupid to realize this?”

“I-I understand...” He lowered his head, covering his nose.

I glared at him, then heaved a sigh before looking up. “Any reports from the air?”

“According to them, the settlement up front is empty. Everyone appears to have evacuated to the fortified city.”

“Then the place with the wall is our target? But there’s quite a bit of distance between here and Scudet. Evacuating there would make no sense...”

A knight chimed in to present his own deduction: “Well, according to the wyvern squad’s reports, there is a fortress city to the rear of the village.”

This put me in a foul mood, but I held myself back and simply clicked my tongue again. “You imbecile. Look at the wall! It would take at least a year, if not two, to build something like that. Even if they mobilized an absurd number of people, the fastest they could have completed it would be about six months. What purpose would there be in building another town nearby? Answer me.”

“Um... No reason, Your Highness.” Sufficiently browbeaten, the vacuous fool lowered his head.

The reports we received from the wyvern were limited, and we only had a vague idea of what was happening. The marionette mage riding the wyvern could lose control if their concentration wavered for even a moment, and that could mean being thrown off the wyvern's back. They had to continuously feed magical energy into their spell, which meant they couldn't be detailed in their reports.

Not only that, but forcing a living thing to go against its primal instincts required a substantial amount of magical power. For example, getting the wyvern to do something like dive-bomb the wall would be exceedingly difficult. I couldn't possibly use a high-ranking marionette mage for that. As a commanding officer, I couldn't let these fragmented reports confuse me. I would have to take everything in and judge the situation for myself in order to identify the optimal strategy. That was what it meant to be in command.

I sighed and shook my head. *How can someone with such a clear mind as mine be treated so poorly? Are they that jealous of my abilities?*

"I will break through their fortifications no matter what, and I am going to show off my true skills," I declared before turning to my army. "Listen well! According to our eyes in the sky, a number of the villagers have evacuated. They might have already noticed us. Take care as we press onward!"

"Yes, Your Highness!"

We marched down the road, large shields held up in anticipation of an ambush, yet it never came. We arrived at the wall without encountering a single obstacle. We looked up at the wall, then exchanged glances.

"After coming all this way, I cannot imagine this is a trap," I said. "In reality, their villagers are probably few in number. They likely fled elsewhere after they spotted the wyvern." If there was no seasoned Chivalric Order permanently stationed here, it made sense for the villagers to flee at the first sight of a wyvern. "This might be the best possible scenario. If we can take over a base of operations like this without damaging it, it will prove useful to our conquest of Scudet. Now then, open the gates!"

"Yes, sir!"

The soldiers tried to begin destroying the gate, but no matter what they did,

they couldn't even put a crack in it. "Wh-what is the meaning of this?!" one asked.

"Prince Unimog!" said another. "Our iron hammers are doing nothing to it!"

"What?! That can't be!" I chewed my lip.

The gate isn't made of mithril... Is it composed of some kind of new monster material?

"Wait, weren't the villagers fleeing through the back? In that case, the back gate must be open! Come on, men! We're cutting around the other side!" I continued delivering orders as I resumed my march. "Offensive mages, follow from the rear. Heavy infantry out front! Stay on guard!"

"Yes, sir!"

Before we could get around to the back of the village, we saw something that stopped us in our tracks. "Wh-wh-what the hell is that?!" someone cried.

Not even I could blame him for losing his head. We had already been surprised by the walled stronghold, so how else were we to react when we saw the gigantic fortified city on the other side? "It can't be!" I said again. "Is that Scudet?!"

"That's impossible," said a confused soldier.

"Scudet is supposed to be circular, so this is something else!" said another. "It must be a military base that they built in secret!"

"Silence!" I roared, then looked at the distant fortress again. "What a strange form. Do you think it is operational?"

One soldier nodded. "There appear to be objects lined up at set intervals atop the wall, likely for defensive purposes. There also seem to be people nearby."

"So they're going to hide and throw magic at us, eh? Arrows and stones are also a possibility..." I rubbed my chin and groaned. "This would have taken more than three years to build. I cannot imagine how our nation's intelligence unit overlooked an entire fortress city."

"I agree, but don't tell me you're planning on—"

“Taking it over? Of course!” I declared. A few of the knights grimaced in response, and I glared at them. “There are no troops around the fortress. That’s information straight from the wyvern squad. Our first step is to examine its defensive capabilities, and then, should it prove possible, rip it from the enemy’s hands. It should be a piece of cake.”

My cowardly knights went silent in the face of my plan. I shook my head and sighed. *Useless, the lot of them.*

Nothing happened as we continued our approach. Well, there was movement from the soldiers on the wall, but not a single attack. Even though we were close enough that they should’ve been able to fire arrows at us, the fortress maintained its relative silence. I commanded my men to adjust their formation so that their shields could block incoming arrows, then advance carefully. Eventually, we were close enough to look up at the front gate.

“Is it not fully functional yet?” I wondered aloud. But no sooner had I spoken than a voice came down from above.

“This is Seatoh, Lord Van’s territory! State your affiliation!”

It was the voice of a child. That combined with the insipid question made my soldiers burst into laughter before I could so much as snort. Given how nervous everyone had been over attacking the fortress with our small force, telling them not to laugh would be cruel. But we couldn’t afford to just stand there and cackle; we were well within range of longbows.

“We have come to inspect your village!” I shouted back, blending a lie with truth in my search for clarification. My intent was to demonstrate that we meant no harm. “There should not have been a wall here—where did this fortress city come from?!”

“It was completed just recently! We get a lot of monsters around these parts, so we’ve been strengthening our defenses! Um, why have you and your forces come all the way from Yelenetta?”

“H-how did you know we’re from Yelenetta?!” We had no flags raised, and our armor bore no insignia. How had they figured out our affiliation?

“Uh, it was a leading question, actually. The fact that you went straight from Espar Town to this village leads me to believe you’re not all that bright, huh?” the child said, exasperated.

“How dare you insult me! Come down here this instant! Don’t think I’m going to take it easy on you just because you’re a child!” I bellowed.

Much to my dismay, my furious response was met with chortling from atop and beyond the wall. They were laughing at us! Someone else on the wall said, “He’s an idiot! A full-blown idiot! Ha ha ha! If this is who we have to deal with, this will be simple!”

“Indeed it will,” said another.

“Grrrrr!”

I was nearly blind with rage. They were completely underestimating us! This was all because they felt safe on the wall. Their assumption that we could not reach them had inflated their egos.

I took a deep breath and yelled back, “You are the true idiots! Our wyvern can attack you from above! Your wall means nothing!” The voices on the wall fell away at the sound of that. I turned to the soldier standing diagonally behind me. “Order the marionette mage to fly low and threaten them. In their fear, they will soon surrender!”

“Prince Unimog, that kind of recklessness seems unwise...”

“Why?!” I glared at the soldier, who grimaced but still dared to reply.

“If they have an elemental mage, our wyvern may come under fire.”

“Are you a blockhead?! A wyvern is still a dragon!”

“Of course, Your Highness,” the soldier answered, clearly dissatisfied.

It was no mean feat to hit a dragon flying at high speed. Even if they did manage to land a spell, one or two magic attacks wouldn’t be enough to kill it. This would be a good opportunity to measure our enemy’s fighting prowess.

Why does nobody understand something so simple?

“I’ve issued the command to the mage,” my soldier said.

“Good. Once they’ve been overwhelmed by fear, they might take extreme measures. Stay on your toes.”

I glowered at the top of the wall. People were moving, but there was little they could do from up there. At best, they could fire off some ineffectual shots with their longbows.

I can’t wait to see the shock on their faces, I thought as the wyvern drew an arc through the air. It was flying at high velocity above the wall. “Go! Remind them of the true power of a dragon!”

A cackle tore from my lips just as a voice from above the wall shouted, “Fire at will!”

An instant later, black objects rained down on the wyvern in a fan shape from above, engulfing it. The projectiles whistling through the air mixed with the wyvern’s cries as it faltered and dropped, smashing its head on the middle of the wall and collapsing to the ground.

Shortly thereafter, the speed of the black rain eased up, and it began to shower down on *our* heads instead. “Th-the shields! Get the shields!” someone screamed.

I hurried to hide behind the heavy infantrymen. A moment later, the horrible screech of metal clashing against metal echoed amid the pained groans and shouts of the people around me. Unsure what was happening, I ducked.

A few seconds later, the torrent of black objects came to an end, and I fearfully opened my eyes.

Terror seized me as I took in my surroundings. “N-no way! What the hell?!”

My soldiers had collapsed all around me, crying out in pain. From what I could see, only a few were dead, but none of the injured were in any shape to fight. Someone asked, “What happened?! Is this magic?!”

No answer came. Though a decent number of us were unharmed—myself included—none of us could say what had transpired. I checked on one of the fallen soldiers, and their armor had barely a scratch on it.

This has to be magic, I thought...until I knelt down to get a closer look at the

projectiles. They were flat pieces of metal with sharp tips poking out in four directions. They were as thin as the palm of my hand, which meant they were also light. I scanned the area and found dozens of the things littering the ground.

“What are these?!” I asked. “Is this what the enemy used to attack us?!”

Shockingly, it was a child who responded. “It’s a four-sided shuriken, a type of throwing star. Since they’re thin and light, I stuffed them into a container and tried making a shuriken bomb. We shot a whole bunch, and I’m happy to see it worked out. The problem is that we only have two shuriken ballistae, and each can only fire a single shot, so we can’t exactly take on a massive army. At least not yet.”

I whirled around. The drawbridge had been quietly lowered without my noticing, and the gate was half open. Past it was the child who’d spoken—and he was far younger than I’d expected. He wore a pained grin as he padded up to us.

“I’d say this experiment was mostly a success. But, well, the attack range was narrower than I thought. Some of the shuriken also got deflected back at us, so that was kind of dangerous. We won’t be able to use these again without making modifications, unfortunately.”

Armored men with swords and shields guarded him on all sides. There were no visible gaps in his defense, but at this distance, we still stood a chance at victory.

I moved faster than I could think and began to chant. The quickest of my spells could be completed in fewer than ten seconds. The soldiers raised their shields in defense, but it was too late for them. “Burn to death! O flames—”

Before I could finish casting, someone else activated their own spell in a low, masculine voice: “Water, come forth.” The battlefield was suddenly flooded. “Freeze.”

That one word was enough to turn all the water to ice, locking my feet in place and dispersing my spell before I could complete it. That spell was followed up by two more voices, belonging to an elderly man and a middle-aged man.

“Earth Wall.”

“Wind Scythe Wall.”

An immense earthen barrier rose up before me, followed quickly by a fierce wall of whirling gusts.

“Bwa ha ha ha! I remain the best! I have the most experience, after all!” A man clad in flashy attire appeared from beyond the wall, accompanied by a beautiful and alluring woman. The child from before was with him as well, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the man’s face.

“I-It can’t be! You’re the...!”

The man looked down at me with a frown.

Van

MOST OF US LOOKING DOWN FROM THE TOP of the wall were exasperated. The enemy soldiers had circled around town without even attempting to investigate it, plopping themselves right at our doorstep. Didn't they wonder whether we might have soldiers hidden in town? Weren't they worried about the possibility of a pincer attack?

"They're here!" I said. "Ready the ballistae!"

The villagers were a bit panicked about the knights marching on us, but King Dino, Aperta, Panamera, and Dee simply looked annoyed. To put it simply, everyone present who had proper combat experience was thoroughly unimpressed.

"They're really just walking toward us?" the king said.

Panamera sighed. "Their commander is just doing as he pleases. Shall I torch them? I promise to keep them alive."

Though her manner was utterly relaxed, her words sent a chill down my spine. Still, nobody objected.

The problem was that we didn't know whether that was an appropriate response to this particular enemy. Their brazen invasion of my territory was an open act of hostility, but it seemed they might just be idiots who had been sent as an envoy from Yelenetta or something. "Let's hear what they have to say first. I'm curious why they crossed the border with so few soldiers," I said.

The people around me went silent. I took that to mean they were willing to accept my will as the lord of the land.

"All right. Till, Khamsin—ready the anti-air weapons!"

"Would the ballista types be okay, Lord Van?" asked Khamsin.

"Yeah. The catapults aren't stable yet, so just get all the ballista types ready to fire."

"Understood!" Till and Khamsin both sprang into action.

It didn't look like the wyvern planned to attack anytime soon, but the rest of the hostile force had drawn their weapons. The army marched forward with shields at the ready.

"Hmm, we'll have to tread carefully," I said. "Are they within range of elemental attack spells, Lady Panamera?"

"Yes, but it will take some time from casting to activation to impact. When humans are fighting other humans, that amount of time typically provides an opening in which the opposing side can take out the enemy mage. There's also a limit to how many times spells can be cast at long range. I would argue that fewer than one hundred meters is the optimal range for practical magic combat."

The king grunted in agreement. "And it would be safe to assume that the enemy has elemental mages as well. It all comes down to determining the best uses of magic and minimizing wasteful moves."

I see, I see. Then this stupid march isn't necessarily a boneheaded decision?

Aperta let out a deep sigh. "Well, they certainly are idiots."

"Mm-hmm."

"Makes you want to take out their commander."

Aperta's comment had seemingly been enough to prompt the others to dunk on whoever the poor enemy commander was. *They're not wrong, though.*

"Annnd they got awfully close while we've been chatting," I pointed out with an exasperated sigh. Maybe I could test the waters by making first contact. I looked down and shouted to the oncoming forces, "This is Seatoh, Lord Van's territory! State your affiliation!"

Next to me, Panamera burst into laughter. "I swear, you have zero sense of urgency..." she explained between chuckles. "Look, even your enemy is laughing."

I glanced down at the cackling enemy troops. *Yup, they're definitely my enemies, Time to die for the sin of being rude jerks!*

"We have come to inspect your village!" a voice shouted back. "There should

not have been a wall here—where did this fortress city come from?!”

I see you evading the question. I asked for your affiliation, pal.

“In all likelihood, they are the Chivalric Order of some noble from Yelenetta. I am curious as to why they crossed the border with a wyvern in tow, but considering how stupid they appear to be, they may simply have given it no thought,” the king theorized.

With this information, I managed to trick the guy into admitting he was from Yelenetta. I was so delighted by how easy he was to handle that I got a little too big for my britches and made him angry. *How childish can you get?*

“He’s...he’s a buffoon!” the king said, pointing and laughing. “A full-blown imbecile! Bwa ha ha ha! If this is who we have to deal with, this will be simple!” While I understood the king’s behavior, I did find myself wishing he wouldn’t further antagonize our enemy.

“Indeed it will,” agreed Aperta.

The enemy commander and I went back and forth a few more times, but it only served to aggravate him more. “Our wyvern can attack you from above!” he screamed. Wyverns didn’t have dragon breath, but their aerial dominance still made them a genuine threat.

I looked at Till and Khamsin, who were finishing up the anti-air ballista prep. “Are we ready to go?” I asked, and they confirmed that we were.

These new ballista models had a unique form, with a tube in the center that resembled a gun barrel. To the left and right were long, thin holes through which the bow traveled like a rail. As for projectiles, they fired barrels. The bottom region of the barrel that contacted the string was made of a hard wood block, but everything else had been deliberately constructed to fall apart easily. Once the barrel passed the bump installed at its tip, it would burst into pieces, blasting out shuriken at high speed.

It would be hard for *any* flying monster to dodge. We tried it out, aiming for the wyvern as it swooped down toward us. “Okay! Khamsin, open fire!”

“Yes, sir!”

One shot to start things off. Khamsin operated the ballista and, just as planned, the barrel burst into pieces as it was launched. The cluster of black shuriken spread through the air with incredible power. These new ballistae were designed to fire off only a single shot so that all their force would go into each projectile.

The shower of high-velocity shuriken smashed directly into the wyvern. As I predicted, the shuriken tore the beast to shreds, and it tumbled through the sky. It occurred to me then that I'd failed to consider one important thing. "Ah, I didn't think about where it might fall," I said just as the wyvern vanished from sight and collided with the wall not far below us. A deafening boom shook the wall, and I grimaced. "Did anything break? That sure was dangerous... A bigger dragon might've destroyed the wall."

But the king and his cohorts were gazing down at the wyvern with sparkling eyes. "It's full of holes!" said Aperta.

"What absurd firepower," the king said. "If those ballistae were used to wage war, they would rival even elemental mages, depending on how long they take to construct..."

They continued with their super-serious conversation about the practical applications of my anti-air ballistae, but things on the ground were grim. The angle from which we'd fired meant that the shuriken, having ripped straight through the wyvern, ended up raining down on the people below. Beyond our wall was a portrait of hell, complete with groans and screams of pain.

I stared down at the crumbling enemy forces. "Okie dokie. I'll go talk to them directly."

"You should disarm them first," the king suggested, looking concerned.

"Don't worry, Your Majesty. I have extremely talented men working for me." I gestured to Dee and Esparda, who stood in front of me.

We lowered the drawbridge and opened the front gate while my men took up positions from which they could swiftly respond. For whatever reason, though, it felt kind of embarrassing to come out of the fortress under such intense protection, so I split them off to the right and left.

“Now then,” I said with a smile, “let’s see if we can’t get some answers. I really hope they’re willing to tell the truth.” I cast my gaze toward a man who was staring blankly at a shuriken in his hand.

Chapter 7:

Yelenetta Approaches

THE INVADING FORCES WERE MADE UP OF THREE hundred men loaned from a count on Yelenetta's border. But more shocking was the fact that Unimog Yelenetta, one of the princes, was leading the charge with his own private force.

Once I heard that the wyvern was controlled by a marionette mage, I hoped I would be able to ask him all kinds of questions. Unfortunately for me, he got smashed into the wall and died.

Anyhow, according to the prince, this little invasion had been in the works for years. Three months ago, they'd put the plan into action. This was only a small part of a bigger plot.

I was holding a discussion in my manor with King Dino, Aperta, and Panamera. The king was oddly irritated about the whole thing; the enemy had apparently been clever about keeping it all under wraps. He said, "I received no reports about the enemy purchasing weapons or mobilizing their soldiers. In fact, their capital was supposed to be in the middle of large-scale anti-flooding construction. I never suspected they would spend that kind of money just to pull the wool over our eyes... They're serious this time."

I could only nod. "I see... I know he kind of sucks and all, but I'm surprised Unimog gave everything up so easily." *Would the prince of a nation really offer up significant national secrets without any resistance?*

The king shrugged, and Aperta stepped in to explain: "He was more of a coward than any of us could have predicted. The moment I asked whether he would prefer to have his nails ripped off or his eyes gouged out, he caved."

"Normally I would welcome an enemy soldier who speaks with such honesty, but this man was so weak-willed, he actually made me angry." Panamera's exasperated tone rivaled Aperta's.

"Ha ha ha... Well, I'm sure he just hates being in pain. So, what are the

specifics of the full invasion?” I asked.

“The operation is primarily designed around infiltrating Lord Fertio’s recently expanded territory,” the king replied with a frown.

“Wait, what?”

The king narrowed his eyes at my reaction, a complex look crossing his face. “I was not sure whether to tell you about the marquis’s situation, but now that you’re a baron, I want you to steel yourself and listen carefully,” he said. This was a show of great consideration for my mental well-being. “As you are aware, Lord Fertio’s territory has grown by about 50 percent in the last ten years. The problem is that he has not been able to match that growth in personnel or training. This means that he has had to put off arranging protections for the newer additions to his territory. Regrettably, Yelenetta caught wind of this. I dispatched border security from the capital, but I do not have enough men, and those I do have are lacking in geographical knowledge.”

“Then they’re about to be invaded?”

The king nodded. “Correct. Both in terms of location and strategy, the first place they will invade is the fortress city of Scudet. To make sure they can act decisively against Scudet, they will also attack the marquis’s second fortress city. Finally, they will take Seatoh.” He raised his head and continued, “Do not panic. The first move has been made, so now we are in a battle against time. Running around in a fluster will not change the results. What we need now is a proper understanding of the situation so we may take countermeasures against it.”

Aperta cleared his throat and looked over the room. “Let us coordinate our response. First, the king and I will take a small convoy with us back to the capital, where we will assemble a royal Chivalric Order to march toward Scudet. Next, Lady Panamera will report to Lord Ferdinatto, put together a supply squad and Chivalric Order, and also march to Scudet.” He turned to me. “Normally, we would only ask village lords to supply us with food. However, in your case, Lord Van, we request your participation in the battle. We have judged that you are more than adequate for the task.”

The all-too-serious look on his face made my mask of nobility slip. “Blegh...”

“Are you rejecting our offer?” Aperta asked, raising an eyebrow.

The air around us froze as the king and Panamera stared daggers at me. Normally, I couldn't say “no” in this kind of environment, but I wasn't backing down this time. I wanted to be a shut-in; I wouldn't leave the village unless it was absolutely necessary.

I need to choose my words very carefully.

In the most serious tone I could muster, I said, “I am honored that you would make such a request of me, but it is my responsibility to protect this village. If I left while it was still under development, that would be akin to abandonment. As a lord, I want to protect my territory.”

Aperta wasn't having it. “You developed a weapon that riddled a wyvern with holes in one strike, designed and built devices that could take down armored lizards and dragons... Yet you would claim that this place is ‘under development’?”

I nodded promptly, ignoring his dubious glare. “One hundred percent. Quite frankly, it's only about a tenth of the way there. There're still lots of things I want to make and do.”

I made it clear that I was serious about this place being incomplete, which apparently came as a surprise to him. The king reacted similarly, but Panamera wore a knowing grin on her face; she was clearly enjoying herself. “You are endlessly fascinating. I do not think I will ever grow tired of seeing the madness you create, but I would suggest accepting this request. When the country is in danger, all nobles must cooperate even at the cost of their own profits. Becoming a noble is akin to taking an oath—oh, right. I acted on your behalf when you were given your peerage, so you don't know how noble obligations work.”

Actually, Esparda taught me all about that stuff, but if pretending I don't know will get me out of trouble, then pretend I shall! But, uh...this isn't going to work, is it? No, it's not.

I sighed and nodded. “I understand. If this is my obligation as a noble, then I will participate. However, I still have my responsibilities as a lord, so I would like to be the one to decide how many people I take with me.”

“Mm, that is fine,” the king agreed. “I must ask that you bring those terrifying ballistae with you if at all possible.”

“Of course. I’ll bring Prototype #28 with me. It’s mobile and tough compared to the other models. The only problem is that it takes time to build and requires a lot of materials, so I’ve only made three units thus far.”

The king looked exasperated. “It sounds like you’ve done more due diligence than my royal researchers. It is incredible how you think of such things.”

“I mean, they’re all just modified versions of existing weapons and devices. Anyway, when I finally get my hands on the thing I’m looking for, I’ll whip up something pretty fun.”

“Is that so?” The corner of the king’s mouth rose in an intrigued smile, and he leaned back in his chair.

“If there are no other issues,” Aperta cut in, “let us proceed.”

No objections were raised, so the king stood up and said, “Nothing? Then let us begin. It will take three weeks to a month for the viscount and me to prepare. En route, I shall send envoys from the towns we pass to the neighboring nobility, but I suspect their troops will arrive around the same time.” He looked down at me. “I doubt Scudet will fall easily, but I suspect that there are tens of thousands of troops in the area. Do not attempt the impossible. Wait for us to arrive so we can storm the city together.”

“Understood!” I said earnestly. I really did intend on following his orders. It would’ve been a real pain in the neck if he told me to rush in all by myself.

“Then let us do what needs to be done.”

The king quickly finished his preparations and left the village, leaving me to my own prep work. I was pretty agitated about it. We’d only just gotten the village’s defenses in working order, and now I was being told to go fight in a war. If this was unavoidable, I wanted to at least go with a group that I knew could handle it.

First and foremost, to protect our home, I would leave Esparda behind as the acting lord, along with any villagers who were good ballista operators. I would also leave the entirety of the Esparda Chivalric Order.

“Are you certain you do not need me to accompany you?” Esparda asked.

“You’re the only person who can run this place, Esparda.”

He scanned the faces around him, then nodded. “I understand. Well thought out, Lord Van.”

My butler had read between the lines. *Well thought out, Esparda.*

That was the village in safe hands. The next issue was figuring out who would come with me. “First, I’ll take Dee and half of his men as my own Chivalric Order.”

“Aye, sir!”

“It’d be too dangerous for Till and Khamsin to tag along, so—”

“I’m coming with you, no matter what!” Khamsin cut in.

“As am I!” Till said.

“Oh, all right. Got it.” *Talk about peer pressure. Well, I figured they’d come.*

“Lady Arte, you’re our guest, so I’m going to have you stay here.”

“I-I’m coming too!” Arte protested.

“Say what now?” I was so surprised that my response made me sound like a goober. But Arte looked like her resolve was as strong as ever. “It’s going to be dangerou—”

“I know.” This was the first time Arte had interrupted me to state her will.

I sighed and crossed my arms. “In that case, you need to be with me at all times, okay? That’s the only way I’ll allow you to come.”

“Of course!” she answered happily. I flashed her a pained smile. I sensed the cheery faces of those around us, but I chose to ignore them. Truth be told, Arte coming was a huge load off my shoulders. If we brought her custom puppet to the battlefield, it could serve as a powerful shield against enemy attacks.

I surveyed the lineup of large carriages, equipment, and knights in the open space within the village walls. “This should be good, right? Nobody is going to say the new baron is short on manpower, are they?”

Dee folded his arms and looked everything over. “If they knew how powerful

we really are, they'd understand this is more than enough. Even considering your age, this should be fine."

I nodded repeatedly. Ortho, watching from afar, spoke up. "Want us to escort you guys? We wouldn't normally involve ourselves in a war, but we'd be happy to protect you, little lord."

What a spectacular idea! This'll make it a lot easier to boost our numbers. I raised both hands in the air. "Oooh! That's awesome! In that case, let's spread the word among the adventurers and see who else wants in! By the way, you have to come, Kusala."

Kusala jumped. "Why do I always get treated like this?!"

You're still surprised by it?

"I don't have any full-blown scouts in my Chivalric Order," I explained. "I have a hunter, but it's not exactly the same, y'know?"

Kusala frowned. "I mean, yeah, sure... But if this is a job offer, I do have the right to say no, don't I?"

"Excuse me? Didn't you know? If you don't take the job, I'll sentence you to death."

"Death?! Fine, I'll take it! Of course I will!" As usual, my joke resulted in exactly the reaction I wanted from Kusala. I assumed that his sobbing was part of the bit.

"All right. Ortho, can you pass this on to the adventurers? Anyone who accepts gets a down payment of five gold. Then, after completing the job, they'll each get one large gold."

"Everyone's gonna end up coming, pal. You okay with that?"

"How many people are we talking?"

Ortho groaned. His expression was stern. "Um... Including the guys who showed up recently, probably, like, 150 adventurers in total? Maybe a few more?"

"A hundred fifty?! When did we get so many adventurers?" My surprise was genuine. We'd started with sixty people, give or take. How had that changed so

much in such a short amount of time?

“Ah, the Adventurers’ Guild publicized everything, so even folks in the nearby towns know about the dungeon. And then there are the people who recently arrived from the capital. Remember, the guild wants to investigate this dungeon as soon as possible, and the more people there are, the faster the mapping goes and the better a grasp they get on the monster population.”

“Isn’t this all moving a little fast? Is the base by the dungeon able to accommodate that many people?”

“It’s totally fine. Folks normally spend one or two days dungeon running, so it should all work out as long as they swap places with the ones who are resting. And once people finish their dungeon dive, they head back to the village to sell off their findings anyway.”

Ah, right. That makes sense. “Either way, we’re talking about heading to the front lines of a real war, so please tell them that they’ll each be receiving five gold plus one large gold. They deserve at least that much if they’re going to risk their lives.”

Ortho laughed and nodded. “You got it. Just saying, though, being an adventurer means constantly putting your life on the line, so most of them aside from the real veterans would be glad to participate for just the five gold. Granted, the bigger the reward, the better the result.”

I felt like I was learning something important about the extreme lifestyle that adventurers led. Then again, even the residents of Seatoh had frequently gone through life-or-death struggles before I arrived. Maybe this was just how the world worked.

“Okay, then let’s give everyone a better chance of survival! I’ll sell weapons and armor to Bell’s place wholesale. I’m pretty sure the Seatoh Chivalric Order is all good to go, but I bet the adventurers only ever buy weapons for themselves.”

Ortho lit up. “Wait, really?! There’s a constant shortage of goods there. Once I let everyone know, I’ll be first in line!”

“But isn’t your party fully decked out already?”

“See you later!”

He ran off, eyes blazing. I couldn't tell if he hadn't heard my question or just chose to ignore it.

Most of the knights of the Seatoh Chivalric Order wore armor made from wood blocks, but Ortho's party was decked out in iron equipment. There were exceptions, of course: Pluriel went with wood block armor because it would be lighter for her, but even she had just bought a new mithril staff.

Eh, they're important customers. Nothing wrong with giving them special treatment.

“Hm, maybe I'll go check in on the Bell & Rango Company,” I thought aloud.

“Excellent idea!” Dee shouted.

Together, we went to check on the equipment. This was a great chance to see Rango, since it had been a while since we last spoke. I brought Till and the others with me as well. I poked my head into the store only to see Rango enveloped in an aura of exhaustion.

As soon as he noticed my presence, he ran over with tears in his eyes. “L-Lord Vaaan!”

“Sup?” I shot him a questioning glance, and he raised both hands in the air.

“Nothing! Everything! Ortho and his guys bring monster materials here every day. There are adventurers complaining about the lack of equipment. And now that we have more villagers, we don't have enough food or seasonings! On top of all that, I taught the former slaves who work here the prices of individual items, but now the workers get into fights among themselves, and I have to be the one who steps in!”

“Wow. Uh, yeah. Sounds tough.” I nodded at Rango, attempting to soothe him in the face of this shower of complaints. They sounded like the kind you'd expect to hear from the stressed-out manager of a newly opened department store.

Honestly, he really was suffering like some sort of middle manager. *You got this, Rango! Being able to manage your employees is a vital skill!*

“Wait, what about that former merchant, or that one girl who had business acumen?” I asked. “You know, the beautiful one.”

“Ah, Medici. She’s the only reason things are still functioning around here, but she’s probably just as exhausted as I am—she’s been doing half of the employee training. She’s literally an angel, man,” he said, bringing his hands together in front of his chest. He stared off into the distance. “An angel.”

His mood swings were intense. “Okay...how about I help you sell some equipment?”

Abruptly, Rango started bawling. “If she’s an angel, you’re a god!”

I grimaced at the joyously tearful man in front of me. “Nope, I’m just Van.”

Medici’s branch of the Bell & Rango Company in Espar Town had all the same goods as the Seatoh location, though buying and selling materials in particular was exclusive to the latter. Honestly, being positioned so close to the road, it might have been even busier than the main store. And right now, the place was abuzz with activity.

I peeked inside. I’d made the building fairly large to accommodate a lot of people, but it was full to bursting with customers. *Yeah, there are definitely more of them here than at the main store. Is this the draw of having a beautiful manager?*

“Any more spears?” a customer asked.

“My apologies,” replied a young employee who was trying to deal with customers right by the entrance. “We sold our last spears just the other day...”

“I’d like a shield.”

“Ah, we still have small shields in stock!”

“Actually, I need one about this big.”

“I’m sorry, but we don’t have any of those left...”

The employee noticed me and tearfully shouted, “M-Manager! It’s Lord Van! Lord Van’s here!”

This prompted the adventurers and villagers to look my way, and Medici emerged from the back. She looked genuinely exhausted. “Oh, Lord Van! Thank you for coming all this way. Um, are you here to restock our weapons and armor?” she asked in tones both hopeful and cautious.

Unthinking, I blurted out, “No, actually—”

“Ugh... Waaaaah!” She collapsed on the spot and openly sobbed. It was beyond pitiful.

“D-don’t worry! I’ll make some soon! Go on, get me the materials! I’ll whip up a bunch right now!” I said in a panicked attempt to follow up my initial answer with something positive.

Medici looked up at me, her eyes still full of tears, and clasped her hands in a gesture akin to prayer. “Th-thank you so much, Lord Van!”

“You’re quite welcome.”

She rose to her feet and called out to the other employees, “Bring us materials! Wood, iron, mithril—all of it!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Watching her desperately issuing orders, I worried that I was in for the fight of my life.

Mere moments later, I found myself whipping up weapons and armor with everything I had for the first time in ages. The adventurers eagerly lined up in front of me, so I made a price list and a box for them to throw their coins into.

“A short sword, if ya please! Iron!”

“Straight? Curved? Single edged?”

“Oh, um... Double-edged and straight, please!”

“Okay, how’s this look?”

“What the hoozie?! That was so fast! Amazing! Thank you so much!”

I handed out goodies to people, one after the other, intending to take less than five minutes per person. After two hours, I had handled everyone present.

“I’m about to keel over... Aren’t I supposed to be a baron, not a line worker?”

Is 'baron' just another way of saying 'factory manager'?"

"I-I'm sorry, I don't think I follow..."

I was exhausted, so I teased Till for a bit. But I guess God was watching, because he decided to inflict some divine punishment upon me.

"Hey, little lord, I've brought some more customers!" Ortho declared, waltzing in with adventurers behind him.

"I'd like a long sword and a set of armor! Oh, and I'd like a large, slightly round shield too, thanks!"

The happy face. The cheerful voice. It was enough to make a man (child) collapse in despair.

Ashes. I had become ashes. I'd burned out completely. *From now on, I shall be Van of the Ash.*

And so young Van paid for his deeds by spending the entire day producing equipment for people. I wasn't exactly in the mood to go to war, so at least making equipment was better than that. But no matter how I sliced it, it also wasn't the job of a baron.

Grumblings aside, my next two days involved meetings with the Seatoh Chivalric Order. I gathered everyone in an open area of the village and stood on a platform. The Chivalric Order had grown since its inception thanks to the addition of new villagers and the slaves, putting their numbers over a hundred. It was still relatively small, but it was more than enough considering our population.

As everyone shifted their focus to me, I began to speak. "Uh, good day, members of the Chivalric Order. This will be your first military campaign. Our destination is Scudet, the largest fortress city in the area. It is under siege even as we speak."

I could see my audience's expressions grow serious, especially those of the villagers and slaves who had no combat experience. *I get it, guys. I don't wanna do this, and I'm sure you don't want to either.*

"Most likely, the aggressors are Yelenetta's Chivalric Order. They've had

scuffles with our nation over and over again—and unlike us, they have a lot of experience.” My soldiers held their collective breath. Looking them over, I smiled. “But there is nothing to fear.”

The crowd stirred as they glanced at one another. Dee eyed me with particularly great interest.

Keenly aware of their gazes, I smiled wider and brought my right index finger up to my face. “There’s no way we’ll be deployed to the front lines.”

More murmurs in the crowd. This time, someone raised a hand: Paula, the captain of my super-strong machine bow squad.

I pointed to her. “Yes, you!”

“Um, haven’t you just been promoted to baron, Lord Van? Isn’t it more likely that you *will* be put on the front lines?”

“Excellent question! An absolutely *fantastic* one, my dear Paula!” Paula flinched in surprise at my over-the-top reaction. I was hyped because she’d given me the perfect chance to explain things. “You see, the king himself is very interested in my weapons and this fortified city! And since sending a brand-new Chivalric Order of two or three hundred soldiers to the front lines comes with a high risk of annihilation, we’ll probably be placed in the rear. Probably!”

Ortho, who was spec’d out in fresh gear, spoke up next. “It’d be great if things played out that way, but I’d argue our current group would fare well on the front lines. Hell, we got more than fifty of those machine bows you made, right?”

“You’re right, but if we go to the front lines, casualties will be unavoidable. My goal is for everyone to come home in one piece.”

I gestured to Till and Khamsin, who opened the wooden boxes lined up in front of us. The folks standing in the front got up on their tiptoes to see inside. I grinned at the childish sight, looked at Khamsin, and pointed at the box to my right. He nodded, lifting up its contents to show the crowd.

“With that in mind, I’ve prepared new equipment to keep you all safe and sound. These shields are big, lightweight, and sturdy. If you stand them on the ground and lean into the back, you can completely hide yourself.” On cue,

Khamsin and company handed out shields to the people directly in front of me. “I even included a barred window toward the top so you can see what’s ahead while you’re protecting yourself.”

“Whoa, it’s so light!”

I watched my knights gush over the shields for a moment, then continued my explanation. “They’re made from the same materials as your armor, so they’re tough as iron and weigh very little. By the way, I attached thin mithril plates to their surfaces, so they should be able to withstand one or two fire magic attacks!”

“Wow, incredible!”

“No guarantees, though,” I added under my breath. I didn’t want to cause a fuss, but my ultimate plan was to have people fire bolts and provide support from afar, so I wasn’t all that worried about direct attacks. “All that’s left are the carriages, so I guess I’ll whip some up,” I muttered. “Considering King Dino and Panamera’s travel plans, we still have a bit of time...”

After that, I dismissed the Order so Dee could train them.

Chapter 8:

Roll Out

I BEGAN MAKING CARRIAGES the next morning and finished them in three days. People poked fun at my absurd speed and made all sorts of comments, but I brushed them all off.

Ha ha ha! Do not underestimate little Van. He'll do anything necessary to stay safe! Self-restraint? I laugh in your face!

In total, there were ten silver carriages each capable of holding ten people, plus fifty horses to pull them. That was as many war wagons and horses as I could prepare ahead of the battle, and quite frankly, it still wasn't enough. But, at the very least, we resembled a proper Chivalric Order.

I did a few final checks to be sure everything was ready. "It'll supposedly take about two weeks to reach our destination. We've got food, backup weapons and shields... I'm done readying the secret weapon... Okay, we're good to take off!"

"We leave now!" Dee shouted from atop his steed. "All squads besides the fifth, take your positions! Fifth squad, prepare the ballistae in the war wagons!"

"Yes, sir!" Everyone was quick to respond, and they soon moved into a neat marching formation.

Wonderful. This pleases little Van.

Inside the sixth carriage, Till stammered, "Um, i-is it really okay for me to ride in a carriage?" That particular vehicle boasted the most lavish interior design of all of the carriages I'd made.

"Of course. You're one of my caretakers. That alone requires more work than just walking outside," I replied, and Till bashfully smiled.

The troops would take turns resting in the carriages, but since I was the lord and all, I got to ride the whole way to our destination. Also with me were Khamsin, decked out in light gear and ready to don heavy armor at any time,

and Arte, whose stamina was a concern. Oh, and I'd be remiss not to mention that the super-strong and awesome machine bow squad was also riding in carriages.

"Let's take it easy for now," I said. "Once we get to Scudet, we'll do some recon. If the enemy has retreated, then great. I suspect they're probably still fighting, though."

Even though magic existed in this world, castle sieges apparently still took a long time. No mages could easily blast through castles or fortress walls. It would be a different story if someone had ten or twenty first-rate elemental mages at their disposal, but acquiring so many was a difficult task. Talented mages were required to protect the nation, and the enemy had mages for the same purpose. Supposedly.

"If Scudet is a cornerstone of this country's defenses, then there'll be mages positioned there, right?" I asked Dee.

"But of course! And that territory also belongs to Lord Fertio! I am certain he'll bring his Chivalric Order as reinforcements!"

I grunted. "Makes sense, I guess."

Pops was amazing, no matter how you looked at it. I understood that. His obsession with meritocracy meant he wasn't right in the head as far as I was concerned, but there was no denying his immense skill. And then there was his Chivalric Order, the one he built up from nothing by gathering people with serious talent and training them to hell and back. Whenever I had a break from Dee's training, I used to sneak a peek at their sessions; the fact that those knights were able to keep up with that regimen meant they were crazy good.

For the record, my regimen was the same as the soldiers-in-training, so I didn't participate in that particular brand of hell.

"Well, as long as there isn't an overwhelming difference in numbers, I suppose things should be fine," I mused aloud, and settled back to enjoy the journey.

When we arrived at the scene, things were not as we expected. The battle

was already over, and Scudet's collapse was on full display.

A massive cloud of dark smoke rose from the ground. Beneath it lay the collapsed walls and scarred remains of buildings. Soldiers fled in chaotic groups from the fortress city, and if I were a betting man, I'd say they belonged to either the borderlands or the marquis. A large group of knights in black armor stood near one ruined wall.

"I cannot believe Scudet fell in only a month or two," Dee's underling Arb whispered in shock.

Dee's brow wrinkled. "I assume *that* was the cause," he said, pointing to some wyverns perching on a wall in the distance. There weren't just one or two wyverns—over a dozen of the beasts lurked atop one corner. It was an unnatural sight, to be sure, and I had no trouble believing they'd destroyed the fortress city. A burst of flame and wind erupted from within the walls as angry roars reached our ears.

"Looks like they're still fighting," I said.

Jaw set, Dee nodded. "They are. I assume that the border knights are taking up the rear guard, and the marquis's men are leading the evacuation."

"Right. Scudet isn't just a fortress, it's a city to boot. There must be lots of civilians there..."

"The marquis's Chivalric Order has deployed around the city to keep the enemy at bay. They're not being pursued head-on, but they have completely lost their chance to retreat."

Once I'd heard grim reports from three different people, I folded my arms and groaned. The enemy was still focused on taking the city and pursuing the forces in front of them, so they hadn't noticed our presence yet. I didn't want to do anything crazy, but that didn't mean I couldn't provide some backup.

I looked up. "It's a bit early for this, but I think we need to unveil our secret weapon. Get it ready, but also be prepared to flee at any time," I told Dee, who agreed and leapt into action. I watched as he and the men quickly prepared themselves, then turned around to look at Arte. "Are you going to be okay? You know, with the secret weapon and all?"

She wrung her hands and nodded. “I can do this.” Her shoulders trembled even as she voiced her resolve.

“I know you can,” I said with a warm smile. “Till, Khamsin—Arte might be defenseless, so I need you guys to cover her.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Of course, my lord!” Their heads bobbed in tandem as they raised their large shields, getting into position.

A quick five minutes, eh?

We lined the war wagons to the right and left, then raised their roofs toward the driver’s seats. Since I’d made them with wood blocks, it only took a handful of strong people to move them. In the blink of an eye, we had turned the wagons into a giant barricade.

I opened the sliding windows I’d put in and had my men place the ballistae there. We were ready to go with our giant wall composed of ten armored wagons and ballistae. Standing behind each wagon was its operator and reloader, and farther back were the machine bow squad and the shield squad to protect them.

We were an iron wall.

“Right then,” I said. “Begin the attack! The louder and wilder we are, the more people we’ll help escape, so go all out! Arte, if you would?”

Arte nodded and looked through the holes in the wall at the city covered in smoke. “Here I go... Automaton, Uno!” At her shout, the wood block puppets sitting in each carriage rose to their feet.

After half a day of fine-tuning, I’d finally completed Arte’s very own puppets. The attire of each was slightly different, but they all wore dresses and suits of armor. Each slender warrior stood three meters in height, and they wielded long swords and massive shields. And since I had made their armaments with wood blocks, the stress on Arte would be kept to a minimum.

The automatons rose to their feet atop the carriages and lightly leapt into the air. The members of the Seatoh Chivalric Order raised voices of admiration as

they watched them move with grace and beauty. The puppets soon landed beyond the wall and, just as Arte envisioned, they broke into a run toward the fortress city. They moved like the wind.

Some of the enemy forces noticed them, but by then it was too late. Using the enemy's carriages as footholds, the automatons

leapt into the air and cut off the heads of the wyverns so artfully that it looked as though they were cleaving through the sky.

"All right! While they're confused, shoot as many wyverns as you can!" I shouted. My troops began to fire bolt after bolt from the ballistae.

"Wyverns controlled by marionette mages are slow to react! Take your time and aim carefully!" Dee said.

All right, everyone. It's time for war. Fitting that my first act on the battlefield is a surprise attack.

Jalpa

“SCUDET IS UNDER ATTACK.”

When I heard the report, my mind immediately went to Yelenetta’s yearly harassment. They knew that a head-to-head conflict was ill-advised, but the fact that we were amassing power made them sweat. Consequently, they’d taken to haranguing us every year to chip away at our defenses. That was the main reason behind their actions, but every time they attacked, they prepared enough soldiers to assault the fortress city. If the city were surrounded, food supply problems would eventually surface.

“I suppose I have no choice. Deploy only the first Chivalric Order and the mage squad,” I said. “Send an envoy to the nearby lords and tell them to dispatch soldiers, too.”

My butler, Silhouette, spoke up. “Your son’s village is out in that area. Shall I —”

“Are you a fool? There is no way such an insignificant village could afford to send out soldiers. In all likelihood, they barely have enough food to eat.”

Silhouette wore a complex look on his face. “But according to the merchants who came from the capital the other day, Lord Van has slain a dragon and received the title of baron...”

I heaved a sigh. The man was Esparda’s successor, and he knew all too well what his duties were as a butler. Capable as he was, he did not have Esparda’s knowledge or experience. He lacked tact.

“Utter nonsense if you think about it for more than a few seconds. What value is there in rumors communicated through who knows how many people? If a young dragon or demihuman were slain, the report would come straight to me, and I have heard no such thing.”

“Th-that is true. However...Lord Van is no ordinary child. He is capable of unpredictable feats of—”

“Silence. Keep quiet and hurry with the preparations.”

Silhouette nodded, visibly frustrated, and left the room.

“Van is most certainly a genius.”

For many years I heard those words uttered by servants in the manor—especially the maids. There was a time when I’d taken them seriously and focused all my energy on the child, but as far as I could tell, he simply had a knack for learning. Time seemed to bear that out: Esparda and Dee trained and educated him, but his results were no more impressive than those of any other child.

He could not produce results. Was there some sort of potential the others sensed that I could not? I thought as much for a time, but when his magical aptitude was appraised, I was faced with the worst-case scenario. My high expectations for him only compounded my disappointment, and my feelings toward the boy cooled rapidly.

“Hmph!” I snorted, gazing out the window. “Slew a dragon and became a hero, did he? How could a child in a village like that possibly defeat a dragon? Even with Esparda and Dee there, it’s impossible.”

The city’s main street stretched northward. It was the very same street by which Van had left when he departed for the nameless village. Before his departure, many of my maids and soldiers asked for permission to go with him, but—unable to afford to sacrifice useful manpower to a region that would undoubtedly fail—I denied them all. Even now, I did not comprehend their adoration for him.

When word first reached me that Van had been given a peerage, I suspected it was a ploy by Lord Ferdinatto. That territory had originally belonged to him, so he could put the boy in his debt by lending him a helping hand, perhaps improving his chances of reclaiming his land. However, I quickly banished the thought. Not only was it far too convoluted, but it was also risky. The count was unlikely to attempt such a maneuver when he was already so wary of me.

“Utter foolishness... Though once Yelenetta’s forces are chased off, I suppose I shall pay the village a visit.”

Should the boy have made some kind of progress, I would not be averse to providing a measure of aid.

Having come to that conclusion, I put my thoughts of Van aside for the time being.

We arrived in the largest town outside of Scudet and gathered the Chivalric Orders and mercenaries from the nearby settlements before marching toward Scudet proper. I had made this journey and fought this fight so many times that I knew the route like the back of my hand; we would arrive at Scudet in a mere three weeks. I would argue that the journey had never been so fast.

But when we arrived, a good portion of Scudet's walls was already destroyed, and the city was surrounded.

"Impossible," I muttered. "Scudet's powerful fortress wall has crumbled?"

Just then, something small and dark fell from the sky and onto the wall. The ground shook and flames erupted, followed by billowing black smoke.

"Magic from the sky?!"

Clearly as confused as I was, a private said, "I can't be sure, my lord! There are countless wyverns in the sky. Do you think there are mages, too?!"

Stradale, the man with the deep-blue hair beside me, narrowed his eyes. "It would appear as though that attack caused irreparable damage to the wall. I imagine it is now on the verge of collapse. I surmise something was dropped from the wyverns. Casting fire spells to destroy them while they're in the air or taking out the remaining infantry would be most effective."

I acknowledged his suggestion with a curt nod. "Understood. That mage's attack is deadly and, unfortunately, the caster is too far away for me to accurately hit from this angle. Same goes for the wyverns themselves."

"Then we'll take care of the soldiers on the ground."

"Right."

Stradale rattled off orders, initiating our strategy. Watching him from behind, I smiled at the way he moved without pause or question. He was a tremendously reliable man, and rich with ingenuity—the perfect commander for my Chivalric Order. He continued to issue concise instructions as he led his

men out on horseback. “Be careful of attacks from the wyverns! Keep moving, and be swift about it!”

The enemy had no formation to speak of, but they would surround us if we simply rushed forward. To prevent that from happening, we had to expand in both directions, taking over one side of the city. If we managed that, all we needed to do was chase off the enemy like we always had in the past.

The wyverns are our primary threat, I thought as I surveyed the scene from our temporary base camp.

Yet the situation did not progress as we anticipated. Several areas on the battlefield exploded, making both the air and the ground shake and sending my troops flying. I initially thought it was some new form of magic, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Regardless, I could not afford to ignore what was happening. “Split the vanguard to the left and right. I’m heading out.”

This startled the young private, who said “As you wish!” before riding out to execute my commands.

After a brief delay, the Order made its way through the troops, and a gap opened in the forces ahead of me. It revealed the Yelenetta soldiers with their backs to the wall, looking my way. Once I confirmed that, I began to chant. “Belt of hellfire... Flare.”

The spell worked immediately. My gauntlet, made from mithril and the hide of a fire dragon, was enveloped in flames that flickered and swayed as though alive. The flames grew in both size and power and launched at the enemy soldiers. The stream of fire traversed the ground, burning the living and dead alike and turning more than a hundred people to ash before it collided with the wall. With nowhere else for it to go, it set the wall ablaze.

This one attack was enough to strike fear into the hearts of nearby enemy soldiers, who froze in place. Having anticipated this, my own troops did not hesitate to charge the enemy. The tide of the battle turned in an instant, and my Chivalric Order chased our fleeing enemy and took back the area around Scudet.

We should be fine.

No sooner had this thought entered my mind than I saw something black falling from high up in the sky. “That’s not good,” I said. The ground quaked, jolting our men on both sides of the battlefield.

“It would appear as though our battle ends here.”

Exhaling sharply, I began another incantation.

Yelenetta’s Army

THE RAMPAGING FLAMES TORCHED THE WALL and our troops. Rallying behind them, our enemies went on the offensive. The speed with which they shifted from defense to offense was tremendous, suggesting that the fire magic had been part of their strategy. As the third-eldest prince of Yelenetta and commander of the Chivalric Order’s second squad, I had to turn things around.

“So, Scuderia’s guard dog has appeared at last? Just as planned,” I said. Then I raised my voice to issue orders. “Hurry and give the command. Tell them to stay calm when they’re throwing the onyx spheres.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

My orders traveled briskly to the front lines. After a brief delay, explosions broke out here and there. The corners of my mouth tipped into a smile.

The onyx spheres.

Our new, almost excessively powerful weapon had upended the lives of the smaller northern countries that had been exploited up until now. We didn’t have many, but they could be a menace when we applied them during key battles. Getting our hands on this new weapon had enabled us to finally invade Scudet. Our long years of being mocked and underestimated were at an end.

The onyx spheres allowed those without magic to produce even more impressive results. Our men put distance between themselves and the enemies before throwing the volatile projectiles. It was more than enough to cut down the marquis’s numbers. With no other options, the enemy soldiers stopped in their tracks.

“This is our chance! Give the signal. Do not let this opportunity go to waste!”

My adjutant did as I instructed, shooting three small pillars of fire into the sky. When they saw our signal, the wyverns descended rapidly, dropping onyx spheres onto the battlefield below. The enemy had no recourse. I watched as they were blown away, each blast reverberating through the air. Before long, their formation was in ruins.

My shoulders shook as I laughed, delighted by the results before me. “Wonderful! Even better than expected! I never thought things would go this well for us.” Pleased, I brushed a hand through my green hair.

The key to this battle was taking the fortress city of Scudet. We had intended to cut off the city’s supply chain by occupying the two towns and three villages nearby, but that would no longer be necessary. Especially now that the city’s defense force was moving to procure a retreat path.

A portion of the wall had been blown away, and our Chivalric Order took the opportunity to flood into the city. After all these years, it was time for us to take Scudet. I had been belittled ever since I was put in charge of the Order’s second squad, but this victory would allow me to prove my worth.

“I’m not inclined to strike down fleeing knights and citizens, but follow-up attacks are part of the splendor of war. Have the wyverns drop onyx spheres ahead of where they’re fleeing, then strike them down from behind with your swords,” I commanded. “Show them what crushing defeat looks like.” I watched the citizens and soldiers spill out of the city, cackling all the while.

My messenger ran off to deliver the new orders. Our vanguard was in the process of tossing onyx spheres and pulling back. It would take some time to reorganize the formation for our follow-up attack, but our enemy couldn’t move quickly because they had to evacuate civilians.

Leashing my impatience, I surveyed the combat situation. “Let us take our time and regroup. We will not have another chance like this. I will take Lord Fertio’s head in this battle!”

Once I confirmed the presence of fire magic on the field, I put the wyverns on standby atop the wall. When our attack began anew, they would circle around in front of the enemy and use their onyx spheres to annihilate them. While we

had cut through half of our supply, we still had more than enough left to get the job done.

“Checkmate. By taking Scudet, we have effectively captured this entire region. Over the next three months, we can strengthen the defenses here and take another enemy stronghold...” Feasting on the joy of a bright future, I checked on my Chivalric Order’s formation and nodded in satisfaction. With a triumphant cry, I issued my final command: “It is time to annihilate our enemy! Our follow-up attack begins now! Soldier, citizen, I care not! Kill them all!”

Sensing that this battle was already won, our men roared triumphantly, raising their swords aloft as they began their forward march. I smiled and gestured my palm toward the wyverns perched on the edge of the wall.

“Tell the marionette mages the wyvern squad must get ahead of the enemy and drop the onyx spheres onto them. Be wary of fire magic and maintain a high altitude!”

This is the end.

I eyed the wyverns, anticipating our final strike...but it never came.

A spray of blood exploded from the creature closest to me, which tumbled down from the wall. Its head had popped off its body as easily as a doll’s, and I watched in shock as it plummeted. Immediately, there came some sort of heavy, booming noise, followed by something whistling through the air. One wyvern, then two, fell from the wall.

This wasn’t a case of the creatures losing their balance, especially not given the way they smashed into the ground. “Wh-what happened?” I whispered just as another wyvern lost its head and dropped dead.

Since wyverns under the control of marionette mages could not dodge of their own volition, the mage in control had to issue a command before it could move. This made instantaneous reactions impossible.

“What’s happening?! What is taking the wyverns’ heads?!” I shouted at my nearby adjutant, but all he could do was shake his head, pale-faced.

Curses! Everyone is so useless!

I gritted my teeth with such rage that it threatened to boil my insides. “Have the wyverns take off at once! They should be safe in the—”

I once again heard the sound of whistling, followed by a loud boom. Another wyvern fell from the wall. At this point, it was almost comical: a third of our wyverns had been massacred.

It’s all happening so fast. What fresh hell is this?!

Yet another wyvern was decapitated. This terrible spectacle made me want to cover my eyes, but I made sure to watch carefully—and this time, I saw it. A slender figure zipped forward and swung a sword.

“It’s the enemy! The enemy is on the wall with a sword! Evacuate the fortress!”

The figure was wearing feminine attire, but that was of no consequence. Master of the blade or first-rate adventurer, they wouldn’t be able to take out our wyverns once they took flight. My prayers were answered as the beasts lifted off, one after another.

“There we go! That’s it! The sky! Attack the wall from the sky! Whoever this is, they’re a much bigger threat than Lord Fertio!” I shouted.

But almost as if my cries were themselves a signal, that nightmarish series of sounds filled the air once more. This time, four wyverns were slain and plummeted to the ground.

“No! What the hell is happening?! Where is the enemy?!”

My adjutant panicked. “T-to the right! They were not on the battlefield at the start!”

I spun to where he pointed and saw something in the distance—some sort of giant wall. “Change targets! We are *not* retreating! Lord Fertio’s Chivalric Order is already running, so there’s no way they can get us in a pincer attack! We will crush this new enemy with all our might!”

I yanked my horse around. Though I had no idea what the strange wall was, our new enemy was in a tight, small formation of fewer than a thousand.

“We will crush them!” I bellowed with everything I had, raising my sword

skyward.

Van

AFTER LOSING OVER HALF OF THEIR WYVERNS, Yelenetta's soldiers turned around and headed toward us.

"Okay, time to retreat!" I cried. "Retract the carriage shields! We can still use the ballistae, so we'll aim for the wyverns while we pull back!"

"We're running?!" Ortho replied. "If we finish off the wyverns, we can win!" He wasn't the only one looking at me in disbelief; the villagers-turned-knights were as well. Till, Dee, and Dee's men seemed to understand what I was thinking, however, so they kept quiet.

"Remember what I said at the start? Our main objective is to make sure no one here dies. Make sure we all get to go home together. If we go up against an army of that size, we're done for. Even if we do somehow win, we'll be left in tatters. Anyone who wants to die can stay, but I'm going home, okay? So, who wants to die?"

Not a single person nodded. In fact, their response was so earnest that I couldn't help but smile as I raised a hand.

"Retreat it is, then! The road is wide, so we can line the carriages up side-by-side and have the Chivalric Order guard us from both sides. Adventurers, we're counting on you for hit-and-run attacks! Oh, and we'll be attacking with the ballistae and rapid-fire bows from the carriages, too, so try not to move around too much!"

Everyone moved with great haste, returning the war wagons to their proper forms and bringing the ballistae out to aim to the rear. Stationed on the carriages were the machine bow squad members on standby; their task was to aim at incoming enemies from the windows. Just to be on the safe side, some of the calvary also had machine bowmen riding with them, and Arte had already called back her puppets from the wall.

"Our main objective here is to not let the enemy get close," I said as our carriages raced down the road in retreat.

Khamsin poked his head out the window. "The enemy is closing in, and the

ballistae can't seem to hit the wyverns!"

"Are they flying in zigzags? Hmm, in that case, tell the ballista operators to predict where the wyverns are flying and shoot ahead of them. Arte, do you mind if I ask you to handle the enemies closest to us?"

Arte looked outside and declared, "Understood. I'll protect the rear." She drew upon her magical energy, her lips moving with a silent chant. Moments later, one of her puppets descended from the carriage and ran like the wind to the rear. The moment after it kicked off the ground, it was already far away. Arte watched with a fierce look on her face as it hurtled toward the enemy like a humanoid wrecking ball. Then it quickly swung its sword.

It was a simple horizontal slash, but the soldier who tried to take the blow with his shield was sent flying, bringing a few others with him. A handful of nearby enemy troops erupted with fresh blood before collapsing to the ground.

The doll rushed into the center of their formation, too fast for our eyes to make out. Even without seeing the fight, we heard the bloodcurdling screams and clanging of combat coming from the group.

The enemies were slowing down, so I rattled off fresh orders. "Great! All ballistae and machine bows, fire at once! Now that they've stopped, this is our chance!"

A gigantic wave of bolts soared overhead. Since our machine bows could fire ten bolts without stopping, they rained down on the enemy like a horrible tempest.

"Okay, guys! We're splitting! Retreat with everything you've got! Machine bow squad, reload!"

My people shouted in affirmation. *That's what I like to hear. Mm-hmm! Now run!*

"The enemy calvary is coming!" Till told me.

"Let's leave them to Dee."

"Oh, they've been annihilated," Khamsin said.

"I figured."

Till and Khamsin were acting as real-time relays, providing me with the latest information while Dee, his men, and the adventurers formed a nigh-impenetrable iron wall around us. Meanwhile, my people finished reloading their weapons, reversing positions rapidly.

“Arte, can you cut down the trees on the left side of the road so they collapse inward?”

“I shall try!”

She reacted swiftly, her puppet running back from the rear. Looking at the automaton, Arte pointed the palm of her hand toward the side of the road, and the puppet leapt toward the spot where the road ended and the forest of trees began. It proceeded to cut down the trees as if they were bamboo being sliced apart with a nata. The trees then fell into the road, becoming obstacles for our pursuers.

After that, we put space between ourselves and the enemy forces. They attempted to pursue us a few times, but in the end we managed to avoid danger thanks to Arte’s puppet, our ballistae, and our machine bows. We spent a day going down the road, rested for five hours, and then made a break for the village. We spent each subsequent day traveling for some twelve hours, then resting and camping out for another twelve overnight.

Eventually, we found ourselves back at my second home, Seatoh.

“We did it. We’re finally home,” someone said.

I smiled and nodded. Then I made my way to the coach of the carriage and stood up, pumping a fist into the air. “We’re home! It’s time for a feast! Who wants a barbecue?!”

The whole group erupted in cheers.

Someone on top of Seatoh’s wall must’ve seen us, because they raised both arms and yelled something, and the gate opened with even more cheers. The folks who had stayed behind in the village rushed out of the gate, waving at us. Esparda was in the very front to greet us.

“We’re back!” I announced in front of the gate while the crowd rushed over. Surrounded by smiles, I let them know the most important thing of all:

“Everyone’s okay! No casualties!”

They broke out in applause, joy and relief washing over them in equal measure.

“Welcome home, my lord. It is good to see you safe and well,” Esparda said, bowing his head deeply.

I beamed at him. “Thanks a bunch, and thanks for holding down the fort too. Did anything happen while we were out?”

“Yes, well, more people from the count’s territory arrived. Our population has increased by some three hundred individuals.”

“Huh. Then Seatoth has finally joined the 1k club? What’s the living situation like?”

“I currently have them staying at the Order’s barracks. They’re in the middle of learning how to do their new jobs, so it would be a great help if you checked in on them.”

“Right, right. Okay. Well, let’s have ourselves a barbecue first! It’ll double as a welcome party.” I grinned at Esparda, and the young woman working under him—who was his apprentice of sorts—spoke up.

“Um, wh-what about the war?” she asked hesitantly.

My smile went crooked. “We lost! I mean, having a whole fortress city taken from us definitely stings, but we came back in one piece, so it’s all good! Ha ha ha!”

Everyone looked pretty concerned about it, but c’est la vie!

Chapter 9:

The Effects of a Battle Lost

Jalpa

WE HAD NO PURSUERS, BUT THAT DID LITTLE to rectify the civilians' exhaustion. The neighboring town was not particularly far—only about a week by carriage—but it took us two full weeks to get there. After so much time, there was little doubt in my mind that the fortress city was under Yelenetta's control. The roads leading there were hardly well maintained, but a Yelenetta stronghold to their rear gave them a direct supply route.

For our part, we were in something of a predicament. To take back the fortress city, we would need the capital's Chivalric Order, the border knights, and any strength we could borrow from nearby high-class nobles. And even if we had the numbers, the whole endeavor would probably take years.

No sooner had we arrived in town than I began to make preparations. "We're reorganizing the Chivalric Order," I said. "The commander of the border knights fell in battle, correct? Tell the second-in-command to get me the total number of casualties. I also want to know how many soldiers are available. And we need supplies—arrange for them, posthaste." Having received my commands, my subordinates ran off to carry them out.

We'd taken minimal losses as far as soldiers and equipment were concerned, but morale was at an all-time low. That mysterious weapon was bad news. The men were terrified after losing their friends and comrades to some incomprehensible device.

But there was someone out there who could fight back.

"Don't tell me our retreat was aided by—"

Before I could finish that thought, a group of knights appeared at the town's entrance. At the front was Murcia, clad in white armor. He had acted on my orders to gather reinforcements from elsewhere and only just arrived. "Father!"

"How slow can you be?!" I roared. "Where the hell have you been?"

Murcia grimaced and straightened up. "M-my apologies, sir! I sent envoys to different locations in the hopes of gathering as many men as I could! I divided my forces into two separate groups so that I would not be late, but even so..."

Rage bubbled up inside me as I listened to his excuses. “Fool! Everything you do is slow! A normal person learns something and commits it to memory. Someone with an aptitude for learning can absorb something and come away with twice or thrice the knowledge. Yet you could learn ten things and somehow walk away with one at most!”

“I-I am sorry, sir! You’re right, I am a slow learner...”

“If you know that, then you should work harder and faster than everyone else to make up for it, you dolt!”

Murcia shrank in the face of my anger. I usually valued his work ethic, but his weakness of spirit and ineptitude were unforgivable.

I was still glaring at him when I noticed new soldiers arriving at the entrance of the town. The group was composed primarily of cavalymen.

“Lord Jalpa Bul Ati Fertio, a man such as yourself should not speak this way. The young man is cowering before you.”

There was no mistaking it: this was the voice of my one and only master. I spun around and immediately took a knee. “Your Majesty, I apologize for such an uncouth display.” All of the anger I had felt toward Murcia dissipated as I lowered my head.

Gravel crunched beneath the king’s feet as he approached, then spoke from above. “Rise, Marquis. What is the situation? Explain.”

My face twitched. Nonetheless, I had to answer him. After a moment’s hesitation, I said, “The fortress city of Scudet has fallen into enemy hands, but I promise to get it back. We are currently preparing for that very operation.”

“I see,” the king said at length. “Give me all the details. When you arrived, had the city already fallen?”

His voice was taut with anger. Cold sweat rolled down my back. “When I arrived, Scudet was already near collapse following a strange series of wyvern attacks. Scudet’s forces in the city were surrounded, so we approached from the western road and cut a path through their ranks. But the enemy threw strange, spherical projectiles at us, and several of my knights were blown away.”

“What? Was it some kind of magical device?”

“I do not know. It was extremely versatile, and there was no way to know when it was coming. Merely throwing it ignited sparks that produced ferocious explosions when they touched something. We retreated, though we initially came under fire when the wyverns dropped their projectiles on us from above.”

The king groaned in frustration. Silence fell between us, and I felt like a prisoner awaiting his execution. My throat grew dry, my breathing ragged.

Finally, the king spoke. “I understand. So you retreated, correct? What were your casualties?”

My shoulders and back were tense even though he sounded calm and composed. “Casualties to my Chivalric Order were light, but roughly a third of Scudet’s border knights were taken out. A fifth or so sustained heavy injuries. Since the enemy did not pursue us after their initial bombardment, the civilians were evacuated with almost zero fatalities.”

“They did not pursue?” The king’s tone held a twinge of skepticism.

He may very well have suspected I was connected to Yelenetta in some way. More cold sweat dappled my spine. “Correct. I apologize for the vague report, but another group from the south provided us with support on the first leg of our retreat. I cannot say for certain what happened, but wyverns began falling from the sky, one after another, and I did not sense any magic.” I ground my teeth, hearing how ridiculous I sounded. “The enemy must have judged them the greater threat, because they turned their entire forces toward the new arrival...”

It was a shameful report. Rather than cutting down my Chivalric Order or the border knights from behind, the enemy had deemed this third party and their strange new weapon more important. In battle, it was key to eliminate a retreating threat before it could return with reinforcements, granting you an advantage, but Yelenetta had prioritized this third party over me. I seethed at the thought.

“That was likely Lord Van. I doubt he was able to prepare enough soldiers for battle. I hope he fled without engaging them in combat.”

My head snapped up. Behind me, Murcia cried out, “D-did you say Van?!”

The king nodded, his expression relaxing somewhat. “I’m sure the rumors are already circulating in your territory, no? Young Van Nei Fertio developed an old village on the outskirts of the kingdom and slew a dragon. In light of those accomplishments, he was given the title of baron, despite his young age.” He sounded almost proud.

Murcia’s eyes were wide with shock, but he smiled, and tears began to stream down his cheeks. I wanted to reprimand him for his idiocy, but it was not the time. “Your Majesty, please excuse my impudence, but how could *Van* be capable of slaying a dragon? The boy cannot wield elemental magic, and he has only a few people working under him. To put it frankly, someone else must have intervened.”

I meant only to explain my thought process, but to my surprise, the king’s eyes blazed with anger. His next words were razor sharp. “Do you accuse your king of lying, Marquis? Or perhaps you imply someone has pulled the wool over my eyes? That I would fall for such an absurd plot? Do I look so ignorant to you?”

I bowed my head deeply. “M-my apologies, Your Majesty. That was not my intention.”

I pictured Van’s face on the day he left home. *That boy slew a dragon? How in the world did that happen?*

Murcia

MY YOUNGEST BROTHER HAD DEFEATED A DRAGON. Somehow, I believed it the moment I heard it.

Such a statement would typically sound like nonsense, but knowing Van, it didn't seem so far-fetched. The eight-year-old had been booted to a middle-of-nowhere village on the verge of collapse with only three knights, an elderly butler, a maid, and a slave child. While the knights were certainly talented, there were just three of them; they could only do so much.

Everyone must have predicted that Van would run home in tears within a year. After all, he was only a small child. But that very same child had expanded his tiny village and even slain a dragon. Even the king recognized this!

If that wasn't joyous news, nothing was. I couldn't stop my tears from flowing.

"I see this has you crying, young man," the king said, smiling. "Are you jealous that your little brother has achieved so much before you?"

I shook my head. "With all due respect, Your Majesty, it's quite the opposite. Hearing that my little brother has overcome his rough circumstances and grown so much fills me with great pride. He was never a normal child, and he had no visible accomplishments to call his own...but now things are different. Nobody will ever deem him lesser or ordinary again. He..." I trailed off and raised my head to look the king in the eye. "He's a hero who slew a dragon, after all!"

I meant this from the bottom of my heart even as I saw my father frown. Yet the king simply blinked in apparent fascination. "So that is your truth, then. In a way, your lack of greed reminds me of Lord Van. I *have* heard that it is the second and third sons who most closely take after the marquis. Having met you, I see that you truly have not inherited your father's ambitions."

The king then turned his gaze back on Father.

"Marquis, it must be rather dispiriting having three sons competing to be your heir."

"Er... Well, yes, I suppose..." Father replied awkwardly, unsure of the king's

intent.

The king nodded decisively and smiled once more. “So how about this, Lord Fertio? You are still more than active. Why not solidify your house with just yourself and your second and third sons?”

“Wait, what? Do you want me to send Murcia out on his own?” Father asked.

“What?” I echoed, unthinking. On numerous occasions, Father had verbally abused me in fits of rage, cursing me as incompetent—but not once had I imagined the king himself advising him to kick me out of the house. I looked at the ground, crushed and reeling, cold sweat dripping from my forehead to stain the earth.

Me? On my own? No way. I had neither the knowledge nor the experience to survive alone in the world. Then again, Van had managed to overcome his awful circumstances. Maybe I was wrong to complain, but I still lacked self-confidence. My heart raced at the very idea of it.

While I fought against my rising panic, I stole a glance at my father’s face. Despite the king’s words, this matter ultimately concerned the man’s successor. Unless the king had a good reason to force his agenda, Father could still decline, in theory.

Or so I thought. Father knelt pensively before me, averting his gaze from the king’s. All words escaped me.

What is there to think about? Isn’t the answer obvious?

He wanted to avoid an all-out quarrel as his sons vied for the honor of succeeding him. I knew of cases in which brothers had killed one another for this very reason; in fact, Father himself had firsthand experience. He’d murdered his older brother to secure his place as head, earning himself the chilling moniker of “Bloody Lord.”

After Father became a marquis, he made it a point to cut such schemes off at the pass. That was one of his reasons for expelling Van, whom he deemed useless. Which meant Father’s answer was—

“I understand. I cannot say for sure whether he is capable of independence, but I will make him the lord of a single town and observe from there. But, Your

Majesty, because this was your idea, I ask that you give him Cubell in Lord Ferdinatto's territory." A self-satisfied smile crept onto his lips.

There it was: as soon as he felt he understood the king's motives, he snipped my strings and tossed me to the wayside. He decided that there was a good way to use me, even if it meant letting me go. But whatever his reason, he was releasing me from the house. My vision darkened as the implications set in.

Then the king spoke again. "Hmm. Cubell, you say? Not a bad idea, but it is a bit far from your territory. Would you not be concerned for your son?"

"What? Erm, no, not at all." Incapable of reading between the lines, Father shook his head stiffly.

His Majesty nodded, grinning as though he'd had some realization. "Aha! I have a great idea! Your youngest son, Lord Van, recently built a new village at the edge of your territory. What say we appoint your son there? This way, whenever you find yourself concerned about his well-being, it will be a simple matter to visit him. Especially because both sons will be in the same location!"

The king's amused suggestion made my father twitch, and he plastered a smile on his face. "S-surely you jest... One cannot call that true independence if both boys are together. If we aim to promote his growth, then surely the best option is to assign him to a poor village out in the country, just as I did with Van—the perfect place for him to use his abilities to improve the community."

"Then Cubell would be far from ideal. It is on the edge of the count's territory, but it remains an important location because it provides supplies and support to our points of defense. It may not be a large city, but I do not see the point in placing him somewhere that is already thriving."

"B-be that as it may... There is already a local governor there and, er... He can learn how to improve a location with a government already in place, right? Things like how increasing taxes can—"

"Hmm! How odd. Did you not say only moments ago that a poor village would be perfect?" the king asked with a mocking smile. Father looked even more confused. "Now you say something entirely different. If you aren't committed to one location, then what does it matter where I assign him?"

My estimation was that Father, who'd been appointed to a prominent position by the king, had misread His Majesty's intentions entirely. He seemed to think that the king's suggestion was made as an excuse to take more territory from the count, but that wasn't the case.

Then what are the king's true intentions?

What was his motivation in peeling me away from House Fertio? I couldn't imagine he meant it maliciously. Nevertheless, I couldn't untie the painful knot in my stomach as I watched their conversation continue.

Father furrowed his brow and stared hard at the ground. "Your Majesty, is it a stroke of madness to suspect you feel *Van* is better suited to protect the border than I am?" He choked out those words with such agony that I feared he might cough up blood. I had never heard Father so furious, nor seen his face so hardened with rage.

Yet the king continued in his flippant, jovial tone, waving it off with one hand. "Ha ha ha! You are off the mark, Lord Fertio. I know of no one who has contributed as much to my kingdom and the war effort as you. Simply put, I find young Van fascinating. And truth be told, what we have discussed depends largely on what happens to Scudet going forward. If the city is taken and Yelenetta further invades our lands, there will be no time for such leisurely plans."

In response, Father bowed his head deeply. What could he possibly say to the king after that? Though I understood in my mind and heart, I couldn't ignore the fact that Father hadn't asked to let me remain in the house.

At the Meeting

BY INVADING THE FORTRESS CITY OF SCUDET, the Kingdom of Yelenetta claimed overwhelming victory with tactics never before seen in Scuderia. Its military then pursued the fleeing Scudarian border forces and Lord Fertio's Chivalric Order.

Shortly after, something put a halt to their pursuit. The fleeing military forces regrouped a town over from Scudet and reorganized under the leadership of the capital's Chivalric Order. Meanwhile, Yelenetta's military forces worked to repair Scudet and strengthen its defenses.

When Panamera arrived, two days after the capital's Chivalric Order, she received a war report from Jalpa and narrowed her eyes. "Lost the siege, lost in the field, then retreated. If it weren't for Lord Van's assistance, our forces would probably have been annihilated."

With the king present, all Jalpa could do in response to this shame was clench his fists in silent anger. The king, looking at Jalpa out of the corner of his eye, posed a question to Panamera. "So you also believe it was Lord Van who offered his aid?"

Panamera smiled. "I would bet on it. The baron is the only person in this country capable of such a feat," she said confidently. Jalpa stared at her in disbelief, but she merely shrugged and added, "As you have seen yourself, Your Majesty, his powers are astounding on every conceivable level. And because he understands that, he is more careful than anyone else. I suspect that he has retreated to his territory to develop a new weapon to use against Yelenetta."

"Hmm, I see." The king nodded. "I expected no less from you, Viscount. It is no wonder you formed an alliance on equal footing with our good baron. Now then, I intend to make moves to retake Scudet soon. What sort of aid can we expect?"

The king began to speak of the future while Panamera offered her own insights, but Jalpa could only watch the conversation unfold, a complicated expression creeping over his face.

Van

I WAS THRILLED TO BE BACK IN MY COZY HOUSE FOR the first time in ages. After rolling around in bed for a spell, I had Till prepare a late breakfast of high-class aromatic tea, with a meal of fresh bread, steamed potatoes, and crunchy bacon.

“Delish! Thanks for cooking all that, Till!”

“Yes, thank you so much,” said Arte.

Till smiled brightly as she took our empty plates away from the table.

“Lord Van, what are your plans for today?” Khamsin asked, looking serious.

Still utterly relaxed, I replied, “Hmm... Good question.” As ever, I felt no sense of urgency. “I did participate in a war and all, so...I’d like to think I’ve done my duty as a noble.”

“That was my first time seeing war in person,” Arte said sadly. “It is horrifying how quickly people can just die. If possible, I would prefer you to never go back to something like that, Lord Van.”

The irony was that Arte had been more accomplished on the battlefield than anyone else here. Surprisingly, she didn’t seem bothered by defeating an entire group of soldiers or beheading a bunch of wyverns. According to her, by the time she decided to participate in the battle, she had already strengthened her resolve to take lives and put her own on the line. The only thing that gave her pause was the thought of someone close to her falling in battle.

I tried to joke that she was like a samurai, but she, Khamsin, and Till all stared at me emotionlessly. *Man, I was really hoping that one would land. Tough crowd!*

“Unfortunately, our ally Panamera is participating, so I probably have to help in some capacity,” I said. Then I sighed, stood up from my chair, and announced, “All right, time to develop a new weapon! If I send something like that to the front lines, it should be more than enough assistance. We know that the ballistae I gave Panamera are effective against wyverns.” I added in a whisper, “I think another powerful anti-aircraft weapon would be perfect.”

With that, I left the manor. As I strolled through the village, a number of villagers-turned-knights lit up.

“Huh?! Lord Van, are we heading to battle again?!”

“If we are, we can get ready on the double!”

Adventurers with combat experience, meanwhile, smiled knowingly. “That’s how you get after an overwhelming victory.”

“Uh, considering we’re the ones who retreated, I’d say we lost.”

“In terms of what went down, we totally won.”

These kinds of conversations came from all sides, making my happy little stroll a proverbial pain in the butt. Eventually, I arrived at the outskirts of Seatoth, where I caught the eyes of Dee, Arb, and Lowe.

“Ho there, Lord Van!” Dee said. “Recovered your strength already, have you?”

“Wait, is it time for battle again already?” Arb asked.

“I’d like to relax a little more,” Lowe grumbled.

They all had different perspectives, and they were all *wrong*. I gently shook my head. “If we get involved in the war effort as we are now, I don’t know that we can eke out a victory. That’s why I’m going to develop a weapon that will deliver a decisive blow!”

The men exchanged surprised looks, then turned back to me.

“Another new weapon, my lord?”

“More powerful than the last?”

“Are we becoming the bad guys?”

I beamed at them as innocently as I could. “The more likely our victory, the better, right?” That triggered a fit of laughter from Dee and pained smiles from Arb and Lowe.

I waved goodbye, then made my way to Rango and his people, who were unloading their carriages. “Hey, guys! Welcome back!”

Bell, Rango, and their slaves-turned-employees all whirled around. They

rushed over, smiling.

“Lord Van!”

“Long time no see!”

“Congratulations on winning your first battle.”

“No, no,” I said. “We definitely lost. All we did was show our faces for a hot second and then flee.”

Bell grinned. “Are you sure about that? You were able to defend the Chivalric Order, the backbone of our nation’s defenses, during their retreat...and you did it all in your first battle, with not a single casualty. I would call that pretty remarkable.”

I shrugged. “Beginner’s luck. I wasn’t thinking at all beyond what was happening in the moment. Anyway, how did your shopping trip go? Find what I asked for?”

The merchant brothers exchanged glances, then pulled out the goods. “Is this right?” Rango asked, placing them in front of me. “It definitely matches what you described, but, well...”

He and the others wore the same perplexed look. It was a model composed of wooden triangles. They were lined up with one another so that the upper and lower bits were connected, giving them a three-dimensional shape. At the center was a long stick, which made it look like some kind of children’s toy.

My eyes flew wide. “This is it! A trebuchet! I knew they existed!” Gleeful, I put a small stone on the tiny catapult and fired it while everyone watched in confusion. Everyone except for Till and Khamsin, that is, who looked on with strained smiles and unbreakable trust.

There were all kinds of catapults that took on myriad forms: ones operated via manpower, ones controlled by bows or springs, and even ones powered by weights. Up until that point, the ones used in Seatoth had used bowstrings that required monster hide and manpower to launch projectiles. They were a unique design, but the model Bell had brought with him allowed me to improve my

design with brand-new ideas. I attempted to build a catapult that used springs, then a slingshot type, but neither turned out right. In most cases, the ballistae were easier to use.

The nice thing about trebuchets specifically was that you only needed to increase their size to boost their power. Their construction was simple, and they had undergone countless modifications over the years, making them the easiest and most effective catapults to use. It was illogical for me to try to recreate that design from scratch, so I'd asked the Bell & Rango Company to locate blueprints or a small model while I continued my in-house catapult R&D.

As a result, I'd gotten my hands on three models and five sets of blueprints. With so much to work with, I'd be able to make the best catapult imaginable.

Oh, and for the record, nobody's been able to find gunpowder for me yet. Seems the stuff still hasn't made its way out here. "Well, no use crying over spilled milk, I guess."

I launched right into my catapult modifications. Thanks to the recent battle against the airborne wyverns, I had a good idea of the range of fire we'd need for effective combat against the beasts. In theory I could develop catapults for a higher altitude, but the mages wouldn't be able to go that high anyway if they had to ride their wyverns. Not only would it be too cold for them, but the air would also be too thin. There were similar limits on how fast the creatures could move, too.

In that case, standard catapults would definitely do the trick. On the model catapult, I could raise the angle of elevation up to forty degrees. Keeping in mind my goal of firing projectiles far into the distance, I couldn't afford to raise the angle too much. The catapult would be able to send projectiles much higher up into the air if I made it more like a seesaw, but the distance they would travel would decrease significantly—and due to a lack of power, projectiles could whiff against enemies high in the air.

The device needed to be able to fire projectiles high enough without losing power. To accomplish this, I made an absurd number of small model catapults, eventually landing on Prototype #54. It was a simple, weight-driven design, but I had added springs to increase its initial firing velocity. Its angle of elevation

could be raised to a whopping seventy degrees, too. This special anti-air catapult fired high into the sky and packed a punch.

As for projectiles, it fired boxes of shuriken. I modified them so that they would spread out more effectively than before, but they ended up functioning the same anyway. *Whoops*.

Pleased with the model, I moved on to producing a full-size prototype—which went spectacularly. The box of shuriken launched into the air and exploded, spreading the tiny projectiles all through the sky. “Oooh, I can’t see them anymore!” I cried, delighted.

Dee watched from beside me, looking exasperated. “Hmm... This is impressive. It flies so high that its flight duration is very long, but then it spreads projectiles over a wide area. The larger the enemy force, the more effective this will be.”

I nodded with a big grin. “Right?! It takes a bit to prepare the next shot, but in terms of power, range, and durability, it gets a passing mark. I’ll settle for this until we get our hands on gunpowder.”

“Settle?” Esparda said, pained. “Please do not tell me you’re dissatisfied with this...”

Everyone else was similarly speechless, except for Till and Khamsin. They looked up at the new catapult, unfazed.

“It sure is big,” said Khamsin.

Till asked, “How many of these are you going to build, Lord Van?”

“Twenty stationary units across the east, west, south, and north. Then another five or so mobile units. Oh, but wait. Bringing these to Scudet might be tough, especially if the roads aren’t flat...”

“Indeed, the roads are quite rough,” Arte said. “Something this big might fall down the slopes...”

Till, Khamsin, Arte, and I brainstormed this until I hit upon an idea. “I know! I can just build them on-site. We should be able to transport the materials without a hitch!”

My crew agreed, expressing their astonishment and approval. Staring up at my fifteen-meter-tall weapon, I thought, *Is it just me, or are the people around me starting to grow numb to all of this?*

A week zoomed by, during which I managed to install a new wall on the outside of the preexisting one, plus a set of catapults atop it. I also prepared an additional five carriages and stuffed the materials necessary for the catapults inside of them. The plan was to use the war wagons from before, so our caravan was going to be quite large.

“I wish we could have squeezed in a little more training with the catapults, but oh well,” I said. “We’re just gonna head off to the base, build some really quickly, then come right back. Wait here, folks.”

I said my goodbyes to Esparda and everyone else staying behind, then began the journey to the battlefield. “Maaan, I was hoping to avoid going to battle a second time,” I muttered, causing Arte to grimace.

“It is unfortunate. I personally think your gift of ballistae was more than enough. You did not have to go and make new weapons.” She was clearly dissatisfied with the situation.

Till nodded in agreement. Khamsin looked like he had something to say, but he kept his mouth clamped shut. I gave them a tight smile and shook my head. “To be perfectly honest, I’d rather never leave the village, but if Yelenetta continues its invasion and takes the towns around us, it’s going to be a big problem. We won’t be able to get our hands on sugar anymore... Just the thought sends a chill down my spine! We have Scudet and Lord Ferdinatto’s Zaltz as defensive cornerstones in this area, so it would be bad for us if those locations fell.”

Khamsin frowned. “Scudet has already fallen,” he pointed out.

I had been waiting for those words. “That’s why I’m bringing these catapults. After we take back Scudet, we can lend them to the fortress city. We can even throw in some ballistae. That way, it won’t easily fall again.”

“Oh, I get it now! Since we have your weapons, everything will be fine!”

Khamsin replied, grinning.

I nodded and smiled back. "I'll lend their forces the ballistae and catapults for free, but I am going to charge them for the shuriken and bolts. I can hire some adventurers regularly to go and sell them the goods, so I think we can make a decent amount from this arrangement." We were finally going to get a steady income. How could I not smile?

Till and Arte both seemed a bit put off.

"Lord Van, you have an evil smile on your face..."

"Scudet and Zaltz..." Arte murmured. "So our fathers will be paying for the weapons, then."

What I was doing was no different than selling swords and armor. It was fair business! Well, except for the part where only *I* could sell them the materials, meaning I had a monopoly.

"I think one gold for a single bolt is fair enough," I said. "For the shuriken, five silvers apiece. Purchase a whole box and I'll cap it at two large gold. A real bargain!"

Considering the materials, this was a bit of a rip-off, but Arte smiled brightly. "That is so like you, Lord Van, selling them for such affordable prices. I take it you are being thoughtful of the citizens living in both areas?"

"Huh? Um, yeah, that's totally it. Super cheap, huh?"

"Yes! Considering their power and value, I would say those prices are far too inexpensive," Arte said.

Apparently, I'd gone too cheap. But staring at her sunny smile, I couldn't muster up the courage to raise the prices, so I decided to give things some more thought before setting them for good.

My heart heavy with regrets, we continued our journey back to Scudet.

Side Story:
Mid-Progress

Adventurers

A NEW DUNGEON HAD BEEN DISCOVERED. Having received this report, a group of adventurers struck out early for the village in the middle of nowhere.

It made a lot of sense, given the dungeon's location. According to the report, it was in a region with no large cities or strongholds nearby, never mind money-making opportunities like mines. Few would ever have reason to venture out there, especially when dangerous monsters lurked in their natural habitats so close by. It was no wonder that the dungeon had gone undetected for so long. That was what many adventurers thought as they gazed at the maps made by the Adventurers' Guild.

Newly discovered dungeons often contained hidden treasures. An adventurer could also make a lot of money mapping out the dungeon's interior, writing up reports on the monsters that lurked within, and selling this information to the guild.

A handful were surprised by the area in question, though. Wasn't it the same location in which a large dragon had just been slain? This rumor spread fast among the adventurers who remained in the capital city. "A dungeon *and* a dragon?"

They were blown away. It was rare for a place to be the location of not one but two wild encounters. Consequently, all sorts of people found themselves heading to the village in the middle of nowhere: those who were just curious, those who smelled riches, and even those with interests beyond the dungeon.

One such group arrived at Seatoh ahead of the rest, and its members were stunned by what they found. Based on their experience and the location in question, it seemed absurd to call the thing in front of them a village. It should have been a rundown settlement at best, not a "village" surrounded by a massive wall. There was even a moat and a river from which to draw water.

"The hell's going on here?" one adventurer demanded.

Ortho and his crew passed by on their way to the moat. He made a mental note of the onlookers before the drawbridge came down, granting him and his

party access to the village beyond the wall. They strode right in while the new arrivals stared, rubbing their eyes in disbelief.

“H-hey, the bridge is down,” one said.

“Forget that for a sec! What’s with that wall?!” cried another. “And check out those weapons lining it!”

The adventurers were downright bewildered. There was nothing desolate or poor about this village. In fact, it wasn’t even a village anymore; it was more like a fortified city. They tried to imagine what lay beyond that wall, which rivaled the one in the capital.

Eventually, they stepped through the gate and encountered another unexpected sight: the massive square building right by the front gate. They guessed that this was the Chivalric Order barracks. Whatever intel they’d received about the village before embarking on their journey was being overwritten in real time.

The village was sprawling, with buildings of all sorts peppering the land. The road running through it was clearly well maintained, even if a lot of land still stood empty.

A knight from the local Chivalric Order descended from the wall and approached the adventurers, who were gawking at their surroundings. He was equipped with a machine bow. “Welcome to Seatoh,” he said, appraising them.

The adventurers answered every question he asked of them, and then exchanged glances. “We heard there was a village out on the border, but is this the right place? We were trying to get to the village on the edge of Lord Fertio’s territory...”

With a smile, the knight nodded. “You’re not mistaken. Everyone who comes here reacts the same way. To be honest, even we’re shocked at how quickly things have changed since Lord Van’s arrival.”

This only caused the adventurers further confusion. “Lord Van?”

He puffed up with pride. “Lord Fertio’s son. He’s still quite young, but he is an incredible person. This place was on the verge of collapse due to repeated bandit attacks until he came along and started developing the village.” Excited

and passionate, he listed off Van's exploits, but he spoke so quickly—and his words were so difficult to believe—that they barely registered with the adventurers.

"Right... So, uh, this guy became the lord of the area, and the village got better?" The knight nodded, prompting the adventurers to look at one another yet again. "Lord Fertio, eh?"

"Makes sense to me. He must've spent a year rapidly developing this place. That's that."

"Wait, does that mean he plans on making this place a full-fledged fortress city?"

While they discussed the matter among themselves, the knight spotted Ortho nearby. "Hey, Ortho!"

"Yo."

One of the adventurers watched the two greet each other. "Hello there! Can I get a minute?"

Ortho turned around. "Hmm? What's up? I was away from home for a whole day, so I really wanna grab a bite," he said, clearly annoyed.

The adventurer grimaced. "Look, man, I'm really sorry. It's just that you look like you're familiar with this place. I've got a question for you, if you don't mind."

"Huh? Sure I guess," Ortho agreed reluctantly.

"You're a lifesaver. Could you tell me about this place from an adventurer's perspective?"

Ortho grinned at the direct question and pointed far back in the village. "Here's your first tip: right that way is a delicious restaurant. I was thinking of heading there myself, so how about you join me?"

The adventurer burst into laughter. "Now that's what I call a tip! If it's really that good, I guess I've got to see for myself!"

"We just got here, too, so we'll join you!" one of the other adventurers said. They were so keen to jump on Ortho's invitation that they all ended up

grabbing a bite at the restaurant.

Incidentally, Seatoth's food culture had leveled up significantly thanks to Bell and Rango, the pair of merchant brothers who had moved to town. The baron's maid, Till, also shared the recipes she learned at the marquis's estate with the villagers, so everyone had become better cooks.

The adventurers from the capital fell in love at first bite. Having eaten their first good meal in some time, they were in high spirits as they listened to Ortho.

"...So we were charged with protecting Lord Van, right? He made us all kinds of weapons, but that's not all. The kid even took down a bunch of big-ass monsters. He slew a dragon! In a village with less than a hundred people, no less! I tell ya, the bows he makes are incredible, man. They can pierce the shell of an armored lizard, no sweat. Hell, a dragon'll go down with one shot to the head."

The adventurers could barely believe what they were hearing. Ortho was already on his second drink and acting a lot more jovial than he'd been when they first ran into him; they all assumed that the liquor was making him exaggerate.

Ortho sensed their doubt, so he grinned and put one hand on his hip. "Wanna give it a try?" he asked, pulling the knife from his belt.

Just like that, the mood at the table shifted. The adventurers tensed and stared warily at Ortho.

"Hey, no worries. I just wanna show you how sharp this thing is," he said, looking over everyone at the table. "Anybody got an old knife or shield on 'em?"

"Uh, yeah." The adventurers still hadn't let their guard down, but one of them offered up a small knife. Ortho took it and switched hands, pressing his own knife into its back.

"Watch carefully." Ortho put a little bit of strength into his hand, cutting through the knife's metal with his own blade. From the outside, it looked like some sort of awkward magic trick. He stole a glance at the stunned adventurers and smirked, brandishing the blade in front of his face. "I bought this knife from

Lord Van. I also have a long sword that's just as sharp. It can cut through an armored lizard's scales no problem. I ain't lying, either."

One of the adventurers frowned. "You mentioned bows earlier. Are they as crazy powerful as that?"

Ortho nodded. "Yup. Wanna take a look?"

"Huh?" For a moment, the adventurers couldn't comprehend Ortho's carefree reply, even as he stood up and walked outside, beckoning them to follow. "Wh-where are we going?"

The newcomers were completely enchanted by this point, trailing after him despite their confusion. Ortho, meanwhile, was stuffed from dinner, had some booze in him, and was in a great mood. Each step he took was lighter than the last as he headed farther into Seatoh, to the wall on the opposite side of the entrance. The gate there was slightly smaller than the one at the front. They passed through it, encountering a small lake just beyond.

"Wait, no way..." breathed one of the adventurers.

"A-are those apkallu?" asked another.

"You mean that species that's so rare they might as well be legend? They can't possibly be in a place like this..."

Ortho scanned the lake while the adventurers stood stock-still, eventually locating someone and raising his hand. "Hiya, Lord Van! Can I have a moment of your time?"

He casually called out to the baron, causing a whole group of people at the lake's edge to turn around. Among them was a child and a large man who looked to be a knight—a mismatched pair, to be sure.

Approaching Ortho, the child spoke up. "What's up?" he asked, tilting his head cutely.

Ortho bowed his head respectfully and said, "Sorry in advance, but I'm showing around some adventurers who just got here and, well...I'd love it if you could make them weapons."

The adventurers, watching this conversation closely, realized something then.

Despite Ortho's status as a veteran adventurer, he was lowering his head to a *child*. This was a strange sight and, after observing the way the two of them communicated and the atmosphere surrounding their interactions, the adventurers took a keen interest in the boy.

Van stared at each of the newcomers, as if he was studying them. "That's fine, but a regular old sword is gonna run you three gold," he said, sounding like a merchant. "A spear, a great sword, or an axe will cost you five gold. Short swords and knives are one gold each."

Ortho smiled and nodded before turning around. "Hell yeah, guys. What do you want? I personally recommend a nice, straight long sword. That blade'll make mincemeat of monsters," he said, fully assuming that they were ready to make purchases.

The adventurers swapped uncertain looks. "Wait a second, I'm not following. Weren't you going to show us bows?" one of them asked.

"Hmm?" Ortho cocked his head to the side. Then he snapped his fingers. "Oh, right! I totally forgot. Still, you should definitely all grab at least one of Van's weapons. I promise you won't regret it!"

The newcomers eyed Ortho like he was a total drunkard, but he couldn't have cared less. Van watched this back-and-forth and quickly came to a realization. Politely, he said, "In that case, do you want to watch a test firing of one of our ballistae? You can get a nice view from up on the wall there."

The adventurers nodded, and Van took over as the group guide with Ortho tagging along. The little lord grabbed his maid and another youth as he led the crowd up the wall.

"Hey, this, uh, Lord Van is the ruler of this area, right?" an adventurer asked his compatriot.

"As far as I can tell..."

Van's tone and aura were the antithesis of what one would expect from a noble, and the adventurers feared that they were being misled. Behind them, Ortho's shoulders shook with mirth.

Once he was atop the wall, Van looked around and spotted one of the

members of the Seatoh Chivalric Order. “Heya! Can I have a sec?”

“Why, it’s Lord Van! Of course. What do you need?”

The person in question was a female knight, which was more than enough to ignite the adventurers’ curiosity. They murmured among themselves. “A lady knight, eh? That’s pretty rare.”

“Nah. No matter where you go, 20 to 30 percent of the soldiers are women.”

“That’s definitely not true.”

Meanwhile, Van smiled at the woman. “Sounds like lady knights are rare. How about we surprise them with one of our ballistae, good dame?” he said with a teasing look on his face.

“You betcha!” she replied, grinning. She promptly took her place next to a ballista.

After confirming that it was already loaded with a bolt and ready to fire, Van turned around and raised a hand to the adventurers. “Now then, I present to you one of Seatoh’s primary weapons, the ballista! The bolts this thing uses are custom-made by yours truly. They come in wood and iron, but either version packs a formidable punch!”

The adventurers kept their mouths shut and listened attentively.

Van ensured everyone’s eyes were on him, then went on; “We will now proceed with a test fire. Please look over there.” He pointed to a far-off mountain, then locked eyes with the knight. She aimed at a forest grove right at the mountain’s base—a target that would be easy to see from their vantage point. “Proceed. Fire when ready!”

As soon as Van made the call, the air quivered and a great boom cracked loudly around them. The ballista shot its bolt in a straight line toward the trees. Moments later, the high-speed projectile pierced multiple trees, which collapsed to the ground.

Even from this distance, the group could see and hear it all. The adventurers watched with wide eyes, looking between the ballista and the damage in the distance.

“Wh-what amazing power...”

“We’d be screwed if one of those came at us.”

“A shield wouldn’t do jack. We’d be sent flying.”

Van smiled at the muttering adventurers, then turned to the boy beside him. “Show them your katana, Khamsin.”

“Yes, Master.” The boy called Khamsin drew his sword from its sheath and held the blade up to the adventurers, who watched with great interest. “This weapon is called a katana, and Lord Van made it himself. It’s one of a kind.”

“Really? *That’s* what you’re explaining to them?” Van cut in, laughing dryly at the way Khamsin bragged about his treasure.

The adventurers were intrigued. They gathered around the mysterious weapon.

“A katana, you say?”

“Hmm, it’s got a flat edge on one side.”

“Yo, look how thin it is.”

“Could one of you please hold up your shield?” Khamsin asked.

“Huh? Uh, sure. Is this fine?”

One of the adventurers held up a round buckler for the boy, who nodded and took a stance with his katana. Though they didn’t know it, this was a classic kendo position. “Please do not move.”

In one fluid motion, Khamsin slid his sword toward the man’s shield. A moment later, a third of the shield fell to the ground.

“Wha...?!” The onlookers could barely put together a single word.

“This katana is uniquely sharp, but Lord Van’s standard swords and spears have their own merits. Fear not,” Khamsin said as he smoothly sheathed his blade.

After seeing his precise, flowing movements, the adventurers gaped at one another and rounded on Van.

“I would like a sword. For length, let’s see...”

“Ah, I’ll take a knife! A throwing knife!”

“F-for mine, I’d like something uniquely shaped. Um, a curved sword...”

Just like that, the adventurers were scrambling to be first in line to purchase a weapon. Van, of course, was up for the challenge.

He smiled and picked up the broken shield in both hands. Focusing his magical energies, he gently changed its shape and properties, morphing it into a weapon. It became a double-sided straight sword that, including the handle, was about a meter in length. As a bonus, he applied an intricate design to the blade and handle.

“Wh-whoa!” This process took only a few minutes, and the onlookers made all sorts of surprised grunts and hollers. The finished blade shone a beautiful silver, and the adventurer who took it into his hands held it as if it were the king’s own prized sword.

“That’ll be three gold,” said Van.

“O-of course!”

The adventurer hurriedly readied the money while Van began to prepare the next orders: a throwing knife and a curved sword.

“This is armored lizard hide,” Till explained. She handed it over to the adventurers, who were still shocked that their weapons had been finished so quickly. Armored lizard hide was said to be stronger than iron itself, and Van looked on gleefully as the adventurers tested their weapons on it.

“All of the weapons I make can be purchased at the Bel & Rango Company in the village. We also have great armor that’s super light and easy to move in, so feel free to make a purchase if it pleases you.” Van beamed, and the adventurers nodded fervently.

In the future, Seatoh would become famous throughout the nation as the place to acquire the very finest weapons in the land. Van, who was just happy to make weapons for some quick side cash, knew nothing of its reputation.

Side Story: Turning Nine

Van

GIANT CHUNKS OF MEAT SIZZLED ATOP MESH AS they cooked to perfection. This was a grand old barbecue, Seatoth's regular big event. The aroma of cooked meat tickled the nose, causing countless mouths to water. Normally we'd have bread, some sort of pasta, salad, and fruits lined up on tables as well, but this time around there was a large, heavily decorated cake instead. Sugar was especially expensive in this world, so the only cake was the one sitting in front of me.

Why? Because it was my birthday, of course.

Till smiled even wider than me when I looked at the wedding-cake-sized monstrosity. It was actually a sponge cake loaded with cream. This was an extremely uncommon baked good in this world, so uncommon that it might've actually been the only one in existence. That spoke to how much trouble Till had gone through to make this happen.

Why all the trouble? Because I didn't exactly remember the baking process in detail. I told her that it required mixing eggs, sugar, butter, milk, and some kind of white powder, then baking the end result. Till took that information and spent a month experimenting before arriving at the base form of the sponge cake. I also told her that frosting could be made using butter or milk, but I didn't have any further directions for her. Somehow, she managed to make that happen as well.

If I hadn't already been prepared to follow Big Sis Till for the rest of my life, I certainly was now.

"Happy Birthday, my lord! You are officially nine years old!" said the beaming Big Sis Till, expert baker.

I couldn't help but give her a big smile in return. "Thanks a bunch, Till."

The villagers, Bell and Rango, and even the adventurers all wished me a happy birthday.

"Thanks, guys."

After eating a whole bunch of meat and fruits in my VIP seat, I finally had someone cut me a slice of cake. I took a moment to examine the cake's soft, fluffy profile before opening wide and nomming down. The cream's smooth mouthfeel! The moist texture of the crumbs! The perfect level of sweetness! Its phenomenal flavors melted in my mouth.

"Delish!" I shouted, prompting someone nearby to turn toward me enthusiastically. That wasn't surprising; I suspected that most of the people here had never seen a cake before. In this world, cakes were more bread-like. For comparison's sake, they were similar to pancakes. They were delicious, sure, but they lacked the fluffiness of a sponge cake.

For the record, baked goods were fairly developed in this world, so it wasn't impossible to find buttery sweets and pastries.

So, context aside, I got to enjoy my first bona fide cake in ages, and it was so good I was almost in tears. Arte watched as I partook, looking intrigued. After all, though she'd essentially been kicked out of her house, she was still a high-class noblewoman; she was more than a little familiar with fancy sweets.

"Um, might I have a small bite?" she asked.

"Oh, sorry! Of course you can. Actually—everyone, let's eat! This is Till's masterwork, and it's super-duper delicious!"

This cake is huge, so why not share? There'll be plenty left even if everyone grabs some.

Till looked thrilled as she cut slices for everyone who approached. At last, the moment of truth: everyone took a bite of the cake together. There were wide eyes all around, and I started to hear exactly the responses I was hoping for.

"Whoa, it's delicious!"

"It's so sweet!"

"Amazing!"

"...I see."

I accidentally caught Till's eye, and we both grinned. It genuinely felt wonderful to see her hard work acknowledged. Then I noticed she had yet to

take a bite. “Wait a sec... Till, why haven’t you eaten any?”

She leaned in close and lowered her voice. In an apologetic tone, she said, “In the month it took me to get this right, I ate cake every single day, so...”

I knew Till well, and in a situation like this, she would normally go with the flow and have some cake. But if she’d been eating it every day, maybe she had heartburn or something. Heck, that sort of thing could make anyone’s stomach feel bad.

Then Till put a hand on her belly and complained, “My weight... It’s getting bad...”

She never spoke about this kind of thing in front of me, so all I could do was nod and grimace. “R-right, yeah. Making cake sure is rough,” I said, attempting to comfort her. There was a time and a place for positivity. The wrong answer here would mean the end of my life.



Just like that, the birthday atmosphere was gone. I ate my cake somberly, every bite heaped with delicious feelings of guilt.

Not long after, Esparda slid in behind me. “Nine at last, Lord Van. Soon, a year will have gone by since you were charged with leading this village. Going forward, I shall put my back into helping you with your studies.”

“Y-you mean you weren’t putting your back into it to begin with? I’ve been drowning in studies every single day!” Shocked, I spun around, only to find Esparda staring down at me with those expressionless eyes of his.

Dee, meanwhile, frowned and shook his head at Esparda’s side. “Esparda, his studies are certainly important. But might pushing him too hard have the opposite effect? Pacing oneself will lead to better studying habits. As such, I believe that half of any given day should be dedicated to the pursuit of swordsmanship, for Lord Van’s future. There are no downsides to learning the way of the blade, you see.”

“No, no, no. All you guys are doing is giving me more work to do! Dee, you’re acting weird!”

I did my best to rally against my stone-faced and muscle-brained tutors. Despite their polar opposite approaches, they were united in going overboard with their harsh teaching styles. They were going to smash me into dust with their absolutes.

On a personal note, I felt I had been working plenty hard. If anything, I thought one of them should propose cutting all of that learning down by half. I tried to resist, glaring at them.

Arte nodded gently, a little wrinkle in her brow. “Indeed. Lord Van knows everything, and he can use the sword as well as any other knight...”

In her own subdued way, she was taking my side, and Till and Khamsin nodded in agreement. But the two demonic ogres shook their heads in unison.

“Regardless of how wise a lord or a king might be, there is no downside to possessing more knowledge,” Esparda said. “For example, when they are faced with some kind of danger, the knowledge of suitable countermeasures will equip them to overcome any obstacle in an appropriate fashion. Lady Arte, let

us say you were a citizen of some hypothetical nation. Would you prefer a king with plentiful knowledge and the ability to act fast or a king who lacked knowledge? Which would be the better leader?"

"I-I see... Now that you mention it..."

Esparda's calm and sensible tone was enough to bring Arte to the dark side. Khamsin panicked and spoke up. "B-but even then, um... Yes, it's good for the lord to be able to wield a sword, but he would have bodyguards around him, so maybe he doesn't have to be that strong."

Khamsin wasn't particularly good at talking, but he was trying his best to back me up. *You're definitely getting a bonus!*

Dee grimaced. "He won't always have bodyguards by his side. Imagine, for example, if bandits slipped into his bedroom at night. Even without a blade, there are ways for him to physically prevail in such a scenario if he's learned swordplay. Besides, this kind of training also strengthens the mind. A lord with a strong heart that cannot be swayed versus a lord who is frozen stiff with fear. Which would you prefer to serve, Khamsin?"

"Urgh, well... I..." Khamsin faltered and gave up.

Et tu, Khamsin?!

Overcome with an odd sense of sadness, I watched the four of them go back and forth with each other until Till spoke up, looking angry. "Even without knowledge or sword skills, even if he couldn't do anything in the face of danger, I would serve Lord Van until the very end, no matter what!"

The four of them turned to her immediately. Arte in particular seemed genuinely moved. "You are so amazing, Till. Once you have decided on a master, you would serve them until the end..."

"Ugh, I'm so stupid!" said Khamsin. "Why didn't I say I would protect him no matter what, bedroom or no bedroom?" He was maybe focusing on the wrong thing, but clearly Till's words had moved him.

But Esparda stood strong. "That might be fine for a maid, but as one of his educators, I simply cannot agree."

Good sir, is your heart made of ice?

“Mmm, in that case, I suppose I must train Khamsin to be the greatest knight in the kingdom.” Dee was all brawn and no brains, so he refused to change his stance even after hearing Till’s impassioned speech. “Except... Hmm, in terms of Lord Van’s health, at least four hours of training every day might be necessary.”

For my part, Till’s declaration got me thinking. “Well, I don’t want to be some pathetic and helpless lord, so I guess I’ll try a little harder,” I said with a sigh, shooting Till a pained smile.

Her eyes filled with tears. She clasped her hands in front of her chest. “You are a wonder, Lord Van! To choose such a difficult path, and of your own volition!”

“Er, well... Yeah, I guess...” Till seemed moved, but in reality her words had driven me into a corner. It wasn’t like she meant any harm, so I chose not to point that out.

Esparda and Dee’s eyes were shimmering. No, maybe I was just imagining things.

“In that case, let us increase your study time by an hour every day. A perfectly reasonable amount, no?”

“Yes. And two extra hours of bladework.”

“C’mon, don’t fight over it!”

It was always bad when the two of them got all weird and excited, so I had to put an end to this conversation, fast. With a rueful smile, I thought, *Though I suppose the only reason I’m good with a sword and know so many things is because they trained and raised me so well. Feels wrong to complain too much...*

My feelings must’ve gotten through to Till and Khamsin because they shot me all-too-similar smiles.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR PURCHASING THIS VOLUME. It's me, Sou Akaike.

Somehow, Volume 2 has gone on sale, and I'm once again overwhelmed with the nervousness that comes from exposing myself to the public... I hear that Volume 1's sales have been promising, and I have all of you to thank for that. You're the ones who decided to buy this book! I've also got to thank Kururi for the wonderful illustrations and H for all the proofreading. I never thought I would get a second volume published... This is all thanks to everyone's hard work and effort. I can never express how grateful I am.

This story was born from my love of tower defense games. A protagonist from another world has to protect an impoverished village, and he turns it into a powerful fortified city in the process. In Volume 2, I tried to expand that setting. I love simulation games and play a ton of them, so I incorporated my favorite elements into the story.

Going forward, Van and friends will find themselves embroiled in even larger battles, but our heroes will never lose sight of themselves and how they do things, excitedly expanding their territory and making it stronger. If you want to keep cheering them on, then I would be thrilled if you went to the bookstore and picked up the next volume once it's out.

And finally, once more, I want to express my gratitude to everyone. To H, for making my sentences sing. To Oraidō, for proofreading. To Kururi, for all the amazing illustrations. And last but not least, to everyone who picked up this book. Thank you so, so much.

—SOU AKAIKE



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