



琥珀之劍

Heroes of Amber

破曉之刻

緋炎

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緋炎 | PUTRON
SADON | HKTIST

可歌可泣的故事，不在於英雄式的犧牲，
而在人們舉劍反抗的決心！

繁花與夏葉之年，第一次黑玫瑰戰爭爆發……
初生之犢的劍士、未來的王國女武神、嬌憨的商人小姐，
面對無情亡靈引燃的烽煙，孱弱的蝶翼緩緩振動……

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The Amber Sword

– 琥珀之劍 –

**- Volume 1 -
War of the Black Rose**

**-Author-
Fei Yan**

**-Artist-
Sadon999**

[WolfieTranslation]

- STORY -

An RPG gamer who played the realistic VRMMORPG 'The Amber Sword' for years, finds himself teleported to a parallel world that resembled the game greatly. He takes on the body of an NPC who was fated to die, and with the feelings of the dying NPC and his own heartrending events in the game, he sets out to change the fate of a kingdom that was doomed to tragedy.







Brendel



Romaine



Freya



Ciel



Sue



Tarkus

布蘭多

原地球人，穿越後來到琥珀之劍的世界。鑒於對劇情的了解，總有未卜先知的本事，行事謀定而後動，性情堅韌冷靜，勇氣過人，重夥伴情誼，擁有不受外力動搖的價值觀。



美蕾婭

現任布契第三民兵分隊隊長，英姿勃勃、巾幗不讓鬚眉，她是布蘭多第一個認識的「歷史」人物，未來的王國女武神。



羅曼

夢想成為行商的可愛少女，日常生活極為獨立，活潑愛笑、生性慧黠，性格古靈精怪，常常有一些異於常人的奇思妙想。



塔古斯

瑪達拉的將領，一黑動爵一因斯塔龍的副手，曼萊茵家族第十四代吸血鬼，有一獨眼將軍一的稱號，典雅而有貴族氣息，每逢大事都不慌不亂，僅憑一己之力，就使各路亡靈領主乖乖俯首聽命。

夏爾

布蘭多利用命運卡牌召喚出來的高地巫從，是一名巫師學徒，天性幽默卻不失睿智，偶爾有些引人發噱的惡趣味，十分崇拜布蘭多之餘，也時常以女人緣的問題打趣對方。

蘇

「赤銅龍故事會」酒吧老闆的女兒，因為亡靈攻破里登堡，不得不跟著布蘭多一眾一同逃亡。她的性格冷靜而精明，擅於從小細節分析事物本質，是芙蕾婭的好幫手。



TL NOTE

Also if you're a new reader, take note that the protagonist is named "Su Fei", and the English equivalent is Sophie. There has been indications of the in-text characters stating the protagonist's taken name to sound like "a female's name" later on. I had originally planned to reveal the Chinese name only when the protagonist revealed it himself, but there has been more than a few complaints about having the protagonist having a girl's name, so I'll put it here in advance to warn you.

In a recent poll as of the update, 35% of the Yay(change the damned name) did not beat the 45% Nay, while the remainder said I don't know, in regards to changing the protagonist's localized name of Su Fei. Given that the protagonist takes on a masculine name quickly, I have decided to leave it as it is.

Just a warning.

Tags =

() - Usually denotes further explanation from either the author or myself.

[] - Denotes characters' inner thoughts

" " - Speech

' ' - This might be antiquated terminology. Special terms like 'druids', 'elves' would be capitalized instead. I.E, Druids, Elves.

Chapter 0

Monologue

The militia's non-commissioned officer did not lie to me. With the necessary experience it can save you at the critical juncture.

If it was not that month's training, that seemingly unavoidable sword that lunged towards me during my deep sleep would have been fatal. My senses brought about something akin to a flash of electricity, which tore me away from the deep sleep that I was in.

What greeted me during the moment when I open my eyes, is the reflection of a sharp long sword which seemed to pierce my heart with a freezing chill.

It really makes my heart tremble!

To tell the truth, I do not know how I was able to react to that. Perhaps it was an instinct that was developed from the long training, and I twist my head to the sides at the last instant, and that sword stabs down and brushes past my ear.

I escape that in the nick of time.

Then I see the sword's design embedded onto a metal plate amidst the shining light reflected from the sword; the black rose that bloomed furiously, which can only be from Brumand.

I pause for a while before recognizing it.

"Madara's undead troops!"

It is as if a bucket of water was thrown onto me, and I completely sober up, fucking hell, why are these damn shit bastards appearing here?

I clearly remember I am taking my leave at the countryside Buccie. This land was left behind by my grandfather, and I received my old man's permission, and stayed here to take care of this old house.

My mother was a Kadireig, and it is probably the only bloodline within my body that is close to nobility. On the other hand, my father was a traditional middle-aged ordinary miller, and he did not resemble my grandfather who participated in the famous November's war and received the Candlelight emblem.

And I, am simply an ordinary youth who can be found anywhere within the kingdom. My biggest dream is to join the army or go out to adventure, and bring back great wealth.

Then perhaps at the end of things, I will find a beautiful wife to spend my life with, a perfect life indeed!

But I am digressing. Right beside my bed is a fearful undead trying to kill me, and it made my heart pulse with dread. Fortunately the things that my instructor taught me back in the days still remained in my mind, and are not forgotten because of my panicked thoughts. I recall in an instant that my sword is placed beside my bed, but that skeleton will surely not let me have the chance to take it. I realize now that this is a terrible habit, I must remember to put it below my pillow the next time.

These thoughts happen within moments.

I instinctively pounced towards the sides from the bed, and knocked that gleaming white skeleton onto the floor. Right now I remember my instructor every sentence from my first combat lesson:

“Remember, these soldiers from Madara's lowest ranks, solely use the ‘soul's flames’ to move. They are slow, lacking in intelligence and they are weak.”

But before I can recall everything, a huge force came from below, as if I am not restraining a skeleton but a bull. In any case, a force that was beyond me threw me towards the sides, where I end up knocking onto the shelves. I can hear the grating sound made from my bones and shelves that would have made people pale. The intense pain throughout my body makes me grind my teeth, but I quickly shake that my dizzy head as I still remember what I need to do. In my blurring vision, the skeleton has already gotten up and intends to pull the sword that he stuck in.

His movements are apparently very rigid, but his strength has nothing to do with the words “weak” right?

But I turn my body and prepare to run as that bastard has already pulled out the sword

and become a dangerous existence again. And I know my strength is not his match, or perhaps even three of me would not even make him 'sweat' one bit.

And the most important thing is I have no weapon.

He is in between my sword and I. Of course, I do believe that this is just a coincidence as skeletons do not possess the intelligence.

I half crawled, half ran towards the door, but I am unable to restrain my voice when I approach near it.

"Fuck my luck!"

That is because the door is broken down before my eyes, and a ray of bright moonlight poured into the house. It is certainly a artistic, picturesque moment, if it is not shining upon another white skeleton.

I note that it is another lowly ranked Madara soldier, and in its hand is a firmly gripped steel longsword. On its bones is armor made in the style of Madara, and on top of that it was wearing a black and heavy helmet.

The most depressing thing, however, is the fact that it is using a pair of obsidian eye sockets with dancing red flaming pupils to look at me.

Apparently I have been locked on as its target.

In front of me is a tiger and at my back is a wolf. This is certainly a bad omen.

Respected holy mother Marsha, I am unable to help myself but pray to my goddess in my heart. I am only 19 years old, I cannot simply die a dog's death in a poor rural village.

That's right, I have not even confessed to the girl I liked! The moment I think about that bewitching young merchant girl, I feel my heart pounding even faster. Her home is just opposite to me, and I cannot let my heart's beloved fall into danger.

I quickly calm myself, and try to think of a way to escape. As my thoughts spin quickly, the teachings of my instructor played out in my mind.

"You can fight battles only when you are calm!"

This way of thinking is certainly applicable to my situation, but my hands have no weapon! I can't possibly fight a wild animal with my bare fists right? I pant as I anxiously stick my back to the wall while my eyes search desperately everywhere. Even though this old place is not a desolated hut, but the living room has nothing that can be used as a makeshift weapon.

If only my grandfather is a high ranked noble. I had visited Earl Remington's home, and their living room was five times the size of this place, and there were many shields, swords and axes hung on the wall. If I am there, I can surely find a weapon that suits me.

Furthermore, my skill with the sword is not bad at all. I am not bragging about this, that old instructor personally commended me, and said I was the most outstanding out of that entire batch that time.

Even that bugger from Remington is not my match at all, although I'm envious of him to have a father who is a prefect. If my father is also a prefect, I am definitely able to enter the garrison forces.

It is certainly pointless to talk about these though. In any case my sword is not reachable thanks to that skeleton. Even though they cannot run and move rigidly, their speed is equivalent to a grown man.

If this happens on the training grounds I bet I can toy with them easily, but in this narrow space I'm going to get cut down.

As I mope around, the skeleton in my bedroom walks out, pauses for a while, then quickly walk towards me. I subconsciously step backwards, and strike against something hard.

I quickly figure out that it should be a painting that is behind my back. This painting is passed down from my grandfather's generation, and it is a family heirloom. That cripple in the Black Pepper Street once wanted to buy that painting with ten gold coins, but it was rejected by my father.

My father is a stubborn man, but I am not the same like him. I had frequently thought about selling this painting if I reached my lowest point, buy a pretty horse, and go adventuring in the capital with that girl with a merchant's dream. If only I am not facing an event like this right now.

I have reached the end of the line, this family heirloom is going to save me right now. I turn around and tore the painting with its wooden frame down. I can hardly care if I am going to ruin it even if it is worth at least ten gold coins. I suspect it is worth even more, as that cripple in the Black Pepper Street is reputed to be stingy.

Ten gold coins is a lot of money, the largest sum of money I have seen is only ten silver coins.

I cannot help but draw a deep breath, my hands are shivering like crazy. I prepare myself to throw the painting at that frightening undead, and slip by it while it defends itself. I will get the sword next and smash these two skeletons to bits with my sword skills.

Of course I can also use it as distraction and run to the streets. But I have no guarantee that the outside is not crawling with this damn shit. Dashing outside empty handed is completely asking to be killed. So I steeled my heart and find it is sometimes better to be braver.

Even though this is the more ideal outcome, perhaps it did not care at all and just eviscerates me, and I can go meet Mother Marsha soon enough.

I cannot help but think whether they will give me a plague,

“Poor Brandel, he is so dead wrong.”

I shiver and shake my head to get rid of this horrifying thought. Cough cough cough, I am not going to die like this.

I glance at the gray looking painting in my hands, seriously, is this worth ten gold pieces? I wonder if that cripple will find it a pity if I throw this out?

That frightening undead is already before me, and I did not have the time to regret over the loss of ten gold pieces and the chance to adventure with the merchant girl. I have thrown at it without thinking.

My throw is strangely accurate, the painting flies towards the skeleton in a straight line. Damn, that stupid bastard really raised its sword and strike that down. That grey painting went with a ‘psszzt’ and split into two.

What kind of ridiculous strength?! But the instructor did not lie, these skeletons are

certainly lacking in intelligence.

While my mind comments on the resulting events, I have already rushed out.

My bedroom is not far now, thank Mother Marsha, I only need to take a few more steps to be able to see my sort peacefully lying there. That sword is also a family heirloom. My grandfather took it to battle, and it was said that he was a squire to a knight who presented the sword to him.

This sword should be from Year 32. It has the emblem design of ivy on it, to commemorate the victory at the highland fight in Grinoires.

That year, his majesty changed the knights' longswords' form, from two arms length to one and a half, and the armguard's bronze accessory was changed to common iron with ornamental designs. This was done in order to adjust to the cost of 'November War' which was dragging on.

Indeed, this is a knight's sword. Hmph, just wait till I get that sword.

"You fucking Madara shit bastards, you're going to suffer now."

Chapter 1

The person in the dream

“Warning: Severe hemorrhaging, Imminent death.”

“Warning: Heart function is deteriorating, Imminent death.”

When Sophie woke up, his mind was still reverberating with the loud warning sounds after that dire battle. It was a piercing sound that cut across his mind over and over like a dull knife, causing him to have a splitting headache.

He remembered he was supposed to be in a game with his friends from ‘The Godly Force’ defending the Orrgash mountainous region against Madara’s undead army. The ashen skies were howling with freezing winds, and countless Shadow Creatures streamed down from the dagger-like mountain peaks. The enemy forces were without end in sight like black tidal waves pouring in, comprising of thousands of skeletons with necromancers hidden amongst them, while bone dragons and blood-curling wraiths circled in the sky.

Surrounded on all fronts, they were definitely doomed in that battle.

[This bunch of bastards from ‘The Flaming Thorns’. Putting your shitty incompetence aside, you fucking idiots actually managed to drag our allies down by allowing the enemies to surround them.]

His first reaction was to curse in his mind.

He then finally had the heart to check his status by the Game System. It was a delightful surprise to find that he did not die, as Madara’s army tended not to leave anyone alive. But he immediately creased his forehead. His injuries were a little too ridiculous. Not only did his heart was dealt a fatal blow, he even had carrion poisoning.

[Wait, carrion poisoning? Did I not complete the mission to gain the ‘Pristine Physique’? Why would a body with the ‘Silver Bloodline’ get affected by this low grade dark status? A Bug? What the heck are you doing, devs?]

He did not have too much time to question this thought, the youth coughed weakly and lifted himself up from the dirty floor matted with dust. He thought that it was a small matter to be afflicted from the Weakened status, and it was enough to find a priest to get rid of it. The urgent thing was to stop the bleeding before he died.

Even though he was not an elite pro-gamer, he was certainly an experienced veteran and he understood the situation quickly just by checking his own body with a glance, even without relying on the Game System.

Sophie groaned once, and pulled off the skeleton which only had half of its body left. It had been pinning him down, even though these low level soldiers had about the same presence as thin air to him.

[Come to think of it, this is already the forty-fourth year into the second Era, and Madara is still conjuring up these low leveled grunts? What use do these skeletons have other than to waste Soul Energy? Just as expected of the undead wizards' brains from Ogador, their minds are affected by the negative energy and have been rotted away. None of them know what the word change is.]

He even had the mood to complain, but he realized in an instant he actually had trouble pushing the skeleton away. Just as expected, the punishment from having a Weakened status was nothing to sneeze at; he was able to easily push away a bone dragon with his bare hands during normal times.

Sophie cast his mind back to when he nearly died with such an affliction.

[When was it? Around a few months ago. 'The Godly Force' guild's battle prowess is nothing to laugh at. If it was not for the useless bunch of gamers from 'The Flaming Thorns', I would have probably continued to keep my undying record.]

Once he thought about this point, the youth could not help but feel waves of depression. The Holy Church Alliance's epic failure would certainly bring up a lively discussion on the forums. He groped around for his bag but he could not find it at all.

"This bunch of Madara thieves!"

He could certainly curse at them all he wanted to, but he still needed to find a way to stop the bleeding. At this time a healing potion would be the best, and if that was not possible a bandage would also suffice.

[There shouldn't be any problems finding something like that in the battlefield. Why is this place so dark...?]

Normally the bags from grunts doing the thankless tanking were left alone. The stuff inside them are mostly healing pots and bandages, especially bandages. He even saw a noob carrying a bag full of bandages, and he laughed as he recalled that sight.

[What a joke, do you really think if you carried bandages you're going to be saved from death?]

He subconsciously prepared to climb up, but he was stunned when he turned his body around towards the dim light in the area.

[Wait, is this the Orrgesh mountain region?]

He should have seen the scenery of dystopia before his eyes; White naked spikes that should have jutted out from the steep slopes, littered with corpses and vultures flying all over the battlefield, the broken Grays flag with a bright cross fluttering on the hilltop.

But this was not what he saw.

There was no ear-piercing northern wind blowing through the Orrgesh region, no wraiths flying across the silent shadows, not even the dry, bone-chilling air.

It was like a hallucination when he still believed he was in Orrgesh, and when it vanished, he came to realize he was sprawling on the floors of a quiet and broken old house. The smooth wooden planks were nailed in onto the ground, and there was an eye-catching pool of dark red liquid...

He could not help but paused there before touching his chest subconsciously. A series of penetrating pain interrupted his actions and he yelled loudly with his teeth bared. This blood was from him, this injury was also on him...

[Where am I? What is this pain! Is the VR machine spoiled?]

He felt the house was slightly familiar to him. On the first floor was the living room and kitchen, and on the second was the corridor leading to the various bedrooms. The cellar was in the basement.

Yes, this was the building design in the Aouine's southern region, and even though this house was a little old, it was not something a commoner can afford to live in. One could guess that the former owner of this house had some form of status.

Aouine's southern region. Sophie went into a trance as he tried recalling memories that were buried long ago. Gesund's mountains and the melodious flutes from Bucces's bordering towns were like a distant dream.

[But the lands have already been taken over by Madara...]

In his memory, the Aouine kingdom had long perished, indeed, it was during the third Black rose war.

"Why am I back in this place!"

"Wait..."

"Bucce... Bucce..." Sophie repeated this name.

[What are these... new memories...]

He remembered.

'His' name was Brendel and born in Bruglas. His blood was half Kadireig which came from his mother, but he was not considered a noble even though he had his mother's noble blood. That was because his father was a commoner. Even though his grandfather participated in the November War and received the Candlelight Emblem, ultimately it was just a household with a single knight which had lost its luster.

[No! What the hell are all these crazy settings? I'm not Brendel!]

Sophie's heart raised a series of alarms but a voice subconsciously came out and immediately sobered him.

"I am Sophie, and am also Brendel."

A cold dread immediately washed over Sophie's spine. He held his breath as he found there was a little something extra in his memories. Brendel's memories were poured into his mind like a torrent; a stranger had intruded his very self by force without his permission.

Sophie's breaths were rapid gasps and his pupils widened in shock. He quickly remembered that hopeless sword swinging from that frightening skeleton. He tried to shrug off that scene, but as his memories piled up he got mentally exhausted instead. His mind throbbed painfully and his forehead was full of perspiration.

"Hah." He suddenly recalled the event of the big battle in Orrgesh. The Grays Church knights fought a fierce battle against Madara who surrounded them and pushed them to the brink of despair. He remembered that 'his character' was killed by a necromancer.

After that green light swept over him, the world turned to darkness...

That was how the game was supposed to be set up. The death would persist for twelve hours.

[Can someone explain to me why a normal death in the game lead me to here?]

[...To this world?]

His mind was a scattering mess. If there was a word to describe his current train of thought, it would be 'ridiculous'.

[Ridiculous!]

He understood what happened to him. He got teleported to another world!

His soul crossed over to his world onto a dead person called Brendel!

No, more accurately it should be combined into one...

Sophie grabbed onto the floor planks tightly. His fingers' joints were a little numb. He looked at his own arms. They were a little long and there was signs of malaise from his pale skin. Even though he was prepared for it, he could not resist a jump in his heart. His skin should be a healthy beige color descended from the Mongolians and not something so pale!

His heart raced as he became flabbergasted. Even though he had the entire nineteen years of the former owner's memories, it could be said he did not know anything about what he was experiencing right now.

He felt what the youth Brendel had in his life.

His aspirations, his desires, what he loved as well as what he hated.

It was like he had just been reborn and lived nineteen years. His everything was like Sophie's everything, as if it they were one and the same. These two very long dreams that merged with each other made him felt lost.

"I am Sophie."

"But I am also Brendel."

A sense of sluggish exhaustion gushed out from Sophie's innermost heart, and covered his entire body in an instant. In the end, he gave a long sigh and calmed down after a respite.

[Forget it, I should just let it slide since there's no way I can change things.]

Sophie could not resist shaking his head, and looked at his arm:

"He had the nerve to claim he was number one in swordsmanship with such meager abilities,..." He could not help but mock himself when he thought of Brendel. Unexpectedly he felt a scintilla of relief.

Sophie became dazed as he remembered a certain event.

This was the 'Year of the Bustling Summer Leaves and Flowers', and also known the opening year of the First Black Rose War. In this war Aouine's borders were completely decimated, but that was also the era where a new renaissance happened.

His first choice was the Aouine kingdom when he first played this game. He was a complete newbie who grew in such a war and experienced the devastation firsthand.

The curtains of the game were raised thanks to the start of this war and accompanied by Aouine's one-sided defeat. The situation was only reversed only when the Bruglas army arrived to defend the borders. Sophie's memory of that dire battle was deeply engraved. He had followed the defensive forces into battle and the survivors were less than one out of ten.

He was mostly an average man in his past life, and Brendel was no better.

Brendel's skills with the swords were literally pointless. The sudden assault from Madara was something out from a classical textbook. Swift, merciless and silent, and when this ancient kingdom reacted from it, the entire army within this region experienced a cataclysm. He must have encountered the Madara's scouts on this very day.

Sophie suddenly felt an alarming chill climbing his spine again.

He immediately understood that he needed to save himself by finding something to stop the bleeding. The youth struggled towards the empty side corridor. As he examined the design of this house, it resonated with his imagination. He was well acquainted with the building design precisely because he had the most unforgettable time spent here. He shook his head to get rid of this nostalgia.

[Now is not the time to think about this! I need to stop the bleeding right now!]

Chapter 2

Sophie's world

Even though the house was old it appeared immaculate. The former owner had cleaned it very well.

Sophie raised his head to look at the half-skeleton that he pushed away earlier. A pile of broken bones sat there quietly. Brendel's counter attack before his death resulted in the only casualty amongst the undead scouts. These skeleton scouts lacked intelligence but the necromancer controlling them did not. Defeating this skeleton probably made the necromancer investigate the area personally. This mistake could hardly be attributed to the youth's fault because he would not know about this fact.

During this peaceful era, there were not many who knew about this.

A painting which was sliced apart laid flatly on the floor. The skeleton's soldier's cold sword was not far away. Sophie's pupils dilated slightly. Madara's troops most likely intended to attack straight after the scouts retreated as they did not even bother to pack the place up to hide their presence.

But this certainly conformed to Sophie's memory about the War of the Black Rose.

"Hmm?"

Sophie raised his eyebrow a little. His gaze laid about the sliced painting. His eyes were not mistaken, there was a hidden layer under the painting frame's surface.

[Wait, an oil painting? Perhaps this is the famous painting of Bucce?]

Sophie suddenly remembered a particular event in the game.

He immediately struggled over to it with strenuous effort and vigilantly kept his ears open at the same time. Sophie knew that the necromancer that killed Brendel was of the lowest level, but even then it was more than enough to kill a normal person with ease.

The low level necromancers were able to use the novice ranks of Black Magic within the game, capable of conjuring up ghouls and skeletons in the nearby cemetery. They were naturally crafty and experienced in sneak attacks. They were a big threat to people who did not understand them.

Sophie was different because he probably understood them more than they understood themselves.

He laid on the ground and tore the painting frame open. A clink rang out as a ring rolled onto the ground. At this time he could not help but take in a breath lightly. The design of the ring was all too familiar to him. It was made of silver and shaped into a looping spiral with a Holy Phoenix symbol on the center of it.

It glimmered slightly in the dark. Such a design was rarely seen in the Aouine southern region.

This was the northern Sanorso's national emblem.

Sophie carefully rubbed the ring. This was the famous Ring of the Wind Empress, a mission reward for the 'Bucce's oil painting' in the game, but it vanished when the next patch came. Ultimately the people who knew and completed this mission were close to none.

Sophie was not one of them. He only heard of this tale before. In the legend, this was a fake keepsake belonging to one of the four saint, Delutte.

[According to Brendel's memories this belonged to his grandfather. Who exactly is that man?]

The Ring of the Wind Empress's effect was Agility+1, and it could expend the energy within to launch a wind bullet to strike at the enemies in front. In the game it was able to absorb 1 OZ energy every ten minutes, but he did not know if there was any difference here.

He gazed at it and his heart raced for a moment, and even forgot about the dangers of his surroundings. The ring's appearance had partially answered his guess. This world was probably the same world he was familiar with in the game.

Sophie exhaled without being able to suppress himself. His current mood were swayed from the succession of events, but his hesitation was short and he slowly put

it on his forefinger. Magic rings only worked when worn on the forefinger or thumb. In the game, the region between the thumb and forefinger were called by the Talan witches as 'The Domain of Sacred Mystery'. They believed that it was where mana was gathered in the human body, and many gestures were evolved from that starting point.

Naturally, it was just trivia that he adopted as role-playing.

He was about to test the effects of the ring, when a large crashing sound in the first floor transmitted over and made him turned his head around abruptly.

He was startled and immediately became alert. It was possible that an undead had made the noise, and even if it was not, there was the possibility where it alerted the enemies outside. He quickly threw down the painting in his hands and retreated against the wall by instinct. He made his way out to the door and carefully gazed into the living room below.

He instantly saw a suspicious figure.

It was a young girl wearing a simple leather dress who carefully entered the building. She looked around to her left and right, but despite her tense appearance she did not pay attention to what was above her. She was tightly gripping a hammer used for masonry with difficulty. She seemed to be searching for something.

Sophie sighed.

He coughed. It was not loud but in this empty house it resounded a few times.

The girl was evidently startled and raised her head in alarm, her face awfully pale. In his mind, the young girl before him was considered a beauty. Her chestnut hair was bundled up in a dignified fashion, but her silky smooth forehead along with thin long eyes made her look enchanting. Her eyebrows were slightly raised; her eyes were clear but bewildered with a pointed and straight nose. One look at her let him knew she had a fiercely independent personality.

She had a special quality about her but he definitely could not view her as a lady or someone from an aristocrat's family. She was slightly hunched over like a sneaky person with her tightly gripped hammer, while she carried a cowskin bag around her waist like a merchant.

The young girl quickly saw Sophie and relaxed instead. She let out a long breath and

patted her chest, and displayed a beautiful smile: “So it’s just you Brendel, you scared me.”

“...Miss Romaine, how did you enter my house?” Sophie felt a headache coming up when he saw her.

This person in front of him was a girl that the dead Brendel had always adored. She and her aunt lived in the opposite house, and she usually had some quaint aspirations. For example, she wanted to go out outside of Bucce to become a traveling merchant.

Sophie thought her view did not make any sense. A traveling merchant in Aouine was not a respectable job; some of the citizens in the continent grouped them together with conmen and thieves.

During King Ansen’s era, there was a period where these people collaborated together to swindle people and were greatly despised, and came to be known as ‘People who have two mouths and three hands.’

The two mouths meant they were glib and excelled in deceiving people. The three hands meant they did not kept their hands to themselves, often stealing and doing despicable things. They could be said to be one of the biggest great threat to public order. when Sophie was a newbie back in the game, eight out of ten missions available were about them.

“I climbed into the house from your kitchen window, and it’s just too small! It nearly tore my dress.” The young girl complained as she bent her waist down to fix the corners of her dress.

“Nobody gave you the permission to come in from that window!” With the inheritance of Brendel’s memory, Sophie had a certain immunity to this girl’s personality, but he could not help but grumble in his heart.

“Never mind,” He shook his head: “Just what are you doing here in the middle of the night?”

“I’m worried about you, Brendel,” Romaine answered while she looked around, her expression incredibly curious: “You did see it right, a skeleton walking about?”

[She noticed the skeleton as well?]

Sophie suddenly realized the girl's eyes were on his chest.

"You're injured?" The future merchant girl tilted her head and blinked.

"Yeah..."

"Let me see that," She grabbed her dress, ran up the stairs noisily, and clawed at the youth's right hand pressing against the injury, "Come on, take your hand away, what are you covering it for, your wounds will get infected!" She grumbled, and peered at his wound.

She drew a sharp breath and raised her head: "This is such a terrible wound!"

Sophie felt the girl's cold hand grabbing his own and his heart skipped a beat. Even though he knew this belonged to Brendel's feelings he did not make an effort to stop it.

"It's fine..."

"Fine—, are you mad!?" The merchant girl gave him a look of reproach, then she dug into the cowskin bag hanging on her leather dress: "Just wait a little, I think I brought bandages..."

Sophie looked at her with interest.

He knew that the things in her bag were what she considered her precious treasures. Over half of them were strange objects. Seashells from the seaside, glass marbles of different colors, a bronze whistle, old coins from the ancient past, and various other items. Most of them are not worth any money, but they were rarely seen in this region.

Her biggest interest was to rummage through a pile of old stuff in a shop. Even though the two of them did not have a lot of money to speak off, she always managed to buy cheap and rare things that she loved when they combined their money together.

He held Romaine's hand and shook his head: "Let's go into the room and search for the bandages, it's too dangerous out here."

"I'm not afraid of these pile of walking bones," She glanced up at him when she finally found a first aid box: "Do you know how to bandage yourself? I don't know how to do it."

Sophie opened the box, retrieved the bandages and hemostatic cotton, then paused in confusion for a while. He originally planned to find these emergency supplies, but his consciousness still treated this world like a game.

Once he applied the bandages in the game, it would automatically stop the bleeding and replenish his blood, but he suddenly realized doing it here in the real world actually required professional knowledge. He could not possibly just randomly go round his injury with the bandages a few times right?

“Brendel, do you want me to try?” She looked like she was about to lunge at him.

“Nope.” Sophie quickly rejected her. Even if he had nine lives to spare he would not waste it away.

He thought the last resort was better than Romaine’s meddling. The Virtual Reality game appeared to have based itself on the real thing, perhaps it would work in real life as well? If he simply died there, then he would just blame the gods for this crazy turn of events.

He took off his shirt and bit one end of the bandages, then wrapped the bandages from the side across the injury a few times. He was a veteran at doing this inside the game and he did not fumble here.

He carefully avoided to tie the ends too tightly and was ready to finish the last touches, but he promptly stopped.

He saw a light green number, +1, slowly floating up from his injury.

At that moment it was like a bomb had suddenly blasted in his mind and rang in his ears. He could not remember what he was doing for a moment, but he immediately regained his senses and yelled repeatedly in his mind: “Stats Window! Stats! Appear!”

He waited with a heart filled with expectations and dread, and after a second, a series of data appeared and floated on his arms, legs, joints, torso and his heart.

Strength 1.0, Agility 2.0 , Physique 0.9

Then another set of data appeared in his eyes out of nowhere:

Intelligence 1.1, Will 1.3, Perception 1.0

Overall power rating 1.0, Element (Sealed)

These set of data and lines of words were like a waterfall gushing out and poured forth onto a translucent window panel:

Brendel (Level 1 Human male NPC, Strength-type: Physical, Close combat)

XP: 1 (Commoner level 1 —, Civilian soldier level 1)

Lifeforce (Weakened): 60% remaining (Bandaged Status, 1 Health point will be recovered every day)

Skills

Commoner [Basic knowledge (Level 1), Geography Knowledge (Level 0), Local knowledge (Level 1)]

Civilian Soldier [Military Swordsmanship (Level 1), Grappling techniques (Level 1), Tactical Theory (Level 0), Military Organization (Level 0)]

[J-Just like I thought!]

Sophie thought the feelings of a normal person who just scored five million dollars would probably react the same way like he did.

Was this a dream?

No, he knew that a person within a dream would not be unlikely to think so logically, and even fewer would even think they were in such a dream.

Then was he still in the game?

[No, the current year in the game was the 2nd era of the 44th year.]

The young man felt his mind was in a fine mess. All the strange thoughts sprang out in a rush and made him felt a little giddy. But Sophie shook his head and understood that it was reality.

[Mother Marsha, do you exist here?]

Sophie could not help but prayed in his heart to the ultimate goddess in this world for some answers.

Chapter 3

“Brendel, Brendel?”

Romaine poked his arm at his side while Sophie was apparently engrossed in checking out his stats.

[Only 1.0 OZ in strength? Even a skeleton has 1.5 OZ worth of strength!]

He could not resist cursing this NPC’s uselessness.

All the representation units for the stats were in OZ, the simplification for the ancient word Oauth, also known as Energy Level. 1 OZ in strength would allow one to raise about 50 KG worth of weight and the punching strength will not surpass 150 KG. This was roughly the equivalent of an adult’s strength.

Even the players’ basic stats in the game were 2 OZ in Strength, Agility and Physique, while Intelligence, Will and Perception were 1.5 OZ. They were about two times the stats of a normal person, and the Overall Power Rating was 5 which meant that they would have no problems facing off against 5 normal people.

Brendel was part of Aouine’s militia force who trained for several months. Even if the players had the ‘Hero’ stats it would not be at the point where the stats are this so far apart right?

Sophie had mocked the players’ titles as ‘Heroes’ for only having the combat strength of two skeletons. But when he switched to Brendel’s point of view, he realized that the players were really the main characters molded in the hero form. It was quite ridiculous.

He fell into a state of sadness when he thought about how he was not able to even beat a skeleton.

Brendel stroked his arm but the faint green numbers still remained in his retinas. He discovered there was still a difference from this world and the world that he knew. In the game a bandage would restore 1 HP per minute, and the civilian’s 6 HP would only require six minutes to be replenished like before but it needed a few days here.

This was a bad sign.

Fortunately the method to use the skill sets were one and the same. If he thought about the 'Basic Knowledge' skill, it would bring up the common things regarding this world. If he thought about the 'Military Organization' he was able to gather information about Aouine's army structure.

Even though there was also some slight differences, the information seemed to directly exist inside his real memories and not from a system. For example, his skills in the sword. He could clearly feel that his existing techniques were accumulated from several months of training. The form on where to strike, the position to place his body weight in, where his eyes should look at, and how to perform feints and strikes based on the enemies' own form.

The game would display the approximate paths as to where the sword should be swung at, and automatically aided and corrected the angle. But in this world, it was sufficient if he possessed the skill sets as he was automatically able to utilize them subconsciously.

Even though the veteran gamers have their own insight to attacking, they still needed the system, so you would not be able to find these gamers to suddenly become a swordsman or martial artist. The reverse was mostly true, however. Real life fighters truly had a much easier time in the game with very few exceptions.

There were some things that had no shortcuts.

Sophie felt the sensations in his hands. The feeling that he possessed the skill sets were much more fascinating compared to the rigid feelings within the game. Everything in Brendel's memories felt like a natural part of himself and were not just mere 'skills', and combined with what Sophie had learned in the past world.

Of course while he was thinking all of the above, he still reacted quickly and was alert when Romaine poked his arm. His ears shook slightly as he heard some faint noises coming outside the house.

"Brendel, you heard that?" She went behind his back and whispered.

He nodded. There were footsteps making clacking noises and there were quite a number of the noises. His heart made a loud thump as he immediately figured out that the vanguard of Madara's huge army had arrived. He made a noiseless gesture and

pulled her to escape from the back without delay.

The vanguard came earlier than expected. Right at this moment the rural areas of Grinoires were still in sleeping deeply in their sweet dreams, and no one expected the disaster which was going to rain down.

Except for these two.

The urgency from the impending countdown made him frown deeply. He brought her to the southern guest room of the corridor and shut it lightly. They made muffled coughs as the dust was everywhere. The room had not been used for a very long time but he knew the window led to the outside, and allowed him to oversee everything outside of the manor.

This manor belonged to Brendel's grandfather, and it sat on a hilltop not far away from Bucce and was able to oversee the entire village from below. It was like a mini town with originally six families and all of them moved away, with the exception of only Romaine and her aunt who remained behind.

He walked over to the window, lightly wiped away the dust and raised the curtains.

"You actually know where these things come from right?" She withdrew her hand from his pull without trouble and asked in curiosity.

"...This is Madara's undead army. A war is coming." He answered as he carefully inspected the area outside the house, taking care to hide behind the curtains.

It was indeed Madara's vanguard. He drew a light breath as he counted three squadrons of skeleton troops in the center of the manor's estate, a total of forty-five skeletons. A bunch of red light was dancing in the darkness. On the side were three necromancers controlling the low level undead. They were of a classic design; skeletons wearing long robes, their hands holding on to bone staffs, with green fiery eyes darting about as they inspected the low level skeleton soldiers.

The young girl gasped quietly in the dark when she saw the number of skeletons.

"Where's aunt Jennie?" He said.

"She went to a nearby town, and will only be back a week later." She replied.

Sophie turned his head to glance at her. He only saw a pair of gleaming eyes filled with a strange excitement.

“Are you not scared?” He blurted out.

“I don’t know,” She replied in a whisper, and raised her head: “But my heart is pounding, like it’s really excited.”

Sophie went speechless. Looks like there was quite a difference between this girl and a normal person.

[Some people are made out to be adventurers from their births, perhaps this girl is someone like that—]

He pretended that he did not hear any of it and gazed outside the window again. The necromancer had not paid attention to their building yet, and Sophie was able to continue observing them without any worries.

[There are more shadows flickering across the forest. It seems like there are even more enemies out there.]

He roughly estimated the initial force was slightly over a hundred. This was not a small number, and with such a force there must be an undead Acolyte Wizard commanding in the shadows. It was the worst news possible to him.

In the game, an undead acolyte wizard was roughly equivalent to a level 10 player. Even if it fought alone against seven or eight well trained male adults, be it militia or the army, they would not the match for it. Romaine and himself were only two and their foe even had a large army behind him.

Sophie tapped his finger on the window impatiently.

The guards from Bucca would need at least 5 minutes to reach this place. If they encountered the enemies they would have to hold on for at least this duration, with the assumption that these guards even discovered the attack in the first place.

[How can we alert them to this invasion? The best way is to set a fire. If the flames were bright enough, the smoke and light in the darkness would warn the guards. But it’s also a problem if we are going to set a fire.]

He felt a little vexed.

“Brendel? Are we going to die?” She suddenly asked.

“Uncertain.” Came his reply.

The dark room fell into a deep silence.

In this deep darkness, a ray of moonlight streamed inside from the corner of the window and created a small silver colored path.

After pondering for a few moments and just before he was about to set down the curtains down to calm down and think of a way to escape, he heard a conversation from the outside.

“Where is that body of that pitiful worm, bring him out and let me take a look. Didn’t the report stated there were only two women residing here?”

This first voice sounded like it came from a young man; his tone was cold and sharp.

The second voice sounded raspy and old as though dried firewood was cracking.

“He was merely an unfortunate fool, my master.”

Apprehension struck at Sophie’s heart and he peered outside again, quickly discovering the voices to come from under a nearby tree’s shadow. Over there, a figure wearing a broad black robe was talking to his Necromancer subordinates.

Sophie’s eyes quickly cast his eyes on his sleeves, and faintly saw a greyish-white bone insignia. This proved that he was an undead Acolyte Wizard.

His guess was not wrong.

“...Know this, I don’t need your opinions. All you need to do is to obey my orders.” The robed wizard suddenly stopped and raised his head to the Sophie’s direction.

Sophie’s heart pulsed with dread and immediately let go of the curtains.

[Damn it!]

He still thought he was a veteran warrior with 130 levels and had completely forgot that the enemy's Perception was many times higher than his stealth skills.

Even though he was not immediately discovered he must have raised the enemy's suspicions.

Just as he had expected that figure outside said: "That's enough talking. Quickly carry out my orders. I feel that there is someone alive in this house. All of you had better search this place carefully, I have a suspicion that our plans have been discovered by the people here."

This was the end of things. If they discovered Brendel's 'corpse' had disappeared they would immediately act upon it. Sophie's mind spun quickly. His immediate thought was the kitchen's back door, but the Grinoires's region was mostly a farmland and there was no place to hide in the open.

There was a small forest at the bottom of the hill but there were at least a hundred meters of uncovered ground.

[What should I do?!]

"Brendel?" The girl queried him with her eyes.

"Come with me." Sophie gritted his teeth.

[One step at a time there's no choice to it.]

He ran and opened the door, immediately discovering a necromancer and two skeletons entering the house from the entrance. The necromancer that wore a long robe swiftly raised the bone wand when it saw Romaine and him.

But Sophie's reaction was faster and he had no hesitation in raising in his right hand. He pointed his forefinger and aimed at the undead monster.

"Oss!"

He prayed for the ring to work and it answered his prayers with a slight warmth; the air in front of him expanded violently with a loud bang!

It was as a hurricane had swept across the house, and caused the necromancer with

the two skeletons with it and the entire front building to explode in a fury. Countless splinters and pebbles along with bone debris were hurled outside, and rained down onto the ground like countless butterflies dancing in the air.

The instant the explosion happened, five golden colored orbs flew respectively from the necromancer and skeletons' bodies and dissolved in Sophie's chest. Everything happened in the blink of an eye and the youth did not even realize that fact himself.

Even after the explosive wind ended, the ground was left with the evidence of a colossal aftereffect of something firing from within.

After everything fell to a silent still, Sophie showed an expression of utter shock. In the game it was 30 Wind Damage, and certainly more than enough to kill a lower rank necromancer and the skeletons, but was the effect this exaggerated?

Although there was a gaping hole in this building left behind by his grandfather, he did not think twice about it and immediately promptly turned around and ran.

"Brendel, you're a wizard!" Romaine exclaimed behind his back.

"No, I'll explain to you later." He took a deep breath, pulled her and rushed down the stairs to head towards the kitchen. He needed to reach there before the enemies reacted.

"Wait, Brendel, I can't catch up with you..."

"Careful, we're moving down the stairs—"

"Ah!"

The sudden explosion had caused the skeletons to turn their heads, but they lacked the intelligence to comprehend things and only reacted to the noise. Thus they still waited at the same spot and waited for the necromancers to give the orders.

The necromancers' green flaming pupils flared up, and they raised their bone wands with embers forming at the tips.

"Don't use fire, you bloody fools!" The black robed wizard pushed their bone wands down and rebuked them loudly. The explosion had most likely incurred the attention of Bucces' citizens. If there was a fire it would send a clear warning to them.

He immediately turned back and pointed at the house: "Soldiers, catch those two bastards!"

The sounds of swords flourishing echoed out as the soldiers drew out their swords together as they rushed inside.

Sophie had already dashed down to the bottom of the steps but he saw waves of skeletons rushing towards him when he raised his head. Uncountable red lights flickered in the darkness and he felt goosebumps crawling all over his skins. He was not a veteran soldier with hundred of levels any longer, and the ring on his finger was still in the recharging mode. He could only braced himself as to what would come next.

Once the skeletons caught up with him, he would most likely become minced meat from being hacked by their swords...

[Fuck! They're fast!] Sophie felt helpless upon seeing this situation.

His injury in his chest hurt terribly, but he still managed to reach the cellar in the basement before the skeleton soldiers caught up and closed the door behind him. Before he could even relax, multiple swords immediately stabbed into the door.

Fortunately he withdrew his hand quickly, otherwise he would have been pinned through the door.

"This is too close for comfort!" Sophie's heart raced quickly. Although at the other end of the cellar was the exit he was looking for, he knew he needed to find a way to warn Buccé. This was the only way to save their lives, or at least the only solution he could think of.

[Fire can also be used to repel the low level undead.]

"Brendel?" The merchant girl panted heavily with her waist bent. She could not help but raise her head to look at him with different eyes. He had greatly surprised her with his decisive bravery.

"Miss Romaine, please guard the door!" Sophie quickly said. He needed to spend every second to act on his plan.

The soldiers started to break the kitchen wooden door. It was never meant to be used as a defense and very soon there were several holes in it.

“Me?”. She blinked.

“Yes, give me a little bit of time.”

“What are you going to do?” The merchant girl asked curiously.

“I’m thinking of a way to warn the people in the village. Madara is going to attack us with a full-scale army, we need to warn them.” Sophie tried hard to calm down and replied while he searched for flints.

[What was in Brendel’s memory again...?] He clenched his fist and tried hard to recall the missing information.

“Okay, sure, I’ll do that.” Romaine immediately went over to the door to defend Sophie.

“Will you be fine?”

“Of course.” The young girl shook the masonry hammer in her hands and replied confidently: “I’ll do my best since I’ll become a great merchant in the future!”

Sophie stopped his hands and looked at her, nodding.

“You will definitely become one, Miss Romaine.”

“Yup, Brendel.”

Chapter 4

[If I remember correctly, Marden is the current captain of Bucc'e's guards. A soldier who participated the November War like Brendel's grandfather.]

Sophie knew him because he was the famous NPC in-game who taught travelers the 'Exploration' skill.

But the true reason why this old soldier was famous amongst the gamers, was because he committed an egregious error as the guard's leader.

He had mistaken the intention of Madara's invasion to be the usual skirmishes in the past. He had one chance to launch a counter-attack and defeat the undead army's vanguard, then retreat without casualties and become the hero of this kingdom.

Sadly, he did not take this opportunity and chose to evacuate the Bucc'e's citizens, and ultimately entered into a path of obscurity because he was blamed for the failure to stop Madara's advance, and the loss of countless lives.

[It's a pity that he had to end up this way. But how exactly did he discover Madara's attack early and why did he not choose to fight them?... Is it because he wanted to keep his own life?]

An impossible thought suddenly sprang out of his mind and he threw it out at once. He had seen the old man in the game and found no signs the latter was a coward.

[Regardless, I need to try to think of a way to warn them and change history. Fire is a warning sign in the army's regulation and an indication of an invasion. I can only hope they understand this signal]

The banging continued outside the door and every second was steeped with a tense atmosphere.

"Brendel, they are coming in now!" Romaine gripped the masonry hammer tightly with both of her hands. She stared at the door with her brows bunched together like a knot.

Sophie did not have time to think about his plan any longer; he glanced back to the door upon hearing Romaine's words. They would be dead if the undead skeleton army rushed in.

Crashing sounds emitted from the door as sharp swords hacked in and out. The Madara's swords gleamed like they were the fangs of a beast.

Something knocked against the door violently with a huge crashing sound, causing dust clouds to slowly fall from the ceiling.

The wooden door groaned as cracks quickly fractured it.

[Calm down, calm down, just continue treating like a game. Remember the missions you have done, this is merely one of them...]

He breathed in deeply to regain his composure. He tied a cloth drenched in oil around a bundle of straws and firewood, then tied everything with a string; the whole process was done with ease. The creation of a torch was the most basic task in the game. This particular combination would last for a few minutes.

But the remaining time given to him was dwindling, and soon enough another violent smash struck against the door, causing the hinges to break and rattle loudly. The dust flew sharply and hovered everywhere from the impact.

"Brendel!" Romaine felt as her heart was going to jump out of her throat and she blinked her bright eyes furiously.

"I'm here with you, don't worry, I just need a little longer." Sophie's forehead was full of perspiration from the pain and tension. He struck the flint with a metal chain many times, sending sparks flying everywhere but the torch refused to be lit.

A game was different from reality.

The soldiers' immense strength finally cracked the door's center open and made it tilt sideways, but it still barred entry.

A bone hand reached in from the outside to break the latch.

The merchant girl jolted from fright and she immediately smashed the hammer on it. The hammer pounded on it with a bang and cracks immediately appeared on top of

the hand, but the skeleton soldier did not feel any pain and only paused slightly before it tugged at the latch again.

Romaine was stunned momentarily as she witnessed this scene, even forgetting the hammer in her hands.

“Brendel, Brendel, what shall I—...” She quickly asked, fear creeping into her voice.

Brendel finally lit up the torch just as the door’s metal latch fell onto the ground with a clank.

With the door finally opened, the first skeleton marched in with its sword. It turned its heads and the flames within its black eye sockets locked onto the youths.

One of the skeletons witnessed a dark object becoming bigger and bigger in its field of vision, and before it could react a hatchet was buried into the skull.

(...This is your final resort. When you throw your sword you must remember that your hands must be steady, your center of gravity low, and no hesitation. You need to try and maintain a straight line between you and your target...

...If your enemy is a skeleton, then your best target would be to choose the shoulder blade and arms, the spine or the thigh bone. And unless you have the confidence to break the head open, the skull is not the weakest point...)

Sophie suddenly had a flashback of Brendel’s instructor teaching him how to fight against skeletons.

If he did it at the start of the game he would probably have split the skull into two equal parts because of the ‘Heroic’ stats as a player, but like what the instructor had taught him, a hatchet stuck in the skull did no damage to the overall structure.

“Fuck!”

Sophie looked at the skeleton soldier leaning backwards. He had used the military skill ‘throw’ which would have been difficult for Brendel, but Sophie reflexively used it as a veteran. Yet when the hatchet left its hand, the brutal realization struck him when he remembered he no longer had a player’s stats.

“Miss Romaine, be careful!” He pulled the merchant to his back as he saw it

straightening up again.

“Brendel...” She was completely terrified.

“Don’t worry I’m here.”

Even though Brendel said that, his heart said otherwise, especially after seeing the pile of packed skeletons rushing in.

He surveyed his surroundings but there was simply nothing that could be used here. That skeleton was about to shrug off from its temporary daze.

What could he do? Just give up?

Sophie shook his head. He could only gamble on to survive!

He charged forward with gritted teeth, grabbing the skeleton’s sword arm and ribcage, and lifted the skeleton upwards with an almost practiced maneuver before he hurled it towards the group of skeletons.

Perhaps extraordinary circumstances allowed him to use every ounce of Brendel’s strength. The skeleton was unable to resist when it lost its balance, and was sent crashing backwards while affecting the ones behind him. These forced the skeleton to take a few steps back.

The Madara’s undead was stopped for a short moment but it was more than enough.

The young man’s emotions spiraled into a daze. He could not believe he succeeded with this desperate move.

He threw the torch onto the stacked firewood and straws in the corner of the kitchen.

Flames flared up quickly.

“Let’s run, Romaine!” Brendel pulled her hand from the side and start leading her to the back door.

She had never felt so tense in her life. The last time she saw the youth was well over a year ago, and only felt that he was shy and easy to talk to. His recent return seemed to show that he had not changed much either.

But today he displayed courage and composure beyond belief. These qualities which were displayed during these dangerous junctures, were surely the 'reliable man' had that her aunt always mumbled about right?

[This feeling is sooo strange—]

Her mind thought about things that she could not explain. When she noticed that he grabbed her arm, her heart started racing.

“Brendel?” She said when Sophie suddenly stopped moving.

Smoke started to fill the place up and the kitchen was filled with choking odors.

Sophie finally cleared his head.

[Mother Marsha above, I set fire to Brendel's grandfather's house. He will surely suffer divine retribution. Err, even though I'm Brendel right now.]

Messy thoughts started popping up, as Brendel's memories filling his entire mind.

A low, raspy voice came from behind: “Move quickly, my undead soldiers. Put out this fire and ferret out that worm, we only have a minute—”

The voice cleared the youth's mind and he started to move again. He knew that the undead was afraid of fire and would be difficult for the skeletons to advance. This was the best time for him to run.

But the fire was a double edged sword and he needed to be quick.

“Let's go.” Sophie pulled a string of sausages from the ceiling and led the merchant girl towards the back by blindly feeling his way there. This was not a gesture of his greediness, but to the players within the ‘The Amber Sword’, they had developed a subconscious instinct to grab food whenever it was available before fleeing.

The fire became bigger in sheer seconds, and turned the surroundings into a sea of flames with billowing smoke. The temperature was rising quickly.

However, Sophie swiftly found the small door that was used to transport food. He opened it and went inside before locking it again.

Sophie coughed once but the merchant girl behind him was coughing in distress. He calmed himself before searching the grounds, and instantly found the golden latch. Just as he was about to open it, he hesitated.

He suddenly recalled something.

===== Freya's POV =====

Perhaps to the citizens of Grinoires, the stars and skies in April or May did not hold many differences. It was only when one looked down from the slopes of the hilltops at the end of the fifth month where the temperature would start to rise up, would they find the place to be a sea of red and white flowers in the early summer. It was the most peaceful place in Aouine, but it was also filled with wars for many centuries.

The girl looked up. The summer night's sky was like crystals that covered the entire western to northern areas. The bright starry light painted the night. These stars held legendary tales of gods and myths amongst the citizens.

She stood at the village entrance and cast her eyes at the hilltop. Freya was slightly worried. That loud bang earlier made her feel restless.

[Did they not mention there was undead movement in the nearby regions, is it possible...]

“Freya!”

Upon hearing that should she turned her head, and looked at the young boy who still had traces of a child with surprise. He anxiously ran to her side, bent at the waist and panting.

“What’s wrong, little Fenris, did something happen?” The young girl’s voice was soft and clear.

“Did you hear that noise?”

“Yes, I came to take a look at it because of that,” Her gaze went back to the hilltop, “I’m worried about Romaine, her aunt went to the nearby town... I heard that it was unsafe recently and asked her to stay at my home for two days, but she did not agree to it.”

The young boy looked at her with wide eyes.

The girl's light orange hair was tied into a long ponytail, and her figure appeared to give out a heroic atmosphere. She wore a greyish white leather armor made from cowskin, and in it was a thick set of cotton shirt, the symbol on her left shoulder painted with black dye to look like a painting of pine leaves.

On her waist was a short rapier and on its hilt was a fire emblem.

If Sophie was there he would instantly recognize her as a civilian soldier of Bucces. The black pines were the most common tree in Grinoires mountainous regions, and it was also the symbol of the Bucces forces.

The formal army guards of Bucces wore a well-made combat cape and leather armor that a different color.

In Aouine, every youth would receive militia training and it usually started from the age of fourteen. The training would take place every year starting from October to next year's March until they reached nineteen. The youths and adults who received the training would become militia and were the most important reserves during times of war. This rule was set during the Year of Thunder, and militia training became one of the most important measures in Aouine's military initiatives.

"Isn't that young man staying there? I heard he was a militia at Bruglas." The young boy said.

"The people from the city are not trustworthy," She flipped her long ponytail and furrowed her brows: "I'm worried precisely because that man is staying over there!"

"This is just your bias, Captain Freya~"

"What would you know... Never mind." The young girl lectured him without turning her head: "Alright, just spit it out, a boy shouldn't long-winded like a girl, got it!?"

"Captain Marden has ordered the guards to gather up!" Little Fenris's neck shrank a little and said.

Surprise streaked across Freya's eyes: "Captain Marden? How did you come to know this?"

"That idiot Bennett told me," He blinked and replied: "When I came out, he already rode ahead to report to the guards."

“Do you know what exactly is going on?”

“No.” He shook his head.

The young girl turned her head towards to the hilltop, and she could barely see the manor’s outline in the darkness.

“Call up everyone, we’re going out.”

“Freya, it’s so late now, Aunt Shia will murder us!” The boy’s mouth was agape and asked instead: “It’s better that we wait for tomorrow’s news right?”

“Coward!” She glared at him, but knew he was speaking the truth. Even if she was the captain of the Bucces’ militia, she loathed to create trouble when she thought about her aunt’s terrifying wrath.

“Aren’t you just the same...” He just mumbled a few words before he saw the girl’s serious face with a gesture to be silent.

“Freya?”

“Shhh—” She turned her head sideways, and cupped her ears. There was a faint but distinct whistling sound.

“What is that sound?”

The whistling sound came from far away and approached nearer and nearer to their heads in mere seconds.

The young girl’s expression changed, and when she wanted to raise her head and move her body to evade, it was too late. A black shadow came from above the sky and pierced into her shoulder, causing her to yell out and fell backwards.

“Captain Freya!” He shouted.

“Fenris, run, run!” The ponytail girl yelled out in pain.

Arrows fell like rain.

Sophie paused.

“What’s, wrong, Brendel.....?” The merchant girl felt something was amiss and asked with coughs interrupting her words.

Sophie did not reply and searched through his memories.

When Madara attacked in the game they were not able to avoid the gamers. They were not like the NPCs who worked in the day and rested at night. Some of the gamers were truly like nocturnal creatures.

He recalled when Madara attacked, they also received interference from other gamers like himself, but most of their invasions were still successful.

[Why?]

Indeed, he recalled that this era where Aouine was an ancient kingdom marching to its death, its neighboring countries were welcoming the new turbulent era.

[Because the rising stars of Madara are coming out...]

Sophie reflected pensively on the situation.

[The current Madara in this era shocked the continent because they had many incredibly skill leaders to the point where one could call them legendary. The new revolutions to the army’s policies (368th year, the revolution of the black rose) seven years prior made them even stronger. This change developed a strong foundation and outstanding disciples were nurtured, supporting their invasion with powerful military might.]

This military might would be displayed in this war.

And in the midst of the War of the Black Rose, the Madara’s army lightning speed and clear judgment shook everyone in their boots, and yet, it was until Aouine was decimated before everyone became vigilant.

And precisely because of this.

This blight, this darkness, this shadow, would devour this kingdom entirely.

“These bastards are not the same as common fodder.”

As his rivals in the past, Sophie had a deep impression with Madara’s officers. Only people who had fought with their elites would know of them.

Sophie’s hand was placed on the cold latch, his heart sinking into numbness. The moment when he closed the door to bar the undead from getting to them, would be the moment they launched a preemptive attack on Buccie. They would not allow him to have the time to provide the warning to them, even if it was just a possibility.

There was the possibility where Madara’s skeleton soldiers waiting behind the back door.

[What should I do?]

Chapter 5

“Lord Maeza, my soldiers have opened the cellar’s door and cornered them, but the interior has been set on fire. My skeletons are hesitating in front of this dirty flames and I need time for them to adapt.”

The necromancer lowered its head with its body deeply hunched. The green fiery flames flickered in its eye sockets with a cunning gleam, but it placed its arms across its chest to show obeisance.

Madara had a restrictive aura based on levels. Anyone who tried to approach them would feel deep fear from within their souls. This was especially true because there were undead wizards who were naturally effective in manipulating and torturing the soul.

The undead Acolyte Wizard tapped his long pale fingers on his black silk robe. He stood on the top of the hill and oversaw Buccu’s bells ringing loudly in the darkness.

The humans were falling into deep despair.

But this nightmare was just the beginning. Not far from here was an undead army hiding in the darkness, and another reserve army hiding at the sides of the forest. He had ordered them to fire arrows at the village, with the next batch of arrows to be fired again.

They would use the Arrows of Soul flames.

These raging Icy Blue flames cannot be extinguished by normal means... He would order the skeleton soldiers to invade their village when the living were drowning in fear.

“How long?” The future undead wizard’s voice was cold and sharp.

“About—” The necromancer estimated with its head lowered: “Eight minutes, no, at most five minutes.”

“I do not have the time to wait. I will leave a squad to you, eleven skeleton soldiers. Is

that enough, Kabara?”

“Sufficient, my lord.”

The future undead wizard laughed cruelly: “It is best that you do not let these rats slip away from the back door.”

“Do not worry, my lord. I have already placed the soldiers upon your order earlier.”

“Then I shall wait for your good news when I return, Kabara.” He pointed towards the front and looked meaningfully at its subordinate: “I will receive the village’s subjugation and enjoy the humans’ fear of eternal death. But Marsha above, I pray that my decision to attack early would not affect Sir Incirsta.”

“It will be as you wish for, my master.” The necromancer bowed deeply.

===== Brendel’s POV =====

The interior of the house was flooded with billowing smoke. Fire embers kept licking from under the smoke, and the blistering flame not only stopped the undead’s invasion, it also blocked all visibility.

The increasing heat were roasting the back of two people, the blinding smoke forcing them to shut their eyes, their throats and noses were constantly pricked. But Sophie’s heart was in a state of frozen numbness.

“What’s wrong? What are we waiting for?” Romaine asked while coughing.

“Give me the hammer.” The young man finally started to act. He had been listening attentively and beyond the crackling flames, he had heard the unique ringing of a bell.

Buce had sounded the alarm.

[I hope the guards in the village are smart enough to do something. I should give up counting on the militia there because they’re only a bunch of hot-blooded youths. If anything, they should just try and survive the night—]

They were Aouine’s future.

But he immediately checked his line of thinking. Perhaps he was unable to even

survive past this situation.

“Are there enemies outside?” The merchant girl’s eyelids opened and she passed the hammer over.

“I am not sure but it pays to be careful.” Sophie wanted to be optimistic, but he needed to prepare for the worst outcome. He was an experienced warrior in the game who relied not on luck but cautiousness.

“Brendel.”

“Yes?” He stopped his action of opening the door.

“You seem to be a little different today.”

[I’m exposed already? But that shouldn’t be! Brendel and my personality are actually quite similar and I inherited his memories. How did I get found out so quickly?]

Sophie’s heart squeezed tightly.

“What...?” He could not restrain the anxiety in his voice.

“Hmm, I can’t really tell, it’s just a feeling.” She contemplated for a while and asked earnestly: “You will protect me right, Brendel?”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“No, thank you.”

“It’s not necessary to be courteous with me, Miss Romaine.”

“Eh?”

Sophie grinned but did not reply. The tense feelings in his hearts were greatly relieved. He drew a breath and tensed his body, lightly pulled the latch and placed his hand on the door handle.

He was going to open it.

What fate was going to wait for him outside, a brand new world? Or an abrupt death?

Was Mother Marsha going to play a trick on him?

‘But it is a taboo to fathom Mother Marsha’s intentions—‘ Brendel’s memories told him.

“Miss Romaine, I’ll count to three, and we will rush out together.”

“Got it.”

“Three...”

“Urgh.”

“Ahh.”

“I’m sorry, I’m too tense, I should start from one...” Sophie realized his mistake.

“It’s okay, Brendel...” Romaine hid her face under her hands. She knocked onto the youth’s firm back, and her heart jumped.

She was not a person to be so easily embarrassed.

But Sophie did not have the mood to appreciate the girl’s thoughts. He was also embarrassed from making such a silly mistake. He thought he should be calm about opening the door because they were merely a few skeletons.

He gritted his teeth and opened the door. Before the smoke dissipated a gleaming sword stabbed towards him.

There was indeed an ambush.

Sophie’s mind had never been more calm. It was as if his years in the game as a warrior merged with this body’s own lifetime. The sword’s emblem, Brumand’s blooming black rose, was reflected in his eyes as it swung in a straight line.

The skeleton’s movements was rigid and he knew its weaknesses.

He understood that he could not directly match the enemy’s strength with his own, and held Romaine back while evading it. The cold steel sliced across his shirt without drawing blood.

Then Sophie swung the hammer from above towards the skeleton. The smoke parted to reveal the skeleton's chest and with a loud crash, three of its ribs were cracked open and hurled backwards.

The skeleton stumbled backwards from the impact and blocked the rest of the skeletons from advancing, and the youth immediately took the chance to dash out from the sea of flames.

He immediately surveyed the battlegrounds. The sight of four skeletons soldiers filled his veins with ice. If there were only one or two skeletons he might even have the mood to curse at them.

[Damn it, the enemies seemed to think highly of me. Am I treated like a scout? It certainly looked like being flashy was not a good thing...]

That made sense to him. He believed his performance in killing a necromancer was no less than what the best scouts could do. In this rustic area, a typical scout would be nothing more than an ordinary hunter.

He felt Romaine gripping his hand tightly. The subconscious reaction from the girl showed off scared she was. He wanted to comfort her by saying something but he did not know where to start from.

When he looked over to the dark forest that was at the bottom of the hill, he wondered how he would cover the distance.

The wind blew across his face and the chill spread across his sweaty forehead.

The four skeleton soldiers were surrounding him quickly.

[What can I do, just close my eyes and wait for death's embrace?]

Sophie could only try to cover the merchant girl behind him with his body, and wished that he had his warrior with hundred and thirty levels. It would only take a single blow to smash them to bits...

But this world did not have the word "if".

Reality was ever so disappointing.

...

[Wait, levels? I killed a necromancer and 2 skeletons. Brendel killed 1 skeleton. I have 6 Experience points!]

The young man suddenly felt he had missed something. His heart trembled as he realized, the Ring of the Wind Empress!

The requirement to raise a swordsman only required 5 XP to advance to level two. How many XP would it need to raise a Militia's level?

He hoped that there was not much of a difference between this world and the game's. He would be able to escape if he had just one level.

Time was running out, the four skeletons were already in front of him, he only had a breath's time, four seconds, to life or death.

He used his fastest speed to check the data in his retina.

XP: 6 (Commoner Level 1: —, Militia Level 1, 0/3)

[Thank the gods!]

He understood what he needed, even though investing the XP into a militia class was an obvious waste, he could not care less.

[Any wastage was better than becoming any icy corpse, right?]

"Militia, 6 XP into the profession, quick, level up!" He yelled in his mind, 4 skeletons had raised their sharp swords, and the merchant girl behind hugged him tightly.

"Brendel, they're coming!"

And the data changed again.

XP: 0 (Commoner Level 1: —, Militia Level 2, 6/10)

A warmth coursed through his veins. He understood that his body was changed with the 0.1 strength and physique addition, but they were currently unimportant.

A swordsman in comparison would have gained 0.2 strength, physique, agility and even perception. A militia would be utter garbage when compared.

But they were unimportant.

What was important, was the chance to pick the unique talents when a character levels up to two. It was the first of three chances to pick a unique talent in this life.

This was the first chance, the fairest chance, the chance which would bring him new life.

He anxiously waited, a second was like a millennia, but the panels for unique talents finally lit up.

“Unique talent, Unyielding.”

Scorching flames blazed in his eyes. Four swords swung at his body, but he lifted the masonry up as if to conquer the world, while shifting his head, heart and organs away.

Three swords stabbed into the youth’s body at the same time.

[Fuck!!! That fucking hurts!]

But he now had the ability to resist becoming unconscious from bleeding for five minutes, and he would not die from any physical attacks for thirty minutes. Red warning signs appeared all over his eyes as his Lifeforce dipped below zero.

The ‘Unyielding’ talent was activating the Soul’s Fire, and was similar to how the undead were controlled.

The skeletons did not attack any further as they perceived him as an undead, but Sophie roared and swung his hammer at them. Their balance broke as they stumbled back and their swords were withdrawn from his body, but he did not let his voice leak out.

He had only one chance now to bring Romaine away from here. Then he needed to find a health potion with the remaining time he had. He did not know if it existed in this world but he could only have faith in his heart.

There was no other option.

“Brendel!” Romaine’s voice changed when she saw the injuries on his body.

“Hold on tightly to me, Romaine.”

“I...”

“Hold on tightly!” The youth had no time to explain and roared angrily. Brendel appeared to look like a real hero covered in blood in this very moment.

“I got it, sorry, sorry, Brendel.” The girl looked astonished as she said.

Sophie grabbed Romaine’s hand and quickly escaped.

“Miss Romaine.” He ran and said with considerable strain.

“Y-yes.”

“Listen... carefully...” Sophie panted. The Undying ability did not allow the body to retain its strength, and he already felt that his surroundings were becoming blurry.

The only thing that was clear to him was the howling wind in his ears due to their running.

“Yes?”

“If I faint, bring me to Bucca and avoid Madara’s troops... Go to the Holy Church and... seek for a health potion, do you understand?”

“I, I got it, Brendel... You won’t die right?”

“I... Don’t know... Cough... We should see what... Mother Marsha has arranged for us...”

Sophie did not know whether the merchant girl really understood, but he only had enough energy to give her this set of instructions. He had to leave the rest to fate.

He turned back to look and saw the flames in the hilltop amongst the blur. He sighed and closed his tired eyes.

The life that he once had was definitely gone now.

[I can't believe I actually risked my life just like that. Was I ever so decisive and brave?]

Even if he died he would be able to find solace.

[At least I managed to save someone and it wasn't a failure this time...]

He thought as the world turned dark.

Chapter 6

Freya

Sophie felt like he dreamed for a long time. He was surrounded by silent shadows and everything appeared to be distorted and strange. A black moon and a solitary high tower were reflected in a dark body of water, persisting at the beginning and the end of his dream.

What did the moon signify? What did the high tower mean? Or was all of this just a nightmare?

Sophie did not know, just like he did not know when he would wake up. He persisted in this state until he overheard a conversation in his disconcerted state.

“Freya.” The voice belonged to a boy.

“Briedon, have you contacted them?” It was the voice of a young woman, her diction clear and distinct.

“No, there was a bunch of monsters blocking the road. We were not able to find where Ser Marden and the others went, and there’s this person...” The boy said.

His voice pointed towards Sophie.

Sophie’s heart skipped a beat. He could feel a gaze on his body. It was like a pathway that connected him back to this world, causing him to feel like he was sinking slowly, before he realized it was gravity pulling him.

Sophie finally recognized the fact that he could sense his body but it did not respond to him.

[Am I dead.]

His breathing started to go into a slight disarray.

“He’s one of the wounded, take care of him.” The girl said.

[One of the wounded? Are you talking about me? Ah, that's right, I'm gravely injured.]

His mind started to sharpen and his memories played back like scenes from an old movie. He had borrowed the body of a young man called Brendel and gambled his life away to accomplish something. That was certainly not something he would do.

But he succeeded.

"Freya, he's awake." The child suddenly said.

"What?"

"I saw his eyelids move."

"That's not possible, his injuries are grave enough for Mackie to..... Eh!?"

That was true. Brendel's body was already in a near fatal state when he took it. He then used the talent 'Unyielding' to survive multiple stab wounds. He clearly remembered that his stomach and right chest were completely pierced through.

Sophie's mind started to focus and the surrounding voices became clearer. The noisy din of panicked confusion, crackling sounds made from burning wood, hurried footsteps and metallic clashes, drowned out the conversation between the girl and the child. The temperature around him started to rise, as if to lick him with a gentle warmth but it quickly started to scald him.

[Hot.]

He blinked. The first thing that came into his irides when he struggled to open his eyelids was a surprised girl.

Sophie's impression of the girl who was supposedly called Freya, matched the girl in his mind after listening to her voice.

She had light brown hair coupled with bright eyes and her long hair was tied into a ponytail. Her looks brought about a refined heroic elegance to her. She was observing him with a lowered and Sophie did the same thing by looking up to her.

She wore a greyish white leather set which fit snugly to her figure, and wore a thick cotton shirt with the pretty emblem of black pine leaves on her left shoulder below it.

He also noticed the sword at her waist; a short rapier with a flame signet on the hilt. He shifted his gaze upwards, and saw the bloody bandage across her left chest and shoulder.

[The uniform of Buccé's militia. The symbol of the Church of Flames. Did they just experienced a fight?]

Sophie's eyes captured every detail. The noises in the surroundings were dying quickly when he woke up.

"Where... is this place?... Where is Romaine..."

When he spoke, he felt as though molten steel was being poured into his throat, burning him and drying every last drop of moisture, forcing him to cough weakly after his last word. There was a throbbing pain from his chest that traveled throughout his entire body when he coughed.

The only reply he received was a wind coming from the mountainous stretch of pine trees. The wind blew across the black pine needle leaves, causing them to rustle like the sounds from a river.

No one answered him.

"He woke up."

"I can't believe this, he actually survived with those injuries."

"He's probably just living on borrowed time..."

Then the hushed whispers wormed their way into his ears. Sophie was a little confused.

[What's happening here, these people should be Buccé's militia right? I'm probably saved by them, so where is that merchant girl? Did my plan succeed and Captain Marden understood my intentions?]

He turned his head sideways. He first saw a bright bonfire which danced in his eyes, the fire embers following the rising smoke and dissipating into the night sky.

"You're awake?" The girl finally came to her senses and quickly rushed to stop him

from moving: "Wait, don't move, this is Bucces, do you remember where you are?"

"Bucces... Bucces." Sophie repeated this name. He let out a sigh. He should have died from the wounds he received, no matter how many times he looked at it, regardless of whether it was real life or a game. "Can you tell me what happened to me?"

[The only possibility was Miss Romaine finding a health potion for me.]

"Little Fenris and Mackie found both of you in the forest not far from here." Freya looked at him curiously. Even though the youth called Brendel came to their village for almost a year, he did not really interact with the village's young adults.

He was always alone in his gloomy house and only accompanied Romaine occasionally to the nearby town. Even the dumbest people in the nearby area knew the youth was interested in the girl who dreamed about becoming a merchant, excluding the latter herself.

Freya gave another round of appraisal to him when she thought about this, along with a drop of suspicion.

"All of you are?" He said.

"I really wonder how Romaine and you managed to escape." The girl gave an unwilling sigh.

"How is she?"

"She's fine. Don't worry, she's in a better condition compared to you by a thousand times. You should pay more attention to your own condition," Freya stroked her forehead and spoke softly: "But she kept going on about going into the village, do you know anything about that?"

Sophie paused.

[This means I didn't use a health potion, so how did my injuries...?]

Almost like an instinctive response, he opened his stats display and the dark green data appeared in his retina. He stared at it in shock at the words:

Lifeforce (Near death, weakened): 10% ('Banadaged' status, 1 HP will be recovered

every day)

[Impossible!]

Sophie's first reaction was to believe he was still dreaming. No one understood his condition better than he did. He had at least 4 different fatal injuries along with massive hemorrhaging. No matter how he sliced it, he was deadlier than dead.

[Why do I still have 10% left?]

Sophie shook his head in an effort to clear his mind a little, but he saw the girl's face beside him turning tense: "Don't move, you're heavily injured..."

"Don't worry." He waved his hand subconsciously.

Sophie was very clear about his current status. Even though he was puzzled over it he was not in a condition where he was losing blood, and there was no other 'bad status' on him. He was in a 'Weakened' and 'Near death' state, and understood these conditions were not something easily solved. He could only wait and recuperate slowly.

But since his injuries are in a stable condition there was no danger to his life.

[How did my wounds automatically become 'stable'? The 'Unyielding' talent doesn't have this ability!]

He was greatly puzzled.

"You cr—!" Freya eyes went wide. She had never seen someone as crazy as he was.

Everyone thought he was doomed from the start and no one expected him to survive. Yet he woke up. Just from that fact, he should thank Mother Marsha's for her mercy.

But the damned bastard did not seem to care at all.

[One should cherish his life properly, damn it!]

"Get back and rest right this instant!" The girl drew a deep breath and ordered through gritted teeth.

Sophie paused blankly and looked at her with dumbfounded eyes.

[What was wrong with this girl's head?]

"Y-you received the Militia's training right? My name is Freya, Bucc'e's third platoon's leader. Right now I'm ordering you to follow my orders, temporarily," Freya blushed as she realized she lost her temper much too easily: "You have no problems with my orders, yes?"

"You're Freya?" Sophie became shocked and blurted: "Freya Elisson, born during the Year of the Moon Flowers, your father the Great Knight Everton?"

"What, how did you?" The girl got confused with the series of questions: "N, no, my father is only a carpenter in the town..."

There was a sudden riot of laughter in the surroundings.

"Freya, this man's pick-up lines are good."

"You should be careful around him, Captain Freya."

"Nobody will treat you as mutes if you speak two sentences less, Mackie, Ike!" Freya turned her back and glared at them sullenly.

During this time Sophie took the time to observe the militia with solemn gazes.

[This platoon has seven or eight people. It coincides with Aouine's unit structure, but the leader is a female and that's even a young brat in it... This girl's name must be a coincidence. It might look like it was a special exception, but the truth is Aouine's frequent battles over the years have weakened it beyond words, to the point where they needed women and children to fill up the ranks.]

He felt disappointed as he watched the girl and boy squabble.

[What happens next will devour the last bit of vitality the kingdom has from its shiny surface.]

Sophie gave a sorrowful sigh filled with lament.

He witnessed this passage of history from the beginning of the game, and did not

expect to relive it once more in this parallel world.

He stared at the girl leader next to him in a trance.

[No... I'm not mistaken about her. Freya Elisson. The last general of Aouine and later called the kingdom's Goddess of War. The daughter of the Great Knight Everton who's also known as 'The Sceptor of Fire'. She isn't noticed early in the beginning of the war, but ultimately received the Princess Regent's favor to become one of the top rising heroes of this kingdom. I didn't expect her to experience Madara's first invasion.]

"What are you looking at?" Freya turned her head around, and looked back blankly when she saw his gaze.

[...The situation is urgent. How much time did I lose by being unconscious? Now is not the time for her to hold the initiative or to act like the old Brendel. Since they rescued me our lives are tied together. I have to save myself, and the militia before me.]

He was not admiring or enamored with her, but was treating and observing her like a strange animal.

"You have not seen anyone dying before you yet right?" Sophie suddenly asked.

"Hah?"

"No, I should rephrase my words. Are you afraid of people dying?"

"What, I..." The girl was at a loss for words.

"The injuries I received is none of your concern, so may I sit up?" Sophie said in a grave voice.

"N, no."

"Why?"

Freya was speechless. She was indeed scared. She was afraid to see someone die in front of her. Even if she was the future War Goddess covered with countless auras, the current Freya was nothing more but a naive village girl.

She had never seen the cruelties of a war and still retained a naive outlook towards

the world.

Sophie raised the corners of his lips a little. He too had not seen a dying person before him, but his experiences in the 'The Amber Sword' were many times more than Freya.

He had at least experienced the pain of loss.

He was even more naive and younger than the girl in front of him when he started playing the realistic game in his past life. The horrifying events in it quickly made him mature and he learned many things.

He cherished the nurtured feelings and memories but they also left the seeds of revenge in him.

"Therefore, you're just a naive little girl. What authority or ability do you have that would make me obey your orders, Miss Freya?"

"Y... you—"

He knew there was no merit to argue with her. He took another look at the bandages in front of his chest, and immediately changed the subject: "Who tied my bandages?"

"Captain Freya was the one who did it, she's the only one amongst us who know how to do the emergency first-aid." The bratty little boy rushed to give his answer. He looked curiously at the young man who seemed like an experienced leader.

He thought the militia in Bruglas was indeed different, at least compared to their militia in a small place like Bucce.

"I barely managed to stop your bleeding. Don't think of wandering around, I don't want to tie your bandages again." Freya immediately warned him.

[This game-like system is crazy enough for me to survive the attacks earlier. If I follow the game rules in my previous world, the bandage's effect instantly recovers 1 HP upon application per day...]

So he answered politely: "Thank you for bandaging me. Although you are terrible at it."

"..." Freya inhaled deeply.

[Mother Marsha above, please forgive me for my rage—]

She was strangling the grinning bastard to his death in her mind.

Chapter 7

The plan

“Well then, where exactly are we?”

Sophie started to inquire for the news that he wished to know after he flawlessly got hold of the conversation’s direction.

The experiences he had in the game was enough to treat the youths in front of him like children. He was exuding an air of confidence which affected all the people in front of him, regardless of Freya in front of him or the ones behind her. The center of the topic had shifted to Sophie without them realizing it.

Even the ones far away raised their head and turned to him.

“This place is the Forest of Red Pines. Don’t move.” The girl with the ponytail took a deep breath and trying hard to calm down and reply.

[She controlled her temper pretty quick. As expected of the Goddess of War, although she’s still naive—]

Sophie suddenly gaped at the future Goddess of War in surprise.

“Wait, the Red Pine Forest,” Sophie repeated her words in shock. “Why are you gathered here?”

He remembered the place was called the ‘Dwarven valley’ in the game where level 14 Brown Bears nested. But it was Bucces’s southern region and the militia had no reasons to appear here.

“We came to look for you.”

“Actually we came to find Miss Romaine, she’s a friend of Captain Freya.”

“She’s also a member of the third militia squadron.”

The people behind Freya started talking at the same time.

“Have you defeated the Madara’s vanguard?” Sophie asked the most important question in his heart.

“How’s that possible!” Freya looked puzzledly at him, her expression was almost asking him why he asked such a silly question: “The town’s guards led the villagers and retreated to the north. We got separated from the rest. The monsters in the main road are getting more and more numerous, and we could only proceed to the south. Besides, I was also worried about Romaine...”

“Therefore, everyone in your squadron came here?” Sophie’s felt his heart sank.

The girl nodded as if it was the most natural thing, her long ponytail bobbing up and down.

Then Freya suddenly felt a little strange.

[Wait, he’s not Captain Marden, why do I feel like I’m talking to someone with a higher rank!]

Sophie tapped his forehead pensively. He did not know whether to describe their actions as naive or foolish. They already had trouble surviving on their own and they still wanted to save others.

[No, maybe perhaps they could be described as being kind. But the battlefield does not need unnecessary kindness; they are only harming themselves.]

Sophie became silent, but his heart was languishing into a spiral of lamentation. He had set Brendel’s grandfather’s house on fire to warn the village, but history still repeated itself and continued to travel to its original pathways.

[There are even people here who are hopelessly foolish.]

Sophie’s original expectations were completely dashed and it left him with an empty feeling. It was a heavy blow that left him dispirited. He sighed in his mind. The things that he could change were too little. The wheels of history could not be stopped by a meager force. It was absolutely necessary that he got stronger, but before that, he had to survive.

[Captain Marden, it appears that even I am unable to save you. Why would Brumand's black rose, the Madara, invade the borders before the fifth moon's celebration of eternal death? Bucce would be on their highest guard after all. No, perhaps they are right to attack since they succeeded after all.]

But he only possessed the strength of an average man; he had done his best.

"Brendel!"

As he silently grumbled inwards to himself, an elated voice rang out beside him. Sophie turned his head back, and saw the merchant girl with a face full of disbelief and surprised joy appearing at the other side of the forest. There was another girl at Romaine's side, wearing a suit of greyish white leather armor. She was the probably the person who went to notify Romaine.

Romaine dashed over like the wind to Sophie's side and studied him carefully as if she was afraid of him suddenly disappearing.

"I knew it Brendel! I knew you would be okay!" She said before she explained urgently, as if she was afraid of him getting angry: "Oh— I'm sorry. Freya refused to let me go back to Bucce, I..."

"It's fine now. I'm alright." He replied gently.

"Really?"

"Really." He nodded.

"Romaine, please don't move him. His wounds are grave." Freya brows knitted together like they were going to touch one another. Did these two people know how grave these injuries were? He was just one step from meeting Mother Marsha!

"It's fine." Even though Romaine said that she stuck her tongue out and stood up.

Sophie smiled. The personality of the merchant girl was simply that way. He looked at both of the pretty girls and could not help but admired the scene.

If he did not teleport to this world, perhaps the merchant girl would have met the same fate as Brendel did. The Madara invaders were merciless.

He peered at the others.

Amongst all of them, who would survive at the very end of this battle? He clearly remembered the survivors from the militia and the guards were less than one out of ten. But he was here now and perhaps there could be a deviation in history. There were many things he did not know, but at least the people around him should be saved. These youths were the future seeds of this kingdom.

“Alright, let’s get back to the important issues. Do you know how serious the situation is right now?” The young man exhaled, trying hard not to show off painful he felt. He knew that he needed to rest desperately, but the current circumstances prevented him from doing so.

His gaze landed on everyone, and Freya and the young militia looked startled. Romaine blinked her eyes playfully.

“Huh?” Freya said.

Sophie coughed weakly. He said: “What are you going to do next? If I am not wrong, the Madara undead has taken control of the main road?”

Silence fell upon them.

“H, how did you know?” Freya looked at him in surprise.

[Of course I know, I even lived through it.]

Sophie’s mind replied. But the surprised looks made him a little pleased.

Knowing the future had advantages.

But that feeling could not cover the anxiety in his heart. Madara’s attacks in the the fourth month was swift and decisive. He needed to create a comprehensive plan to protect himself and the youths in front of him.

The enemies that Buccie faced were undead from the left wing of Madara’s army. Leading them was Incirsta, known as the infamous ‘Black Lord’ in the future. Even though he was merely a twenty-something novice now, this rising star had begun to show off his prowess at the start of this battle.

[And what do I have right now? The body of a nameless person in history, and he even died at the beginning of the war.]

The only advantage Sophie had was the knowledge of the future. He would be able to handle the series of events but he needed to make good use of the opportunities available.

He had only two choices and his mind quickly worked out the scenarios.

[The first option would be the safer route by picking the 'Valley of Jagged Rocks'. It took the One-eyed Tarkus, Incirsta's right hand, seventeen days to control this region.

But the distance is far away. I'm worried that we will not reach there in time to break through before the enemy surrounds the place. Unless there are horses of course, but where would I find them for these ten odd people here?

The other option left is to break through the 'River of Daggers' before the battle between the 'Undead Ghosts' led by Vesa and the 'White Knights' by Ivanton takes place.

Currently, there is only one necromancer leading a small skeleton army patrolling there.]

He rubbed the cold ring on his finger. With the Ring of the Wind Empress, was it not a simple task to break through the defense line comprised of eleven skeleton soldiers and one necromancer?

Still, he needed to make everyone in this militia team to obey his orders. It was also why he presented himself so forcefully from the beginning.

He took a look at everyone again.

"Anyone who had a little knowledge in military studies would be able to make a natural conclusion like that. They sealed off the main road to break communications and to pave the way for their army. The next step is to clear this region's remaining Aouine's forces while using Bucces as the center."

He stressed his words heavily, paused and continued gravely: "Us."

A heavy silence loomed, then the light gasps of the militia army sounded out.

“And I ask you now, what are your plans?” Sophie asked wearily.

They turned and looked at each other.

There were ten skeleton soldiers defending Bucces’s main road, and they could not force their way out. Even though there was the reckless confidence from them and the enemies did not count for much, they had their reservations shown when it came to life and death battles.

Freya’s face was full of worry. She had not considered far ahead at all when she made her decisions earlier. Even though they were deemed as militia they were merely a bunch of inexperienced youths.

Although she did not say anything her helplessness was already written on her face.

Everyone’s gazes had fallen onto Sophie since a while ago. He seemed to show a demeanor exuding experience and calmness. This impression had a subtle influence on them, making them felt he was reliable during times of danger.

“Brendel?” Romaine asked worriedly.

Sophie looked back at her and gave a small smile to put her at ease.

“We need to plan for the worst outcome.” He snapped his head back at them. He planned to break their naive attitude.

This was not something he did for the first time. The newbies in his guild always held some optimistic behaviors when they went to the battlefields for the first time. But once they received a blow from a shock, they would go into disarray and quickly get annihilated by veteran teams.

There was actually not that much of a gap between players and the people before him.

The key factor was their mentality, and veteran players like him were in charge of giving inoculation shots to the newbies.

“Plan for the worst outcome?”

Just as Sophie was about to answer, there was a series of rustling from the forest. Everyone looked over there at the same time, except Freya who faced over to a set of

shrubbery and said: "Jonathon?"

"It's me, Captain Freya."

Everyone sighed with relief, but Sophie quietly gestured at Freya with his hand, warning her to raise her alertness. Freya was a little surprised at his gesture, but immediately realized the militia training did not allow them to leave their posts without reason.

Sophie had absolute faith in Aouine's militia training. These youths might be naive, but that not mean they would forget about the basic training rules they had done every day.

There must not be any negligence in a battlefield.

"Did something happen, Jonathon?" She asked as she placed her hand on her sword's hilt.

"I, I'm sorry, Captain Freya, I, I got caught..."

The shrubbery was parted into two with a rustle, and there were two people who walked out. A crying young man with a pale face with his arms raised, and the necromancer that followed behind with its finger pointing towards the young man. The green flames that were dancing in its eye sockets peered at everyone.

"Hehe, I caught a bunch of rats."

Their breaths were taken away.

"Jonathon!"

"How could you..."

And the gasps of disbelief followed.

Chapter 8

The bloody forest

The young members of the militia roared in fury as their eyes bore at the traitor before them.

The young man who was controlled by the necromancer paled even further with a shudder, his shame and fear made him bow his head deeply.

He had no choice because he did not want to die—

Freya felt her heart nearly stopping. She reached for her sword subconsciously, but the necromancer immediately dismissed her notion to draw it. The green lights in its eye sockets flared up, and the young man's arm exploded like a smashed egg. Blood and flesh sprayed everywhere, and he screamed loudly, falling down and curling into a heap.

“Gaaahhh! Please save me, Captain Freya!!!”

The bloody Jonathon rolled on the ground, shrieking in horror.

This frightening scene made a few people turned away and threw up. Freya turned white and stumbled backward, her legs trembling and unsteady.

“Little human girl, it is best that you do not move rashly.” The necromancer warned her with a shrill voice, its terrifying gaze sweeping across everyone who was there.

But it soon discovered there was only militia here, maggots that were not worth mentioning.

The green lights in the necromancer's eye sockets dimmed with disappointment. It had received orders to pursue and kill the human scout, and not to squabble over these maggots.

Freya's mind was a complete blank, but she tried to shake off the waves of dizziness that were assailing her and tried her best to mull over the ways to escape from the

situation. She still remembered she was the leader of the militia and could not show her weak side.

Sophie supported Freya from behind to prevent her from sinking to the ground, but she surprised him with her determination to stand on her own.

The girl beside had Romaine had already fainted after she saw Jonathon's plight. It was fortunate that the merchant girl was there to hold her.

Sophie felt one of Romaine's hand grabbing on to his sleeve tightly. It was a sign that she trusted and depended on him.

But he knew that the militia needed some assurance at this time or they might break down mentally. They were living in a generation where Madara had not invaded yet and would find it difficult to endure a cruel scene like this. It was perhaps fortunate the young men and women were trained as militia and prepared for wars to break out; Aouine was a country that was stricken with the ravages of war after all.

"Freya." Sophie whispered weakly.

The young girl paused for a short moment and immediately woke up from her stupor. She breathed deeply and calmed down bit by bit under Sophie's presence. He nodded in admiration when her fingers on her sword's hilt relaxed.

[Good. Few people would be able to calm down when they are facing a life and death situation, although the same could be said for me.]

His heart was as serene as it could possibly be. Perhaps the shock from traveling to a parallel world and his supposed death had allowed him to be numb to the threatening situation in front of him.

Regardless, it was definitely a good thing.

He continued to whisper: "Do you remember what I said earlier about planning for the worst?"

Freya froze for a moment and nodded slightly.

"Do you have the strength to fight?"

“Yes.”

It was a reply which almost could not be heard.

Sophie’s heart was relieved.

He rubbed against the Ring of the Wind Empress with his thumb, and the sensation he felt told him it was half recharged.

[It seems a few hours have passed since I fainted. It only takes ten minutes to receive a full charge in the game. It’s not going to be able to create a Wind Bullet, but a powerful whirlwind is possible.]

He prepared himself for the worst outcome. Even if there was an army of skeletons behind the necromancer, he would not flinch or panic.

At the same time, the necromancer was finally convinced there was no ambush here. It did not even bother to look at the pitiful figure that was crying beside its feet, and raised its skeletal arm:

“My soldiers, slay everyone here!”

The dry ear-piercing voice screeched out from the necromancer, and there were four skeleton soldiers wearing dark heavy chain armor and wielded sharp swords that rushed out from the forest. Their bodies made clacking noises as they moved through the swirling mist, approaching closer to the militia with every step.

If it was a little earlier the militia might still have the courage to resist the undead soldiers, but it was different now. The confidence they had earlier was shattered by the necromancer’s terrifying power, and the remaining bravery they had were crushed by the approaching soldiers. They were in no condition to fight back as they trembled before death.

They could only retreat backward in terror. Some drew out their swords shakily from an instinctive will to survive, but there was no certainty as to how much they could defend themselves.

There were only quickened breaths echoing throughout the forest and the rustling of dead leaves as death snaked towards its preys.

The necromancer crackled in laughter as it watched them. The green lights in its eye sockets danced wildly as if they were savoring the fear.

Fear was human's greatest weakness. Their emotions could easily be made use of. In comparison, the undead naturally overcame this weakness. Every one of them could be considered as the finest soldier, especially the lower ranked undead which did not even need to think and simply obeyed their orders.

Even veteran soldiers could be as helpless as children in a battlefield. The Madara's undead hated weak creatures and sought to eradicate them.

The necromancer felt only hatred for them.

Madara's victory was certainly assured—

But at this moment it heard a faint whisper:

“Then I'll leave it to you.” A calm youthful voice said, brimming with confidence.

The necromancer felt its Soul Fire jumped a little. It was a bad omen, and the necromancer turned its head warily.

A shining ring entered into its line of sight.

The ring was worn on that heavily injured militia's thumb. It had not taken notice of this human who was half dead because there was nothing to note of.

A human could pretend to be heavily injured and possibly fool people, but they would not be able to deceive an undead. These cold unfeeling creatures which climbed out from graves were able to perceive the Flames of Life directly, and there was no mistaking Sophie's faint flames.

He was definitely heavily injured.

The true threat came from the magic ring on his thumb. The green lights in the necromancer's eye sockets suddenly dimmed, as it could suddenly feel a dangerous aura gathering in the air.

The necromancer came into contact with fake replicas of powerful artifacts when its master had taught it black magic. From that aura emitted in the air, it judged the ring

to be at least twenty OZ.

[Why would such an artifact of a true wizard appear in the hands of a normal human?!!]

The necromancer showed an expression that was full of surprise and greed.

“My undead soldiers, pry the ring off his finger and give it to me!” It raised its bone staff and screamed.

“Oss.”

But Sophie raised his right hand and spat out the word with all his strength as if to expel all the air in his lungs. The youth took a step back and his head was full of cold perspiration.

The space between them expanded visibly before it violently contracted.

The distortion in the air rapidly reverted back to normalcy with a sudden explosion, and the blast of frenzied wind roared with a thunderous boom. The wind was like a tempest of sharpened arrows piercing through the necromancer and the skeleton soldiers. They tried raising their arms to protect themselves, but the rampaging whirlwind made them stagger to their sides.

There was no damage done, but the impeding effect was easily visible.

“Now, Freya!” Sophie shouted.

The girl’s long sword sang in response as she drew it out, her long ponytail dancing behind her figure.

What amazed Sophie was how the inexperienced girl acted next. She did not rush in rashly, but turned her head and yelled at the rest of the militia: “Mackie, Irene! What the hell are you waiting for!? The third squadron, soldiers of Bucca, follow me into battle!!!”

The burst of courage was like a signal; simple words in a battle between life and death could become a suggestion which brought about limitless strength.

But this needed one condition, and that was composure.

A single person's composure could affect others, and Freya's reminder startled them to come back to their senses. They immediately recognized this was the final chance of surviving this encounter.

The raging winds continued to force the enemies back helplessly.

When the young militia discovered this, they quickly regained their mettle and the sounds of swords being drawn out reverberated in the forest. It was as if their discipline learned from the days spent in training returned to their bodies.

"Mackie, cover me."

"You fucking monsters, it's time for your turn..."

"Kill that foul witch first!"

"That's a necromancer."

"Little Fenris, you're behind me."

Sophie looked worriedly at the chaotic battlefield. He was afraid of someone acting rashly and ruining the situation, and he yelled out at them: "Everyone, remember what you learned in training! You can only fight well if you remain cool-headed!"

In the online game 'The Amber Sword', he had seen many hot-blooded newbies acting the same way like the youths here.

It was good to be heated but losing their rationality was not allowed.

He recited the militia's combat rules. It was something everyone here had recited before, but there were not many who could keep these tedious but valuable rules in mind during a battle.

[This Brendel is really something.]

Sophie played back Brendel's final battle in his mind. As a new soldier, Brendel's performance could not have been more perfect; he recited the combat rules when he fought against the skeleton and he had some considerable talent in wielding a sword as a militia. Unfortunately, he was in the wrong place and at the wrong time.

The young militia soldiers who heard Sophie's reminder made them levelheaded. But it was not sufficient, as Sophie knew they needed more confidence instilled in them, or else their regained morale would plummet back to nothing.

The wind started to weaken.

The skeleton soldiers shook their rattling armor and tried to find their balance, preparing to fight back, but Sophie's voice already instructed the militia to change their tactics.

"Listen well. These low ranked Madara's soldiers lack intelligence and move slowly. Their greatest weakness presents itself when they turn their body. Do your utmost to follow their sword hand and move towards the left. They have a blind spot there and you can attack safely..."

Mackie, partner up with Irene and attack from both sides. Do you know how to cover her? Good, attract the attention of that skeleton, keep up that pace."

Sophie laid half of his body onto a boulder, staring closely at the battlefield's situation and instructed them on their next move. It was almost as if his words carried a magic, bringing strength, composure, and calmness to the young militia soldiers.

They were quickly rewarded. Erik broke a skeleton's thigh bone from slashing its leg from Sophie's directions, and his partner, Fenris pierced through the skeleton's skull as a follow-up.

The instant the sword pierce through the skull, the undead creature seemed to let out a gasping sound, the Soul's Fire in its eye sockets flickered and quickly died.

Sophie's eyes caught a gold light flying into his chest from the skeleton.

Sophie stared at his chest for a moment. It was different from the previous time, he clearly felt the experience points clearly. But he did not have time to relish that fact as he heard the excited yells from the militia's victory.

"Heavens, I did it!" Erik could not believe it and yelled as he held his bleeding wounds firmly: "Brendel, how the hell do you know about these things?"

Brendel gave a small smile. His experience came from within the game where he analyzed the enemies with his allies. Even knowing their smallest habits came from

harsh lessons; knowledge attained from thousands of battles and deaths in the game.

Bucce's militia also learned something similar from their training, but they were merely superficial in Sophie's eyes. If Bucce's training raised his prowess against the skeleton soldiers by 10%, then his own knowledge would raise beyond 50%.

From the 375th year until the end of the 2nd era, the frequent battles against Madara had made Sophie completely familiar with their lowest ranked skeleton soldiers, to the highest ranked demonic wizards, vampire lords, and even bone dragons.

There was no one in Aouine who understood the undead kingdom more than him, perhaps even the entire continent. After all, the kingdoms in this continent, prior to the first War of the Black Rose, did not have as many intense conflicts with Madara as compared to the future.

The experience that Sophie had in this world was one of his proudest accomplishments in the game. He relied heavily on his knowledge, and it was the only reason that he had the confidence to win this battle.

But he had to finish this task at hand quickly to be safe. The violent whirlwind might have attracted unwanted attention.

His eyes fell upon the necromancer as he contemplated.

This was a difficult enemy.

Chapter 9

The battle against the Necromancer

A lower ranked necromancer was well versed in two different magic spells, Shadow Shroud and Debilitating Touch.

In the game, black magic was brought about by the Miirna race. They were servants of the Twilight Dragon, and lived in the icy plains of northern Kirrlutz a century before the Era of Chaos.

The Miirna shamans were well versed in Spirit and Dark Shamanic spells. These spells later on, along with all unnatural spells that affected the mind or attacked the body, were classified into black magic.

After the holy crusade, the King of Fire, Gatel, drove these citizens of darkness into the cold north, and it was said from then on no one ever saw them again.

But the Miirna definitely existed. In the Bible of Darkness, the black magic had been passed down to the Shadow Lords of Madara from these demonic race.

But to call Shadow Shroud as Black Magic was a little undeserving of the name. It was merely a type of magic to aid in concealment, and the spells used were able to cover the tracks of a small squad of undead troops.

The skeleton soldiers were not invisible or vanished into thin air, but a mere trick to hide them under dark shadows. It definitely did not make their sounds, scents or other sensory senses other than sight disappear. It was also limited to a certain radius.

During the dark night, these spells naturally became the best cover for Madara's undead troops, and it was the main reason why Madara's army had chosen to only move during the night time in history.

As for the Debilitating Touch, Freya and the other militia had already experienced this frightening black magic here.

This evil spell were necromancers' primary means of attacking and relied on negative

energy to invade the minds of the enemies. The stronger the negative emotions the enemies had, the weaker their wills were, and the more damage the spells would do.

Until they were dead.

Debilitating Touch was similar to various other black magic that relied on negative emotions to cause damage.

The necromancers with their cunning and deceptive nature, wielded these two mysterious magic spells and led skeleton soldiers which were stronger than humans without a fighting profession. It appeared as if they were enemies exceedingly difficult to defeat.

But Sophie knew their secret. Necromancers did not have the ability to cast magic. Its true source of power came from the bone staffs in their hands. The bone staff was a powerful magic artifact that belonged to its own individual owner, but once it left their hands it would become an ordinary stick.

With this knowledge at hand, Sophie prepared a strategy to defeat the necromancer.

Following the next defeated skeleton soldier under Sophie's supervision, the strongest sword fighters, Freya and Irena marched towards the necromancer on both sides.

"Attack its hand! The Dark Shamanic spells are not as mystical as you think," Sophie pointed out the undying monster's weakness from behind: "Did you see its gesture? Hinder it from completing the spell and knock the bone staff out of its hand—"

That necromancer abruptly raised its head and met Sophie's eyes, the viridescent flames quivering in hatred. Sophie choked up, his throat drying up as though it was being burned. He knew that the necromancer was starting to focus on him, but he tried to shrug off the unnerving feeling quickly, as he knew it was impossible for the necromancer to bypass the militia and attack him.

Nevertheless, the terrifying chill from the creature's gaze forced him to halt his instructions, and he waited for Freya and Irene to rob its concentration away.

The necromancer gave a ghastly laugh and shook the bone staff. Darkness covered it completely as if it was being submerged by a wave of water. When Irene's long sword pierced into it, there was nothing but thin air. The necromancer had vanished at the very same spot.

“What?” The girl was stunned.

Sophie’s expression did not change at all; he was too familiar with what it can do: “To your left, Irene!”

She did not react to his voice in time.

But Freya who rushed over slashed through the air with her sword, a straight silver line that seemed to illuminate the area, and when it reached the place where Sophie had directed, the necromancer stumbled backward in dismay.

Everyone saw the shadow-like figure revealing itself after retreating.

“Human!!! Who are you! You are not part of the militia at all!” The screaming voice was a frenzied rage, and its expression appeared to be in utter agitation.

It was impossible for a militia to know this much, and part of what Sophie said only circulated amongst the Madara’s undead necromancers.

But Sophie kept his silence, and Freya’s sword followed up again. The green lights in the necromancer’s eye sockets danced wildly, it raised the bone staff to parry the sword in hatred.

A necromancer possessed 1.7 OZ worth of strength and Freya did not have a higher strength than Brendel, thus her attack was easily steered to one side, and she stumbled forward a few steps before she was able to stop. She subconsciously held against her left shoulder and grimaced.

The injury from the arrow earlier seemed to be reopened.

“Captain Freya, let Mackie attack it instead, your injury...” Irene shouted out as she defended against the necromancer.

Mackie and Fenris charged over to them.

“Fenris, I want you to back off!” But Freya cut off his path and shouted at the inexperienced brat with a fierce command.

“But I’m also a soldier!” The adolescent shouted in defiance.

“Back off, did you hear what I said!?”

Fenris’s face flushed red with fury but he did not dare to go against Freya’s order. She had always been the leader amongst them with a kind heart and resolution in her actions. Everyone was content with her as the leader.

Sophie shook his head in disapproval. The battlefield was not a place to have a squabble.

“The four of you are to attack the necromancer together.” He said simply.

“Mister Brendel, you—!” Freya was at a loss for words as she looked back furiously. The young Romaine stood beside the youth who was lying on the boulder. She looked at Freya innocently and blinked.

[This damn girl, she already defected to his side?!]

Freya fumed inwardly.

“A necromancer is a difficult enemy to deal with, and the four of you are just sufficient to cover each other’s backs.” Sophie answered in a serious manner.

“But little Fenris—”

“Is also part of the militia.”

Freya bit her lips. Mackie and Irene were steadily losing ground from the necromancer’s attack. If the undead creature found a chance to cast a spell, the squad would lose another member. It was something that she could not stand for. She nodded reluctantly as she thought through the possibility.

“Alright.”

“Praise the Gods! Brendel, you’re too amazing!” Little Fenix cried triumphantly and readied his longsword immediately.

But Freya grabbed his cuff from behind and issued an order: “You are going to follow closely to me, and never go out of my sword arm’s radius. Do you understand?!”

“Oooh...” He replied with disappointment.

The situation was reversed when both Freya and little Fenix joined the battle. Irene and Freya were outstanding fighters in their militia batch, and surprisingly little Fenris was not any weaker. He was decisive and accurate with a strong inclination to attack, and unlike Aouine's military swordsmanship which pursued balance in both offense and defense, his style seemed to resemble Kirrlutz's aggressive sword techniques.

Sophie gave a high evaluation to him. If Fenris reached Brendel's age, he would probably be as good as him at using the sword.

Sophie mused over the possibility where Brendel did not die. Even though he mocked him when he first came to this world, if Brendel continued to grow in the upcoming battles, he would have most likely become as brilliant as Freya. It was as if he was born to fight when he handled himself against the skeleton.

[Unfortunately, there was such a thing called fate, and there were no 'ifs' in history.]

The battle between the militia and the necromancer relied heavily on Sophie's input. It was as though Sophie saw through every move of the necromancer, and even the smallest plan it had was pointed out.

What was the necromancer going to do?

Why was the necromancer moving right?

Was it preparing a spell?

When should it be interrupted?

The necromancer grew more and more appalled. The undead did not feel fear but the necromancer felt at a loss on how to respond. At the very end, it was screaming: "Who are you! An undead shaman! Or a black knight!"

The uttered sentences were exchanged for Freya's unforgiving strike. The claw-like fingers that were gripping the bone staff flew up and it gave a shrill scream. The green fire in its sunken eye sockets dimmed like it was a candle flame in the winds.

"Wretched humans....."

The battle finally ended with Mackie's orthodox strike with his sword. The

necromancer had exhausted itself considerably before the loss of its hands and bone staff, and it wailed in frustration as the bright sword pierced through its skull.

Its Soul Fire exploded from its body.

It was the final counter attack from this creature, but Sophie had already warned them preemptively. Only Irene who was a little slow at evading had her right hand singed a little.

The final two skeleton soldiers that remained were destroyed by the rest of the militia. Only one of the militia was wounded from the skeleton soldiers, and the forest was finally restored to its former peace. The wind blew across the forest, causing the leaves to rustle gently.

Everyone stopped and looked at each other. Their faces were full of disbelief, including Freya. They actually won against a necromancer and four skeleton soldiers.

Mackie's sword was the first fall onto the floor with a clang, and it set off a chain reaction. Everyone hugged each other together, shouting and yelling, and even some of them cried out loudly to vent their emotions. The merchant girl also seemed to be relieved.

To survive such an ordeal made their feelings ran high.

But Sophie was unperturbed. He raised his head and saw three golden lights flew into his chest from the darkness. Nobody seemed to notice this, even Romaine who was beside him.

[Hmmm. I'm the only one who can see it?]

Sophie felt a little puzzled.

He glanced at his surroundings once and opened his character window at the same time without thinking. He did the same things like he did in 'The Amber Sword', opening his character window once a battle was over.

The green lines of data appeared immediately in his retina.

Strength 1.1, Agility 2.0 , Physique 1.0 Intelligence 1.1, Will 1.3, Perception 1.0

Overall power rating 3.5, Element (Sealed)

Brendel, Male Human, Level 1 (Strength type body: Physical, Close combat; Talent: Unyielding)

XP: 4 (Commoner level 1 ———, Civilian Soldier level 2, 6/10)

Health (Weakened, dying): 10% (Bandaged status, 1 HP will be recovered every day)

Skills (Empty slot skill 1 XP)

Commoner [Basic knowledge (Level 1), Geography Knowledge (Level 0), Local knowledge (Level 1)]

Civilian Soldier [Military Swordsmanship (Level 1), Grappling techniques (Level 1), Tactical Theory (Level 0), Military Organization (Level 0)]

He noted the change from his strength and physique. This meant he received the increase from the 'Civilian soldier' profession.

The Overall Power Rating increased by 2.5. The Ring of the Wind Empress granted a 1.0 increase in agility, and the rest of the increase came from his corresponding stats from his militia profession.

He had gained 4 XP from four skeleton soldiers and one necromancer. It was half of what he should have received. Sophie thought for a while before concluding it as a 'Team penalty'.

[This is total bullshit! Why the heck would there be something like this in reality?]

He made snide remarks in his mind but felt it was pointless after a while. Compared to the fact that he teleported to a parallel world, it was even more ridiculous.

[It's good that my suspension of disbelief is amazing...] He rubbed his forehead as he felt a little headache.

Sophie stared at the 'Civilian soldier' level and hesitated. He truthfully did not want to invest experience points in this profession. The profession was pretty much garbage to him, and he had always viewed it a NPC-only profession.

Now in this life here, he could not have thought that he would actually spend experience points on it.

[I even chose the talent point Unyielding! There are so many talents for a Warrior, and I picked one of the worst talents. And I'm stuck with a trash profession.]

It was a skill that allowed him to be immune from fatal wounds, but he only had five minutes to act on, unless he received a healing spell powerful enough to restore him. He also had not seen any restoratives even though it was so plentiful in the game.

But he did not waste too much time regretting as it did save his life.

He was unable to find another profession right now and yet he urgently required more power to survive through the war. He had no choice but to continue walking down this damnable path of the profession 'Civilian soldier'. He felt depressed for a while.

He was musing over his character screen when he stood up suddenly.

[Aouine. This is a doomed kingdom within the game, and in Brendel's memory, this is the 'Year of Bustling Summer Leaves and Flowers'. This is the first year in the game's opening. I have knowledge of the future. I was able to prevent the militia from getting killed with my leadership. I... might be able to change this kingdom's fate.]

His body trembled when he realized this fact. Indeed, no one was more familiar with what was going to happen in this world. As one who did not succeed in doing well in his past life and escaped reality by hiding in the gaming world, what was he going to do in this world to make up for it?

He stared blankly at the virtual data reflected on his retinas and could not help but ask himself:

[Isn't this a world you're hoping for? To save Aouine from tragedy?]

Chapter 10

Emergency first aid in the battlefield

Sophie stared at his character stats in a daze. There was a glowing stat there.

[It's fine... Even if I leave that world, I have no regrets left behind there. Right, I should concentrate on my situation now. One step at a time, what should I do with my ability points?]

The 10 AP (ability points) he got when he raised his level should be used as soon as possible. Under the dire situation now, even the slightest improvement in power was an improvement over nothing. It appeared to him that increasing the sword rank or a combat-related skill was a pretty good choice. Anyone else would probably have chosen this option. Still, he hesitated as he had thought of something else.

He dismissed the character window in his mind, and it faded from his retina. He raised his head to look at the militia, only to find them still reveling from the victory earlier. He stiffened for a moment before he shook his head with an austere expression.

This was a terrible sign.

He gestured to Romaine to help him move towards the group, before raising his voice and asked: "Do you all really think you are safe now?"

His voice was not loud, but everyone present had their voices silenced, and the forest became quiet enough to the point where one can hear a pin drop.

Sophie's authority was still in their minds. The young militia had not forgotten who directed them to victory.

The earlier warning he had given had turned to reality.

They suddenly became self-aware and realized it was certainly not the time to celebrate. Their lives were practically controlled by Madara's undead troops, and yet they had the time to make merry. They felt a surreal feeling creeping over them as they realized this fact.

Thus everyone stopped and cast their gazes on him. Sophie was currently very weak, but there seemed to be an air about him that would lead them to victory.

Everyone believed that.

Even Freya sighed quietly. This was supposed to be her responsibility, but she and her subordinates were not able to control their emotions. She had forgotten that she was even the leader and the responsibilities that came along with it.

The ponytail girl showed pangs of regret when she became aware of that.

“Bandage your wounds, clean up the battlefield, and remember what you have learned in your training. Do you really need me to remind you?” Sophie also sighed. These headless chickens were more of a newbie than a newbie could ever be. It was fortunate that their stats were better than a normal NPC.

He rubbed his forehead.

The young soldiers of Bucces started to move. They stanching the wounded soldiers' bleeding, swept up the battlefield, and took the swords and armor from the skeleton soldiers. Their chain armors were much better than their leather armor in protection.

Another person extinguished the campfire under Sophie's instruction. Sophie wanted to knock his head against a tree when he gave the order. They actually lit a fire in the enemy's rear position.

Freya originally wanted to see what she could help with as Brendel was not familiar with them after all. But she soon realized that it was completely unnecessary, and no matter what he did, he had done things far better than what she had considered doing.

She could not help but fidget with her hair, her mind was full of questions; They were both militias, but was there so much of a difference between Bruglas and Bucces?

[How could this be?]

Freya had always thought the people that came from the city could not be any better than they were, she started to feel dejected in front of the youth called Brendel.

On the other hand, Romaine did not care about her situation too much and happily went along with the others to gather the loot. It looked like the future merchant girl

was only interested in selling them.

Sophie glanced at the cheeky kid whose name was little Fenris when he went over to the unconscious Jonathon.

“What about Jonathon?” Fenix asked everyone.

This question made everyone look at each other. A strange silence spread everywhere.

Indeed, he was one of the youths in the village, and could even be seen as having a close relationship with all of them. Jonathon was the timidest amongst them, but they still did not expect he would do something like this.

Even though he had no choice, his action was equivalent to a betrayal and it hurt them. It was as if their innocent friendship had cracked, and showed how distrust between humans came about.

Freya also had no idea to repair the relationship between them. She was also deeply hurt. Even if she wanted to speak up for him and protect everyone in the militia, she had no confidence to persuade the others.

And if she spoke, she might force them into a decision and there would be no chance for them to remain as friends.

Everyone in the militia held the same viewpoint. They were just naive teenagers, and they were straightforward and weak at the same time. They cast their eyes on the only outsider here as they hesitated.

And Sophie sighed.

“Miss Freya?” He asked her.

“I, I don’t know...”

“Then bandage him. We don’t know if we are even capable of stopping the bleeding, perhaps he will die before tomorrow’s sunrise.” Sophie sighed again.

Everyone exhaled with relief at the same time. It was Sophie’s order and they just needed to follow it. It was an excuse to run away but even humans needed to escape from time to time.

On the other side, Sophie beckoned to Freya to come over. She looked puzzledly at him but came over.

“You know how to perform first aid, Miss Freya?” Sophie asked.

“Just call me Freya,” She nodded: “I learned a little, from Captain Marden.”

[Captain Marden?! The heck, that old dude also teaches first aid here!?] Sophie nearly choked.

In the game, the first NPC that taught emergency first aid in the Grinoires region was a Doctor Borg from Fortress Riedon. That NPC would give a mission to collect fifty bundles of flaxseed before teaching the skill, and the majority of the gamers considered it to be a major pain in the neck; to the point where they immediately skipped the quest and went to Bruglas to learn it instead, where they simply needed to pay ten silver coins to the Holy Cathedral of Fire there.

Even though the market price of 50 bundles of Flaxseed was a small difference compared to the ten silver coins, it was much more troublesome to acquire them.

[This is an undiscovered secret!]

Sophie got all excited at learning something new, but suddenly realized he could not go back to his old world.

His excitement quickly died down but still asked her with enthusiasm: “Can you teach me a little?”

Freya took a deep breath, gritted her teeth and glared angrily at him. The bastard had just told her she was unskilled at bandaging earlier.

But she was not a petty person to get her revenge back, so she thought for a while before asking: “What do you want to know...”

“The important things to take note of and the way how to wrap them.”

Freya did not reply immediately and went over to his side to check on the girl who fainted near Romaine. The latter had abandoned her with a face of excitement when she went to gather the loot.

The girl did not seem to have sustained any other injuries and only fainted.

Freya turned back to look at the pale youth and hesitated for a while.

“Let me take a look at your injury.”

“That’s fine, I know my injury well enough.”

“You—”

“Enough, what exactly did you learn from Marden?” Sophie changed the topic.

“...Mainly on how to wash the wound, to stop the bleeding and bandage it.”

Sophie’s heart suddenly skipped a beat. It was something from within his soul, not a voice or words, but he clearly received a message:

‘Freya is teaching you the skill ‘Emergency first aid’ and requires 8 AP to learn it. Do you wish to learn the skill?’

He exhaled slowly.

[Holy s— I want this! And it even appears just like the same format as the game, of course I want to learn this!]

The Emergency First-Aid skill had the ability to stop bleeding and prevent the infection of wounds. It was a skill that ignored the surroundings and raised the chances to succeed compared to a random bandaging and was something that he urgently needed. Only the army priests from the Holy Cathedral of Fire were able to perform this skill and it was virtually unheard of for a militia to know about it.

He accepted to learn it and a message immediately came back:

“There is no suitable profession found for learning emergency first aid, which profession do you wish to assign the skill to?”

Sophie placed the skill under the Civilian Soldier profession. Unsuitable professions would take twice as much AP to raise a level. However, the Commoner’s profession was stuck at level 1 and skills cannot be leveled higher than a profession’s level.

Freya taught the skill in detail to him, but she quickly realized he was staring at her blankly without any reaction.

She blinked once before fury burst up from her heart.

[You're trying to find an excuse to take advantage of me you bastard!]

The young girl's hands curled into fists and she became so angry that even her ponytail trembled.

[How could you do something like this to Romaine, she had her heart practically given to you!]

She tried her best to curb her anger and waved her hands in front of Sophie but there was no reaction. If she did not consider him to be an injured person she would have sent a flying kick over. But right at this moment, Sophie's eyes blinked as he regained his senses.

He checked his skill set again and was satisfied from learning the skill. At least he would have the confidence to navigate through the future battles.

It was an important requirement to have the ability to heal the team members. He was one who planned ahead and thus abandoned the idea of learning sword skills or combat abilities. But when he came back to his senses he saw Freya's displeased expression.

"What's wrong?" He looked puzzledly at her.

"Were you listening?" The girl asked through her gritted teeth.

"Of course, and I already learned it already." Sophie answered naturally.

"You-" Freya nearly fainted from the lack of breath. "I have not even finished teaching, and you already learned it?" She glared at him with a severe lack of trust.

"Of course."

Freya wanted to punch him in the eye. When she wanted to argue back at him, someone shouted from the sides.

“Captain Freya. We can’t stop Jonathon’s bleeding, could you come over quickly and take a look?”

Freya was about to set off but Sophie said: “This is a good time, how about letting me do it?”

“You?”

Freya’s face was of great distrust.

“Help me over.”

“D, don’t overdo things.”

“Then I’ll ask Miss Romaine to help me over?”

“In your dreams, I’ll never let her near you ever again, you shameless lout!” Freya snapped in refusal but still helped him up.

“Shameless lout?” Sophie paused blankly, not understanding why he got yelled at.

“You know what you did.”

“Huh?”

Chapter 11

The two factions' resolve

===== Tarkus's POV =====

The light within the living hall which was occupied at the last minute brightened and then dimmed. Part of the candles' flames was intentionally extinguished. The dim light illuminated the deep gashes on the wooden floor.

In the remote corner, a silent and chilly atmosphere seemed to fill the air.

The figures that were sitting down could not get used to the light from the remaining candles, but as long as the middle-aged male leader who had a pale face and wore an eye patch did not speak, none of them dared to utter even one sound.

If Sophie were here, he would have recognized this man, simply because the latter's appearance did not change much even after a decade.

That pale man was the right hand of 'Black Lord Incirsta'; the Vampire Lord, One-eyed Tarkus. He was a member of the Rhein family, and belonged to the Vampires' fourteen generation. He was considered to be young amongst them, but he was a true veteran in Madara's army.

In comparison, Incirsta, was still like a greenhorn, but that sentiment did not matter to Tarkus, as it merely marked the beginning of their cooperation with him.

Tarkus looked at the skeleton soldiers bringing out the stacks of papers and books from the study. He took a moment to watch them before turning back and spoke to the necromancer: "Speak. What report did Rothko want to inform me when he left you behind?"

"Esteemed General Tarkus, my master found a human scout in the village's manor." The necromancer bowed his head and answered in a raspy voice.

"And?" He glanced at the necromancer once, and his gaze went back to the Strategic Map that laid open on the table.

“He escaped.”

Several disdainful laughs rose from the surroundings.

The vampire general lifted his head, and the faint laughter was immediately silenced. He paused for a while, before saying: “I understand; Rothko did very well. But I want him to do better the next time and not waste time on these types of needless distractions. I want him to advance to the Beldor Forest before noon.”

The necromancer nodded respectfully and left.

But once it left, there were voices of dissent in the room. This time it was a giant skeleton covered in an old brass armor, the dark yellow flames flitting in its eye sockets with fury:

“Lord Tarkus, it is possible that this scout has discovered our plans—”

It opened and closed its mouth, but the air that escaped from its hyoid bone suddenly ceased. That was because Tarkus was staring at it with his remaining left eye, and made it stop subconsciously.

A burst of quiet laughter erupted around him, and the mockery contained within the laughs made the flames in his eyes dance with regret.

“Kabias.”

“Yes!” The giant skeleton immediately held his chest high to show he was alert and answered.

“Take this location down.” Tarkus’s fingers pointed to a village on the map.

“Before sunrise,” he pointed to the roof: “I want to see results.”

“Yes, Lord Tarkus.”

“Wesker, Ebdon.”

“Yes!” The two voices replied at the same time.

“I want you both to attack Verbin and seal off the Dagger River.”

“Yes, Lord Tarkus.”

“Raven’s Beak.”

“Yes!”

“I’ll give you two small squadrons, search and clear this area.”

“Yes!”

Tarkus raised his head from the map and looked coldly at every one of them: “All of you are nobles from Madara. I want everyone to swiftly and elegantly accomplish my every order, precisely as I tell you to. Fortress Riedon, this is our next target.”

He stood up and placed his pallid right hand over his left shoulder: “Madara will be victorious.”

The undead all stood up as well and said gravely: “Madara will be victorious!”

Tarkus lowered his head, and his gaze fell upon the map once more. He looked at Bucces’s southern red pine forest, then to the Green village and Beldor forest, to Fortress Riedon and upwards, finally to the River of Jagged Rocks.

[A human scout?]

He gave a scornful laugh.

===== Brendel’s POV =====

Right at the same time, with the full moon at its peak in the pine forest.

There were no wolves howling in the mountainous region. A chilly wind started blowing in the forest, which seemed to pierce through the branches as if they were made out of smoke, and everyone shivered from the creeping cold behind their backs. The youths of Bucces had never spent the night in the wilds, and the darting shadows in this foggy forest made them jumpy. Each shadow that moved was like a frightening monster in their eyes.

But a single voice calmed them.

“Hold this part down.”

“Yes, continue doing this.”

“Water.”

“Pass me the bandage.”

“Hold it down firmly.”

Sophie gave a long sigh of relief and wiped off the perspiration of his brows when it was finally done.

He was relieved to see a faint green color of [+2] floating from Jonathon’s body.

With his emergency first aid skill reaching ‘Level 0’, the recovery effect from bandaging naturally improved as well. There was practically no difference compared to the game, but every indication that popped up made him feel at ease.

The instruction that he meted out, cleaning the wounds, preventing infection, stopping the bleeding, bandaging and the finer details and techniques, he taught Mackie and Neberto thoroughly. He was in no condition to do it himself, and his own body was just slightly better than Jonathon.

As Neberto finished the last step, Sophie lifted his head up to find everyone staring at him in astonishment.

A professional.

They only had this conclusion.

Even little Fenris looked back at Freya earnestly and said: “Captain Freya, it seems that compared to your skills, you are quite the amateur.”

Freya looked on with an ashen face.

[Indeed, indeed, this shameless cad found excuses to approach near me! Hehehe, hahahaha!]

Her heart ended up concluding this outcome in a fury and looked worriedly at

Romaine, but she only saw her smug face counting the victory loot on the ground that was taken.

[This damn lass...!]

...

Only Sophie himself knew that his knowledge came from the skill 'Emergency First Aid'. Whenever he looked at this skill, the knowledge to perform each step appeared in his mind. And in his memories, the emergency first aid skill came from the first three chapters of [Grierson's holy bible]. The contents of the three chapters discussed the techniques to bandage. And it so happened that Sophie knew Grierson from within the game, who was Bruglas's current Grand Priest.

Since he had already read the contents of the book at least a hundred times, his familiarity with it was like a pro-gamer priest opening a smurf account performing bandaging.

Sadly, he had to pay the price when he became a smurf. *(TL: The price is Freya's ire. Also, smurf means an experienced player creating a new account to trick people that he's a newbie.)*

On the other hand, Sophie quickly realized that Bucce's third squadron consisted of ten members, including Freya. He knew Mackie, Irene, Erik and little Fenris.

Then there was Neberto and Vlad. These two brothers were citizens from the mountainous forced to move from the Bora region. They inherited the native feature of a taciturn behavior and did more work than they talked.

There was Jonathon who was in a coma and unlikely to wake up.

Finally, there was daydreaming merchant Romaine and the girl that was with her that time. Sophie later knew that she was the daughter of a baker in the town. Her name was Bella, with a gentle, shy deposition, but at the very least she was a good girl who was kind from the bottom of her heart.

This was the crew that Sophie had to lead.

[They seem like outstanding youths, but they are really newbies amongst newbies. They don't know what to do next.]

So he considered for a moment before he spoke: "What plans do you have?"

All the smiles vanished, and there was stillness in the air.

"Let's go to Fortress Riedon," Irene suggested after a while.

"That's right; Captain Marden will definitely go there." Erik followed up next.

He had expected they would say that. And he shook his head.

He looked at them and saw the uncertain expressions on their faces as if they were helpless to what might happen tomorrow. Freya appeared to fare slightly better, but her white knuckles that gripped her sword tightly betrayed her true feelings.

Only Romaine said as if it was the most obvious thing: "I'm with Brendel."

This reply made Sophie feel like laughing in frustration, but her straightforward reply garnered his goodwill. The youth paused for a while before saying: "Very well, I do agree that the most important thing to do now is to leave this area."

"And that means you have something that you disagree right?" Freya asked.

Sophie nodded: "Does anyone has a map?"

Everyone looked at each other. Who would have this? Even though they were called militia, they listened to the leader of the guards most of the time. If one cut through the sophism, they were just a backup squadron.

Sophie also realized his mistake. Without the permission from the Holy Cathedral in Aouine, someone possessing a map would be treated as a spy and 'handled appropriately'. He kept treating himself as a parallel world traveler and forgot that he was already a member in this world.

And there would never be another so-called 'player' here.

"The guards... should have that..." Mackie stuttered behind the crowd.

[Duh. Isn't that obvious.]

Sophie shook his head and sighed. He looked back at the merchant girl: "Romaine, give

me a sword.”

“Here, Brendel.”

Sophie took the sword and drew two lines on the ground.

“This is Webster River. This is the Pine River.”

He poked between the lines a few times: “This is Bucce, the Green village, and Verbin.”

He drew up a summary with a few simple strokes, but the youths once again felt their horizons were broadened. It seemed that no one could compare with Brendon’s grasp of the world.

“Aren’t these the three towns?” Bella covered her mouth in surprise.

“This is amazing, so our surroundings are like this.” Erik’s looks to Sophie were nearly of worship.

“So Bucce is here right?”

“Brendel, how do you know so much?” Everyone started talking excitedly. They could not suppress their curiosity.

[Of course I know. If I don’t, I might as well find a tofu and knock myself to death with it.]

But he could not respond with sarcasm here, so he deliberately said: “Did you not learn how to read a Strategy Map?”

[[[Strategy Map? What was that? Mother Marsha above, even Bruglas militia had to learn this too?]]]

Everyone looked vacantly at each other.

Stars filled everyone’s eyes as they looked at Sophie with deep respect.

But his heart was drowning in mirth. This was something that not even the officers in the regular army forces might know, and it was pretty much impossible for a militia to learn this. He continued his lie and just pointed at the intersection of the two rivers:

“This is Fortress Riedon.”

“Oh, this is Fortress Riedon?” Romaine asked curiously.

“What’s wrong?” Sophie clearly heard giggles from his surroundings, and he asked them.

“It’s like this, Brendel. Romaine envied the merchants who went to Fortress Riedon when she was young. She complained every day and said she wanted to become a merchant. One day she ran off saying that she’s going to accomplish a grand business in Fortress Riedon, and you know what-” Little Fenris immediately betrayed her and stopped at the cliffhanger.

Low murmuring laughs sprang up.

“And?” Sophie asked.

“Haha, she lost her way in the forest, and it was Uncle Cecil who went looking for her—” Little Fenris snorted loudly with a laugh.

“N-nothing of that sort happened.” Romaine’s eyebrows were way up in her forehead.

Sophie looked at the merchant girl and thought she had not learned this lesson well enough.

“Alright, let’s get back to the serious topic. Why do you want to go to Fortress Riedon?” He arranged his emotions and continued asking.

“There are troops there.”

“Captain Marden will be there.”

“My uncle will also be there.” Everyone’s tongue started wagging again, but basically what they meant to say was this: Their relatives were separated temporarily and might have gone to Fortress Riedon, so why would they not go there?

Sophie had trouble refuting their reply. It was normal for them to believe it was so, and who would abandon their own relatives? But he also knew that the people who fled from Buccie were very likely to be caught by Madara’s army. Going to Fortress Riedon now was most certainly heading into a trap.

He knew that they had to reach the Beldor Forest before the 'Death God' Kabias did, then proceed to the Dagger River before Vlad and Ebdon. From there, they had to enter the Forest of Hunted Deer, brushing by the Incirsta's main army, reaching Ankries and inform the guards of Incirsta's troops that were advancing.

This was the only way to keep this militia alive and prevent Aouine from being defeated as badly as the original history.

But how was he supposed to tell them?

[Forget it. I'll just do the same thing as before. I'll take one step at a time.]

He rubbed his throbbing temples, and changed his mind: "Very well, we can head towards Fortress Riedon and consider our next move."

He looked up and met Freya's worried eyes. She apparently did not believe too much of what he said.

"Ser Brendel?"

"Nothing, it's just a prediction. Perhaps there might be some changes to the situation." He smiled at her, but inwardly sighed with great reluctance.

Reality was cruel. It was not up to him to choose when he was so weak. He would have certainly tried his best to think of something, if there was another chance.

[You, why are you always so naive?]

He derided himself.

Chapter 12

The lake's reflection

Both factions spent the night in high tension.

Tarkus waited for his plans to attacks to unfold, while Brendel was worried that he was unable to gauge how much time was left. Madara's army and the eleven youths from Buccie moved through the silent darkness, their destinies closely intertwining while they moved away from each other.

Eventually, the sun rose. The first ray of light hit the ground to indicate it was morning, and time seemed to pass by in a flash before they realized it.

The militia did not encounter even the most common brown bears in this region as they traveled for hours, and they appeared to be safe from enemies.

Afternoon came.

The militia in front of Brendel parted the obstacles in front of them with the blades whistling through the air, as he squinted his eyes. The golden sunlight seemed to pierce through the dense vegetation. He followed the voice and looked up from the stretcher he was in, and the surface of the scenery in front of him looked like a mirror, with the reflection of light entering into his eyes.

A lake.

It was like a dazzling emerald that was placed here with the surface shimmering in the midst of trees and mountains.

"Look, it's a lake!" Little Fenix shouted in surprise.

Freya rewarded him with a smack to his head, making him cry out in pain.

They were not traveling to relax, and everyone had to be more cautious as they might meet Madara's army anytime. Brendel explained they were safe the entire night because there was no Strategic Value in this vicinity.

As to what Strategic Value meant, the young girl did not know.

The youth that came from Bruglas always seemed to know more things than everyone else. Even though she was not content with that fact, she grudgingly came to accept it.

She wondered if every other youth in the city was as brilliant as he was.

[This world is so unfair—]

Under their silent movements, Freya had transited from one extreme end to another. She could not help but feel a little jealous. If she had trained in Bruglas along with the other militia, she might be able to do better than this shameless cad.

Except that the truth was there was no Bruglas's militia training camp. Brendel trained in Dragaz. Sophie did not mention about where Brendel originally trained, as he needed to maintain a facade to gain the youths' confidence to lead them out of this impossible situation.

He decided that he had to call himself as Brendel from now forth.

[This girl might be able to do it in the future, but she isn't capable of leading the militia out from this situation right now.]

Brendel looked at Freya as he contemplated things. The girl with the ponytail was observing the surroundings, and she hesitated for a while, before finally relaxing the grip on her sword and exhaled.

"We'll take a break here." Freya gave the order after confirming there was no danger.

Everyone relaxed at the same time.

"I almost died!"

"I'm going to bet I won't do anything but sleep at Fortress Riedon."

"We can discuss all we want to do when we actually reach there."

"Shut up Irene!" Their voices could be heard in the forest. Even though they tried to keep their voices low, every sentence was uttered with a rush of delight.

They were just too tired.

A single night was not a long time, but their high tension was something akin to torture. They traveled through the forest under the dim starlight with immense pressure from the life-and-death situations that might occur anytime.

It was so dark that they could not see their fingers properly, and the only thing that accompanied them was the sounds from flying insects and the occasional owl hoots in the forest.

They moved across endless trees in the darkness with a somber mood on them, and it was as if silent spirits hovered over everyone. The chilly atmosphere made them even tenser.

It was always an unknown mystery what was behind the dense vegetation, and the bedtime stories that depicted the monsters in the mountain did not help at all.

When dawn finally broke and the cold atmosphere finally disappearing, everyone appeared as if they had been hoisted out of the water. Their faces were pale with clammy perspiration on their forehead. Even Brendel was not an exception. In the past, he had obviously slept on a comfortable bed, away from wars and lived in a peaceful land, but he was now on a stretcher listening to all sorts of strange and scary noises from his surroundings.

Especially in this darkness where the leaves frequently brushed past his face, and unknown insects crawling on his neck.

Once he thought about doing this for the next whole week, he nearly flipped out. He wanted desperately to go back to his former life, even if he did appear cowardly, he wanted to go back to his former peace.

He swore to an enthusiastic oath to save the kingdom, but his passion came and died quickly. However, when he saw Freya's exhaustion and worried demeanor, he stopped his chaotic thoughts and calmed down.

Because he was being relied on.

He realized he needed to throw away the identity of Sophie and accept his new life. He touched his own chest and realized the one who died was not Brendel, but Sophie.

It was not him that accepted this world, but this world that accommodated him.

Brendel's stretcher was placed beside the lake, and he could see colored pebbles not far from him. He checked Jonathon's status. He miraculously lived through the ordeal, but his condition was not optimistic.

"How is he?" Mackie asked.

"Uncertain." Brendel shook his head.

Mackie became quiet and stared at the lake and threw pebbles into it.

This river was called the Crystal Lake, and by reaching this place, it meant that they were very close to the Green village. However, the only one that knew where they were going was Brendel. The youth stared in another direction and saw a few faint signs of grey smoke.

It looked like Kebias had already attacked the village. Its fate was no different from Bucces. The speed at which Madara attacked was incredibly quick, and it was no different from his memories within the game.

Brendel still remembered about this lake, and he took a look at the other end. The trees were dense and dark under the high mountains, but he saw familiar shadows lurking nearby.

He remembered that he spent a considerable time in this area hunting brown bears and foxes, and subconsciously smiled while recalling the days where he sold the hides in-game to earn money.

He took back his hand that was on Jonathon's head and spoke to Mackie: "Help me out with something."

"To do what?" Mackie said.

"Help me take out my bandages, I want to change it," Brendel said.

He had earlier asked Romaine to distribute the sausages that he took from his home, and everyone had the chance to taste the well-known sausage from the Grinoires region.

He was exasperated to find that none of this militia actually thought about taking some rations with them when they escaped from Bucce. Even the reliable Freya did not think this point through as well.

The remaining food they had was just a long roll of sausage.

“Let’s talk about what you saw when you left Bucce, so that we can understand more about the enemy to– Shit, Mackie, not so forcefully.” He hurt so much that his eyebrows trembled.

Freya sighed when she saw this scene: “I’ll do it, move away, Mackie.”

Brendel looked on in surprise as the girl with the long ponytail walked right to him. She lowered her and carefully removed the bandages.

“Is there a problem to distribute all the food like this?” She hesitated for a while before asking quietly.

“What problem?”

[This bastard obviously know what I’m talking about!]

Freya gritted her teeth in annoyance, but Brendel found it funny when this kind hearted girl did not dare to make any sudden movements with her hands.

“You know what I’m talking about right? We’re not going to Fortress Riedon?” Freya lowered her voice to a whisper that almost could not well-known.

Brendel studied Freya carefully, and he thought that long ponytail with its light brown color suited her very well. He thought for a moment and asked: “Your aunt and uncle should be in another party right?”

Freya hands stopped as she buried her head downwards.

“Sorry,” Brendel sighed: “If there’s a chance, I’ll do something about it. But I can’t guarantee anything and shoulder this responsibility. It’s too big.”

“Thank you.”

It was a hushed reply.

“Captain Freya, Brother Brendel, what are you guys muttering to each other?” Little Fenix’s voice rang out with awful timing. He was sitting under a tree and looking curiously at the two. Freya was someone he had always admired, and Brendel was his new idol.

His words successfully attracted everyone’s attention and turned over at the same time to look at them.

Freya’s face turned crimson, as she realized he was too close to the cad, and stepped backward to explain: “N-nothing, j-just discussing...” Unfortunately, this innocent girl did not understand that it was better not to explain herself, but with her retreating step and explanation, everyone had their own foregone conclusion.

Especially that blushing face, when did the captain ever become shy?

Romaine rubbed her sleepy eyes and sat up. She seemed to have just noticed what happened. Even though Freya was afraid she might misunderstand something, she tried to signal her for help, but the merchant girl had her head in the clouds and smiled freely: “It’s fine Freya.”

“You, too, Romaine—” The girl with the pony tail could not finish her sentence, and her words seemed to choke.

She glared at Romaine, and wanted to march up to her and strangle this damn girl.

But Brendel noticed a worried gaze over to him from the youth Neberto. He was slightly taken back. Could Neberto be interested in Freya?

[If you lack bravery that would not cut it.] He shook his head.

“Alright that’s enough,” He interrupted everyone: “I’m discussing the question of food distribution with your captain.”

Brendel’s words were like the natural authority from a lord, and everyone stopped and focused their attention on him.

[So Miss Romaine, can you explain why are you looking at me with shining eyes? Are you looking for loot?] He shook his head for the umpteenth time.

He continued: “This amount of food, it’s not enough to feed everyone even if we ration

it. Besides, we need to keep our strength up to handle any enemies we encounter.”

“But-” Freya only said one word and saw Brendel shaking his head at her.

“The Green village is not far ahead, and we can travel there to find something to eat. The undead doesn’t require food, and it originally belonged to us humans. We have the right to take it back.” He said.

“The green village? Isn’t it overrun with Madara’s troops?” Erik was sitting on the ground when he asked. His injuries on his legs were bandaged with the help of Brendel, and he had nearly recovered.

The bandaging effect was a hidden recovery value. It would slow down after a period of time to indicate that the bandages needed changing. The time to recover HP was nearly a day in this world, so a change of bandages was only necessary until then.

“Of course there are enemies. But we are moving in a small group, and we might not encounter them directly.” Brendel answered. He had established an escape route and was prepared.

“A small group, you mean we’re sneaking in?” Little Fenix became interested.

“Yes, I’m going to pick a few to go along with me.” Brendel nodded, and he looked at everyone: “Erik and Vlad are injured, Mackie and Neberto are to stay behind to take care of them. Romaine, you stay behind and take care of Bella. As for the others... Irene and Freya, the two of you go along with me.”

“NO!” Little Fenix and Freya objected at the same time.

“Irene and I can go, but Brendel, you need to stay behind.” She inhaled deeply.

[Does this guy even know how bad his injuries are]

“I’m going to go too.” The brat was the first to jump up.

Brendel looked at Freya and sighed: “Very well, I’ll answer your objections.” He bit the bandage in his mouth as he wrapped the other end around his body tightly.

A faint green [+2] floated from his body.

He breathed in deeply and felt his strength gradually returning to his body. Even though he was still weak, especially feeling the debilitating poison in his body that was consuming his strength, he managed to move by himself.

He lifted his head up and asked: "So, Miss Freya, what reason do you have for keeping me here? Injuries?"

"It's good that you know that." She turned her head away with a scoff.

Brendel smiled faintly, with his teeth barely showing.

Chapter 13

Brendel's starting point

[Should I consider skipping the Green village? No, That isn't possible.]

Brendel knew something inside there that had a great impact on his future plans. Regardless of stockpiling for food or proving he was fit to go, he had to go into the village that might be overrun with Madara's troops.

So he first tried to parley with words: "If I don't go, how would you know where to start? Sneaking in and searching are not things that you could do on the first try, and you need a detailed plan and investigation before entering."

The abilities 'Sneak' and 'Search' are the special skills of people who had put in a lot of training in the shadows, for example like the professions 'Nightingale' and 'Hunter'. As a warrior, Brendel did not understand their capabilities too well, but he had partied with these players before and finished missions together. His experience alone would have triumphed over the entire militia's experience here.

Freya still disagreed. She understood his words, but Brendel's injuries were too grave in her eyes.

"Tell us what we should do and please leave it to us."

Brendel was not surprised at Freya's refusal. He broke into a wide grin with his canines showing when he knew he had to rely on his usual method of persuasion. Something that could only belong to a warrior's wisdom.

"Romaine."

"Yes!"

"Lend me your sword." He held his palm open.

"Here, Brendel." Romaine took her sword with both hands and passed it confidently to him.

“My thanks.”

Brendel took the sword and breathed in deeply to adjust his mindset to his peak condition.

He had a feeble status because his HP was below 40%, and the poison in his body took away another 20% of his strength. He could only use 0.6 OZ worth of strength now.

The rough equivalent of a fourteen-year-old youth.

“There isn’t much time left, so to prove that I have the ability to take part in this expedition, let us use an ancient method to decide matters.” He pulled the sword from its sheath. “A conversation between fighters.”

He surveyed his surroundings. Everyone seemed to take on an expression that they had somehow misheard Brendel. Mother Marsha, Freya was the undisputed number one swords-fighter in this squadron, even Irene was defeated by her.

‘This bro over here, do you really know how badly injured you are right now?’ This question sprung up from their minds at the same time.

“Brendel, stop fooling around.” Freya was starting to get angry. She had quite the confidence in her skill in using the sword, did Brendel really think himself akin to a veteran who had survived the November war, to able to defeat her under his current condition?

Brendel did not say anything else, but took on a posture that said ‘En garde!’.

The ponytail girl nearly blew her fuse. She had thought that he should have known his limits by now, but things were not going the way how she expected them to. She clenched her fists and decided to teach Brendel a lesson.

Freya lifted her sword upwards and swung a vertical cut towards Brendel. Her basic foundations were formidable, her sword arm steady, and there was a singing sound from her blade as it slashed through the air.

Brendel reversed his blade and parried it in response. The immense feedback from his sword nearly dislocated his hand, but he immediately laid his blade vertically and slashed above Freya’s sword. The youth’s strength was certainly low, but it startled Freya as his sword had already reached for her armguard when she had not even

entered regain her stance to attack again.

She could only pull back even though she was unwilling to retreat.

It was a given that she suffered a disadvantage. Brendel's technique was very famous in the warrior's profession, and it came from Kirrlutz's swordplay. In the game, it was called [Kador's counter]. It was a high skill technique, and even though Brendel could only display part of its prowess, it was more than enough to stop Freya who was currently nothing more than a fledgling in his eyes.

The price was to learn this technique was two barrels of Madara's black wine. He had learned it from a mercenary, and it looked like the wine was worth it.

Freya backpedaled quickly in order to handle Brendel's swift counter attacks that followed up. She tried to force him into engaging their swords together by striking horizontally at him. Her reaction was very quick, but her execution was full of openings. Brendel had already predicted her move and taken one step back to avoid it. When she saw how he evaded her attack, the long sword had already pointed towards her chest and was rapidly closing in.

Freya gritted her teeth in frustration and swung her sword with her body weight in order to defend herself in time. But to Brendel, her attack had already become something of a joke, and only swung her sword because she did not want to admit defeat. He lightly pranced backward in return, and she fell to the ground as she lost her balance from her hasty defense.

Dust flew everywhere.

"It seems that I have already convinced you." Brendel sheathed the sword and said simply.

Freya raised her head in disbelief.

It was not only her, the entire batch of militia except Romaine, had their eyes widened in incredulity. Was that a swords style of a militia? Perhaps he would even lost against the veterans in the guards.

"How?"

"There's nothing strange about it. I'm the best swordsman in the entire 33rd batch of

the Bruglas's militia." Brendel randomly answered: "Your turn, little Fenix. Let's 'talk' about your problems."

Little Fenix's face turned to an ashen grey and quickly shook his head: "I-I don't think I should go. The rest of you can go ahead."

[This brat.]

Brendel shook his head.

After instructing the squadron the time and place on the agreed location to meet up, Brendel, Irene, and Freya quickly moved off. Time was short, and they had to fight for every second.

The Green village was to the east of the Crystal Lake, and the distance was not very far away. When they approached further into the direction, they could see the darkening sky due to the spiraling smoke through the gaps of the thick leaves. It looked like it was a bad omen.

According to Brendel's input, they were at the northern side of the village where Madara had recently occupied it. The state of how the village appeared to them proved that he was right. Madara's troops had indeed swept past here, leaving charred remains everywhere.

When Freya looked at the billowing smoke from the burning remains, her final hope was dashed. Madara's troops had advanced before them, and it seemed like it was a distant dream to even reach Fortress Riedon. She stole a glance at Brendel and wondered what this youth was currently thinking.

Brendel hid in a tree and observed the skeleton soldiers. Then he started counting the trees that were shorter than the average ones. When he counted to the twelve tree, he took a mental note of how it looked like.

In this Green village, there was a key buried under the twelfth tree in a specific location. It was a solo mission within the game which would allow him to enter a tomb.

He started to remember about some details on who dug the tomb; it seemed to be someone who was a priest? But this memory did not matter too much. What was important was this tomb belonged to a knight from the Holy Cathedral, and if reality coincided with the fantasy game, there would be great loot within it.

However, what he was really after was the sword 'Thorn of Light' within the tomb.

It was a rare artifact that had been infused with the 'Holy' attribute.

[If I get the sword, I'll be an unstoppable undead slayer!] Although, that was only how he imagine it would be in his mind.

After confirming the location, Brendel turned back and pointed to the area outside the forest: "See that?"

""What?"" Both of them looked puzzledly at him.

"The number of skeletons in each patrolling unit. They passed two times, and four times there. It seems that there are two squadrons from Madara in the village." Brendel said with the insight from his abundant experience: "Twenty-two to twenty-four skeletons, two necromancers."

"That many!" Irene was alarmed.

"That's still not the worst outcome. The problem is how they are controlling the graveyard and the plaza. The necromancers will use a summoning spell and gain an endless supply of soldiers. This is where we need to be careful." Brendel continued.

"They are desecrating the dead!" Freya clenched her fists in a fury.

"Indeed, but they have the power to do something like this." He sighed, and pointed to another section of the forest: "Over there, do you see that farm? You can sneak in by using the fences and the trees' shade. There should be a cellar in the farmhouse that probably has not been burned yet. It should not be too difficult to find, and you can hide there. When the sky turns a little darker, we can move."

She subconsciously nodded before realizing something was wrong: "How do you know all this?"

"I stayed here for a while," Brendel answered naturally. He did not lie. Except it was just in another world that he stayed in.

"Then what are we supposed to do after waiting?" Irene ask.

"Just wait for me there, and I'll come find you a bit later. These monsters are

concentrating their efforts to summon new skeletons, and they should not be actively seeking to find survivors. If the undead is indeed looking for survivors, you need to watch your heartbeats and breathing because they can see your life force.” Brendel instructed them in detail.

“Hold on, are you not coming with us?” Freya was keen enough not to let this fine point slip.

“I have something that I need to do on my own.”

“You-” She wanted to argue, but saw how the young man was patting his sword. It meant, ‘Do not forget you have been convinced by me.’

‘But how could that fight count for this?’ Freya wanted to argue back, but Irene pulled her arm to warn her about the incoming skeleton patrol.

“Do you trust me?” Brendel asked in a whisper.

Freya shook her head, then hesitated, and then nodded.

“Then the matter is closed. Quickly set off. Don’t worry. I’ll come back safe and sound.” He said earnestly.

Freya looked at him with her words stuck on the tip of her tongue. But she was finally led away by Irene in reluctance. Brendel watched them hide under the thick foliage and hide under the long grass, moving slowly to their destination. When they finally sneaked into the farm, he exhaled with relief.

Brendel turned back and continued to watch the patch of short trees. Tension enveloped him. This was the first time he’s taking a risk by himself in this world. It might appear to be no different back in his previous world, but there was only death waiting for him if he failed here.

He was more willing to move with Freya, but how was he going to explain he knew about the key? He could not tell them he buried it there, this terrible lie probably could not even deceive Irene, not to mention Freya who was as sharp as a needle.

After weighing all options, he decided to move alone.

“There’s nothing to this, Brendel. Just think of it as opening a new account to level up.”

He rubbed his temple and cheered himself onwards.

Chapter 14

The tomb of Gerald

Things were a little different compared to Freya's route. Sneaking into the farmhouse was aided with the cover of the trees, while Brendel had to move to the patch of short trees under the skeleton soldiers' watchful eyes.

He had to take a risk here, but there was also no need have an additional risk by going in early. He decided only to act after the sky turned darker. Even though the undead was able to perceive the life force, their range was limited during the night time.

Meanwhile, Brendel studied the patterns of the skeletons patrolling the area. He quickly found there was a gap between the two squadrons. When the two intersected with each other, he was able to move forward safely for approximately ten seconds.

He looked at the area in front of him and estimated he was about twenty meters away from his destination. Even though he had 2 OZ worth of agility, he was definitely unable to able to run forty meters to and fro and dig up the key that was under the tree. He also had the attribute of being weakened too, and it seemed like an impossible task.

He decided to make a new strategy instead.

The sky rapidly darkened.

It was time to act. His heart pulsed rapidly and strongly from the tension in the darkness.

He was using his life as a token to play this game, and was there anything more exciting than a game with death as punishment?

He held his breath and counted fourteen steps from the skeletons. This was the time that the two squadrons intersected, and he threw his sword to the direction of the short trees.

This was the first step.

The sword was thrown over to a patch of piled leaves and caused a slight rustle when it hit the leaves. Brendel waited anxiously for a long time, and he relaxed when the two squadrons intersected for the second time.

The next step was the most important one. Brendel counted again until the two squadrons intersected for the third time. He drew a deep breath sharply and rushed out. His mind was void of any thoughts, and he blanked his fear and tension out. The only thing that he had in his mind was speed, more speed.

Three seconds.

Brendel reached his destination and exhaled slowly. He knelt down, parted the leaves, took his sword and started digging. But his efficiency in digging up the soil was worse than what he expected. He dug as he counted in his heart.

Six seconds.

He had prepared an extra second for himself. He left his sword and started running back, the surroundings around him passing by him in a frantic blur. He dove in the bushes and stopped there, feeling like his heart was going to stop any time.

The skeleton soldiers intersected for the fourth time and did not discover his presence. Brendel breathed in deeply again. He felt that this tension had started to turn his limbs into jelly, but the adrenaline rush made him incredibly excited.

He continued to wait for his second chance. Brendel had calmed down greatly when he made his move, but he still came back empty handed.

He only dug for two seconds the third time as his stamina had clearly dropped. He tried for the fourth time, and finally discovered a four sided slab from his fingertips. Brendel had never seen this in his gaming history, and his heart started to race again from the excitement of discovering something new.

This was it.

Brendel was incredibly relieved, and for a moment he almost could not stop digging, but he knew time was running out. He breathed in and out, calmed himself down, left the sword and ran back.

The fifth attempt, Brendel's mind had calmed down, and he was more than ready. He

ran towards the tree to try and pry the foreign slab out. It had begun to loosen, but Brendel's ears caught a sudden sound that did not feel right. The skeleton soldiers' route had changed.

[Impossible!]

Our protagonist felt the blood in his veins turning into ice. He did not know if it was a cruel joke played on him by the heavens. The Madara's skeleton soldiers lack the basic intelligence to think, so they would not change their patrolling route by themselves. The only ones who could order them to do would be the necromancers, but they had no reason to do so.

Unless they discovered foreign invaders.

He cast a glance to the farmhouse. Did Freya and Irene get exposed? But there was only silence from the direction to the farmhouse, and he overturned this idea.

The clacking steps were getting closer and closer behind him. These monsters were probably able to spot him already. Brendel felt the world was crashing down on him. What should he do? He faced six skeleton soldiers, and they were easily able to cut him to pieces.

Use the Ring of the Wind Empress? No. Putting aside the noise caused when casting the spell, destroying even three skeletons was considered to be the best outcome possible. How about the remaining three skeletons?

Brendel kept on reminding to calm himself down even though every hair on him seemed to be standing. He questioned himself what he would have done in the game. Indeed, he would go through every skill and stat points to try and survive from certain death.

He only needed to use his imagination to do so.

He instantly thought of an idea but the madness of it frightened even him.

[This is not a game, Brendel, can you afford to do this?!] He could not help but ask himself.

But the skeleton soldiers were getting closer and closer, and he had to make a choice.

He took a deep breath.

And plunged his long sword into his stomach.

Agonizing pain spread throughout his body from his stomach. The feedback from it was ten thousand more intense than it was in the game. Brendel cried out once and nearly fell over. He felt he was just too crazy; the perspiration had started to gather and rain down from his forehead.

Right at the same time, the skeleton soldiers' clacking footsteps also stopped.

He succeeded.

The 'Unyielding' skill had activated and deceived the skeletons that were void of intelligence.

Brendel did not dare to waste any more time. He endured the waves of dizziness as he pulled out the sword. Even though he intentionally avoided the fatal areas, his blood still sprayed out and pooled onto the ground. The youth was not brave enough to look at it, and continued to pry the slab of stone out of the ground with his sword. He finally tore it out and started towards the slope and slid downwards.

He only had five minutes to save himself, a gambit between the fine line of life and death.

The 'Soul Fire' that was activated by the 'Unyielding' skill supported him the entire way towards the village. He was momentarily startled when he saw countless skeletons everywhere from the ruined buildings. They were the work of the necromancers. They crawled out of the graves or even tore themselves out from the bloody corpses when their souls were summoned.

The night that had fallen seemed to give the skeletons a frightening aura. It was fortunate that Brendel had seen enough of them in the game, or he would have been frightened to the point of collapsing.

He quickly soothed his feelings and did a rough count. He saw there was over fifty of them. It was certainly not a small number and would mean that Madara's invading forces were increasing with every step they take. The only thing that made him feel a little easier was how these makeshift skeleton soldiers' combat prowess was much lesser compared to the other undead skeletons.

They were even weaker than an average adult male.

Brendel advanced while he looked at them. His destination was a small shrine within the village and recalled that it was somewhere in the north. These undead soldiers saw him as an undead, and even if Brendel knocked into them, they merely adjusted their postures and continued forward.

It was good news to Brendel.

With this advantage at hand, he merely used three minutes to find the shrine of Kaldas. The undead did not respect the God of Pottery and had already destroyed a section of the shrine's wall. He remembered that this shrine was later rebuilt.

He entered the building and felt his way into it. It was pitch black inside, but after searching inside for a while, he quickly found the way towards the 'Room of Solitude'.

What he did not expect was a wandering skeleton in it, which gave Brendel a huge jump scare. It was fortunate his nerves were tough enough to endure it, and he quickly calmed down with the thought that it was merely a puppet that had no intelligence.

He felt it was getting harder and harder to breathe, and his vision was starting to become a blur.

He had only one minute left.

After searching through his memory a little, he searched behind the podium and discovered a four-sided depression there. At this moment he thanked the gods and put the slab into it with trembling fingers. He was afraid that a cruel joke would be played on him again.

Fortunately, no such event like that happened here.

At first, it was an unlocking sound in the darkness, then a second low rumbling sound from beneath, and finally a third sound that seemed to indicate something was opening. He felt a slight breeze blowing him from his back. When Brendel turned around, he saw light coming from within the passageway of the tomb.

There were purple colored crystals that decorated the walls. These were not worth anything due to the light being too weak, and thus they were not used.

He shook his head as he nearly collapsed from the giddiness. The game's version was completely different from this world. Players did not experience what Brendel was experiencing right now, and in fact, they were completely unaffected for five minutes. However, once the time was up, no matter how fine they felt, they would immediately collapse onto the ground.

Brendel was completely relying on his own willpower and the desperate resolution to survive. He tried to keep himself awake by recalling the details about the person who was buried here. The NPC who was buried here was famous, and his name was Gerald, born in this village. He had participated in Aouine's battle for Independence, and he acted honorably for his whole life and requested to be buried in his hometown when he died.

It was said that this location used to be part of the forest which was later cleared, and a shrine was built on it. The Holy Cathedral of Fire created a pathway inside the shrine to make a tomb for this holy knight, allowing him to forever sleep in peace. Brendel wanted to get this knight's weapon that he used in the past, which was the 'Thorn of light'. He did not wish to interrupt the knight's eternal sleep, but even the knight was probably unwilling to desecrate this village.

The youth panted as he struggled forward against the wall another twenty or thirty meters. He knew that he had gradually reached the end of the passageway when it started to brighten from the effects of high-grade crystals that adorned the walls. He tried to wake himself up, but he did not have the time to relax, as a black figure suddenly dropped down on him.

Two steely claws hooked onto his shoulders and lifted him upwards into the air.

Brendel felt the immense strength penetrating his shoulders. He could not move at all from the vice-like claws, and he recognized there was an absolute difference in strength between them. In his great shock, his mind started rattling, and he realized that it was a gargoyle. It had at least the strength of 4 OZ.

[The person who completed this quest in his previous life did not say anything about a gargoyle!]

A gargoyle was the great work of an artisan wizard from Bucca. It was a level 23 monster, and a low ranking necromancer was like a gentle puppy compared to it.

Before Brendel finished thinking, he felt himself hurtling through the air and smashed against the icy wall. His bones creaked and groaned as if every single one of them shattered.

He did not have any time to worry about it, as the gargoyle started to attack him again. He got up and shook his head to clear his mind.

[Is there any chance left?!]

Chapter 15

Thorn of light

The menacing gargoyle stood tall at nearly two meters and even with its pair of wings tucked in halfway, it had a total width of over five meters. It seemed to fill the entire passageway when it charged at Brendel. The blast of air that came from the gargoyle's charge stifled Brendel's breathing, and he found there was nowhere to hide.

He immediately raised his right hand and yelled with all his might: "Oss!"

An earth-shattering roar came from the ring.

The air distorted in the narrow passageway and four consecutive bangs followed as the light crystals embedded in the wall exploded. The maelstrom of air formed into a wind bullet and struck the giant creature. The currents were like sharpened blades and stripped the metallic surface of the monster away. The gargoyle's lower half body cracked away and was hurled backward into the air like a broken kite.

It then crashed onto the ground with a thundering boom, and a dust cloud formed in the passageway.

Brendel coughed while he was in the midst of the dust cloud, and he quickly rushed forward with his sword in hand. He knew that a gargoyle had 60 HP in the game and a wind bullet did not kill it. It was more than likely that it was still functioning in this world's reality.

He indeed found the heavily damaged gargoyle moving as the dust started to clear up. Half of its wings were destroyed with a bright blue liquid oozing from it. The monster opened its mouth and screamed repeatedly at Brendel, while it clawed weakly at the ground.

[Kick the dog while it's down!]

Brendel did not hesitate and brought the sword up with both his hands and swung with everything he had. The sword struck the monster's chest and forced it to take a step back.

The second swing quickly followed, but the gargoyle brought its wings together and covered itself, and bright sparks flew up when the sword made contact with the steel wings.

Brendel had used up all his energy, but he did not manage to bring it down, and the injuries in his body seem like they were going to rupture. However, he did not lose heart as this attack had brought him a chance to go around it when it went into a defensive mode.

But when he ran a few steps forward, the gargoyle suddenly screamed as it unfurled both of its wings. He quickly guarded against them with his sword, but the massive strength from it knocked his sword far away which struck against the wall.

He was also thrown back against the wall from the impact and felt the air in his lungs escaping from him. However, he realized he was only a short distance away from Gerald's tomb after the monster's sudden action.

This thought cleared his hazy mind, and he understood what he needed to do.

He yelled once more and gathered his strength, tolerating the intense pain and got up and dashed towards the tomb.

The gargoyle was a mechanical creature and was commonly used as a tomb guard. The only thing that was able to command it was the control rod which could be inside the tomb!

The light in front was becoming brighter; the warm and gentle light seemed like it could soothe the soul. But Brendel's heart still raced as there were only seconds left, and this was the final chance to succeed or die.

The youth's heart skipped a beat when he heard the lumbering footsteps of a heavy object behind him. His instinct that was developed from years of battle made him jump forward, but he was late by a second. Brendel felt the claws grabbing onto his foot while he was in the air. He crashed onto the ground, and he was forcefully dragged back.

The impact made him threw up blood. He had experienced situations like this in the game before, but he never felt tenser in his life. If he failed he would be facing death, what else could he do in this situation?

The green fonts in his retina indicated there were only ten seconds left from the 'Unyielding' skill.

A sudden thought suddenly came into his mind.

He turned his body over, raised his right hand and pointed the ring at the gargoyle. The ring seemed to glint coldly.

Eight seconds.

The gargoyle's green eyes suddenly showed fear and shrieked, released Brendel from its claws and flew backward.

Bucce's artisan wizards were incredibly impressive; the war constructs that they made were powerful and cunning, but Brendel was able to make use of this point to his advantage.

Intelligence was a dual edged sword. Once the creature was able to think for itself, it was able to feel fear and protect itself.

Brendel gasped for breath and blinked. He trembled from the succession of catastrophic events that happened one after another. But he knew that he could not afford to relax.

Six seconds.

The youth half crawled, half walked towards the tomb that was filled with a holy aura using mostly with his willpower. His first glance landed on the sword that was in the coffin: The 'Thorn of light'. But he was not concerned about this right now; he was searching for something else.

Three seconds.

His eyes swept over the left wall. There were a few compartments there. The second one. He brushed away the cobwebs and reached into it while a few insects crawled away.

He took the bottle out.

'No 7 Health potion'.

This potion was made from the holy cathedral, and there was a fire symbol on it. Brendel brought the potion to his chest and used all his senses to relish the moment.

Two seconds.

Brendel tore away the cork from the bottle with trembling hands.

One second.

He raised his head upwards and gulped down the potion's contents. The bitter taste filled his whole mouth, but it felt so pure that he praised it from the bottom of his heart.

'Number 7 (16 oz)', the most common potion in the game, was a substitute for 'Number 5'. The priests of Madara were ordered to create these potions during the 'Year of moon flowers', in order to handle the increasing troop deficits. It restored 25 HP but only healed non-lethal wounds.

The holy potion took effect immediately. It first restored the abrasions on his four limbs, and it healed at the rate where he could nearly see it with his naked eye. His wounds that were caused by the sword came next, and there was an itchy effect that persisted for several minutes before stopping.

Brendel tried breathing once and found that he had no problem with it unlike before.

He peeked at the entrance and found that the gargoyle did not chase after him. He was certain it did not fear his ring to such an extent, but more likely because it simply could not enter inside. That was probably a holy barrier in this tomb that prevented any evil creatures from desecrating the place.

He sighed with relief and sat down to inspect his wounds. The only injury left was the one Brendel received from the beginning. As it was a fatal wound, the potion had very little effect on it.

Still, it was more than enough. Brendel stood up and wanted to yell in excitement. This was his best condition ever since he came into this world. There was no pain, his weak status was gone, and he could use his strength as much as he wanted to.

The youth exhaled slowly and thanked the gods. He could not believe that he was able to survive this ridiculous ordeal and was immensely proud of his glorious

achievement.

He clenched his fist and calmed down from his feelings with much difficulty. He recalled about Freya and Irene still waiting for him, and it was time to realize his next plan.

His gaze landed on the shining sword that was in the coffin when he turned back.

‘Thorn of light’. This thin leaf-like sword was rarely seen amongst the human race because it was an Elven sword.

Brendel traced the blade with his hand and looked at it. He saw the two lines of Elven text carved onto it:

“Thy sword shall burst forth from light, and strike thy enemies with terror.”

He had never seen this sword before, but he knew of its fame. This was a Level 19 legendary sword, not only was it exceedingly sharp, it increased the user’s ‘Strength’, ‘Will’ and ‘Physique’ by 1 OZ. This meant that he was two times stronger than a normal human if he used it.

[People in the game had seen this sword in action and described it online. The most important ability is to detect the undead, and many people wanted to have that. As long as any undead comes near this sword, it will start to pulsate with light; it’s also the source of the sword’s name.]

Brendel appreciated this moment when he looked at it. There were seventeen similar swords made by the Elves in the game, but the majority of it was collected and destroyed by Madara’s shadow lords in the first era. There were only three left, and this was one of them.

He held the sword by the hilt and power immediately integrated into his body. He felt stronger and lighter, but Brendel did not have too much time to experience it in detail as a voice echoed in his mind:

“Young man, are you going to continue walking down the road that I pursued?”

[Hah?]

Brendel’s eyebrows jumped up as he realized what this meant.

[Proof of Inauguration'! This is the 'Proof of Inauguration! It's not difficult to get it in the game, but I certainly needed this urgently— A mercenary?]

He did not expect the Holy Knight Gerald's 'Proof of Inauguration' to be a mercenary. The latter was not even a knight, let alone as a Templar Knight.

[What is up with this situation? Isn't he a knight?]

"You have discovered the 'Proof of Inauguration', you need to spend 2 XP to raise to level 1, would you like to take this profession?"

This profession was certainly better than a militia, even if it was not a 'Knight'.

"Yes."

A series of words lit up in his retina.

– Mercenary [Charge (—-Level)]

– Charge: A skill which assaults the enemies. The charging speed is raised agility multiplied by ten times. The cooldown is 1 minute. This skill cannot be used when you have the 'Weakened' status.

Brendel could recite the description in his heart without even reading it. He was too familiar with it because this was the first skill for a warrior class.

[Is this fate?]

Nothing else happened after that, so Brendel started to look around the tomb. He was uninterested in the treasures in it, but he wanted to find holy water that could repel the undead. It was too good to pass up as it could save someone at the critical juncture. But he suddenly stopped on a small gargoyle statue.

A statue.

[This is it!]

Brendel received a shock. This was the gargoyle's control rod, and it was the key to command the gargoyle. He immediately took that away. It was a delightful surprise to control it. But right at this moment, the tomb suddenly shook, and the dust fell from

the ceiling. Brendel turned his head to the entrance to hear an explosion that came from the outside.

[It might have come from the farmhouse!]

Brendel felt unsettled.

Did something happen to Freya and Irene? Brendel could only think that there was only this possibility. He quickly grabbed the weaker 'Number 9' health potions and wrapped them in his bloody clothes and ran out from the tomb.

In his rush, he did not see a piece of paper underneath the health potions, and it fluttered down to the ground when he took them away.

Brendel knocked onto the gargoyle when he rushed out. But this time he had the control rod, and the monster sat in front of the tomb's entrance like an ornamental statue. Brendel felt a slight pity in his heart. To control the gargoyle he needed to have the correct commands, or he would have brought it out to kill the necromancers.

This mechanical statue was immune to their negative spells, and thus a complete counter to them.

The youth rushed out quickly, but before he was able to catch his breath, there was a sudden attack from within the darkness.

Chapter 16

Bucce's guards

TL: There are three grades of army here. The highest grade currently is the Kingdom's formal army, then the guards, then the militia. It's kind of hard to spot the differences, so there might be some mistakes here and there from me. Just know that the people Brendel is about to meet are the 'Guards', which is considered as a formal army unit compared to the militia.

Brendel dodged sideways and allowed the skeleton's attack to pass him by. He had nearly forgotten about the skeleton in the 'Room of Solitude'. But he was no longer injured like before, and his hand was already on the sword's hilt.

A flash of light streaked across the passageway as the body of the 'Thorn of Light' glimmered with white light. The skeleton's upper body flew into the air. He watched the remaining bones gradually turn into dust.

[The Thorn of Light is indeed a Holy sword as it even has a Purification effect.]

One golden light entered into his chest.

Weapons with the 'Purification' effect did double damage to undead, which was no wonder why he did not feel any resistance when he cleaved the skeleton into two. It was like a hot knife cutting through butter.

[A divine weapon.]

He immediately graded this sword. Well, although it was not really one, it was just as good under his current situation.

But he was distraught over Freya and Irene's safety, so he immediately kicked away the lower body and ran outside. His 2 OZ worth of agility could finally be used without any problems, and it showed off his true speed. His strength, agility, and physique crossed 2 OZ, and he ran like a speeding truck.

Brendel traced his original route back, and the dark passageway twists and turns did

not cause him any obstructions at all as he jumped out from the shrine's destroyed wall. His powerful Lifeforce immediately attracted the nearby wandering undead. Two skeletons walked over to him with clacking footsteps, but what awaited them were two silver flashes of light.

Two XP instantly went into Brendel's chest. He looked over to the direction of the farmhouse, his pupils dilating when he discovered that there were flames from the building igniting the night sky.

And in his line of sight, hundreds of skeletons were starting to surround the building. He knew that the undead in front of him with low intelligence would not act on their own, which meant there was a necromancer nearby who had discovered something.

"Freya, Irene!" Brendel's heart dropped like a rock. But when he was prepared to rush over there, he heard a cold and shrilling voice behind him:

"There's a human over there, kill him!"

Brendel looked back from his shoulder, and discovered a necromancer commanding six skeletons that formed into a line advancing towards him.

The necromancer raised the staff in its hand.

But Brendel reacted and moved faster than him. His 'Charge' skill instantly activated and lunged at it so swiftly that he appeared to be like a blurry shadow. "Stop him!" The necromancer was startled and shrieked loudly.

The first skeleton soldier raised its sword, but Brendel's cold eyes appeared before him. A voice yelled out in his mind clearly, and it was as if the feelings of the original owner of this body had been poured into it:

"You Madara fuckers, you're all going to burn into ashes!"

He did not even care to use any technique and simply sent his own sword hurling into the skeleton's. A deafening crash pierced through his ears as the skeleton's steel sword bent and broke off from the immense impact, and the sword continued to slice past the skeleton.

Brendel's charge did not stop at all, and the skeleton soldiers that were left behind from his speed were quartered equally before they realized it. At this moment, there

were no more obstacles between him and the necromancer.

The frightening visage of the necromancer was twisted into an expression of disbelief and its mouth was wide open.

“This sword, is for Brendel!” He roared.

His sword pierced into the necromancer’s left rib cage and through the other end of the third rib-cage bone. The ‘Thorn of Light’ flashed brightly as he glared at the necromancer’s green flames in its eye sockets. He then swung the blade free upwards.

The flames in the necromancer’s eye flickered unsteadily and immediately died down. A clanking sound could be heard as the staff from its hand dropped down. The necromancer was starting to turn into ashes from the ‘Purifying’ effect.

Three golden lights flew from the necromancer into his chest.

When he turned back, there were two more skeleton soldiers that had approached towards him. Brendel swung his sword upwards and immediately cut off the first skeleton’s arm, changed his sword’s direction and lopped off the skull. He then kicked the skeleton’s ribcage and it flew towards the other skeleton.

It immediately swung its sword to defend against the hurled skeleton by cutting it down, but before it could recover from the swing, a flash of bright light swept down across its body and sundered it into two. The chain armor’s rings seemed to rain everywhere.

Another two golden lights flew into him.

Brendel silently called out to his character stats window in his mind. The green fonts appeared across his retina. He chose one of the categories, and said in his mind: “Profession and XP.”

– XP: 11 (Commoner level 1 ———, Civilian Soldier level 2, 6/10, Mercenary level 1, 0/10)

More skeletons started to approach him, and he casually blocked one of the incoming swords, and said in his mind: “11 XP into the Mercenary profession.”

– XP: 0 (Commoner level 1 ———, Civilian Soldier level 2, 6/10, Mercenary level 2,

11/30)

Brendel pushed the skeleton back and checked his own stats. His strength and physique were raised by another 0.2 OZ, his agility and perception had increased by 0.1 OZ. But the most important thing was he had 25 AP, and this point alone made the militia profession lose its value.

[Good.]

He had 2.3 strength, 2.1 Agility, and 2.2 Physique. His overall power rating was 8.0, and completely surpassed a starting player's attributes and had begun to take his first step to a Tier 1 Power.

Brendel's mind had cooled down from the necromancer's fight. He looked at the three skeletons in front of him like they were air.

[Yes. I'm finally back.]

===== Guards' POV =====

Ten minutes was enough to let the dust settle down from the battlefield.

The sounds of hooves could be heard from afar.

Two riders.

The youths on the horses rode together on the long street. They let their horses stop as they surveyed the surroundings, and looked on in surprise as they saw the remnants of dust and bones. They did not speak for a while.

"Zeta, you're seeing this right?"

"It looks like it's only one person who did all this. Do you think it's from the Fortress Riedon's army?"

"There's a necromancer here, Mother Marsha above! Zeta, can you fight against four by yourself?"

"No, I can't. This must be the work of a veteran soldier." The lithe young man quietly looked at the surroundings, and disbelief gradually showed in his expression: "Ryan,

there are six more skeleton soldiers over there.”

A pause.

“Erm, you mean seven?”

“Seven.”

“We need to inform the vice captain of this event here. What is your guess? From the Kingdom’s army? Or a traveling knight?” Ryan immediately looked back at his friend and asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine, but I agree with your suggestions.”

===== Brendel’s Pov =====

When Brendel reached the farmhouse, it had already turned into a sea of flames. The burning structure was like a scene from the movies, and there were occasional sounds of the building collapsing from within, but he did not see the undead army chasing Freya and Irene.

Conversely, he only saw the newly raised undead running away from the flames. These fiery flames are the natural enemy of the undead, and their weak Soul Fires were trembling from the strong light. They were almost close to being purified into ashes.

The building’s flames were not blue. In the game, the Madara’s armies would only use the cold Soul Fire, and thus this was certainly not done by the undead here. Could have Freya and Irene set the fire? He shook his head as he did not think they would be so decisive.

He suddenly turned to a direction from his sharp senses, and happened to see a platoon of skeleton soldiers moving quickly to somewhere. He squinted as he saw a pulsating darkness from them. Was there a necromancer nearby?

He pulled out the sword with the ‘Thorn of Light’ shimmering lightly. He advanced into that direction, and the blundering skeletons that came into contact with him quickly turned into 7 XP.

But before the youth was able to approach, he suddenly heard a loud crash from the corner in front. Countless bone fragments and chainmail rings rained everywhere, and

two or three skeletons hurtled through the air into the nearby fire.

Brendel got startled.

That was probably a Tier 1 Power.

[Who's the person behind the sea of flames? Human? Fortress Riedon's formal army? But they did not appear here in history...]

He subconsciously took a defensive posture, and coincidentally saw a squadron of riders as they emerged from the flames. There were like an unstoppable torrent that rushed out, and the leader of the riders rode towards him. He raised his long sword and the riders reined their horses and neatly formed together.

"Who are you?" A rider asked coldly. His voice appeared to be a young man. But there was a momentary pause from him. Brendel could not see his expression, but he felt as if the young man knew him.

[No, to be more precise he knows the former Brendel.]

There were whispers amongst the riders from behind him:

"I'm betting that's a militia."

"I know him."

"But you are not wrong, he's merely a militia."

Brendel frowned. When he gradually adjusted to the bright light, he finally saw the attire of these men clearly. Blue woolen coat over an armor fashioned like Dragonscale, shining white steel helmet, and a knight's sword. There was the silver white background with black pine leaves symbol on the shoulder as well.

Bucce's regular army.

"Brendel, why are you here?" The leader of the riders changed into a tone of superiority.

"I have the same question." Brendel searched through his memories and found this person's name: Bannett. He was also a Bruglas citizen, and he had shown excellent

promise in the militia training and recruited into the regular army. He was later sent to Bucces' border to be trained.....

However, this was just how it looked on paper. No matter how good Bannett was, he could not have been better than the former Brendel who was the best swordsman in their batch. However, Bennett's father was a local official who spoke up for him, and he naturally had a smooth transition.

The current Brendel knew the enmity between them, no, it could not really be described as enmity. At most, they just looked down at each other.

And as expected, Bannett followed up with: "This shabby looking militia over here, I'm ordering you as the vice captain of the Bucces' regular army to immediately report to me: why you have appeared in this area?"

The riders immediately snickered, as they knew Bannett just wanted to find a bit of trouble with this fellow from his hometown. Report or whatever, that was just an excuse.

Brendel raised his head, with the flames from the burning wreckage reflected in his eyes.

Chapter 17

The Goddess of War

The flames continued to rage around them, the golden-red light illuminating every one of their faces till their edges of their faces were contrasted darkly.

Brendel raised his head and carefully regarded the young vice-captain riding on the horse. Brendel saw that he was equally serious: He pursed his lips and glared silently at him as if to make him submit.

But regardless of who had control of this body, Brendel or Sophie, they would not be affected by him.

“I’m a militia from Anchorite, may I ask Ser vice-captain from Bucces this: when did the guards from Bucces able to command the allied troops from another region? May I ask Ser vice-captain where your appointment order is?”

The riders behind Bannett immediately stopped whispering when they heard Brendel speak. Brendel fought for Aouine in the game for years. His grasp of the kingdom’s laws was beyond any of the young guards here.

The young vice captain thought for a long time and stubbornly replied: “Special times calls for special needs.”

Brendel knew Bannett would not put down his pride and back off. Still, he did not want to waste any more time on this, and would not have bothered to trouble himself from the childish fights unless Bannett sought to seek it first.

“I’m looking for Freya and Irene. Did any of you see them?” He asked.

This was Brendel’s most concerned question. The flames seemed to have been lit by the young guards, but he considered the possibility where the future Goddess of War was also burned to death. That would have been a grave sin on Bannett’s part.

[Just a mere thought, cough.]

But Brendel's carefree attitude looked like arrogance in Bannett's eyes. He truly did not know why Brendel was so proud of himself when he did not amount to anything at this moment. He resisted the loathing in his heart and asked: "Freya? From the third militia? What is she doing with you?"

Brendel could see that the vice captain was fond of Freya, but his hostile attitude annoyed him. He had tried to provoke him many times.

"Vice-captain Bannett, it's my freedom to be with whom. As for the reason why I'm here, I'm afraid it is the same as yours. Please don't think I don't know what kind of plight you are in right now." He replied sarcastically.

"You bastard, you dare to show your insolence in front of us!" One of the youths behind Bannett angrily rebuked him: "You're only a mere militia and in front of you is the vice captain of the guards, correct your attitude now!"

Brendel paused a moment and started to study him carefully.

And as if they wanted to show off to him, they neatly formed into their formation as if to intimidate him. He looked at the fifteen young men who stood tall; there appeared sharp with their uniforms, drawn weapons, and shining armors. They certainly looked impressive.

Brendel knew their pride came from being the best in their cities or the Grinoires's region, and had undergone strict selection and rigorous training. They were close enough to be considered as 'Tier 1 Power'.

The Holy Cathedral of Fire had decreed a rule that the average Overall Power Rating of a person between 3 OZ to 20 OZ be ranked as a Tier 1 Power. This included the entire White-ranked swordsman, wizard apprentices and low ranking Elementalists, and other various professions.

The Holy Cathedral of Fire used Amber Stones to test for each person's purity in their stats. Brendel had seen this item in the game before, but they were mainly used for NPCs. The players were able to see their own data in the character window, and thus they did not need to be tested.

He once read an information book about the game, and knew that sixty percent of the entire Vaunte continent was of the 'Grade 1 rank'. This was because the humans' average lifespan was over one hundred and sixty years and they had the time to grow

stronger, but once the range was limited to the age of seventeen to nineteen, the ratio would be lower than twenty percent.

In Aouine, other than the wizard academy, the church and the reserve knights, the majority of the youths in this twenty percent were in the guards. *(TL: Level 1-20 = White rank. Some other ranked codes from the later chapters.)*

It was true that these young men were able to hold their heads high up amongst the militia rabble, but Brendel was a person from another world with freedom, and never had the thought of lowering his head.

A modern person's perspective who recognized himself as the biggest authority after the divine.

Therefore he glared coldly at the rider who castigated him and quietly evaluated his strength. Even though the opponents were strong, he did not think that his stats were any less than them after having the Thorn of Light and the Ring of the Wind Empress.

With his experience as a level 130 warrior, anyone who challenged him would definitely be laid to waste. At best they could rush up and overwhelm him, but he guessed that Bannett would not want to do something as shameless as that.

What surprised him was the vice captain stopping his own men by raising his arm, and he asked gravely: "How did you know what we came here to do? What else do you know? Who told you this?"

Brendel obviously knew because of his knowledge in the game. He might not know every detail, but once he thought about how history was going to progress, he could guess the events that happened. He knew that they were here not because they wanted to launch a counter attack but for a different reason.

Once he rearranged the thoughts in his mind, and thought of how the Bucce guards were going to break the siege to reach Fortress Riedon, everything could be explained.

The events were similar; what happened now seemed to mirror the history in the game. The Madara undead was supposed to lock down the Beldor's forest successfully today, and in the morning or afternoon, the fleeing refugees and the Bucce guards were attacked by the Madara's army. They were incredibly close to Fortress Riedon, and they almost succeeded in reaching there, but Kebias's skeleton army made their efforts futile and they were stuck here.

Even now, Fortress Riedon had not noticed the east was being invaded by Madara.

This was not a coincidence, nor was it because luck did not stand on Bucc'e's side. It was because they faced the left wing of Incirsta's army who was terrifying and effective for the very first time. It was simply impossible for the Bucc'e guards to match the infamous undead general when they brought along the weak and old.

Furthermore, they had encountered Rothko's necromancer army earlier who slowed them down. These two points had caused them to fail and turned today into a tragedy.

When Brendel realized this, he took a longer look at the young riders and found their uniform was not as clean as it looked. A few had their armor scratched and dented. Their eyes appeared listless under their angry expressions. He guessed that this was the day when Marden experienced defeat. What they required now was food and medicine from this village, to assure the survivors' hearts and prepare for the next attempt to escape the siege.

But Brendel was certain that Marden was not going to expect failure a second and third time shortly after today. He had only a day and a half before the 'One-eyed' Tarkus's main force arrived, and today's tragedy would repeat again.

In the end, Marden was fortunate to escape at the very end with his life, but he lost all glory that belonged to him as a soldier.

Brendel shook his head when he thought of this and did not have any mood left to argue. Still, he was not one to answer kindly to an aggressor, and replied in an ill-disposed manner: "Is there really any need to ask? Isn't everything is written on your face when you dramatically marched into this village?"

"You bastard-" The young man behind Bannett angrily replied. His veins jutted out from his temples, and if it was not for Bannett stopping him, he would have pulled out his sword and fight Brendel.

"You're completely right. But since you are unwilling to take up the responsibilities of a militia, then stand aside." The young vice-captain said: "Please don't block our way."

"Wait," Brendel's temper flared a little. The idiot tried to incite him to a fight? He stood in the middle of their path and asked solemnly: "Are the villagers with you right now?"

"It's none of your concern."

“How many are injured?”

Bannett’s face turned darker: “It’s none of your concern.”

“It has every bit of my concern. These are my friends and families. Freya, Little Fenris, Irene, and Mackie. Their family members are also amongst the villagers. Everyone in the militia is fighting to protect Bucca, and what are you guards fighting for?” Brendel replied. “Listen well, I am not picking a fight with you, but I want to have an answer.”

His steady voice made everyone in the squadron silent. Their angry mutterings also ceased.

“Move aside, Brendel,” Bannett said with an ugly face.

Brendel’s heart sank. He had a bad feeling.

He shook his head: “Bring me to captain Marden. I can bring you out of this dire situation, but before all that you must tell me, did something happen to the family members of the third militia squadron?”

Bannett’s face completely fell.

“You? Lead us out?” The young vice-captain seemed to have squeezed the words out from his teeth. When he finished, he turned his head around and gestured at his own members, indicating them to move out from the other side.

He did not even want to waste his breath on Brendel anymore. He even regretted that he spoke to him earlier. He thought about the battle in the afternoon and felt that it was the biggest nightmare in his entire life. He even suspected that it would continue to haunt him his whole life.

Brendel stood at one side as he watched them leave silently. His mind considered at the various possibilities, but there was only one possibility that made sense. He could not help but call after him: “Bannett.”

The captain immediately stopped.

“Was it Freya’s family?”

Bannett’s body went rigid. He hesitated for a while and nodded.

“What happened exactly?”

“When you find Freya, help me tell her this.”

“What?”

Bannett sighed: “If you find her, tell her that I’m sorry. During this afternoon’s battle, Uncle Cecil and her aunt were, unfortunately...”

Before he finished speaking, he heard a clanking noise behind him.

Everyone was startled and they looked back, only to find Freya with a pale face full of disbelief and her sword had dropped from her hand.

The youth Irene who followed after the future Goddess of war looked helpless.

“Freya!” Brendel was shocked at her appearance. He already knew what Bannett was going to say.

“How’s that possible, my aunt wouldn’t.....”

Freya’s voice suddenly broke into sobbing, and tears started pouring from her eyes.

There was a weak spot in everyone’s heart.

Brendel looked at Freya who had always been acting strong, kneel onto the ground. She cried in sorrow, and she appeared so weak that she looked like a small injured animal. This familiar scene had happened many times before in his memories and his throat felt parched. He wanted to say something comforting, but there were no words that came from his lips.

He could only watch over her quietly. He suddenly realized something.

[Did this cruel war baptize this simple, innocent and kind-hearted girl into a future Goddess of War?]

History was repeating itself.

Chapter 18

The footprints on the other path in History

The vast land slept within the darkness where nature did not emit even a single sound. It was as if the silence was mourning for the dead souls that had left this world. A meteor shower streaked across the starry skies, appearing and disappearing quickly as if to symbolize the names that appeared briefly in history.

Bannett silently stood straight up against the cold night wind. He sent out command after command, and the guards vanquished the undead remnants in the ruins of the Green village. Every single undead had to be purified. Every single one.

The young vice-captain felt that this was the only way to make himself feel better.

He checked the time. He had only thirty minutes left.

Zeta looked at the scene from afar. He shook the glass flagon in his hand, and touched the girl beside him: "Hey, you're called Irene right?"

Irene was a little startled.

"I'm Zeta. Do you want a little?" He raised the wine flagon. "Pure Fire Wine made from the Crystal river. Ryan and I found it in a wine cellar. Sadly, I don't know if I can still drink this after this war..."

He paused for a while.

"You know, I had a dream once. I wanted to become the best scout."

"But I'm regretting it a little."

Irene felt this person was really strange, but she was curious as to why he had regrets.

"Why?" She asked.

"My biggest goal was to discover the enemy as quickly as possible, because

discovering them would justify my value. But now the thing I want to do the most is to hide the villagers. If I can hide them, at least they wouldn't be killed. But you know what? I couldn't do anything. I was unable to do anything."

"It's not your fault."

"But I'm a soldier." Zeta sipped the wine: "When I saw that girl cried, I thought that it would have been good if I had died like Kevin did in the battlefield. But I'm still alive so I can't escape from this."

Irene fell into a silence, and she suddenly thought of Brendel. She had this strange impression that this young man who led them out from every dire situation once and again, would be able to lead them out of the darkness that was shrouding them.

Maybe her premonition would be right, and everything would be solved.

She hoped in her heart.

Brendel and Freya sat together.

Brendel truly did not think that he was good at comforting someone. He felt that it would have been better for someone else to be here right now, but that damnable Bannett just left with a grim expression without any words, and Irene just stayed far away.

[Isn't this girl over here your captain?! Do something!]

It was fortunate that Freya adjusted her emotions quickly. But she kept staring into space in a daze, her bright eyes had dimmed and were filled with loneliness.

Brendel had seen that look before in the game. When she became the Goddess of War, her gaze could sometimes be seen with the same quiet sadness, as though she could never be healed. He felt a little sad, and very much preferred the innocent and kind Freya, who was also a little stubborn and got upset over small matters.

But what could he say here? He hesitated for a long time, and when the words came up to the tip of his tongue, he suddenly felt that they were not persuasive. The lines that he prepared did not appear to be suitable at all.

When he was agonizing over it, she spoke:

“Ser Brendel.”

“Huh?”

“Why do think we have wars?”

[Uh...]

He had never really thought about it. In the game, the bigger guilds would frequently fight over profits, reputation and even a simple matter of pride. Kingdoms fought over power, benefits, and lands. Wars would frequently break out without warning.

He might have answered this in the past, “Because humans are always controlled by desire. They would seek to dominate and pillage, and that is why they fight against each other.”

But after today, Freya’s sobs had etched themselves into his mind and could never be erased. He found this answer to be pointless. Humans were weak but they could be resilient.

“Wars simply happen. The only thing we can do is to accept it. We are living in a terrible era, and we can’t choose the era we want to live in. But we can try to change it,” Brendel said, and suddenly the words formed themselves in his mind: “Perhaps we are unable to change anything, but at least we have tried to realize it along with many other people. The memories that we had fought together are more than enough.”

He remembered the days back in the game where he fought for Aouine. His friends and people who shared the common goal fought along with him. There were many promises that were made together, and even though everyone parted ways at the very end, he did not regret having these memories.

These were his memories of Aouine, burned into his very soul.

The young girl became silent.

“Freya.”

“Hmm?”

“You must have loved them very much.”

“Yes.” She replied: “When my father passed away, my aunt and uncle always took good care of me and were proud of me. But I loved them too, so very much.”

“I’m just puzzled. Why did the heavens choose you?” Brendel said.

“Hmm?”

“Freya, have you ever thought about becoming a general to protect this land?”

“How’s that possible, Ser Brendel, are you trying to make fun of me?” The young girl was a little angry, but her voice became quiet again: “I just want to be a good captain. But my powers only amount to this much, and only this little. To fulfill my responsibilities till the very end... That’s too far away, and I can’t reach that destination.”

[No, not only did you do it, you did it perfectly. Freya, you were the last hero of Aouine, and one that people remembered the most.]

[The gods gave you extraordinary trials and you had ordinary talents. But you were humble, dedicated, kind and strong. You were beyond amazing.]

Brendel played with the small stone gargoyle statue in his hand. He looked into the distance and sighed: “Freya, I don’t know how far you would go in the future, but I want you to remember this.”

“Yes?”

“Friends. No matter how far you are going to go, there will be many people who would accompany you. You will never be lonely.”

Freya’s eyes widened, and suddenly they were misty. She thought of Romaine, little Fenix, Mackie, Irene and everyone in the third militia squadron.

And of course, her aunt and uncle.

She wiped the corners of her eyes and looked at the crimson sky that was illuminated by the burning village. It had continued to burn, and the spiraling flames seemed to hint at the next battle which was going to be even bigger.

“Thanks.” She whispered back: “Shameless cad Brendel.”

Our protagonist started to cough and choke.

When he looked back in protest, he saw that her eyes had returned to its former brightness, and it was shining like the brightest night star in the sky. Brendel suddenly felt that his existence here had worth.

History had started to change.

Bannett quickly found what he wanted. Medicine. Even though the Green village appeared to have been completely destroyed, the things that the undead didn't need were food and medicine, and they were simply stacked up in a corner.

Furthermore, Brendel was there to help them.

Even though Bucca, Verbin and the green village were under the protection of the guards, Brendel was definitely much more familiar with the area than them.

With his memories, he found two secret cellars that were filled with medicine, food and other goods. There were cast iron, copper and even gold, which were useless in their current situation, so he left them untouched.

It was not Brendel's usual habit to leave empty handed. The owners had died in the war and they had no descendants.

These cellars were the players' favorite spots after Madara torched the village. If the players found one they would have become considerably rich. Because of that, Brendel knew these spots very well thanks to these greedy players.

He left the bulky items alone but he wanted the magical equipment.

Under everyone's shocked eyes, he quickly opened hidden compartments. They were mostly filled with precious gems and gold.

The leader of the young guards looked darkly at Brendel with suspicion. When did he learned something like this and became like a burglar?

Brendel brought out a half platemail meant for a female in the midst of their amazed mutterings. It was an ancient armor adorned with complicated bronze ornaments, but the black gold symbols on it showed that it was an artistic ornamental armor from the golden age of the past.

Before they finished admiring the armor, Brendel took out another ornamental armor with a flourish. He beckoned to Freya.

“Freya, over here.”

“Me?” The future Goddess of War pointed at herself.

“Try this out.”

“Wait,” Bannett immediately mocked without thinking: “Brendel, are you serious in letting Freya that piece of artwork? Not all armor is meant to see action, you do know it right?”

Brendel ignored him and wanted to put it on for Freya. But she blushed and shook her ponytail and received the ornamental armor: “I, I’ll do it myself.”

He paused in surprise. There was not much attention paid to this matter in the game. He had helped the other female players who were knights and warriors with their armor, but he forgot he was in another world now.

“What are you trying to do?” Bannett watched Freya run to an area with dense foliage and asked.

“What?”

“That’s an ornamental armor and it’s too heavy. You can’t be serious to let Freya wear that into battle right? Besides, has the militia learned to fight wearing armor before?”

“Too heavy?” This was the first time Brendel had heard of this argument. He looked back at him with a raised eyebrow, wondering if lead had been poured into his mind.

He did not bother to explain but beckoned Freya over. He asked: “How does it feel?”

“It’s a little heavy. It’s not very flexible.”

The youths behind Bannett giggled and laughed. How could an ornamental armor not be heavy? But the majority of the laughs were made in jest and not mockery.

Brendel paid no attention and chanted: “S’Taz.”

An ancient word, its meaning was 'Wind'.

The half plate was instantly enveloped by a green aura, which floated around Freya's body and then tightly wrapped around her whole body. The young girl was startled and uttered a low yelp of surprise: "This is?"

Brendel looked back and said: "A Half-Plate of the Wind Empress infused with the Wind Element, described as heavy? The Elven armor smiths who designed this must be turning in their graves."

Bannett and the riders were at a loss for words.

Chapter 19

The one who opposes

Brendel and the militia followed alongside with Bannett and his riders. They transported the food and medicine to the Guards' camp located in the Beldor's forest region, traveled across the mountainous forest, and finally stopped at a camp in the valley. There was an uproar in the camp when they discovered the youths of the third militia squadron approaching towards them.

They thought the entire third militia squadron had perished in the battle of that fateful night and were prepared to accept that reality, only to find that they had returned alive.

The refugees were overjoyed. Even though they were not entirely comprised of Bucces' natives, and some of them came from either Verbin or the Green village, the heartwarming scene affected everyone. It was the first piece of good news they have for the past two days.

A good sign like this signified that the future might be favorable. Along with the food and medicine they brought back, the people who were plagued by the cold and hunger were able to eat something warm, and the injured was treated. Everyone thought that hope was not far away, and even forgot a little of the tragic battle they encountered in the afternoon.

Marden gave a command to light the campfires. The veteran soldier that survived the November War was brave and resilient, and would never submit to the Madara undead. He was not afraid of the undead forces discovering them and even said they were free to bring the battle to them as there were no cowards in Aouine.

There was simply no way to hide so many people who had no militia training. Thus he decided to make them comfortable.

Freya who had lost her relatives found herself treated like a hero. At first, Brendel was worried that she might be depressed instead, but found that it was an unnecessary worry.

“Freya, it’s all thanks to you and your militia!”

“Freya, don’t be sad. You still have us, don’t you? Everyone in the village supports you. You’re a strong girl, and everyone knows that!”

“Freya, are you alright? Come over here and let Aunt Aakash take a look at you. You need to be more careful!” A plump middle-aged woman parted the sea of people around her. She might have the quality of a having a loud voice and rough handling like a countryside villager, but her concern was genuine.

She parted Freya’s fringe and wiped her face and took a long hard look at the girl.

“Aunt Aakash, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? Don’t hide everything in your heart, understand?”

“Really, I’m fine. Thanks, everyone.” Freya looked at everyone gathering around her. Her eyes were getting misty and interfered with her vision. They had a terrible time for the past two days. Their eyes were bloodshot and jumped at shadows, but she saw that they had genuine concern for her.

Brendel stood far away and watched this scene. A warmth spread in his heart.

The warm campfire and heartwarming affection permeated the air with the aroma from the food, seemed to have dispersed the gloomy darkness in their hearts. Even if it was just for a single moment, he could not help but feel touched by it.

It was a beautiful moment.

[The relationship between people should be what I’m looking at right now.]

Eventually, he walked up to a craggy white boulder, leaned against it and stared at the stars in the sky. They shimmered from time to time and looked like diamonds strewn across a dark purple curtain.

“Why aren’t you going over?” He suddenly spotted Romaine sitting at a higher place and asked.

She was hugging a bag that was placed on top on her legs. Her feet dangled back and forth in the air.

“They don’t like me.” She said.

“Why?”

“In their eyes, my aunt and I are weird people. Besides, which girl in a normal family would want to be a merchant? It’s normal that I don’t get treated well.”

Brendel retorted inside his mind.

[Woah, you actually know what’s wrong with yourself?]

He then realized that he did not have much of an impression of her aunt. She always traveled and was hardly home, and only came back once in a while to bring some strange items that Romaine might like.

Romaine might have adopted her unique personality because she was always by herself.

“Tell me about your parents. I don’t think we ever talked about them before right?” He asked.

“I have never seen them before. My aunt was already with me by the time I started to remember things. She even told me, ‘Little Romaine, remember to repay my kindness!’”

The young merchant girl giggled and gazed at the moon with bright lights.

Brendel looked vacantly at her.

“...So that’s why you want to become a merchant?”

“Yup.”

“That’s a strange way of thinking.”

“It’s fine if you think.”

They chatted for a while before Brendel saw Freya escaping from the crowd. She had appeared to be an affable, naive and simple girl, but once she turned back into the captain of the third militia squadron, she seemed to show off a little of the future

Goddess of War's vibe.

She promised Brendel to let him see Captain Marden earlier. Although she did not know what the young man wanted, like Irene, she had started to have a blind trust in him that he was able to bring them out of this predicament.

Freya was not trying to be reliant on him, but she was curious.

On the other hand, Brendel's plan was this:

He had brought the militia and the Bucces' guards together by coincidence, and he knew what sort of setback Marden would have next. Now that they are at this juncture in history, he needed to create a fork on it where they successfully escaped from the Madara undead.

In Brendel's heart, his very first thought was to keep himself safe. But he quickly shrugged that thought off. If he did that, how was he able to face Freya, Romaine, little Fenix and everyone else in the militia?

His heart was in turmoil when he saw the future Goddess of War weep in the Green village. He had experienced enough failures back in the game in the past world, and wanted to live without any more regrets.

Brendel pondered on it and decided to continue walking down a new path yet unseen in history.

Romaine naturally did not want to leave his side, and so the three of them traveled across the valley and several campfires. They finally found the old man at the end of the valley. As expected, Bannett was also there, but Brendel ignored him and looked straight at the veteran soldier.

Brendel counted the years in his mind where he had not seen Marden.

[The game's time is 8 times faster in the VRMMORPG... It means I have not seen him for at least thirty years in the game.] *(TL: 30/8 = 3.75 years in real time.)*

In the game, Marden was deeply unhappy in his late life but ultimately passed away in peace. His only one consolation was not seeing Aouine's final moment where it fell into complete ruins.

Many players had a strong relationship with him. If the players had an exceedingly high reputation, he would teach many hidden skills that included scouting, swordsmanship and moving in the shadows. Most importantly, he taught the Warrior profession's first advanced skill: 'The Roar of Bravery'.

The old man did not appear too differently in his memory of the game. He seemed to be slightly younger, and the resolution in his face was stronger than it was in the future.

Brendel had spent time with him and knew his character well. He was calm and fearless, but he had a fiery temper and hated people who beat around the bush. It was better for him to express himself openly to gain a better impression.

But he still had a little reservation in his heart when he spoke to Marden. What was going to happen if this person's personality in this world was different from the game? Even though he thought Marden should have the same character in this world, he found that the things that happened to him were too surreal to be certain about anything.

Upon hearing his thoughts, Marden's eyebrows moved, and his forehead wrinkled up. Just as Brendel had predicted, the first to object was the young vice-captain of the guards, Bannett.

"What are your reasons for saying that we will lose in the upcoming battles?"

Brendel looked quietly at Marden, and the old man spoke: "Young man, I'm grateful for your loyalty to the kingdom. But I would also like to hear your reasons as to why we would lose."

Brendel inwardly sighed with relief. He was most worried about the temper of the old man. Once he was able to speak freely to him, he had the confidence to convince him: "I have one question, do you know the size of the Madara undead in front of us?"

The young men present in the area were silent.

Marden did not speak as well, but he signaled to Bannett, who replied: "From the looks of the afternoon battle, the ones who continued to pursue us should be the same army which engaged us. There was an additional force that joined them as I noticed a difference in their flags. They are most likely commanded separately. Unfortunately, we don't know the exact details about the Madara forces."

Brendel looked at him in astonishment as he did not expect him to actually possess some measure of ability. It was impressive that he was able to make this conclusion from observing the chaotic battlefield.

“It’s not strange to not know the exact details about them since you don’t understand the kingdom of Madara.” Brendel said: “This kingdom has never been unified as one in reality. It was before the Era of Runes and Swords, when a group of exiled shadow shamans became the earliest dark lords of the Madara region, which then became a paradise for pirates and undead creatures...”

“What are you talking about?”

“Listen to him, Bannett. Be patient.”

“Hmph.”

Brendel smiled, as he knew he had gotten Marden’s attention. He’s a true veteran, and regardless of his temper, he had already gotten useful information from him.

“At the same time, this kingdom had a powerful nature to conquer other lands. The dark lords warred against each other repeatedly and attacked the surrounding lands without warning. Kirrlutz, Aouine and Osor and even the Baamrin region had suffered from them.

The dark lords possessed many divisions of elite soldiers because of their frequent wars. Even though their formations are a mess, their fighting strength cannot be ignored. The two forces that you saw today are most likely very different in their formations.

I would like to hear details as to what happened in your battles, and from there, I might be able to provide information that might be of use.”

“Brendel!” Bannett stood up in anger. “You liar, how would you know about the Madara’s force, I know that you well enough, you’re—-”

He wanted to continue speaking, but Brendel’s icy glare halted him. Bretton’s words died in him, and almost could not believe how he was silenced from Brendel’s expression.

The Brendel he knew of was not so domineering and was just someone who had just

a little talent to him.

“Listen closely, Bannett. I am not here to argue with you.” Brendel emphasized every word. “I don’t expect you know to know how critical it is right now, but I’ll have you take responsibility for your actions for any time lost!”

Bretton was momentarily stunned before he bristled in a fury and was ready to fight.

“Tell him what we encountered, Bannett.” Marden interrupted them. His forehead was deeply wrinkled.

Chapter 20

The one who persuades

Bannett stiffly sat down and cast a sneering look at Brendel. He was certain in his heart that Brendel was definitely lying. They had trained together in the same military batch in Anchorite, and even though he did not see him after they went back to Bruglas, he continued to receive news about him and knew about his background.

His father was just a simple miller, his mother had some noble blood in her, and his grandfather was a knight who survived the November war. But what sort of extraordinary experiences would he have?

After Bannett was recruited into the guards, it was said that Brendel had decided to follow his father's footsteps. The only thing that he did not know was why he went to Bucces and stayed there for a year.

It was highly unlikely that he had learned so much about Madara within a year. And if this bastard were to lie, he would have to face Marden's scrutiny.

Bannett peeked sideways at his captain. Even though this old man's temper was incredibly bad and a stubborn person as well, he was exceedingly sharp. Anyone who tried lying to him would easily be exposed.

Another young man from the guards picked up the conversation to stop the awkward silence after Bannett sat down. He spoke about the battle in detail, with the occasional nods from the others or additional lines from them added to his description. Bannett and Marden were the only two people who kept their silence.

Brendel noted Marden's eyebrows were trembling from time to time which showed off his anxiety in his heart. Bannett, on the other hand, decided to simply watch everything in silence and ignore Brendel.

Brendel continued to listen to them and soon figured who they had encountered. The leader of the army who continued to pursue them from Bucces was most likely Rothko. He was a brilliant undead wizard in the game and given the nickname of 'Corpse Wizard' by the players. His talent was easily converting undead spirits into

necromancers, and thus his army was replenished very quickly. Even though he did not have a high offensive stat, he was cunning, patient and made use of his army as cannon fodder to exhaust the enemy and deal a blow to their morale.

[Right now, he should only be at an apprentice level. Therefore, under Tarkus's tactics, he would just be a leader of a middle-sized army.]

Brendel wondered briefly if he encountered each other when he escaped from Buccie.

He did not need to guess about the leader of the second army's identity. The one who razed the Green village to the ground was Kabias. The skeleton warrior was not famous in Madara's history, but was considered as a veteran and definitely one of Tarkus's generals in this battle.

A middle-sized undead army would have the numbers of over two hundred and at least twenty necromancers in them. Kabias's army, as one of the main forces sent as a vanguard, had at least one-fifth of Tarkus' left wing's army. His large forces definitely had more than just skeleton soldiers and necromancers. It was highly likely that there were pale knights and dark warriors in the army too.

Brendel omitted many details to the Guards. He quoted legends and rumors to briefly describe their ranks, but stating their numbers was certainly out of the question. Even though he knew about the future, he had to tread carefully.

"I am not sure if you have heard of this location called Ansel. It's the main region where the undead wizards are living in. Madara is split into three factions. One faction is the vampires, and one is the undead wizards. I'm going to skip the description of these two factions since you should have heard about them."

"The last faction is one that also holds considerable might. These dark lords in this faction are comprised of holy knights that committed crimes, nobles that were exiled, pirates and undead wanderers. They worship the Black Bible, and are rulers that believe in Madara's traditional ways."

"All these stories are very interesting, but they are just stories." One of the guards retorted.

"No, just think about it. If there is one person who could unify them, then Madara will return as the blight from the darkness. Right now, the current events match a certain prophecy."

“You just said that this kingdom has never been unified before.”

“It has never been unified in the past, but their chance to do so is approaching before our very eyes.”

“What does this ‘unification’ has to do with our situation?”

“Of course there is, have you heard about the legend of the Mercury Staff?” Brendel suddenly changed to another topic.

“That’s also described in the same prophecy, right? It’s said that when someone possesses it, they will rule the darkness in the world?” Someone asked.

Brendel nodded.

“The full name is ‘The Mercury Staff of Loptr’. Loptr is a genius undead wizard, and he nearly unified the Madara kingdom. Fortunately, he failed at the end, and his staff went missing, and this legend was left behind. When someone possesses the staff, he will become the King of Darkness. And just this year of spring, someone had witnessed the appearance of the staff in Ansel.”

“Hold on,” Bannett’s expression suddenly changed. “The rumor a few months ago was real?”

“A few months ago?”

“Wait, I remember hearing about this. It’s some merchant who brought this news here, saying that someone opened a huge door using a strange staff.”

“‘The Door of Lament.’” Brendel added details to the horrified soldiers’ conversation, “That door leads to Loptr’s treasury and his throne.”

The old captain frowned: “Young man, even though I don’t understand the fights between these powerful people, you mean to say there has been a great change in Madara? It is indeed terrible news, and at the very least, it would mean that Madara is completely prepared for this invasion. Even though I don’t know what their goals are, they wouldn’t just invade us on a small scale, right? What you said sounds too ridiculous to be true, but that does not mean it is not possible.”

His hand that was full of calluses was placed on his knee, and it was near enough to

draw his sword anytime: “Bannett. Do you know this young man?”

Bannett was startled. If he said that he was suspicious of Brendel, even though the captain would not immediately strike at him with the sword, he would at least tie him up and question him.

He looked at Brendel without hiding the ridicule in his eyes. But he thought for a while and did not choose to do something like that: “I know him, and I think he’s lying to us. But if I think about it rationally... He has no reason to lie to us.”

“What if he has been bribed by Madara?” Marden asked again.

“I have also thought about that, but that’s unlikely considering what he and the third militia squadron had been through. If this Madara commander had prepared things in advance, then I think our defeat was justifiable.”

“Very good, Bannett.” Marden patted his vice-captain’s back.

[Eh?]

Not only Marden, but even Brendel also looked differently at the young vice-captain. It seemed that this fellow had a pretty good head on him. He had the impression that he was too narrow-minded and could not become a true leader. He started to mull over on his assessment on him again.

If Bannett had denied knowing him or accused him of something, Brendel had the confidence to persuade Marden due to his knowledge of the future. However, that might have led to a situation that he might expose himself as a different person.

“Alright, then we’re going back to the real topic,” Marden said. “Kid, you believe that Madara’s goal is Fortress Riedon?”

“In the Grinoires region, Aouine’s defensive line is Stronghold Vermiere. Fortress Riedon protects the flank of that defensive line, so Madara’s goal can only be Fortress Riedon.” Brendel nodded.

Marden rubbed his nose and cursed: “Then the Madara forces that kept biting on our tails are their bigwigs? Fuck, why did we have to encounter this pile of pigshit trouble!”

“I don’t know the exact details,” Brendel said while he hid the knowledge that he knew

everything: “But based on your description, there’s an undead wizard in the first army that pursued you, and one of the Dark Lord’s army that came as reinforcements.”

“The undead wizard’s army formation is comprised of necromancers as a platoon leader. It’s easy to recognize them. I believe the size is half a company of one hundred to two hundred undead. The Dark Lord’s army formation is more chaotic, but there should be at least the size of two companies, based on the size that invaded the Green village.”

“It sounds about right.” Marden nodded.

What he did not know was Brendel actually reduced the number by half. Even so, that number made everyone worried. The size of the undead army vastly outnumbered their thirty guard members who even brought a group of weak villagers with them. How were they supposed to break the siege?

The old captain also sighed.

“Alright, Brendel. Since you came to tell us all these things, would it be right for me to think that you have a solution? I can tell you right now, if the situation is as you have reported, then I have no confidence to bring these men out of this siege.”

Freya bleated with surprise.

But Brendel nodded: “I do.”

Everyone’s gaze suddenly focused on him, and even Bannett looked at him with shock and disbelief.

Brendel wiped his sweaty palms on his shirt and took a breath. He was slightly tense. Even though he had a plan, he had little confidence in it. Receiving the attention of everyone made him feel pressured. The next few sentences he was going to say, concerned many lives. He wondered if he needed to be more careful in his choice of words to convince them.

He reminded himself to think calmly and not leave out anything.

“Everyone should travel to the north and cross the River of Daggers.” He said.

“The River of Daggers?”

“Where is that place? Why do we need to go there?”

Brendel hesitated for a while. How was he going to explain that the ‘Pale Knight’ Ebdon and the ‘Undead Ghost’ Vlad will be late for nearly two days before surrounding that area?

Chapter 21

Three-pronged approach

Brendel's mind quickly spun. He thought if he had some form of scouting skill available, like 'Eagle-eye' or 'Precognition' or other related skills, he could persuade them. As his mind went through the possibilities, he suddenly thought of another way.

[Of course! That will work too!]

He wiped his sweaty palms again and relaxed.

"Right now the River of Daggers is in a state where it's nearly unprotected. In the worst case, there's only one squadron of undead defending there, so why not break through that area?"

Everyone's initial response was almost the same.

"What, is that true?"

"How's that possible?"

"How do you know that?"

Brendel raised his hand to silence them: "Bannett, do you recall that your guards found a half-broken statue in the green village?"

"The statue that looks like a devil, heavy and frightening, yes." Bannett suddenly recalled a report from Zeta and Ryan. They had found it in the underground passage in a ruined shrine, discovered signs of a knight, and the guards expanded their search for him before finding the statue.

Brendel took the small black statue from his pocket: "That's called a gargoyle. I think even the likes of you would have heard of it. It's a war unit made by Galbu's Wizards Craftsmen, and they control these gargoyles by using this thing here."

He laid it flat on his palm and raised his arm for everyone to see clearly. The young

guards that participated in the Green village's search quickly recognized that it looked exactly like the statue.

"Wait, you mean to say you can control that thing?"

"Can it still move?"

"That thing has wings, can it fly?" The scout, Zeta, asked Brendel from the back.

"Yes, and it can fly as fast as a dragon. The army position for this unit is similar to our own kingdom's flying dragon riders. It is one of the best scouts in a battlefield, and I used it to avoid the majority of the undead when the militia and I went to the Green Village."

"During yesterday's morning, I discovered that the Madara's army in the north was stalled in their progress. There were at least three companies that stayed in Verbin as they did not lock down the northern shores in time. They had problems in cooperating there, and the undead armies currently in front of us have not discovered this mistake yet." *(TL: In case anyone forgot, a company in army size = 80 to 250 soldiers according to wikipedia.)*

"Unfortunately, this gargoyle that I sent out earlier was discovered by the undead patrols and damaged as a result. When I ordered it to return, it landed in the Green village."

Freya suddenly responded when Brendel finished explaining.

"So that's the reason. Brendel, when you said you had something to do, it was this? No wonder you always managed to lead us away from danger and wanted to go to the green village with your injuries. If you wanted to repair that thing, why don't you just tell us?"

Before Brendel could say anything, the future Goddess of War bowed her head.

"Sorry, Brendel, I'm also at fault. I was angry with you at that time, but I didn't think that it was for our sake."

[Hah...?]

Brendel suddenly felt that he was too much of a genius, as he actually managed to

weave such a story out from nowhere. And it even let Freya connect everything from the beginning. He did not know whether it was because he was just too smart or because Freya was just too stupid.

He suddenly felt a little embarrassed when he saw Freya's apologetic face.

And with Freya's speech, everyone started to believe in Brendel's story. She was the best militia out of Bucces's current batch, and even Marden had a good impression of her. She was also a native of Bucces, and surely she had no reason to lie to them, right?

Even Bannett rubbed his forehead and asked: "Can that thing still move?"

"I can't say for sure. I'll try my best to test it out. I already reestablished the contact with it, and the only thing left is for it to recover on its own." Brendel lied without batting an eyelid.

[If I could move that thing, I don't need to waste my time bullshitting you, pff.]

A level 23 gargoyle, never mind a necromancer, even if Rothko was to fight against it, he would have trouble handling it.

Bannett was unsatisfied with this reply: "You're really as stupid as a pig. How did you let the enemy discover the gargoyle flying in the air? If we had this flying scout, we would be in a much better position."

"Is your particular talent called 'Shirking your responsibilities'? If I'm not here, will you forget to fight your own battles too?" Brendel mocked him.

"Hmph!"

"Alright, that's enough. The battles ahead are our duty. Kid, we will believe in what you said. But the Madara undead in front of us are still alert, and it will be a different problem altogether when we bring the villagers along with us, compared to just the guards moving. Do you really think we can escape?" Marden asked pensively.

"This would have to be under your responsibility, Captain Marden."

"Well said." The old veteran could not help but look at Brendel thoughtfully. He found it strange that Brendel seemed to know what he was thinking at every other turn and answered it. He thought that if this young man changed his career and entered into

politics, he would have a great future.

Only the Gods knew that Brendel understands Marden's personality all too well.

Marden stood up and ordered: "On my command, the Bucce guards shall gather here and prepare to break out of this siege!"

""Understood!""

The guards stood up together at the same time.

Marden looked back and said: "Zeta, tell the villagers to let the men amongst them gather up. Now is the time for Aouine's men to protect their home and families."

Zeta looked puzzledly at him. "Captain?"

"What are you looking at? Are you afraid of death? Let me tell you youngsters; this is the moment where you fulfill your oaths when you joined the army. We will attack the Madara's vanguard before dawn to break out of the siege, but I doubt anyone here will be able to survive.

However, that is fine! Because the Bucce's villagers will sing of our bravery and tell everyone in this world that we are not afraid of death, and have fulfilled our responsibilities till the very end."

The old veteran swept his gaze on everyone with his solemn expression:

"My old commander used to say this to me, 'It's a warrior's duty to protect the weak.' I give you now this exact quote, and I hope you remember the glory of defending your kingdom!

So, does everyone know what you have to be ready for?

Bannett, I want you to lead the rest of the villagers to escape from the River of Daggers. There's only one thing needed here, do you understand?"

"I do." Bannett's eyes were heavy, but he bowed and replied.

"Very good." Marden nodded: "Kid, and Freya, the two of you. I'm requesting you as members of the militia to immediately join the Bucce guards, do any of you have an

objection?"

Freya immediately shook her head.

But Brendel nodded under everyone's shocked looks: "I have an objection."

Marden paused in surprise.

"Speak," He looked at Brendel for a while: "If you're afraid of death, then you can get the fuck out of here right now. Buccé's guards have no use for cock-sucking cowards."

There were murmurs of laughter from his surroundings, but strangely Bannett was silent. Brendel glanced at him in wonder, then his eyes fell onto Romaine, and he remembered what they had talked about earlier.

"I have never seen them before. My aunt was already with me by the time I started to remember things. She even told me, little Romaine, remember to repay my kindness!"

"...So that's why you want to become a merchant?"

"Yup."

"That's a strange thought."

"It's fine that you think that way."

Brendel smiled in his heart. He looked back at Marden.

"Captain Marden, from Buccé's point of view, the decision you made is fine, but have you forgotten to ask a question?"

"What question?" Marden was once again baffled, becoming more and more curious of this kid.

"The three villages in the Buccé's region act as a buffer for Fortress Riedon, and Buccé's guards always had the responsibilities of alerting Fortress Riedon of any invaders. If you chose to leave just like this, then what will happen to Fortress Riedon that didn't receive any warning? I don't think that all the responsibilities you need to do have been fulfilled yet."

Everyone's faces gradually changed as they heard Brendel's speech. He was right. If they merely led the Bucces' villagers out of danger, they would not accomplish the responsibilities given to them. Stronghold Vermiere's defensive line would be compromised if Madara managed to break through Fortress Riedon.

And if that was to happen, then someday the entire Grinoires' region might be taken by the Madara's undead army. The young men were at a loss for words when they thought that Madara might be able to invade the Aouine's central city, Bruglas, with their undead army.

But what could they do here?

"We tried our fucking best!"

"We could only do so much under this damn situation!"

"It's not that we abandoned Fortress Riedon, i-it's Fortress Riedon that abandoned us!"

But Marden just stared at Brendel. Since the latter pointed this out, it would mean that he had a solution.

"Indeed. I do know of a path that could bypass the siege and lead straight to Fortress Riedon. Even though the chance is small, it's better than nothing." When Brendel said this, the air in his lungs seemed to be squeezed out of him. He exhaled deeply.

He looked back at Romaine again who had lowered her head and was fretfully fidgeting with her bag.

"Which path is that?"

"The Zevail mountain pathway."

Marden took a deep breath. Even though he had searched for various routes in his mind, he avoided this place subconsciously. He wanted to remind and ask Brendel if he knew how dangerous this pathway was.

This pathway was the south of Beldor's forest, passing through the pine valley and river, and led to out to the wild woods of Aouine's borders. Once they were out of the pathway, they were at the edge of civilization, but ever since 'The Roaring Year' (Year

350 of the first Era), no one ever came out alive after they entered this mountain path.

There was even a rumor of fierce dragons living in the valley.

He even thought there was a sliver of hope to survive from attacking Madara, compared to entering the pathway which would result in certain death. He contemplated for a long time but was unable to discard the idea that the path was more dangerous than the other routes.

“That’s a route of no return, kid.” The old veteran shook his head.

“There is no need to fulfill your responsibilities, only your attempt in doing so.” Brendel replied.

“But I can’t send my soldiers to death there, that would be irresponsible to them. A warrior should have glory in death.”

“That is not a problem.” Brendel replied: “I’ll go.”

There was complete silence.

“Wh-, say that again?” Marden was completely dumbfounded.

“I’ll go.”

“Why would you... the responsibilities of Bucce’s guards have nothing to do with you at all?! Kid, if you want to force yourself, why not join us?” The old veteran could not help but ask for the reason.

“No, I’m not forcing myself.” Brendel looked back at Romaine and gave a small smile. “I have my reason why I need to go there. If there are any other reasons, they are just there along for the ride. Now then, Little Romaine, are you willing to come along with me?”

“Brendel?”

Romaine stopped what she was doing and lifted her head up in delighted surprise.

Chapter 22

Accident

The decision for a three-pronged approach was quickly accepted, and it was now a matter of how they were going to move out.

Marden would personally lead the guards to attack Madara's undead army before dawn and attempt to break out of the siege, while Bannett will lead the remaining villagers across the River of Daggers. Brendel and Romaine will travel across the Zevail mountain pathway to inform Fortress Riedon of the attack.

They were going to move out in three hours.

Marden dismissed them, and the young guards quietly turned around and left. They did not waste their breaths on any more words, and only the sounds made were the clinking equipment being packed by them.

The campfire's wood crackled as the flames flicked chaotically. Shadows swayed about on the ground that was full of leaves and pebbles. Everyone had many things to prepare for the attack. The final few hours of the night were like grueling torture to them.

Freya went to assemble the third militia squadron, while Brendel packed his own bag and stashed the remaining health potions that he found. The other bottle that he took from the tomb had been given to Jonathon.

Brendel was unwilling to see someone die before his very eyes and saved the youth, with the excuse of "I wanted to have Bucces' citizens' good will and his family's gratitude" given to the militia.

He felt that his identity as a modern person was affecting him every passing day. He wanted to pursue a better world as he witnessed the cruel battlefield in front of him.

He randomly stuffed two days worth of food into the bag, mostly dried jerky and biscuits made with various ingredients. The Amber Sword's world had stronger production values compared to the real medieval era on Earth. Thus there were

abundant resources here.

Anyone who knew this world would understand their civilization level was relatively high, but progression seemed to have taken on a different route compared to Earth because there was magic in this world.

When he rechecked his items and pulled out a bottle of health potion, he was surprised. He discovered a hard piece of paper that was stuck under it. The paper looked like it was glued to the bottle, but he easily took it out.

It was slightly bigger than a poker card, with the width about the size of a palm. There were magical sigil patterns on the back of the card, and on the other side, an illustration of a knight kneeling on the ground, wearing a full set of armor with his hands raising the sword to the air.

At the top left-hand corner of the card, there was the number 'II' written in an ancient language, while at the center bottom were six yellow crystals. Brendel recognized these crystals in the game as a term called 'Element Type'. Six yellow crystals represent 'Earth Element' and '6'.

Brendel was very knowledgeable about the game's lore, and there were very few things that he did not know, but the card in his hand was a riddle that he knew nothing much about. He pondered for a while and was confident that it was taken from Gerald's tomb, but that itself did not provide any clues to what this was.

He might be able to search the internet forums or the game's information panel in the game, but here Brendel was limited to level 1 in all his knowledge skills in another world, what could he search for?

After considering all possibilities, he finally raised the card with his fingers, and asked the merchant girl who was concentrating on repairing the edges of her dress with a needle and thread.

"Little Romaine, do you know anything about this?"

"D-don't call me that!" Romaine's little eyebrows went up to her hair:

"Huh? What's this, a tarot card?"

"I know what a tarot card looks like."

“Then I have no idea what this is.”

Brendel scrutinized the card and wanted to say something more, but he suddenly squinted his eyes. He spotted Bannett and a few of the young guards pulling their horses into the trees' shadows.

[What are they up to?]

He suddenly thought about the strange behavior that Bannett had put on when he was discussing with Marden. As suspicion grew in his heart, he kept the card away and stood up. He began to follow them.

“Wait here.” He said to Romaine.

“Sure.”

The guards might be youths with great potential, and their individual strength significantly surpassing an average person, but they were not alert to their surroundings. The entire group that walked in the forest did not discover the person tailing behind them at all.

Although, there was also the fact that Brendel was a veteran at moving in the shadows, from the time where he had to fight against the big guilds or to negotiate with them in the game. It was just that he did not realize that he was using these techniques subconsciously.

If a normal person saw how Brendel was tailing them, they would not see anything unusual about his movements, but Zeta who was scouting in the tree nearly had his eyes popped out. He immediately recognized the young man as Brendel. His captain had personally told the guards before that he was merely passable in swordsmanship and useless in all other areas.

The swordsmanship of a militia did not really count for anything in their eyes, and any of them could even defeat Freya or Irene. However, as members of the guards, they had their own pride and did not pick fights with a militia.

No matter how much Bannett hated Brendel, he would not say something like, “I’m going to teach you a lesson!”, because it would look like he demeaned his status as a guard.

Yet, at this very moment, what Zeta saw in Brendel was something completely different. He remembered the time when he was taught by a knight who received a Scarlet Medal, but his techniques definitely paled in comparison to this young man.

Brendel was like a shadow hiding in the darkness. Every time he moved, he avoided the ever-changing lights from the valley. It was by chance that Zeta spotted him because Brendel was in between the light and his position. Otherwise, he believed that he would have no chance of detecting him.

===== Zeta's POV =====

[Is the vice-captain wrong about him? Perhaps he's actually a scout for the capital's army? Or is he Madara's spy? What should I do? I can't make any noise or I will spoil the vice-captain's plan. The camp is only thirty meters away and any commotion made will draw the attention of the others.]

Zeta suddenly felt himself tense up.

He took a deep breath and gestured at Ryan who was in another tree nearby, indicating him to pay attention to Brendel's direction. At first, Ryan was a little puzzled why Zeta kept pointing in a direction where nobody was at and even wondered if the latter was drunk, but soon enough he saw Brendel and his expression changed.

[Holy shit, is this guy a chameleon?]

"What are we going to do?" He gestured and ask.

"I'll go up first, cover me from the right." Zeta gestured back.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, his skill in the sword is formidable, at least a 'Second-class unranked Swordsman'."

A 'Second-class unranked Swordsman' was a specialized term amongst swordsmen. The rank was the equivalent of the best guards, while a 'First-class' was of a white rank Swordsman's strength, or equivalent to a player from level 15-20. Zeta was afraid that Brendel hid more of his capabilities, thus he treated him with utmost wariness.

Ryan nodded to acknowledge his plan.

Brendel was in complete surprise.

[Twenty-odd men with ten-odd battle horses, classmate Bannett, are you trying to cause a mutiny?]

But he knew it was impossible and unnecessary for Bannett to do that. After following them for a while, they stopped and discussed quietly among themselves. When he wanted to approach closer, he suddenly felt he was in danger.

[It's too quiet. Right about halfway through this journey, the insects suddenly stopped making noises.]

He used to pair up with a girl called 'Shadow' with the profession of 'Nightingale'. Even though the scouting and searching were done by this profession in the game, Brendel learned enough from her and experienced many battles to adopt an instinctive sharpness, and even the slightest movement of a blade of grass was enough to put him on alert.

Just like how he foresaw Rothko's search for him back then in Bucca.

Brendel immediately sensed an arm trying to wrap around his neck from behind, a technique used by scouts. Brendel took one step backward, his hands immediately working to grab the opponent's elbow and wrist. He made use of his body weight and sank to the ground, and raise his arms upwards to pull and throw this unknown person, and instantaneously sent a black figure flying to the tree. The figure knocked against the tree and emitted a muffled sound of pain.

The strength between the two was about the same, but Brendel had the slight advantage of attacking first. However, he saw that the figure's immediate action was not to defend himself but to rush at him, and a flash in his mind quickly made him realize there was another person nearby.

A silver flash of light streaked across the air, and Brendel's 'Thorn of Light' was instantly unsheathed. He stepped sideways, and the sword was already at the other man's neck.

The dim light from the reflection of his sword lit their faces.

Zeta and Ryan were astonished. Even though they thought that Brendel was perhaps stronger than their vice-captain, there had to be a limit to his skill. Even if Bannett was the top swordsman amongst them, it was impossible for him to fight against two guards at the same time.

They felt like they were somehow in a dream and just stared at Brendel's sword.

===== Bannett's POV =====

"Listen up, everyone. Captain Marden is an old veteran from the November War. Everyone here should be familiar with this point. He had already fulfilled his duty to the kingdom and proved his loyalty. We have an old saying, 'If Mother Marsha allows you to live, then you should cherish your luck.'

We cannot allow a veteran who had survived against all the odds from the November War to bet his life once again. That is why I made this plan. Please allow me to lead all of you to protect Bucca. It is not because I desire to steal glory from someone else, but this is simply something that I cannot run away from."

"Well said, vice-captain!"

"We will support you."

"Captain Marden will understand."

Bannett smiled. When Marden ordered him to lead the villagers to the River of Daggers, he decided to refuse his orders. However, he knew of the old man's temper, and the latter would never allow him to object. Therefore he decided to make a bet.

He did understand that Marden was trying to protect him. The captain mentioned more than once that he would become someone of importance, a pillar to support this kingdom. But Bannett also understood that Aouine did not need any cowards.

Once he thought about it, he saw Brendel's face in his mind. The useless bastard actually took the initiative to suggest crossing Zevail's mountain pathway. He believed that Brendel was just trying to find an excuse and run away. It was definitely a possibility.

But right at this moment, a light noise in the quiet forest made everyone turn their heads.

They saw Brendel pointing his sword at Zeta and Ryan's backs as they walked out from the bushes. At first, everyone did not react to this scene, then their expressions changed like they saw a ghost.

"Zeta?"

"Ryan, what happened?"

"Ha ha, we made a mistake." Zeta's face was one of embarrassment.

As for Brendel, he looked at the vice-captain with surprise on his face. He did not expect Bannett to be so bold; the latter actually wanted to lead these willing youths for a diversionary attack against Madara. What kind of courageous spirit did he have?

Brendel found it a little funny, but he also respected this decision. Was it merely a youth's hot-blooded nature, or just his ideals? When he took a closer look at Bannett, he saw there were traces of responsibility in his eyes.

Bannett was glowering at Brendel. How could he not? If Brendel yelled out and alerted the camp, his entire plans would have been for naught.

"What do you want?" Bannett growled at him. He wanted to use a stronger tone but he was also hoping that Brendel would not divulge his plan, which he was almost certain of.

Brendel lowered his sword.

Chapter 23

Dawn, mountain pathway

“It’s too dark. It seems like it’s a bad time to take a stroll right now.” Brendel said with a smile.

His eyes quickly swept over everyone, and he walked straight to the center of the twenty-odd people in front of him.

The young guards subconsciously parted to let him cross. Bannett gripped the sword in his hand tightly. He glared menacingly at Brendel, but also refrained himself from taking any action, as he knew he would not be able to suppress the commotion if they fought. One of his men at his side tried to rush up to Brendel but was held back by Bannett’s other hand.

The tension in the forest was as taut as a bowstring.

But Brendel kept walking to the other end of the forest before he stopped and spoke.

“Bannett, the things that you learned in the guards included disobeying orders? Well, I’ll tell you now that your plan is shit. All of you should know Captain Marden’s temper well enough. Why do you even bother to try forcing him to agree to your petition? If it was up to me, I’ll just bring everyone out secretly and leave one person behind to inform him.”

Everyone looked at each other with a loss for words.

Bannett’s hand on his sword shook a little. A streak of suspicion flashed in his eyes, involuntarily wondering what the cocky bastard in front of him was planning.

“Quickly now, go ahead and tell me when you’re going to move out to attack Madara, so I can decide when to move as well.”

“...Before the Crimson Star disappears.”

The young vice-captain thought for a while before replying. Even though he was wary

of Brendel's motives, his plan did sound more enticing, and the possibility to execute it was much better.

"Then you should go to the clearing of the 'Fox Forest' and hide there. That particular area should be the nearest and safest location to attack the Madara's undead army. I'll pick up a piece of paper, write up your excuses, and bring it to Marden to let him know what you're up to after you're gone."

"....."

"Also, be focused when you fight against the necromancers, their magic spells will only work against people with weak willpower!"

"Brendel, just what exactly do you want? How did you find Zeta and Ryan, and how did you manage to beat them?" Bannett asked darkly as he took his hand away from his sword.

"Alright, this might be our last meeting after we part. Whether we are rivals or simply hate each other's guts, it's possible that everything will become memories after this. In the end, we're Aouine's citizens, so I'll wish you luck."

Brendel waved his hand to indicate what he thought was not anything worth mentioning.

Bannett watched him leave silently.

.....

Leaving Marden's fury at Bannett's actions aside, the old veteran found that there was no way for him to attack the Madara's undead army any longer. He could only arrange for Freya to gather the villagers to form a defensive squad and prepare to break the siege at the River of Daggers in the north.

And right about this moment, Jonathon, who had lost his hand, was seeing Brendel and Romaine off. Little Fenix accompanied by his side to see them off too. Because of Little Fenix's age, Freya forced him to leave the militia. He was dissatisfied with her decision, but he recovered quickly when Brendel praised him a little and insisted on following Brendel to Fortress Riedon.

Of course, Brendel did not agree to his request. He figured that he would probably be

stabbed by Freya when he reached Anchorite if he allowed him to join.

Little Fenix was just too young and unsuitable, even though he indeed needed one more pair of hands.

Brendel stroked the brat's head.

On the other hand, Jonathon was at the sides, opening and closing his mouth without saying anything. He looked at Brendel in shame. He knew that he survived because of him.

"I-I'm sorry... Brendel, Thank you... For saving me at that time." He finally stuttered.

"It's fine. Everyone has their moment of confusion. Jonathon, the militia is willing to bring you back because they believe you will return to them. Alright, concentrate. Don't let anyone else look down on you any longer."

"Thank you."

Brendel nodded and looked up in the sky. The stars were beginning to fade, signaling the arrival of dawn. It was the darkest time of the night as the stars and moon disappeared, but it was going to be fine. Sunrise was coming soon.

He took his gaze away from the sky and lit torches together with Romaine. Even though it was a little unwise to light torches to travel in the dark with Madara's undead around, they were leaving the area. If there were beasts that appeared, the biggest threats were probably going to be just mere wolves. He was certain that he could handle five of them easily.

The two of them left from the camp's south and passed through the dense trees. The most common black pine trees in Grinoires appeared everywhere as far as they could see into the distance. There were occasional animal shadows that flitted in the light but quickly vanished.

They slowly walked past two hills, and the path became steep as they descended from the slope.

Anyone who saw their surroundings would be puzzled as to why the trees there were decaying. Many rugged and sharp boulders jutted out from the slope, and the valley in front of them was filled with such rocks.

“Brendel?” Romaine asked, suddenly finding the environment to be a little frightening.

“It’s nothing. Just follow me closely.”

Brendel knew his destination was getting closer when he saw this scene.

He had traveled this pathway in the game before. It was a very famous place amongst the players, and remarkably dangerous for anyone below level twenty.

He could not help but recall old memories of this place.

The Zevail mountain pathway started at the southern Beldor forest area, and the trees extended all the way to the Pine River. This area was excavated in the past to transport forest logs down the river, but the logging mills were mostly abandoned due to Madara’s expansion in the region.

The Zevail mountain pathway was disused and turned into a haven for illegal merchants who smuggled using the mountain pathway to avoid checkpoints.

Sometime later, a Golden Demon Tree set its roots in the area, taking the earth’s nutrients away, and the entire forest surrounding that area started to decay. It also killed all creatures which carelessly entered into that area, and the area was slowly perceived by people as a place of certain death.

The level 31 Golden Demon Tree had evolved to a ‘Rank Two creature’, and had the strength of a Silver-ranked Swordsman or a Wizard. Even the kingdom’s formal army did not want to go against this troublesome enemy.

Since it did not stop the communication between Fortress Riedon and Bucce, the kingdom’s knights chose to leave it alone.

But this location was a famous grinding spot within the game. The Golden Demon Tree remained undefeated in the game for the first three years, and the NPCs even made a wooden post in front of the entrance, where the Dwarven, Elven and Aouine’s common language were written on it:

“Beware! Those who enter this area should give up on all hope.”

Of course, some short-sighted players wanted to challenge themselves. However, these solo players who went in alone did not even get see the appearance of the boss and

perished. It was about a year in before people started going in with parties to adventure there, but the furthest they went in was to the stretch of the Pine river before they were forced back.

This continued to the latter half of the second year, and there was constant news of entire parties who died there circulating in the bars, turning into a hot topic during meals. When the 'War of the Black Rose' happened for the second time, the parties that entered the mountain pathway dwindled down, but in exchange, they were much stronger.

Brendel recalled that he entered the mountain pathway around that time. His experience in the game was quite plain. He was neither aggressive nor was he conservative. He managed to go to the Pine River and witnessed the unending bleak scenery filled with dying trees and dark shadows.

What gave him the deepest impression, was not the sudden change of Bucce's lush greenery to the death-like area here, but the strength of the enemies and unbelievably high encounter rate. His party was in a state of fatigue every day, and the party was finally dismissed when they could not continue onwards.

But two months after his stint, a guild called 'Freedom' completely tackled this area. They became very famous for a period. However, people realized afterward they were not that powerful, and simply found a special method to engage the enemy by luck. This method was released as a recorded video onto the internet by enthusiastic players and brought about a craze where players soloed the Golden Demon Tree.

Brendel was one of those people who benefited from the footage that was released, and managed to grind out an item called 'Heart of the Golden Tree'.

The average level of the players back then was level 27.

But what he wanted to do here was simply to cross the mountain pathway and skip the Golden Demon Tree boss. He had the Ring of the Wind Empress, as well as the Thorn of Light that had a purification effect against the undead, so he might have a chance to survive.

He reminisced about his gaming years with relish. The prices of the magical equipment in the past did not go down for an entire year, and he did not think that he would be able to cross this pathway with his equipment stats over 10 OZ at such a low

level.

Indeed, the godlike equipment he had now was something that he could not imagine.

Due to his knowledge in his past life, the facts that he owned two godly equipment from the very start made him feel surreal. If he was fortunate enough to escape from this disaster... He felt a little-hotblooded thinking about the future.

Precisely because of that, he had to cherish the chance in front of him. He gripped his sword a little tighter and called Romaine to follow a little closer to him.

The future merchant girl seemed to have an aptitude for adventuring. She nimbly jumped onto the sharp boulders on the way down to the valley without any trouble.

Even though dawn had probably broken by now, the darkness around them did not seem to lift. The only sources of light came from their burning torches, illuminating their rocky surroundings with long shadows.

If one were to look at them from afar, they would appear like two stars within the forest.

Brendel recalled there was a plateau nearby that allowed them to avoid encounters. It was too dangerous to enter the Zevail pathway currently, so he decided to travel in the daytime where it was a little safer to cross the pathway, and they were also likely to be out of the range of Madara's undead army by now.

The earliest undead army to reach Fortress Riedon in history was Kabias's division in the morning of the third day. This would mean that he had a full day to arrange his plans. The time remaining was plentiful.

He raised his head up and saw the outline of a sign in front of him.

Chapter 24

Withered trees

The deeper they went into the mountain pathway, the more desolate the scenery became. There was nearly no vegetation on the ground, and the path that was void of life was filled with intersecting rocks that appeared like sharp fangs.

Wilted brambles and grass had grown from within the cracks of the walls. Withered trees seemed to manifest themselves in the distant darkness. The cold wind could be heard blowing through tree branches like ghastly whispers.

Brendel knew that the Demonic Trees drained the nutrients from the soil and turned into this to a barren wilderness that people came to know about. He raised his torch, and there were occasional decrepit skeletons that appeared in the shadows. They seemed to be animals like mountain goats which had accidentally barged into this forbidden area and turned into the Demonic Trees' food.

Romaine nimbly followed behind with her torch raised with one hand, while she gripped her bag with the other and looked everywhere with curiosity and tension. It was the first time that she traveled this far away from her home, and she felt like she was beginning to fulfill a merchant's dream. The difficulty, excitement and the endless wealth and treasures awaited her, just like how this dream nurtured the numerous other merchants and adventurers in this continent.

She even had a sense of security by following Brendel.

The two sources of light passed through the narrow valley. Brendel's hand was placed over his sword's hilt. Once he passed through this area in the game, he would have entered a den of monsters of a certain type called the Rotting Beasts.

The Golden Demonic Tree was a terrifying creature. It was a variant of the Golden Trees, and its former body was most likely the Holy Elven Tree. However, 'The Tree Shepherd' who belong to one of the great evil cults, implanted the tree with the 'Blood of Gods' and turned it into a Golden Demonic Tree.

In this chaotic world, darkness thrived where civilization's fire was unable to reach.

Not only did the undead exist, but there were also regions where leaders found their own evil cults. In the game, evil disciples followed the footsteps of 'The Tree Shepherd' and did surreptitious things. There were signs of their actions everywhere, letting people know of their existence, but no one knew what their motives were.

Even Brendel was no exception.

The Golden Demon Tree had two abilities. The first was to turn plants into living creatures. It was able to turn shrubberies into monsters in the form of humans, and they were called Rotting Beasts. These Rotting Beasts were the scouts of the Golden Demon Tree which populate every area of this narrow valley.

A single Rotten Beast in the game was level 7, and their strength was roughly the equivalent of the guards that Brendel saw, but their intelligence was considered low. Veteran-ranked Rotten beasts were over level 13, which were difficult opponents for him.

The second ability it had was to infuse its fruits with Demonic Mana. When the fruits of the Golden Demon Tree fell onto the ground, it would turn into a wilderling creature, growing to over two meters tall within a day. These are elite guards of the Golden Demon Tree, and their level was between level 20 to 22. The only chance Brendel had if he encountered them was to use the Ring of the Wind Empress.

After several decades, these Rotten Beasts and Demonic Creatures had accumulated to a large number. If Brendel did not attain his current equipment, it would have been an impossible task for Romaine and himself to pass this narrow valley. He would also have to take special care to avoid the Golden Demon Tree which had reached a Grade 2 Ranked Creature.

They continued to progress with shuffling sounds from their footsteps, which sounded a little frightening in this lonely area. Brendel fondly remembered that he used to come here with a large bundle of ropes, oil, torch, dry rations and a hook to this area and fought the Golden Demon Tree hundreds of times.

The loot from the Golden Demon Tree was between 20 OZ and 30 OZ, and the best drop from it was the legendary 'Heart of the Golden Tree', which restored 1 hp every minute and considered to be a godly artifact in the early game.

The only difference Brendel felt was the future merchant girl following behind him.

He suddenly felt that it was somewhat romantic to adventure with the girl that he was interested in.

“Brendel?” Romaine suddenly whispered to alert him.

He turned around and noticed her gaze on his hand. He was slightly surprised as he found the Thorn of Light to be glowing with white light from its sheath.

[There are undead nearby!]

He was startled but immediately realized that the Madara undead might have sent a squadron to patrol this area to ensure no one slipped through their grasp. He relaxed a little as he considered a undead squadron to be an easy battle, as long as he did not alert the Rotten Beasts in the valley.

He pulled out the sword and started testing various directions. It turned brighter as he pointed to a specific location and he immediately knew they were ahead. He gestured for Romaine to stick closely to him and extinguished their torches and moved in that direction.

Indeed, there was a squadron of undead. Leading them was the Necromancer Kabara. Its performance in Buccie not only let the human scout escape, but it also led to the demise of a fellow Necromancer. Rothko assigned it to this area to punish it for the disappointing performance, and also to remind it not to be too eager to display himself in front of its master or superior. *(TL: Kabara appeared in Chapter 5.)*

Kabara understood its error, but the urgent issue was how to defend against the Rotting Beasts in front of him.

The necromancer and its soldiers had first defeated a Rotting Beast in the form of a human with full of thorns, but three other Rotting Beasts immediately charged at them. A pair of flaming eyes protected by branches was located presumably on their heads, and they glared at the undead soldiers. When Brendel took a further look, he saw there were broken skeleton bones around the Rotting Beasts.

Their battle had begun.

[What exactly are these creatures?!]

Kabara’s green flames dimmed in its eye sockets.

Seeing that the enemy was going to attack again, he could only reluctantly order its skeleton soldiers to change their weapons to their bows. The soldiers lit their arrows with a ghastly blue Soul Fire, and a wave of arrows shot at the creatures. Two Rotting Beasts that were struck by the arrows roared while their branches swayed about, causing a shuffling sound and they fell onto the ground, turning into two bright bundles of intense flames.

The necromancer instantly chuckled. They were indeed stronger than their skeletons, but these plants were afraid of fire. What a blunder, how did it not think of this point earlier? Kabara raised its staff and caused the remaining Rotting Beast to explode into two halves, and a shower of wooden splinters flew everywhere.

Brendel climbed onto a white boulder and involuntarily laughed when he saw the necromancer gloating from the victory.

[This moron is heading toward its death. It actually used magic here.]

The Golden Demon Tree's favorite nutrient was mana, and it sought after it like a drug. If there were any ripples of mana caused by any spells, it would immediately appear. This necromancer might not have known about it, but its demise was inevitable.

But this also meant that they were in trouble, and they needed to find a way to go someplace higher; otherwise, they would be killed along with this mindless undead.

He turned to Romaine and pulled her down. She had been looking and blinking at the undead. Her bright eyes did not contain fear, but curiosity.

"I recognize that necromancer." She whispered.

"Shhh!"

Brendel treated what Romaine said as a joke. The undead's appearance was similar enough to each other to make it hard to identify them, and they basically had no difference in their outer appearance other than the ripples of their soul. It was not only limited to the low ranking undead, and even when he identified the higher ranking ones, he did it by finding the decorations on their body or special bodily traits.

"I really do recognize it, Brendel, this was the one that I saw at your home from far away." She swore.

“Okay, just lower your voice, if you alert them, we are going to be in deep trouble.”

Brendel squinted. He had already seen shadows advancing from the darkness, and based on their movements they should be Rotting Beasts. After counting over thirty of them, he stopped. The numbers were still increasing, yet the necromancer had not ordered the skeletons to extinguish the Soul Fire on their arrows. The Rotting Beasts were attracted to light, and he decided to treat them with their deaths as a foregone conclusion.

“There seems to be a lot of things around us, Brendel,” Romaine said.

“Yeah, come with me. Lower your body, and don’t alert them.”

The two people continued to climb higher slowly with Brendel leading in front. He started to note the good points of bringing her along. She did not panic at all under this situation, and it was a difficult thing for a normal person to do so.

He recalled in the game where a bunch of female players in the party would scream whenever they entered some frightening places. But that was not the most embarrassing situation, as some of the guys also did the same thing.

He reminisced as he progressed upwards and looked down quietly from time to time.

The rotting beasts had started to gather into torrents from several directions below, surrounding the necromancer and the few skeletons. Kabara finally felt something was amiss, and started to cast a spell of Shadow Curtain. But before he finished chanting, two dark red creatures came out from his blind spot from between the boulders and smashed his remaining skeleton soldiers to bits.

[Marsha above, Lord Rothko! What are these damn things, there was no need to patrol here at all!]

The necromancer did not care about its subordinates at all as there was no compassion within the undead. But it was allowed to have a sense of self-preservation, and it jumped up onto the boulders quickly. A necromancer’s agility and strength were not low, but people tend to be misled by their appearance.

Brendel did not enjoy this scene at all because the necromancer jumped toward to his direction.

[Are you fucking kidding me, can't you choose a better direction?!]

He obviously did not dare to pull out the 'Thorn of Light', otherwise in this darkness, it would become a 'Lure of Light', where every enemy would have its eyes on him.

Fortunately, a dark red Rotten Beast suddenly jumped up to grab the necromancer's ankle which made it sink a little. Right at this moment, the Rotten Beasts had surrounded this area, and all the skeleton soldiers had probably been crushed to bits. If Kabara hesitated for one second, it would have followed their fate.

[Kill it!]

Brendel yelled in his mind.

He felt Romaine gripping his shoulder from behind, almost as if she was as tense as he was. Anyone who saw the situation would see that their positions would be exposed if the necromancer came any closer.

But Romaine's breaths landed on his ears and made him a little distracted. He turned around to look at her and found she was staring at some other place.

[Huh?]

Brendel subconsciously looked into her direction, and his heart plunged into an icy river.

Chapter 25

Minute and second

Brendel followed her gaze and nearly let go of his Thorn of Light, both sword, and scabbard, out of his hand from a tremble.

[What the hell?]

At the narrow valley where it intersected the area of sharp boulders, the field at one end was filled with throngs of Rotten Beasts chasing after the necromancer Kabara on the cliff, resembling a tidal wave that was climbing up slowly.

And on the other side, there was a slim figure that was also climbing up the narrow valley's cliff in his line of vision. She carried a huge bundle on her back, and a sword was hanging from it, swaying along with the girl's long ponytail as she slowly proceeded forward.

[Freya?]

He rubbed his eyes, almost thinking that he saw wrongly. But Romaine wouldn't be wrong at spotting her, and the reason why she was nervous was that it was definitely Freya. But did she not follow Marden to the River of Daggers, why did she appear here? He could not believe she would abandon the militia's third squadron.

"Brendel, that's Freya."

"I see her, just don't make any sound, I'll think of something!"

"She will be caught by them, so we need to help her right?" She turned her head back and asked testily.

"No, Romaine! I don't need your help on this matter. I'll definitely think of something."

He found it was a great pity that he did not even have the chance to go bonkers. The situation was very delicate, and the key to changing it was not in his hands. It was decided on whether his luck was good today, and unfortunately, it looked like he was

not.

The undead's situation was just as bad. Brendel turned back and saw the necromancer cutting out his feet without any hesitation, forcing the Rotten Beast that had grabbed onto it fall into the midst of the other monsters.

It quickly flipped over and used its bony hands to climb up the cliff. Its 1.7 OZ strength allowed its light skeletal body to climb rapidly as if it was flying on it. However, when it boosted itself upwards mid-way of the cliff, it suddenly paused.

Kabara raised its head, and the green flames in its sockets illuminated a male human's shocked and angry face on top of a gigantic boulder. While it felt that the ripples of his lifeforce were a little familiar, it was of no importance, because it had already raised its bone staff at Brendel.

[A human maggot.]

It thought in its mind.

Brendel was unable to care anymore at this moment, he pulled out his sword with a singing ring, the Thorn of Light bursting with dazzling radiance in the darkness, and thrust it straight into Kabara's forehead, creating a light crack. A golden flame surged forth from the crack and spread everywhere.

"Ga—" Half of a word was stuck in Kabara's throat. The speed from Brendel's thrust was so swift that it was unable to react, and it felt it was reaching the end of its life.

Kabara had once thought it would become a great necromancer.

It tried to stagger backward, but the youth grabbed its bony hand. It was surprised for a moment, wondering why he wanted to save it. Yet it was a undead that forever worshiped the Dragon of Calamity, how could it ever accept a lowly human's aid?

Just when it was feeling vexation over his actions, it saw that he smoothly pulled off the ring from its index finger.

[Despicable! You human maggot, bandit...]

This was Kabara's last thought, and the Soul Fire in its eyes was extinguished.

Three experience points.

Brendel was surprised that this necromancer had a remarkable Ring of Spiders which added +0.2 Perception. The familiar patterns struck out at him, as he had one in the past that he kept as a souvenir and did not throw it away.

Perception was a stat that allowed a character to sense its surroundings and boosted hearing, smelling, sight, touch and taste to complete a comprehension towards space and objects.

It was a fundamental attribute in the game. There was a low-level dungeon in Bruglas called 'The Public Mausoleum', where it did not allow the usage of a fire. Parties had to keep dodging a high-level monster in the complicated passageway in it, and items that raised perception and agility were once highly sought after because of it.

Brendel's friend had once given this exact ring to him, and when he reminisced about it, he felt tearful. He nearly sold everything he had to gather a full set of 10 OZ worth of perception equipment, and in the end, he still failed to complete 'The Public Mausoleum'.

With the chain of thoughts, he suddenly recalled there was a wonderful item for warriors within this dungeon, The Emblem of Bravery, +2 Military swordsmanship. He patted his head, as he had forgotten about this item. He had spared no expenses in order to get this emblem in the past.

"Brendel, Brendel!" Romaine's voice was full of anxiety.

He was startled, the merchant girl did not panic so easily, did something happen to Freya? He quickly threw the necromancer away and saw a Rotten Beast which caught up to Freya. It extended its withered branch-like claws and grabbed onto the bundle's strap that the girl was carrying, and hauled her backward.

"Freya, be careful!" Romaine exclaimed in surprise, and she stood up and wanted to run downwards, but Brendel grabbed her and pulled the girl who could not read the situation back.

[Seriously, please stop adding to my pile of troubles!]

"Just stay here and wait!" He threw the Ring of Spiders at Romaine to let her look after it.

There was a limit to how much magical equipment a character could use, and the witches speculated that it had something to do with a human's mana pool. Brendel, a level 2 mercenary had reached the peak of what he could use when he had 40 OZ worth of equipment.

“Okay, Brendel, but...”

When he looked around his surroundings one more time, he realized that he was worried to leave this clumsy girl here. He had pulled out the Thorn of Light earlier, lit the area and attracted attention to himself. If he left her there, she might be attacked.

If Little Romaine got injured, he would really regret it. But Freya was also in the midst of grave danger, and he already treated this determined and kind lass as his most important partner, how could he do nothing at all? He was really in a dilemma here.

All these thoughts passed through his mind in a fraction of a second.

At the bottom of the valley, Freya shrugged off the Rotten Beast's claws and struggled to run forward two steps before falling. Her helpless eyes glimmered with a little hope when she saw them in front of her.

“Brendel—” She got dragged backward before she managed to finish her sentence.

“Pull out your sword.” He shouted.

“It's grabbing on to my bag; I can't get to it—”

[This blockhead!]

He decisively passed the Thorn of Light to Romaine: “This sword can curb them, protect yourself!”

“What about you, Brendel?”

The youth shook his head to inform her not to worry and ran towards Freya's direction.

[Damn it. This isn't the first time anyway. If fate likes to play jokes on me, then go ahead and do so.]

Monsters seemed to like picking off the weak first just like how it was in the game. Before he even jumped down, a human-shaped shrubbery had blocked his path.

A young Rotten Beast, level 7 creature, with 2.2 Strength, 3 Physique, 1.2 Agility, Dark attribute, weak to fire and striking, half-resistant to piercing attacks.

Brendel's memories came back in a rush. The unique points of a plant-type monster were its high physique, but low agility and the Thorn of Light was truly their bane. Except he did not have it right now. He gritted his teeth and cursed quietly. The only thing he could rely on was his 2.1 Agility, and he did not intend to waste time with this enemy.

The Rotten Beast in front of him did not feel the same way as it lumbered heavily towards him. Even though it was in a human shape, it ran on all fours, completely looking like a wild human that had not evolved.

Brendel dodged sideways to avoid its claws, and the sharp tips of the branches scratched a few bloody marks across his forehead. He thought it was fortunate that it was not undead. Otherwise, the debilitating poison in his body would accumulate again.

But he did not have the time to celebrate as a green line scrolled down in his retinas:

“Emergency warning: You have been affected by a paralyzing poison.”

[Fuck! I completely forgot about this!]

Brendel nearly cursed out loudly.

Because he was over level twenty in the game and could easily pass through the Rotten Beast's territory stealthily, he forgot that this creature's attacks also had poison. Even if it were weak, the combination of the remaining debilitating poison and paralyzing poison would cause significant deficits to his status.

Even though he cursed his mistake, his actions did not slow down at all. His hands grabbed the enemy's thorny claws and pushed it back, targeted the dark red Rotten Beast and used the ability 'Charge'.

This dark red Rotten Beast was a mature type.

Brendel took a deep breath. A mature Rotten Beast had 4.7 Strength which surpassed even a Gargoyle. A Grade 1 Rank creature's power, was not easily trifled with. But he suddenly noted something strange. A mature beast should have dragged Freya away easily right?

Brendel used the young Rotten Beast as a stepping platform and kicked off from it, did a spin in the air, and his skill activated, his speed accelerating across the sharp intersecting rocks with a blurry afterimage.

Dozens of meters were covered in a mere second.

"Let go of your bag, Freya!"

But she held on to it and shook her head defiantly. One of her hands grabbed onto the nearby rock, but she was unable to hold on much longer. One of her fingers slipped.

But he finally reached before she let go of her hand entirely.

"Lower your head!" He bellowed, and he pulled out her sword on the bag when he charged over, then sliced off the strap that the mature Rotten Beast was holding on to.

The dark red human-shrubbery figure immediately lost its balance and fell backward. It tried to regain its stability by grabbing on to something, but Brendel followed up quickly with a kick to the chest, and it fell backward to a deep recess in the valley.

Rotten Beasts were very light, and the one that fell might not perish from it, but it certainly would not be able to climb back up for a while. Brendel finally relaxed after he saw that it disappeared into the darkness. However, he snapped his head back, and his tone became severely reproachful:

"Are you trying to die!"

Freya raised her head and looked at him with her bright eyes. She probably did not expect him to be so furious, and she bit her lips, turning her head away stubbornly.

He wanted to continue his excoriation but paused when he suddenly saw that her hands were full of abrasions and blood. Furthermore, their dangerous situation was still not resolved. He sighed and pulled her up and said: "I have many things to ask you, but we will talk later. Romaine is still waiting for us up there."

“Okay.”

When he wanted to turn back, he saw two golden light entered into his chest. Two XP. He looked back in shock and discovered Romaine raising her skirt with one hand while carrying the Elven sword with the other, running down towards him. The young Rotten Beast had been carefully skewered by her and turned into a pile of ashes.

The merchant girl was also shocked when she saw the results, not expecting the sword in her hand to be so powerful!

“Why did you also come down?” Brendel suddenly felt an urge to send a smack on her head.

“I thought very seriously for a while, Brendel, but I think I don’t have the means to defend myself.”

He went speechless for a while.

Chapter 26

Elite Rotten Beast

“You’re going to scold me right, Brendel?”

“No, just quickly come over. Be careful.”

Brendel felt frustrated and amused over Romaine’s careful steps. But he stiffened when he looked up; three young Rotten Beasts were occupying the boulder he and Romaine were at earlier.

He then surveyed his surroundings and found they had become the shrubby monsters’ targets after the undead squadron was annihilated. It was especially true when the merchant girl still held the shimmering Thorn of Light, as it was like a candle’s flame in the darkness, attracting the servants of the Golden Tree.

Brendel could almost hear the Golden Demon Tree roaring for its thirst of mana in his mind. They had to leave this place before as they even might even encounter Demonic Creatures, the personal guards of the Golden Demon Tree. He turned back to Freya.

“How about it, can you still go on?”

Freya nodded.

“Then we will be going up from the other side, take your sword and be careful.” He said as he passed the girl’s sword back over to her. Even though the Rotten Beasts occupied the high grounds where they originally were, there were none of these shrubby monsters in the opposite direction.

These plant creatures’ speed was not very fast, and they moved across the intersecting boulders only as fast as normal humans. Their main advantages were their numbers, familiarity with the land, high physique and resilience. But he had to find a way to escape them.

Freya brought her bloody hands onto the steep slope, and the pain made her flinch, but she gritted her teeth and tore her sleeves to get makeshift bandages and wrapped

them around her hands. She then continued to climb up the sharp rocks.

Brendel felt sorry and admiration when he saw this scene. However, there was not much time left, so he quickly took back the Thorn of Light back from Romaine and let her climb up first. When he looked again, two Rotten Beasts below them were already on the move.

“Brendel, hurry up!” Romaine said.

Freya’s face was pale from the anxiety and stretched her hand towards him. But he did not have the time to reply to them. The two Rotten Beasts had half stood up and hissed threateningly at the youth.

From a certain viewpoint, these Rotten Beasts did not count as intelligent life and were purely the puppets of the Golden Demon Tree.

Brendel swung his sword horizontally, and the flash of light cutting through the darkness made them retreat slightly. He wanted to grab Freya’s hand with this slight opening, but they immediately charged forward with a low roar.

[You really are seeking death!]

Brendel became furious and used his high agility to jump up, flew across in mid-air and used the Rotten Beasts’ heads as a foothold and swiveled, his upper body already in the best position for an attack.

A horizontal slash in a smooth arc.

“Ah.”

Freya uttered in surprise, finally knowing how far apart she was from Brendel in swordsmanship. She did not think herself as talented, but her greatest pride was believing that she had worked harder and was more focused than most people to do something; Her swordsmanship which was the best in the militia did not mean she was talented, and very few people noticed how much effort she put into training.

This was the reason Marden admired her and made her the leader of the militia squadron.

But her swordsmanship’s foundation could only be considered as solid, while

Brendel's swordsmanship was truly extraordinary and if there were a word to describe it, it would be 'flawless'.

With a single slash, a head was lopped off, without any mistakes at all.

A ring of silver fire burst out from the headless Rotten Beast's wound and quickly consumed the creature. The other Rotten Beast shrieked sharply at him, its claws suddenly extending and they swung at him. As Rotten Beasts rarely did this, many people were deceived by the range of their attacks, but Brendel was unfazed.

[Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me!]

He had already experienced it before in the game, why would he step into the same trap again?

He was already prepared for this attack and raised his sword to block it. The Rotten Beast's claws struck against the Thorn of Light and caused a shower of silvery sparks to fly everywhere. It retreated in agony, but Brendel did not let the chance slip and launched a counter-attack.

He took a big step forward and thrust the Elven sword straight at it.

This was his common technique in the game, but his basic stats and current swordsmanship level made him feel exceedingly clumsy when he executed the attack, with his timing also lagging behind. He took note of his delay and estimated that an Iron-Ranked swordsman would easily be able to avoid his sword, but right now the Rotten Beast had no chance of dodging it.

The sword pierced through its throat.

Fiery silver flames burst out from the entry and exit wounds, turning the Rotten Beast into a pile of ashes in the blink of an eye. 6 golden lights flew in the sky and into Brendel's chest.

The strength of the 'Purification' greatly surprised Brendel. He had never seen anything like it in the game.

"Brendel, you're actually so skilled!" Romaine was momentarily stunned.

Freya was at a loss for words. She assumed that Brendel belonged to Bruglas's militia,

but now that she thought about it, he was most likely lying to her. She was not a fool; how could a militia be so skilled unless he was bluffing?

In truth, the two of them were not skilled enough to judge Brendel's current level. He severely lacked in speed and strength, and the techniques that he barely managed to use were due to his experience.

He also made use of the large difference in the agility between him and the Rotten Beast, and thus was able to execute his mid-air spin, but if he faced another enemy, he would definitely not attempt this method. Without the proper stats and skill level, many of the techniques he knew were mostly useless.

[What a joke, I'm actually painting a target on my back if I do this stunt without unsealing my 'Element' status.]

Brendel did not spend any time enjoying the girls' reactions as he noticed that more Rotten Beasts were climbing up. He quickly signaled for the two of them to continue climbing, and subconsciously looked at the pile of ashes. It was a gaming instinct of his, and funnily enough, he wanted to see if any loot dropped from them.

[Of course not. Well, it's certainly different from the game, didn't they at least drop 1 or 2 copper coins?]

He shook his head and continued climbing up the slope.

A mature Rotten Beast had superior strength and physique compared to a young Mature Beast, but its agility was only two-thirds of their 1.2 Agility. Romaine and Freya had standard militia training, so their speed did not lose out to a young Rotten Beast, not to mention Brendel.

The three of them kept climbing higher and higher, gradually pulling away from the shrubby monsters. However, the latter had the seemingly endless stamina and kept pursuing them, and this cat and mouse game continued for several minutes.

The differences in physique were starting to show.

Even though Brendel was not affected much, Freya had started to pant a little, and Romaine's face was as pale as a sheet. Brendel offered to carry her on his back, but she refused to let him do so.

He looked back at them, and they were behind them approximately tens of meters away. It was fortunate they had not surrounded them from the front due to their lack of intelligence, or else it would have been over. But it was a matter of time before they caught up to them, as a young Rotten Beast had 3.0 Physique which was even higher than his own.

He looked up and checked the distance to reach the peak of the mountain. It was not too far away.

Romaine suddenly shouted breathlessly: “Brendel, look over at the other side on top of the mountain!”

He followed Romaine’s instruction. His pupils contracted slightly as he saw a gigantic Rotten Beast that was over three meters tall, which had suddenly come out from a fissure. It moved quickly towards them.

[Holy shit! An Elite version, this is the leader of the Rotten Beasts!]

He loved to see this creature in the game, but now he was hurling every known expletive in his heart at it. This particular thing was an evolved version of the Rotten Beast as it had directly received the Golden Tree’s blood. Not only did it have an increase in both strength and physique, but most importantly, it had 1.7 agility which would definitely match his party.

“Freya, Romaine, both of you need to quickly go to the edge of the slope over there, and climb upwards to that vertical cliff. There are a grappling hook and rope in my bag, and once we climb up these monsters would not be able to catch up with us for a while!”

He decisively threw his bag to Romaine. He was the only man here, and he had to take up the responsibility.

Even though there was gender equality back in his world, it was an etiquette for the guys to be in charge of defending the rear in the game, and he made this decision immediately without thinking.

“I’m staying behind,” Freya said.

He looked and saw her determined face. He knew that he was unable to persuade her, so he nodded. But this was also because he needed another assistant and at least Freya

was a suitable candidate. Romaine who lazed around in militia training and aspired to be a merchant instead was surely not.

“Romaine, hurry, we’re depending on you.”

“Okay, Brendel!” She nodded as hard as she could and moved to the designated area as fast as she could.

The Elite Rotten Beast quickly leaped towards them. The throng of Rotten Beast was approximately forty meters away. Brendel and Freya looked at each other and estimated they had approximately thirty seconds to finish this battle.

“The range of its claws are three meters long, so be careful of its attacks. We should stand apart from each other. It is also able to shoot the thorns from its body, and they are poisoned. Be sure to dodge this attack from the front.”

She clenched her sword nervously and took a deep breath. Even though she did not know why Brendel knew all these, she was certain that he would not lie to her. She tried to calm herself and nodded quietly.

Brendel grasped his own hands. They felt a little stiff. The paralyzing poison from before had started to show an effect. He opened his character window to check his stats and discovered that his agility had dropped 0.1 OZ.

He then eyed the Elite Rotten Beast with a lament.

[Elite Rotten Beasts only drop money in the game, it’s over ten silver coins! Surely there would be some loot here right?]

But judging from the previous example... He grumbled inwardly.

Chapter 27

Soul Gem

The gigantic Rotten Beast raised its branch-like claws that were the size of a human and used them to smash Brendel. He quickly bent his body to evade it, and the attack went past his head like a hammer.

The withered branches of the claw dragged the air along with it, causing his hair to dance wildly as they continued to swing against a boulder behind him, knocking it away some twenty to thirty meters with a deafening boom.

Brendel spied on the boulder to see it hit and crash against the walls three times, before finally piercing deeply into the ground, bringing debris and dust everywhere to where it landed

He felt a sudden tightness in his throat; the monster's strength was just too terrifying. If he got struck even once, his entire skeleton would not be able to absorb the impact, and would instantly be reduced to bits. His organs would be ruptured from the immense pressure, while the shattered bone remains would pierce them and create a bloody mess everywhere.

Brendel quickly searched through his memories. The Elite Rotten Beast's 8.9 OZ Strength made it one of the strongest Level 20 Creatures around, and only Berserkers and the Dwarven Steel Guards would be able to match its strength.

He had no intentions of facing it head on. He quickly gestured to Freya to protect him from the sides, and used his advantage in agility to get into range for an attack. He swung the Thorn of Light at its left foot.

The monster was nearly 5 meters tall, the branch-like claws were nearly 3 meters wide, and it had great attack range. But when it lowered its head, it found that it had trouble hitting Brendel below it.

Brendel struck its leg with his sword, but the bright purification flames only left a scorch mark on it. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead when he saw the result.

Even though the Elite Rotten Beast had high physique, toughness and resistance, the end result should not be this. This meant that there was a 'Power Rating Difference' here. This was a system setting that was in the game but he did not expect it to be here in this world as well.

Still, the attack from Brendel made the gigantic Rotten Beast raise its head up and roar. The ear-piercing bellow made the nearby blades of grass quiver.

Brendel felt a dull ache in his chest, and Freya even coughed out blood.

[The skill 'Howling Fury' from the Elite Rotten Beast should not have affect us this much! Is it because our levels are too low?]

Brendel felt he was damaged everywhere inside his body. The data in his retina showed different levels of damage in his organs.

"Brendel!" Romaine shouted not too far away.

He turned back and discovered she had finished setting the hook to the rope, as well as attaching it to the cliff above. He felt relieved. Romaine could be relied on when there were critical moments. She was calm during desperate times and certainly had the potential to become a merchant.

He looked at the other direction. The young Rotten Beasts were very close to finish climbing up, and they only had a few seconds left.

"Freya." He immediately shouted.

"I'm, cough, fine." She resolutely wiped away the trail of blood from her lips, raised her sword up and took on a defensive posture again.

"I'm going to finish it off, cover me, but stay out of its attack range."

She nodded. Gripping the sword firmly with two hands, she attacked the Elite Rotten Beast's flank with a low roar. It wanted to stomp on Brendel but got distracted by her. Due to its low intelligence, it diverted its attention to Freya as she appeared to be more threatening.

It turned around immediately and spread out its branches, and numerous thorns whistled through the air and shot at Freya.

She was prepared for the attack as Brendel had warned her about it a while ago. She immediately curled up, defending her chest and head with both her arms. She gritted her teeth as her whole body bled from the attack and was sent crashing back against a boulder from the thorns. However, she was still pleased that she had gained time for Brendel.

Brendel had no time to worry about Freya; he retreated from the Rotten Beast and squatted down, raised his right hand and aimed at the injured left leg with his shining finger.

“Oss!”

The air temporarily went still, then an explosive current of wind blasted at the Elite Rotten Beast’s left leg. Splinters flew everywhere. Nearly half of its body went missing. Withered leaves scattered like it was raining as it lost its balance and fell backwards.

Even if the monster’s defense was doubled, it was unable to defend against a 20 OZ charged attack.

Brendel activated his ‘Charge’ skill next, dashing forward and jumped high up, matching the moment where it fell down. He raised the Thorn of Light and swung it down with all his strength, slashing through its neck with gravity aiding him.

The Elite Rotten Beast roared again, wanting to resist, but Brendel twisted the sword to drive it further in. Silver flames burst out frantically, and the mighty monster finally lowered its head, its life reaching to an end. As the life force and resistance from the Elite Rotten Beast ended, the flames instantly consumed the entire body and it was turned into a massive fire.

Numerous golden lights flew from the fire and into Brendel’s chest.

17 XP.

He suddenly felt a cold feeling in his palm and looked at it. Black smoke gathered from the gigantic Rotten Beast and poured onto his palm. It gradually became solid and formed into a black color crystal.

[A Soul Gem!]

Brendel was shocked, but he quickly smiled gleefully. The power from a Soul Gem was

the purest form of energy in this world. Not only did Madara's wizards use them, but other wizards from different schools were also analyzing their uses in the game. With different rituals, it could be turned into XP to himself or other people, and even replenish a magical equipment's energy or activate certain items.

For example, the Ring of the Wind Empress.

This size of the Soul Gem looked like it contained at least 30 XP, and was enough to charge the Ring of the Wind Empress at least once. He thought he had to find a safe place and hide for at least three hours before proceeding. Without a charge on the ring, he would not have dared to advance any further, but that would have been too much time wasted.

[To think there's a chance to succeed at the end.]

He sheathed his sword and checked the young Rotten Beasts' progress. He found there was already one of them on the plateau they were at and received a shock. He and Freya were exhausted from the fight, and they would not be able to fight another battle. If they were dragged into a fight again, the situation would become dire.

Freya was relieved when she saw him kill the gigantic monster, but her heart raced when she saw the enemies appearing on the plateau. She tried standing up with furrowed eyebrows, but Brendel ran over to her with long strides and carried her like a princess towards the rope without giving her a chance to resist.

"Wh—"

"L-let me down."

The future Goddess of War, currently a countryside girl from Buccie who was blushing, struggled for a while. But Brendel did not listen to her, and she could only let him quietly carry her as she hid her crimson face to the sides.

Romaine had already climbed up when they reached the vertical cliff. She was a decisive person without much fear, and if they still did not reach the cliff, Brendel was sure that she would climb down again.

More and more Rotten Beasts were hot on their heels; they were running out of time.

He wrapped the rope on Freya, then around his own waist. Even though he felt her

body turn rigid, he was unable to worry too much. With the boost in experience points, he leveled up his Mecenary profession to 3. He was able to bring the two of them up with a single hand with 2.5 OZ in strength,

A young Rotten Beast abruptly jumped and tried to grab his feet as he climbed up, but Brendel's lightning reactions guarded against it by drawing the sword from the scabbard and slashing it, instantly sending it back to the throng of monsters. He continued to climb upwards after sheathing his sword.

The three of them were able to reach the top, and they sighed with relief at the same time. Brendel saw that the monsters tried to imitate them by climbing the rope up. He cut the rope with the sword and sent them dropping down without thinking. They had plenty of rope left, and the only important thing they needed to keep was the hook.

Brendel knew that the area they were in extended for kilometers. If the servants of the Golden Demonic Tree still wanted to find them, they had to go all the way to the other end of the mountain valley, so he had enough time to rest. He sat down and gave a long sigh.

"You're the best!" He gave a thumbs up at Romaine. Her performance was just amazing earlier.

[This 'Brendel' really has good luck to be able to pick her up.]

"Really? My aunt also said this many times, 'Little Romaine, you are really the best.'"

The merchant girl puffed up her chest in pride, but quickly cast concerned glances on Freya. He knew she was concerned with her best friend's injury, so he answered:

"Don't worry. These are just superficial wounds. Once we find a safe place and bandage her up, it should be fine."

Freya was still blushing and did not reply.

Brendel finally got the chance to breathe, and he glanced at the future Goddess of War.

He felt a little cross. He wondered how she survived the 'War of the Black Rose'. Was it the qualities of being 'determined' and 'calm'?

The past Freya gave him an impression like that. Even though she was a little naive,

she had great composure that ordinary people would not have. Perhaps she had her own reasons to come here but not letting her bag go made Brendel displeased. She was too stubborn, but maybe that stubborn nature of hers nurtured her tenacious character.

[This is still a bad thing in the battlefield.]

“Why did you come here?” In the end, she was a fellow soldier, and he did not want to hurt her feelings. He thought for a while and decided to use a gentle tone.

Freya was silent for a while, then she removed a ring from her finger: “This is the seal ring from the Captain of the guards. Captain Marden asked me to bring this to you when you report to Fortress Riedon.”

Brendel patted his own forehead.

It was not because he forgot about this matter. The truth was he did not expect to be treated seriously by the people at Fortress Riedon. The militia like Freya might not know this, but a veteran like Marden understood it clearly. If the nobility in Fortress Riedon treated the defense in Bucces with importance, the situation with Madara would not happen today.

The biggest reason why he wanted to go to Fortress Riedon was due to Romaine’s aunt. He did not expect Marden to be moved by his actions and send his personal ring over. He had overlooked this, and he would have rejected Marden personally if he predicted this would happen.

After all, this ring would be of great use to the refugees.

“You were the one who requested to come, right?” But Brendel reflected on it for a while longer, believing that the veteran soldier would never send Freya to her death even if the ring was of great importance.

The girl combed and tidied her ponytail, then nodded.

“Why bother?”

“You’re not from Bucces, Brendel, what excuses do I have to run away? I’m the leader of the third militia squadron, and I need to set myself as an example.” She looked at him and answered.

“And what’s inside the bag?”

The future Goddess of War lowered her head and hugged the bag. She hesitated for a while.

Chapter 28

Haven

“The Half Plate of the Wind Empress!?”

Brendel opened the heavy bag and took a look inside. He rubbed his temples after finding the copper-colored armor tucked neatly in it.

[It's no wonder then... It's no wonder why the mature Rotten Beast could not drag Freya away. This armor was protecting her.]

“Why didn't you wear this?”

“The armor shone with light the last time I wore it, and I was afraid Madara's undead would see me. I wanted to wait for daytime when it a little brighter...”

“Light?”

“It's a green-colored light that wraps around the armor sigils.”

“That's called the ‘Wind's Feathers’, it's not light.” Brendel sighed when he saw her looking puzzledly at himself. It was the most basic knowledge in the game, so he did not expect Freya not to know it at all. He could only pick up the armor and explain it to her.

The Half-Plate of the Wind Empress was the creation of the blacksmith Saint Orso. Just like his ring, the armor had the sigil of the Wind Empress, but these items had their own additional trademark from the creators. For example, the true Ring of The Wind Empress was made by the druids, while Saint Orso placed his own kingdom's emblem on the armor.

Brendel's thought about his ring for a moment. It was a replica and might have been made from a human wizard.

[Strange, even if it's a replica, the old Brendel's grandfather should not have owned this particular equipment.]

He was unable to gather any useful information from his memories, so he stopped thinking about it. If he was to look at it as a gamer, then this might be a hidden mission, but that would be something to do later when he was able to find that lame merchant in the Black Pepper Street.

This particular armor plate came from Elven hands. It was a piece of equipment specifically made for the Elven guards by the Elves; but ever since the 'Year of the Returning Light', hundreds of such armor plates were brought into various kingdoms, so they were not particularly valuable.

In the game's equivalent, it was a 15 OZ equipment.

The 'Wind's Feathers' was added onto the armor's Wind Empress sigils. It was a type of magic that diminishes incoming force or the game equivalent of 'Reduce Blunt Damage'. Plant creatures were particularly affected by this type of magic, so it was not a surprise that the mature Rotten Beast had their strength sealed to a significant degree.

The thing that Freya did not know was the light that came from 'Wind's Feathers' could only be seen if it activated against enemies' attacks.

Freya felt incredibly embarrassed as Brendel explained. She felt like she was a country bumpkin and made a laughing stock out of herself. Her head kept lowering until she finally grumbled in a tiny voice: "Why didn't tell me this earlier?"

[Am I a mind reader? A telepath?] Brendel refuted in his mind.

But he understood that he had subconsciously treated many things like it was common knowledge and caused some misunderstandings. It was difficult to adjust his gamer's habits as he had immersed himself in 'The Amber Sword' for years.

When he saw Freya's crimson face and her arms hugging the bag tightly, he felt that he did not need to ask why she did not throw the bag away. It was because he was the one who entrusted the armor to her and he felt quite pleased that she trusted in his armor that much, so he did not have the heart to scold her anymore.

"This equipment is not a living thing, but you are. No matter how precious this might be, you have to protect yourself first if you re-encounter a situation like this, understand?" He said.

“I’m sorry.”

“How about the third militia?”

“I handed things over to Little Fenix.”

“Little Fenix?”

“Yes, Uncle Marden told me that he might be the most hopeful person in Bucce to make it big, so I used to take care of him and hoped that he would become Bucce’s pride, but I thought that you might be right. How could he grow without tempering himself?”

“You might have thought it through, but did Irene agree on it?”

Brendel sighed again with relief. Freya had walked out from her little world. He thought she might still insist on making the same naive decisions, but realized after her composed behavior that she had grown instead.

“Irene and I have the same idea.”

He nodded. He was able to breathe easier with the squadron’s affairs settled.

[It was fortunate that there wasn’t much of a problem in the militia. Even though Freya’s a little headstrong and somewhat of a petty person, she’s a reliable partner. But it bugs me that she did not throw away the bag at that critical moment. Then again I feel touched. Hah... This is a heavy friendship.]

He turned back and discovered Romaine, who was separated by a campfire, studying the cave they were using to avoid the enemies. It was as if the cave was some sort of rare treasure to her. He wondered if she would ever be worried about her surroundings.

“Brendel, how did you know about this place? It looks like the terrifying monsters will not be able to find us if we are in here.” She asked.

Freya nodded: “But we can’t keep hiding here forever. When the day is a little brighter, let’s set off.”

Brendel also agreed. Both of them were right. The Zevail pathway had several hiding places, and back then in that fateful year, countless ‘Nightingales’ and ‘Hunters’ paid

with their lives to seek out this passageway, allowing the players to avoid the majority of the Golden Demonic Tree's servants and get close to the Monster Boss.

But it had two serious caveats.

The first issue was the need to travel all the way to the heart of Zevail's pathway, into the 'Forbidden Garden'. There were several broken ridges, and they had to use a rope to go across. What would await them would be a bunch of personal guards of the Golden Demonic Tree. But he was confident that he could handle it.

The second issue was leaving from the 'Forbidden Garden' shadow passageway. He needed Grifond's crystal key, which was hanging from the Golden Demonic Tree's branches. In the past, he killed the boss and took it away, but Brendel had to improvise this time.

He roughly enacted the entire process in his mind, and if there were any situation that suddenly cropped up, he would have to handle it on the fly. A perfect plan only existed in novels, and reality was not so forgiving.

It was the importance of having a trump card, and why Brendel placed so much importance in the 'Ring of the Wind Empress'.

He took out the soul gem to check it in detail under the fire. The heavy item looked more like obsidian, but a wizard would be able to differentiate it if they poured energy into it, while an ordinary human being would be to see the differences visually if they were familiar with it.

Brendel brought it near to the campfire, and the crystal immediately looked like it was about to evaporate which proved it was a soul gem. The energy of the Soul was volatile under fire if there was no protection, and explained why Madara's lower ranked undead feared fire.

"What's that?" Romaine asked curiously.

He placed the crystal to his ring and infused 10 OZ worth of power into it. The crystal first darkened a little before turning a little more transparent. Pouring any more power would be a waste.

He considered using the gargoyle statue. He would have the best chance of repairing and activating it but ultimately gave up. There were at least 300 different command

combinations to enable it, and he spent the entire night testing it out half of the commands combination without succeeding. The remaining 20 OZ = 20 XP was not something meager either.

It would probably take 100 XP to completely repair the statue.

[What else can I do with this then? Keep this and wait for another use?]

To the current Brendel, XP that was used now would be useful XP. He needed to raise his strength urgently. He could only change the world by surviving right here and now.

[Use it on myself? Or add it to a skill's XP bar? But the ratio is just plain terrible, 10 XP is needed to just change into 1 AP! In addition, there are no skills right now that I need to learn from the Mercenary profession. But I can't possibly waste it to level up the Militia's level right? I have to wait at least till I have an abundance of XP.]

Brendel felt he was in between a rock and a hard place. He rechecked the outside sky. It was starting to become fairly bright, and they were ready to move off. The servants relied on phototaxis receptors, sounds, and mana ripples to sense their surroundings, so there was no difference to them be it day or night. Humans would have an easier time if they traveled in the daytime, as the light from the torch flames were a giveaway to the Rotten Beasts.

His hand searched his pockets to see if there was anything else that he could use, and he quickly found that card with an artistic drawing on it. Brendel suddenly had the idea of experimenting with it.

To identify an item required a full set of alchemy tools and information books. Players who were not so good at doing that simply went to a NPC. However, it was quite expensive to identify things and the game allowed players to use items even if they did not know what it is.

So many players developed a system to test the items out.

He first tried using common chants, but nothing happened. Then he brought the soul gem to touch the card and check if there was any reaction. Usually, there would be some mana resonance if the item reacts to the soul's energy.

But he did not expect the card to suddenly shine with piercing radiance from the moment he touched it with the soul gem. In fact, the soul gem completely lost its color

and became a transparent crystal.

[There's an absorbing reaction!]

Brendel nearly jumped up in shock, and he stared speechlessly at the transparent crystal in his hand.

Soul gems that lost their potency were called 'Creation Containers', wizards and Elementalists bought these containers and used them as storage for spells. They were similar to 'spell scrolls' in other games, while these crystals were the 'spell scrolls' in this world.

But Brendel was not concerned about this right now. He felt a terrifying shiver traveling all the way up to his spine. 'Mana Absorption' was one of the strongest mana ripples amongst the resonance types. He had gambled wrongly, and even if the Golden Demonic Tree were more than ten miles away, it would have felt this...

This was not the only enemy. With such a strong reaction, who knows if any strange creatures had their eyes on him?

Brendel did not understand why the card reacted so strongly with the 'Mana Absorption' effect. Such effects only appear when it is a magical equipment over 40 OZ, and this card did not look like one.

Brendel quickly made his decision and stood up. Freya and Romaine naturally looked at him in surprise when they saw the light.

"We're leaving. Now."

Chapter 29

Tumen's Legacy

Romaine and Freya extinguished the campfire and followed Brendel who had started running. They guessed that Brendel's sudden change in his behavior was due to that piercing light. Freya did not understand how it was created.

Romaine had an idea as to what happened back then as she saw the soul gem in his hands.

[Ah. That's right. He gave me a ring. I really like the spiderweb design on it.]

It was rare in this world to create a design using spiderwebs, but she liked things that were uncommon.

[I wonder if it has the same magic like the one on Brendel's hand.] She knew that his ring was unique and was able to command the wind to slay his foes.

It was a side of Brendel that she had never seen before, and she looked curiously at his back. She felt that the things he did were full of mysteries and secrets.

"Brendel, what happened?" In contrast to Romaine's carefree attitude of 'I just need to follow Brendel.', Freya was more serious than her. She thought that her responsibility was to take some of Brendel's burdens off.

"Nothing much of importance. But we need to leave this area immediately." Brendel suppressed his uneasiness and replied. He pulled out the Elven sword, and it glimmered against the barren boulders. He really did not know how to explain to Romaine and Freya about the 'Mana Absorption' effect.

It was like an osmosis process where a Magic Artifact of a higher rank took energy away from a Magic Artifact of a lower rank. But it was incredibly rare for a Magic Artifact below 40 OZ to do something like this. However, it was impossible to explain these gaming world's jargon to Freya and Romaine.

Freya looked at him with a worried face but did not inquire any further.

Brendel studied the valley. There did not seem to be any movement below, but he felt insecure in his heart. He requested Freya to wear the armor and told Romaine to prepare the rope.

Freya was already wearing normal clothes on her, so she took out the 'Half Plate of the Wind Empress' and started to put it on. The only drawback was that she had no prior training in using heavy armor, so there was no hope of her wearing it quickly.

On the other hand, Romaine was anxious and a little excited. She wanted to help her out but was afraid of Freya scolding her. Even though they were friends, Freya's anger was not something to take lightly, and she knew that she might actually create more trouble for her.

[It should be fine to wait for the girls to be done.]

Brendel was more worried about the creatures being attracted from within the valley from the powerful mana ripple.

He could not help but raise the card in his hand. He was shocked that the Gerald's most important possession was not the 'Thorn of Light', but was instead the card in his hand.

[A magical artifact that is possibly above 40 OZ. Just how amazing is this thing?]

In the long chaotic era of the past, the Human and Elven wizards were unable to solve the problem of adding Grade 2 power into magical equipment. It was only until the 'Year of the Twilight Moon' (Chaos Era: Year 471), which was when a genius was able to finally solve it.

This genius was Tumen, the Elementalist Emperor.

He invented the technique of implanting Holy Sigils into items, which solved the problem of imbuing them with Grade 2 power. From then onwards, creating magical items that were over 40 OZ and above became a reality.

He did not think the card was some form of sealed Holy Sigil, but he had never seen such complicated Sigil patterns before. It was not the Elven's Wind Empress Holy Sigil, neither the Kirrlutz's Fire God Holy Sigil nor the Irendar's Water King Holy Sigil.

He stared at it for a while and felt a headache coming on. Tumen's techniques that

were handed down underwent many evolutions. Logically, the current Holy Sigils in this era could never be as complicated as this.

[Perhaps an Ancient Artifact?]

As he was trying to figure things out, the card in his hand suddenly floated without warning. It fired a pillar of light in the gray sky, and a few moments later, another pillar of light shot out from the southeast mountains in response.

[Resonance!?!]

Brendel was unable to react and watched the event unfold in a stupor. He immediately wanted to find a table and flip it, because the ripple of Mana had turned into a Tidal wave of Mana. He figured that even the Madara's undead army miles away were alarmed. A resonance meant that this was a 'Combination Item'.

The worst part was how the other item that resonated was within the Zevail's mountain pathway.

""Brendel?""

Both Freya and Romaine spoke at the same time. They knew that the card in Brendel's hand had to be a problem.

"I'll explain to you in a moment, have you worn the armor?" Brendel took a final look at the valley as he asked urgently.

She nodded.

The powerful mana reaction had already attracted the servants of the Golden Demonic Tree. He saw the shadows of several Rotten Beast passing by from the dry cavern from below. He did not dare to delay any further and told them to throw any items that would drag them down. He then set off by following the narrow path along the steep wall.

Rations and water were supposed to be precious commodities, but they could not carry it right now. Brendel carried a few basic equipment and a few bundles of rope. Everyone kept a torch, and they strove to fight for every second. As they continued advancing, more and more Rotten Beasts gathered in the valley, as though the entire Zevail mountain had come alive.

Brendel's heart raced when he looked below. There were countless creatures. The first batch of monsters would take at least ten minutes before reaching their campfire. Even though there might be a few Rotten Beasts who managed to see them, the number was ultimately inconsequential to Brendel.

He was more worried about the Demonic Tree Guards that might have changed their patrolling routes from this sudden change. They had to reach the center portion of the Zevail pathway before the guards found them. That was the only area for to be able to defeat the first patrolling team.

He knew these guards had just crossed the river in this place, and even if they turn back now, they needed two hours. He had grinded this dungeon back in the game countless times, and he was only worried about the differences in this world and the game.

Fortunately, they were just ahead by a single step. The three saw a batch of creatures wrapped in ivy arriving on the eastern side, and they discovered each other at the same time. When these Demonic Trees stood at their full size, they were approximately two times the size of a human. They were also wrapped with aerial roots and were eyeless, but they had membranous organs on their limbs to detect sound.

They were also differentiated by young and mature Demonic Trees. The mature Demonic Tree had high agility and ran on the mountains like they were on flat ground. They were also adept at climbing and was Brendel's biggest threat. Fortunately, there was only one mature Demonic Tree for every ten young Demonic Trees, and it coincided with his memories in the game.

"We need to reach the mountain's peak before them." Brendel's palms started sweating when he saw the Demonic Trees getting closer to them.

There was a huge boulder at the peak and could be used by detonating an explosive to loosen it. It would roll down and crush the Demonic Trees, then close off the entrance from the valley. Brendel did not have any explosives, but he had the Ring of the Wind Empress.

His agility had fallen by 0.3 because of the paralyzing poison. He would have easily gotten up to the small flat plateau on the peak of the mountain if he was at his peak, but he had to rely on the girls now.

They did not really understand what he was thinking, but they nodded. They were currently treading on thin ice, and even though Brendel did not say anything, they knew the monsters were trouble from his anxious demeanor.

Freya and Brendel managed to get to the peak, while Romaine lagged a little behind with a pale face while panting. There was a mature Demonic Tree that appeared on the other side. It was a level 22 monster and Brendel knew that if they fought, they had zero possibility of winning.

Brendel took off his ring immediately and threw it at Freya. He shouted: "Wear this ring on your index finger. Find the weak link holding the boulder, aim at it and activate this ring with the command 'Oss'. Do you understand?"

She caught it and paused: "Brendel?"

"I'll distract this monster, hurry up." Brendel wanted to have Romaine do it instead as he would have another helper to cover him, but Romaine was still behind them when he looked back.

[This is the result for lazing around regularly.]

He shook his head.

Brendel took a deep breath. He was so tense that his body felt numb. Even though he presented himself as calm and composed in front of Freya, it did not mean he was not afraid. The enemy had the power of a strong Grade 1 rank. Without the Ring of the Wind Empress, he found it hard to believe that he could reliably match the opponent.

[4.5 OZ strength, 6 OZ physique, 2 OZ agility. Toughness and defense are extremely high. Its skin has corrosive poison, well versed in range attack, and has the ability to bind someone. It's weak against fire and slashes.]

He mentally recalled the opponent's stats. This mature Demonic Tree's stats were not so different from the Elite Rotten Beast, but he knew there was a great difference in how they battled.

Brendel was still thinking of the opponent's differences, while the ivy on the Demonic Tree suddenly seemed to come alive. Countless ivy branches suddenly came at him. He evaded to one side and rolled to evade the ivy branches that looked delicate, but they pierced through a boulder like steel pikes with a hissing sound, and the surface

of the boulder started smoking. Fear ran freely through his veins.

[A corrosive attack. This is the most frightening aspect of the Demonic Tree. Typical weapons would not be able to hurt them, and instead, get ruined by their corrosive nature.]

The Demonic Trees knew that it had missed when it heard the sound. It moved its ivy to the side and whipped at Brendel again. He hurled expletives at it in his mind but continued to evade it. The 'Iron Whip' continued to sweep over the surface and hurled stones everywhere.

Rock pieces struck the area above Brendel's eyebrows and immediately caused them to bleed, but he did not dare to utter any sounds. He gripped the 'Thorn of Light' tightly and advanced when he saw a gap.

He took a few steps forward but immediately paused.

A series of words appeared in his retina.

"Summon the Holy Sword?"

Chapter 30

Heroic Deck

[Summon the Holy Sword? There are many swords in Vaunte deemed as Holy Swords. The Wind Sword, 'Nordrasis'. The 'Sword of the Endless Sky' could be considered another one, and even a sword simply named as 'Amber'...Not that I owned any of these back then.]

[Is this a type of magic? I know the priest has a low-level Light Magic Spell called 'Spell of Holy Swords', but that's just a series of attacking chants. It has nothing to do with summoning, and the magic vocabulary in the game is exceedingly strict and cannot be changed randomly.]

[Leaving this question aside, the players in the game have no extreme side effects from using magic, like splitting headaches. At most one will feel exhausted, so...]

As he finished contemplating, he put his mind to it and accepted the command, 'Summon the Holy Sword'. There were no downsides to this transaction, and he also treated this as a last-ditch effort.

Brendel slowed down slightly from his thinking, and the Demonic Tree launched an attack with its snake-like vine whips, but he quickly lowered his body and swung his sword up. An arc of silver flash cut off the two vine whips that gave off a rotting smell, and they turned into ashes in the air.

He quickly pushed himself off with one hand from the ground and accelerated to the Demonic Tree's area. When he wanted to continue with his next course of action, the words in his retinas changed.

– The Path of Warriors, unlocked.

– Heroic Deck, Chapter 2, Holy Sword of the Knight.

– Due to the Character's first time in unlocking the 'Cards of Fate', the system shall instruct you on the usage.

The ghostly words appeared and quickly disappeared.

– Holy Sword, the symbol of the Knight’s Dedication and the Sword of Purity.”

– Effect: Pay 6 Earth Element Points (EP) from the Element Pool, and summon the Holy Sword into play. All conditions have been met, Character, please display your card. Point your thumb to the center of the Sigil of Fate, and establish your Mana Link with your index finger and thumb to light up the Holy Sword.”

Brendel immediately that found he was distracted by a number of words that popped up and almost could not see the Demonic Tree. His hands stopped moving for a moment, and the attacks from the Demonic Tree’s vine made him fall back. He grumbled in his mind, but also knew the chance for him to succeed in his attack was slim even if the words did not distract him.

He sighed involuntarily. He quickly glanced at Freya, who was struggling as hard as possible to climb towards the boulder. She was not far away from her goal, but the bouncing ponytail made Brendel pause for a while.

His concentration changed to the other side without any further issues, and he discovered that the young Demonic Trees at below were a few steps behind. It seemed that she would be fine. Romaine who was somewhere below him, however, was in a terrible state. She was panting heavily and unable to climb any higher.

The Demonic Tree and Brendel had crossed blows, and neither gained any advantages. The Demonic Tree realized that the human before him was not powerful, but it was afraid of the Elven Sword. Brendel knew what it was thinking as well.

He gripped his sword again, but the words in his retinas showed a final message:

‘Display the card?’

Brendel looked blankly ahead, but his gamer mind quickly worked, and he thought of the card in his belongings. And as if to answer his thoughts, he instantly found it.

[So this sigil is called the ‘Holy Sigil of Fate’, but I don’t recall hearing about it before.] He was a little puzzled, but his thumb had already been placed on it.

“Heroic Deck, Chapter 2, Holy Sword of the Knight, successfully locked on to target.”

A blinding pillar of light shot out from the card.

The ripples from the magic struck into every living creature's minds like a sharp knife. Not only did the mature Demonic Tree bellowed, but even Freya and Romaine were also rooted to they were, and they looked at Brendel.

They saw him holding the card up high in his hand, which kept firing pulses of light until it disappeared.

"Brendel, t-the card in your hand disappeared!" Romaine shouted anxiously. Her eyes were astonishingly good as she was a good fifty meters away.

But he did not hear anything that she said, as he could only look blankly at the words in his retinas:

- Holy Sword, the symbol of the Knight's Dedication and the Sword of Purity."
- When this card is in play, pay 1 Earth EP to attack your enemies, or pay 1 Earth EP to dismiss your sickness, curses or darkness-related status."
- The Character is required to pay 2 Earth EP and 2 Spiritual Points (SP) to maintain the 'Holy Sword' every ten minutes."
- The effect of the Holy Sword affects 1000 meters."

[...Hah? What kind of evil witchcraft is this?]

Brendel had never heard of a magical artifact requiring the player to keep providing power to it. SP does not really need to be explained as it is related to Willpower, but only a few professions had 'Element Pool', like Elementalist, magic swordsman, sun knight. They were the only professions where their magic required using elemental powers.

[There was never a magical artifact in the game that required a player's Elemental Pool. Doesn't that mean I won't be able to use this artifact if I don't have an Elemental Pool? No, I charged it with the soul gem earlier.]

[Then, the most important thing is the maintenance. To keep using this card means I have to prepare enough Soul Gems. Yet Soul Gems are rare and not every monster drops it.]

All these questions flashed through his mind, but he did not question the power of this artifact, and as expected of a 40 OZ item, the effect was beyond doubt.

A sword made from pure light appeared behind his back. It was several meters tall, with a broad blade and shining armguard with a pair of wings stemming from it. If one looked from afar, Brendel appeared like had grown a pair of white wings.

The merchant girl looked blankly at him, her eyes recording everything down, then glittered with idolization and excitement. Brendel was incredibly cool!

Freya had also stopped moving as she saw what happened, but she quickly remembered she had own mission. She gritted her teeth and continued to climb upwards. The wounds on her hands opened again, and the pain made her furrow her eyebrows.

Brendel checked his status. When the Holy Sword appeared, his negative stats were completely removed. When the debilitating and paralyzing poison dissolved like snow as he felt the holy light nourishing him within his body.

40 OZ, Grade 2 rank, a 'Deacon' ranked priest. Anyone who saw Brendel would believe that he was one if they did not look at his clothes.

[This is strange. This card was summoned with the Earth Element, but it's able to emulate the Holy Element effects. Just who exactly made this card?]

Under his increasing aura of power, the Demonic Tree moved about restlessly. It found it hard to suppress its fear with the intimidating figure of Brendel's.

It screeched loudly and finally attacked. The vines around its body suddenly increased in size, and all of them aimed towards Brendel.

"Brendel, watch out!" Romaine warned from below.

He frowned.

[Because I don't have an Element Pool, I don't know how much Earth EP I can take. If I take the conversion of the soul gem at face value, then I should have 20 earth EP. Summoning used up 6, so I should have 14 Earth EP left. This is ample.]

He raised his right hand and waved across, paying 1 Earth EP to use the 'Attack'

function of the Holy Sword. A golden sword made of light shot out from his fingers.

All the vines that crossed its path with the sword turned into ashes.

[This is the Spell of the Holy Sword.]

He immediately recognized it. It was a low-level Priest's spell, but the attacking power was just as frightening if the OZ was raised accordingly. The Demonic Tree groaned painfully and tried to retreat. Brendel's attack had destroyed a third of its vine. The Demonic Tree relied on the Golden Demonic Tree's mana for nourishment, and the vines required many years to grow.

Brendel naturally did not give the enemy the chance to run and continued to unleash attacks on it. Three golden swords pierced through the Demonic Tree's body while one golden sword slashed it. The Demonic Tree exploded with a huge bang from the center of the body and turned into ashes.

Right at this moment, Freya also activated the Ring of the Wind Empress. Even though her aim was slightly off, the wind bullet still managed to knock the huge boulder down, and along with a series of large crashing noises, the boulder the size of a small hill went crashing down, turning the ground rocks and Demonic Trees into dust.

Dozens of Demonic Trees perished in an instant, and the Golden Demonic Tree felt the loss. It gave a terrifying wail which traveled throughout the Zevail mountain pathway.

Brendel heard of this scream hundreds of times and was used to it. He even found it nostalgic, but Freya and Romaine jumped up with shock and looked at each other.

"W-what was that Brendel?" Freya asked from the mountain peak.

"Don't worry; we won't meet that thing." Brendel sighed with relief when the fight was over. Once this patrol group was settled, the remaining task was much easier. He estimated the remaining time to maintain the Holy Sword to be approximately thirty minutes, but it was not enough time for them to walk out from this valley. If he dismissed the Holy Sword, he would be able to summon it one more time.

He decisively kept the card once he considered the possibility. Romaine finally finished climbing breathlessly and asked: "Brendel, what was, that?"

"It's the power of this card. I didn't realize it was a Magic Artifact earlier." He looked at

the stars within Romaine's eyes and answered ambiguously.

"Magic Artifact?" Freya was surprised to hear this answer.

The ring that he had given her was one Magic Artifact, the Half Plate of the Wind Empress was another, but why would an ordinary person like Brendel know so much about magic? In her eyes, magic was so mystical that it could only appear in stories of legends.

She stared at the youth below her, trying to see through his real identity. He said he was a militia from Bruglas, but she felt more and more that it was nothing more than a dismissive lie.

Right at this moment, an astonishing scene that was more impressive than before was happening, but she could not see it. Brendel raised his head to find that golden lights from the surrounding mountain were flying towards him.

Killing monsters that outleveled him was a wonderful feeling.

Chapter 31

Aftermath of the battle.

[420 XP.]

The golden lights gathered in mid-air to form a stream that steadily flowed into Brendel's body. As he looked at the ruined battlefield, he sat down weakly on a boulder.

[That was a Level 22 monster. Even if I add in my militia and commoner level, I'm only level 6. Crossing a difference of 14 levels, I wouldn't do something as crazy as this even if I'm back in my world playing the game.]

He was forced to fight it in order to survive. His original plan was to lure that monster to the area below the boulder, wait till Freya was done with her task until she was able to come over to fight together and find a chance to escape. This chance was almost non-existent, and very few people in the game would attempt something like this.

He did not feel that it was a big deal when he decided to fight the monster, but now that the battle was over and he had the time to reflect on it, his back was drenched in cold sweat.

He used his utmost effort to reply some of the girls' questions calmly in order not to make them worry, but he knew precisely what sort of situation it really was.

He felt he had exhausted all his courage, but he did not realize that people matured quickly in strenuous circumstances. Freya was also another person who changed. She was only a simple militia a few days ago, but she was becoming more decisive.

He slowly regained his composure. This battle was an incredible reward to him at the eleventh hour. He needed to level up to level 5 so he could unlock the second class skill.

[Level 4 requires 70 XP, level 5, 130 XP, level 6 220 XP.]

– Mercenary Level 4 (0.3 Strength, 0.2 Physique, 0.2 Agility, 0.1 Perception)

– Mercenary Level 5 (0.3 Strength, 0.3 Physique, 0.2 Agility, 0.1 Willpower)

– Mercenary Level 6 (0.4 Strength, 0.3 Physique, 0.2 Agility, 0.2 Perception)

When he leveled up, the character window reflected the changes as it displayed in his eyes. His current stats were displayed in front of him:

2.5 > 3.5 Strength

2.3 > 2.9 Agility

2.4 > 3.2 Physique

[My stats are three times a normal person, and my Overall Power Rating is 25 times above them. Just based on my stats alone, I can even handle the entire Bucce militia all by myself. And if I factor my own experience into the mix, I should be able to handle ten of the guards. I definitely got the status of an Iron-ranked fighter.]

If Bannett got onto a battle horse, he would barely reach the Iron-rank status, Marden had already considered him as a genius. He was only twenty years old, and with his talent, he might become a Centurion Knight, and from a certain point of view, he was considered to be someone of important value to the country.

And Brendel was younger than him by a year.

Nearly half of the entire continent would not be able to reach Iron-rank their entire life, and only one out of ten could accomplish it before the age of twenty.

[Well, it's still not enough. Many babies who were baptized at the Holy Cathedral of Fire were gifted with the status of an Iron-rank. They have a status of 'Enlightened'. There are even rarer cases where they actually broke the barriers of a Silver-rank fighter to reach Gold-rank with the status of 'Chosen'.

There are many people who are talented in the 'Knight' profession. This world favors strength greatly, and I need to utilize my advantages to stand out from the crowd.]

A Mercenary would unlock the skill 'Power Break' when he reached level 5, his next action would consume 3 times the stamina and add 1 OZ Strength to the attack.

This was the most important offensive skill in the early levels, and Brendel generously

added AP to the skill. At level 6, 'Power Break' would only use 55 AP altogether, while it added 4 OZ Strength to the attack, instantly reaching an intermediate Iron-rank fighter's strength.

He added the rest of the AP into 'Aouine's Military Swordsmanship' and 'Brawling'. Finally, he added 6 XP into the militia to make it Level 3, and added another 0.2 OZ to his Strength and Physique.

This was why so many people in the game took on secondary professions even if there was a penalty to XP gain. It was simply better in the early stages compared to focusing on one profession.

[But I'm certain that there has to be a line drawn here. The players who took on countless professions paid the price later on.]

When one entered the intermediate Gold-rank, their Element power would start to unseal, and the advantages of taking multiple professions would gradually disappear.

With his overall level of 10, Brendel closed his eyes and exhaled quietly. The Rotten Beasts were practically XP in his eyes now. If he did not need to go to Fortress Riedon in such a hurry, he would have grinded here to level 15 with just half a month. Time was not on his side.

He opened his eyes and squinted at the distant valleys. Some signs of Rotten Beasts appeared to move towards to their direction. The earlier commotion had alarmed them.

Brendel took up the sword on his side. He was not afraid of them, but it would not be good if they were tied down by them. Romaine's aunt was still in the city, and they were fighting against time to reach Fortress Riedon before the Madara's undead army did.

He suddenly recalled the Seal Ring that Marden gave him, took it out to look at it, remembered something as he studied the patterns of the black pine leaves and smiled coldly.

The old veteran soldier from the November War did not understand this point. Buccu was Stronghold Vermeire's most important buffer since its establishment from the 'Year of the Thunderbolt'.

But politics was not as simple as it looked on the surface. Because of the lack of sufficient funds and various things that were omitted, constructing both Fortress Riedon and Stronghold Verriere was Aouine's limit at that time. These nobles did not consider creating a warning system in these buffer areas at all.

As long as they had their fortress and stronghold, they would get by very well. As for the countryside villages, Madara did not attack every year right?

It was a fact that Aouine was on the verge of collapse. Even if there were loyal citizens like Freya, Bannett, and Marden fighting for this country, the corrupted upper echelons were destroying the country at the very foundations. Bucca was somewhat of a special exception, but Brendel knew that he could see the signs where the country was heading into destruction from other regions.

He sighed again as he looked to the south. The sky was covered by layers of clouds and dimmed the afternoon sun. In that direction, a dark kingdom was about to rise.

"Brendel, your ring."

He turned back and saw Freya gazing at him with burning eyes. He involuntarily joked: "Doesn't it look nice on your finger?"

"You—" The ponytailed girl immediately blushed, averted her head, and saw Romaine giggling at the other side of the hill.

"Romaine, you idiot!"

"What did I do again?" The merchant girl was stunned for a moment.

Brendel chuckled. He knew that she was just venting her anger. He wore the ring back on his finger and felt the Card of Fate. Even though he had never seen it before, it had undoubtedly become his trump card.

[Ten minutes worth of a Grade 2 Magic Artifact's power. Many things can be done, and killing the Golden Demonic Tree is one of them.]

He decided to change his plan. The loot from the Golden Demonic Tree was just too tempting. With every bit of strength gained from here, he would have more confidence in Fortress Riedon. Killing the boss would not take too much time as they would pass by it.

He estimated for a while. He had approximately eight hours left. It was more than enough, but he hoped to get another Soul Gem to make things more reliable. The attacks from the card relied on Earth EP.

He was even planning to unlock his Elemental Pool. But it was not very advantageous to take on a side profession like an Elementalist or Magic Swordsman for a 40 OZ or so item. It was best for professions to be related, so it complemented each other. Elementalist, Sun Knight, Magic swordsman were professions that were independent and hardly added anything to a warrior profession.

He treated the Mercenary profession like a Warrior, as they had the same skills and looked roughly the same in the early stages.

And even if he did want to unlock the Elemental Pool, he needed to take on a mission to unlock his Soul Element, and he was not certain whether he could even find or trigger a quest.

He stopped thinking about it after a while as he had to plan his way into the Forbidden Garden. If he went straight to it, he was able to save two hours. He also wanted to seek out another Elite Rotten Beast.

He stood up and patted Freya's shoulders. She was glaring at him.

[Alright, we rested enough, let's move on.]

Unfortunately, his action that was well-intended, combined with Freya subconsciously stepping back at a terrible timing, patted onto a very bad place, The feedback from his touch felt nice with a soft and elastic feel to it, even though the golden scaled armor was covering it.

The atmosphere turned in an instant.

Brendel watched as the future Goddess of War turned scarlet, then white and finally dark. He wanted to explain himself, but a sword swung mercilessly at him in response.

"Shameless lout!"

"Wait, I didn't mean to do that, gahhh!"

Chapter 32

Forbidden Garden

===== Undead's POV =====

As the fog in the forest dissipated, the battle that took place in it ended. The young guards' sudden attack did bring about an unexpected effect on the Madara's vanguard, but the situation quickly became clear when Kabias gathered the high-level undead.

The forest turned silent.

"Lord Kabias." The pale undead acolyte brought his hand to his chest and bowed respectfully to the giant skeleton.

"I had thought that you maggots wouldn't bother to greet me, Rothko."

The skeleton general who wore a bronze armor sat on top of a pile of corpses. Its legs were crossed, and the flames in its eyes burned intensely. It gripped its double-edged ax, while the other hand was placed on its knee, and looked down on the weak acolyte with full of contempt.

The Dark Lords and the undead wizards hated each other. They had gathered together under the call from the Mercury Staff, but they did not choose to work together by choice. As for the Blood Lords, they had kept amongst themselves and rarely interfered with Madara's politics. They had stayed in this fragmented environment for several centuries before emerging from their stable cocoon.

The prophecy from the witches overlapped with the Goddess Helene's own revelation.

'The Darkness shall rise from the east',

Regardless of the Dark Lords, undead wizards or the Blood Lords, everyone believed that this era was indeed going to end, and a new era would be ushered in by Madara.

Rothko smiled. Kabias was a general under Tarkus, while he was merely a small leader of a company, so there was no argument in their ranks. He drew the ire of the skeleton

before him because their vanguard stole the thunder amongst the other undead generals.

Three hundred skeletons and twenty necromancers won against the Bucces guards and utterly routed the Green village's militia to allow Kabias unfettered access. Lastly, they emerged victorious Bucces's guards. His results could even be described as glorious.

In Madara's tradition, the undead's vanguard was used as cannon fodder to sap the enemy's strength, and under the worst circumstances, they were used as a delaying tactic or buffer. It was typical for one-third of a squadron of Aouine's guards defeat such Madara's vanguard comprising of skeletons and necromancers with ease.

In Tarkus plans, Rothko was nothing more to a chess pawn used for disruption, while the real hammers to strike the nail in Aouine's coffins were Kabias and Wesker. It was unexpected of this undead acolyte named Rothko to defeat the enemies instead, and it surprised Tarkus.

Tarkus was similarly surprised that his right-wing Wesker had committed a huge error in the battlefield. The battlefield was always changing, and even outstanding commanders were unable to be ahead of every step. It was true even if Tarkus was famed for being reliable.

Since the acolyte was from a lowly birthright and did not know his future in Madara, he naturally did not speak back to Kabias. On the contrary, the Skeleton Lord's words were like glory to him. Kabias was biased against all the necromancers, but showing so much contempt for him raised his status.

He looked at the Black Warriors lined up behind Kabias and felt a little envious. He might have gotten a fair amount of loot from the battles, but the majority of them had to be given to the superiors, and what remained behind was not enough to summon even one Black warrior. He heard that there was a Paladin's tomb in the Green Village, which would certainly be the best body to be converted, but the Green village was under Kabias's territory now.

[Although it's a pity, there would be plenty of chances in the future. All the leaders are aiming to get something useful out of this war now.]

He thought for a while before replying: "Lord Kabias, there are a few rats who escaped to the north. We had not seen the refugees since yesterday's afternoon, and I suspect

that the attack here was a diversion, and the remainder of their forces moved towards the north and entered the River of Daggers.”

It was enough for him to stop there. Wesker was in charge of the northern area. If he wanted to capture live specimens or get a share of the loot, he had to get the skeleton’s approval. A small leader like himself could not shoulder this responsibility.

But Kabias was no fool either. It glanced at the little acolyte and realized the little worm’s scheme. It adjusted its lower jaw, creating a clacking sound.

“You want me to go against that bald-headed Wesker? What do I get out of this, little maggot.”

“You would be able to increase your strength, isn’t this advantage good enough, my lord?”

“Hmph. They are merely a bunch of weak humans. I have no interest in creating weak skeletons.

“I heard that there’s a veteran soldier amongst the guards who survived the November war. He’s the leader of the guards.”

Kabias flaming eyes pulsed: “Looks like that fellow Wesker is lucky today.”

Rothko sighed. His persuasion had failed, so he raised his head to take his leave. He and Kabias were from different units, and as a member of the undead wizard’s faction, his vanguard did not need to listen to Kabias. If it were not for this matter, he would not have sought out Kabias.

But at this moment, he suddenly felt a tremor in his heart, and he looked to the south.

The giant skeleton also looked in the same direction, bypassing the forest and looked at the mountains covered in ominous shadows.

[[A terrifying Mana response.]]

“The Zevail mountain pathway.” Kabias sniffed the air as if it could sense the magic coming from the pine river. *(TL: It’s one thing to pretend that Kabias can talk even though it’s a skeleton, it’s another to pretend he has lungs to suck the air in.)*

Rothko did not answer because he immediately felt an even more powerful mana ripple from that direction.

[What is that damned Golden Demonic Tree doing?]

Any wizard within dozens of miles would be able to feel that response. He was suddenly a little worried and wondered if the magicians from the White-mane Legion within Fortress Riedon discovered something.

“We had best send out some people in advance, Lord Kabias.”

“Hmph, I know what to do even without you telling me. We undead have a stronger reaction to magic. When you become a Lich, you are permitted to teach me.”

Rothko smiled again.

===== Brendel's POV =====

Brendel brought Freya and Romaine out from a wall's fissure. He gestured for them to stop, and he looked outside to take everything within the valley into his eyes. A huge golden tree with healthy leaves stood quietly in the center of the valley in the depressed grounds that were filled with gray boulders.

[The Forbidden Garden.]

The Golden Demonic Tree absorbed the nutrients from the land and the surrounding mana, causing the earth to become barren and lose the Earth Element. Brendel raised his head; the sky was gloomy and dark as if black clouds were gathering above them. This was also due to the unnatural balance of the elements.

As the Earth Element has been completely stripped, other elements gathered here in huge amounts, causing the order of the Elements to be chaotic. The law of the Elements was set when Mother Marsha created the world and governed by the Elven-kings, but there could be various reasons for it to be unstable, like the Golden Demonic Tree which disrupted the law.

In the game, an Elementalist's strength would be sealed by 30%. It was the reason why teams hardly accepted Elementalists. The Elementalists even described this bit of history as 'History of the three years with bloody tears'.

Romaine and Freya stared at the strange Golden Demonic Tree. They had heard of a creature like this only in bedtime stories and even wondered if they were dreaming when they saw it in front of them.

The beauty of the Golden Demonic Tree contrasted deeply with the dystopic background.

“W-what is that?” Freya stammered.

“It’s so pretty. Brendel, is that the Golden Apple Tree in the mythical tales? Are the monsters the guards of this tree? I can’t believe there’s a living thing in this environment that’s so beautiful!”

“That’s an oak tree, Romaine.” Freya sighed.

“I-I know that, so it’s an oak tree!” Romaine’s eyebrows darted up to her hair while she corrected herself quickly.

“Don’t get trapped by its beauty. This is probably the most dangerous creature—, no, it should be called as a monster.” Brendel’s eyes scanned the entire mountain and quickly discovered another batch of Demonic Tree patrolling the area. The creatures wrapped with whips slowly moved towards the pathway filled with boulders,

[It matches my memories in the game.]

“Monster?”

“Yes. The creatures that we met earlier are born from this tree.”

“How?” Freya’s eyes went wild with shock.

They were not as tense as before when they saw the patrolling Demonic Trees. The three of them had fought against the servants of the Golden Demonic Tree during their journey to the Forbidden Garden, and Brendel took in another 65 XP. He even managed to get a Tree Crystal from a Mature Demonic Tree.

It was a crafting material in the game, but Brendel did not know how the production stats were calculated, so he just put it into his bag as it might benefit them later on.

He also realized that Freya and Romaine’s apparent growth. Especially the future

Goddess of War. Her strength and agility had risen sharply from the battles, and she was almost at the level of a guard. The only thing that Brendel did not understand was how they received XP, but from the looks of it, their progress was much slower than him.

Freya as a pure militia should have increased her level repeatedly from killing a high-level monster like the Demonic Tree, but he felt that his Mercenary profession's level rose much faster. It was all very puzzling.

But he quickly put away these idle thoughts because he had more important things to do. If the Golden Demonic Tree discovered them, then it would summon the Rotten Beasts from the outside to its aid, and leave them with little time.

He had estimated in the game before, the first batch of Rotten Beast would reach in fifteen minutes, and if they were still unable to finish off the Golden Demonic Tree, they had to consider running away.

But Brendel did not immediately seek to initiate a fight. He had another issue that needed an answer even before he thought of defeating the Demonic Tree patrol. He looked up at the steep slope.

"Wait for me here, don't get discovered." He turned back and replied.

"Brendel?"

Chapter 33

Before the assault

Brendel looked at the steep slope which was shaped like a knife. He then turned to Romaine and got her to wear the Ring of Spiderweb. He realized that her perception was surprisingly high, and letting her wear it would increase her ability.

Romaine had spied on the beautiful ring with black and white patterns for a long time and was naturally happy to receive it. But she still asked curiously: “Is this a magic ring too, Brendel?”

“Yes. It allows you to hear better. So pay attention and if there are any commotions, inform Freya. I’ll be back very soon.”

In this valley, there was another monster besides the Golden Demonic Tree that was of considerable danger, a Rock Wurm. It was a rare elite that appeared because of the side effects of the Mana imbalance. During the first time it appeared in the game, Brendel nearly ended up being defeated by it.

“There are other enemies?” Both girls spoke at the same time.

“There might be; doesn’t it pay to be careful?” He did not want to act like a clairvoyant as it was not going to be easy to explain things in the future if he chose that path, so he chose to reply in a vague manner.

But Freya nodded understandingly and tightened her grip on the longsword to guard Romaine.

“I’ll protect her in the meantime, but come back quickly.”

“Erm?” He looked at her in surprise.

[When did this silly girl become so cooperative?]

He was a little flustered, but it did not look like a conspiracy, so he put down his backpack hesitatingly and took out a rope and hook from it. He looked at the girls

again before he carefully climbed.

“Freya, is Brendel going to be alright alone?” Romaine whispered and asked.

“He has his own plans and we can’t help him with it. It will be enough if we don’t let him worry over here.”

“But—”

Freya she shook her head and her ponytail swayed. Her bright eyes showed a serious expression. She was not admitting defeat to him but felt that her current strength could only do so much. She had reflected on herself earnestly, and she had to have high expectations of herself as a leader of a squadron.

She exhaled slowly and brought her sword close to her chest, becoming determined.

On the other side, Brendel advanced on the steep slope by using the rope and hook. He was still tens of meters away from a certain gap in the wall. He breathed in deeply and glanced behind his back. It was fortunate the Golden Demonic Tree and its guards relied on sound and mana to find their targets. He was completely open from his position.

He grabbed onto a protruding rock, and sand trickled from the surface. The tiny sound did not count for much, but he was worried that it might escalate into something bigger, and tried to limit his actions as quietly as possible.

[30 meters more. it will soon be over.]

There was no soul gem that dropped along the way, but Brendel knew he still had one more chance. There was a treasure in the gap— no, claiming it as a treasure was sort of wrong. Players would call all resources and rewards from hidden places as treasure, but the treasure was a memento.

In the plot within the game, there was a young noble who loved to adventure called Bergens. He came to this valley with his allies but was unfortunately separated from them. Although he managed to escape to a gap within the walls, he died there due to his injuries.

There were some possessions along with a keepsake on him. Brendel could bring the keepsake to Bruglas to complete the mission and though the reward was not

promising, it was better than nothing.

But the possessions that the noble had were more interesting. Since the game gave out random treasures, there was the possibility where anything could be given out as long as the person's luck was good.

The greatest treasure that Brendel got was an Amber Gemstone, but he knew that he was not a lucky person and it was unlikely to get it here.

[A Soul Gem would be good enough since the drop percentage is high... Seriously, what am I thinking about, this is not the game.]

He quickly climbed into the gap and immediately saw the unfortunate noble's skeleton which was collapsed to one side. For one moment, he thought he had gone back into the game, because every detail appeared to be the same.

He quickly composed himself and carefully went over to the skeleton, and his eyes fell onto a small bag. He was stunned for a moment as he noticed a piece of dry and dusty lambskin paper inside it.

[There was nothing like this in the game!]

He picked up the paper lightly and discovered that it was a will. There were only a few lines on it:

"Mother Marsha above, I might not be in this world for much longer. If I am to meet an unfortunate end and the one who chanced upon my will, I hereby legally transfer all my possessions on my body to you. Furthermore, I have a secret wealth passed down from my ancestors and would award a third to you. Please pass a third to my wife, Sadie, and a third to my daughter... (unintelligible).

If you are interested in this wealth, please pass my will and my keepsake to my wife, and tell her 'The date on the Barde ball' and she will understand what I wish to convey.

Finally, I am sorry, Sadie. May Mother Marsha punish me."

Brendel read everything and looked blankly at the paper. He had never seen this piece of paper. The only mission to this was taking the seal ring off his fingers and pass it to Bruglas's citizen registry and he would receive a certain amount of money. The mission would end there and there was no further continuation.

[What does this mean? Is it because this world is different from the game?]

Brendel shook his head. He instinctively refused to believe that judgment. Everything had matched to his memories to every last detail, and there was no reason why there was an exception here. He pondered on it for a while.

[What could be the reason? Wait— Of course! It might be possible that the first person who discovered this will receive a unique mission. There are many 'first' missions and 'only' missions. But has such a thing ever happen in repeatable dungeons? Nobody had mentioned this before, although...]

He continued to hesitate for a long time, finally taking the will and seal ring carefully away, tying them to his belt. He somehow felt that this mission sounded familiar.

Someone completed a mission with a similar ring to it and posted it to the forums, but the daughter's name and the address of the family were completely blurred out in his mind. It was probably this event. This mission would be much simpler if he was able to recall the details.

Brendel did not really mind this point. The harder it was, the better the rewards were. At the very worst he would start from Bruglas's citizen registry, since he had the clue of the noble's name as well as his wife. But that was going to be a future thing, as he had to face his own problems now.

He inspected his victory loot next.

[A pretty good windfall. Two red gems, around 30 silver coins, a smoking pipe, a glass bead and a grey stone fragment.]

Brendel poured everything out and carefully inspected them once again, and he was disappointed that he did not discover any Soul Gems. He sighed.

It was a decent reward if it was in the game, but he did not need money or materials. Items with an immediate impact were things that were most important as he needed to increase his strength. But even though it was disappointing, he still swept everything into his bag. He did not check what was of use as they were just trinkets.

After cleaning out the loot from the gap, he took a final look at the skeleton before returning where he came from. Everything turned out smoothly, and the girls were relieved when they saw him returning to the wall's opening.

“Brendel, you’re finally back. When you were not around, Freya and I were so tense. There was no sound at all in the surroundings.” Romaine patted her chest and exhaled with relief.

“Don’t pull me into this-” Freya’s face turned crimson. “I simply went out there to check the surroundings. There’s a patrolling team out there and we should quickly kill them.”

“Do we need to go out?” Romaine asked

“Well, there’s the option where we can also wait here. When it is a little later, we can leave from the other end of the exit. Although we can avoid a fight, the remaining time will be tight.” Brendel said.

“How long should we wait if that’s the case?” Freya asked.

“We will set out two hours later.”

The girl paused for a while. “How far is Fortress Riedon from here?”

The furthest she had left from home was Verbin. Even though she had heard of Fortress Riedon from the adults’ lips, it was nothing more than an impression.

“Let me put it this way, if we are going to delay for two hours, we will be racing against the undead army.” He looked at Romaine: “We might be able to reach the fortress a little earlier, but there would be little time left to warn them.”

“We will save time if we destroy that Demonic Tree?”

“There’s a hidden passageway behind that monster, and it’s used by merchants in the past to avoid the checkpoints. I have seen it in the Bruglas’s city documents when I was still a militia.” He lied without skipping a heartbeat.

Though there was no falsehood about the passageway since it was knowledge from the game.

“Is the tree dangerous?” He pointed towards it.

“Incredibly dangerous. It’s 50/50.” Brendel answered gravely. Even though he wanted to gamble and finish off the Golden Demonic Tree, he had to tell the girls the truth about the risk they are taking.

In a party, everyone had to make a choice about their lives, no one could force another. The basic rules in The Amber Sword.

Freya went silent.

“Romaine, are you fine with it?”

Romaine shook her head: “I liked adventuring. My life was meant to do meaningful things.”

Freya took back her gaze on her and nodded: “I understand. Brendel, please bring us to defeat it. Even if we are to fail, I will not regret it.”

He did not expect Freya’s reaction to be so strong.

He grinned and said: “There’s no need to be so polite. I’ll tell you how to defeat it. But we need to settle the patrol team first. Six Demonic Trees, I believe you’re already familiar with them, but we need to end it in an instant this time.”

He brought them to the wall opening’s edge. They could see the monsters clearly. He circled an area: “We will sneak over there and launch an attack on my count. We need to be slow when we sneak up on them, and it’s absolutely important that we don’t let them discover us.”

He paused for a moment to calculate the remaining time and continued:

“We still have at least half an hour for a comfortable gain, so we don’t need to hurry. Romaine and I will attack from the right, while you are to hide below that boulder on that left side. When we launch an attack, you will attack the two that are at the very back. Do you remember their weaknesses?”

Brendel wanted Romaine on his side to protect her, as well as easing Freya’s pressure. That merchant girl did not have any true combat strength.

She nodded.

The Demonic Trees’ weaknesses were at their four limbs because their sensory organs were on them. If they lost their limbs they were not a threat.

But she was a little tense.

The way how they handled these trees from before were schemes based on surprise attacks, like falling boulders or waiting till they could jump on them, but it was a frontal assault now.

She was not worried about Brendel's capabilities, but was she able to do so?

Freya was uncertain of herself.

He glanced at her and knew what she was thinking. Every newbie had the same problem, and even though Freya should be considered an 'NPC', but she was probably no different. He thought for a while, and spoke encouragingly: "You don't need to worry too much, your armor limits their attacks a lot and you should attack them aggressively."

She nodded.

Chapter 34

Golden Demonic Tree

The three people made their way down to the valley silently and waited in ambush.

Brendel made his movements seem like time was frozen. His movements were so delicate and subtle that one would find it impossible to discover anything out of the ordinary, even if they were to survey the surroundings.

He had walked on this path more than a hundred times.

He had failed before in his attempts in the game and was constantly discovered when he was still unfamiliar with the strategy, but he was not the past rookie and he would not fail here now.

Even though the Demonic Trees had exceptional strength, these naturally blind creatures were not effective in investigating their surroundings.

The tense Brendel heard the faint rustling of pebbles rubbing against leather boots. He turned back and saw Freya looking anxiously at him. The youth furrowed his brows.

[You're still too tense, Freya.]

He stopped to allow Romaine to pass by him. The merchant girl was doing very well by lowering her body and breathing evenly. Her strides were not overly large and she did not move slowly either. Certainly, she was as elegant as a cat.

Her current mentality was filled with dexterous cautiousness from the excitement, and her heart that was as taut as a string strangely pushed out her potential. She was a natural adventurer.

“Romaine, you're doing really well, keep on doing this.” Brendel encouraged her by mouthing the words out.

She quickly nodded in response, her actions were really small, but she could not

suppress the pride in her heart.

As Romaine passed by Brendel, he looked back at Freya. She seemed to know her own problems and lowered her head involuntarily. He sighed in silence when he saw this scene.

If any person looked at her, it was clear that she did not possess outstanding wisdom, judgment, mentality, or even physique, and one would think she was nothing more than an ordinary person.

But Brendel knew there had to be something about her that allowed her to hold the legendary name of 'The Goddess of War'.

He narrowed his eyes into a line and looked thoughtfully at her. Her light orange colored hair was on full display when she lowered her head, reasonably dense and soft looking. It looked like she had taken much care with it. She did not comb it skilfully, but it was meticulously done.

At this moment she was crouching her body and progressing past him. The girl did not utter any sound, and only her long ponytail followed her bobbing action, almost as if it to display her desire in her heart.

Brendel knew that it was her unbending will, His heart skipped a beat.

"Freya."

She paused for a moment.

"You're too tense, relax a little."

"Sorry, I..."

"It's fine. Do you see the boulder in front of us? We will split up here from now onwards. Hide behind there until the patrol team passes by. You must attract the attention of the last two Demonic Trees the first moment when we launch an attack."

She nodded.

"Go ahead, I'll wait here to watch over you." He turned his body and laid beside a field of broken rocks and gestured to her. "Freya, I'm sure you can do it well."

She showed a shocked expression as it was different from the initial plan. But she was not stupid to not know that he stayed behind to boost her confidence. She felt slightly moved, but could only press her lips firmly together and nodded gravely.

He felt relieved when he noticed that her actions a little steadier than before as she progressed forward.

This was a normal reaction to tense situations. On the other hand, someone like Romaine, who was calm and bold, was rare.

But when he turned his head the other way, he noticed that Romaine had stopped moving and was looking curiously at him. He gave an exasperated sigh and gestured at her to keep on moving forward.

It was unfortunate that her mind was steady but her thoughts were beyond common sense. It was Freya who was more reliable, and he looked forward to seeing her grow into the Goddess of War in the future.

Freya soon reached her destination. The patrol team had just crossed half of the mountain valley, and it was impossible for them to try anything at that moment.

Brendel had a little trouble to get into his own position as encouraging Freya took some precious time. The monsters were already in their ambush range.

At this distance, he might be discovered if he made a wrong move.

But he was still that veteran warrior in the game, forcefully willing himself to gauge the best timing and the enemies' pathing to the best moment without any errors. When he finally was beside Romaine, he had to wipe the cold perspiration on his forehead. It was too close for comfort, but his actions were flawless and he did not let his tense emotions affect his abilities.

Romaine noticed his perspiration and quickly handed over a checkered handkerchief. He glanced at the handkerchief and faintly remembered that it was a handicraft from the northern region Vieiro. It was difficult to find something like this in Bucce and was one of the merchant girl's favorite items.

"Thanks." He mouthed the word.

"I should be the one thanking you, Brendel." She hugged her bag and answered

earnestly: “It’s probably going to be very dangerous soon, and there might not be such a chance later right? So I want to tell you that I am thankful, Brendel.”

Brendel was taken aback slightly and he gave a faint smile in response.

In a few heartbeats, the six Demonic Trees were already near them, and the three of them who hid behind the sharp boulders could hear the shuffling sounds of their footsteps approaching nearer and nearer to them.

The Demonic Trees used a low rumbling note to pass information to each other and were able to feedback to their parent by telepathy.

Brendel saw Freya pulling her sword out, who went as far as to wrap her blade with her clothes to prevent the reflection of the light from the blade from appearing, and he nodded at her thoughtfulness even though it was unnecessary here. She was improving every day and moving away from that idealistic village girl.

He gestured immediately.

‘I will go first, then it will be your turn.’

Freya’s brows creased together. He was always trying to take on the dangerous portion of the job to himself, and it made her feel uneasy and displeased at the same time. But even so, she knew that this was the best plan and could only nod reluctantly.

The Demonic Tree moved across the ground and continued downwards to an array of rocks. They suddenly stopped and extended their search everywhere, and communicated differently with a series of notes that had different tones.

Brendel pulled out the ‘Thorn of Light’, with one arm protecting romaine, and gave an attack signal to Freya—

[Right now, they should be behind us and far apart from each other. Now is the best time!]

Brendel charged out in an arch and his first target was a mature Demonic Tree. Freya decisively pulled out his sword and rushed towards to the back lines of the group, and her targets were the two closest Demonic Trees.

The Demonic Trees in charge of the rear were typically alert, and thus their reactions

were the quickest. They discovered Freya when their heads turned backward and bellowed loudly. Their vines pierced through the air like a javelin, whistling sharply like inhuman shrieks.

Freya swung her hands outwards and blocked the four chain-like whips away as the 'Feathers of Wind' shone individually to protect her. She jumped high up and knocked onto a Demonic Tree. The dimming 'Feathers of Wind' lit themselves once again, and the giant creature was knocked flying away by the sudden assault.

She remembered Brendel's words earlier that her armor was highly effective against them and she should just attack with her limbs.

She gritted her teeth as she headed towards to the Demonic Tree lying on the ground without any real plan. The whips came at her with the force of a tidal wave. she knew she had limited strength and might be knocked away, so she raised her sword up high and cleaved downwards at the Demonic Tree's right arm.

There was a light crunching sound, and its right arm containing the vines flew straight up, but Freya was also knocked away onto the ground from the enemy's attack in return. When she started to get up, another Demonic Tree whipped at her and she rolled onto the ground several times from the impact. Even though the Half Plate of the Wind Empress protected her, the attack from the monster ruptured her inner organs and she coughed out blood.

The enemy on the ground did not recover quickly, so she only had one enemy to face. However, while she wiped the blood away from her mouth, she was unable to find any chance to attack because of the monster's flailing vines that were swinging wildly.

She lightly drew in a breath of air.

At the other end, Brendel had already finished off his enemy from his ambush.

The 'Thorn of Light' in his hands was like a line of silvery flash: His first attack was a stab that entered the Demonic Tree's right flank, which then moved across in an arc to sever the right arm and several vines, turning it into flying ashes.

The second attack was a slash that lopped off its two legs, and the instant the creature lost its balance and crashed to the ground, the icy blade had gone across its neck.

Under the web of swirling lights made by Brendel, the mature Demonic Tree quickly

turned to ashes.

This was the advantage of his guerrilla tactic when he had the first strike, but the rest of them required some improvisation.

He had a few ideas and decided to retreat after his successful ambush. The remaining three Demonic Trees obviously did not want to let him get away and chased him with a roar.

Brendel lured them to a narrow pathway where they formed a line subconsciously to keep pursuing him, but what awaited them was a gleaming silver ring on his finger.

“Oss!”

Freya heard a frightening blast coming from the left side and knew it came from Brendel. She was momentarily distracted. When she regained her senses, she realized that the enemy in front of her was actually stunned by the sound from the explosion.

As an ignorant youth from Bucce, she did not understand that the sound explosion had a great effect on the Demonic Tree that was sensitive to sound. It nearly caused a complete loss to its judgment of the world around it, and the world around him was endless waves of bright light where nothing existed.

The only thing of importance to her that it was a chance, and it was more than enough. She raised the sword that was almost corroded to the breaking point and she mercilessly chopped the Demonic Tree’s legs.

The short battle seemed to draw at an end by her sword’s arc.

With a crisp cracking sound, the Demonic Tree and her sword were snapped in half. She almost could not believe she had succeeded and her mouth was agape with surprise. Then she finally noticed Romaine opposite of her, panting tiredly with a Madara’s black steel sword in her hands.

“Romaine!”

“Freya, s-sorry, Brendel told me to help you.....”

She smiled: “It’s no problem at all, thanks.”

Brendel saw this scene unfold when he came out from the narrow pathway of rocks and was momentarily dazed. He thought that she was going to become angry but her reaction was quite contrary to his prediction.

He did not entirely plan this for the sake of reducing Freya's burden, but also partly on the tactical consideration. The crux of this plan was actually on her side. The strength of the enemy team relied heavily on the mature Demonic Tree as the leader, and the two Demonic Trees that were vigilant.

As long as these two Demonic Trees were bogged down, he would be able to kill the mature Demonic Tree easily and execute the plan to lure the remaining Demonic Trees. If the enemies were able to do a counter attack in this open terrain, he might not be able to protect Freya and Romaine's safety even if he was five levels higher.

He was agonizing over the explanation but she seemed to have understood this point already.

"Why is the Golden Demonic Tree quiet?" She asked Bre when she saw him coming over: "It can't move?"

Brendel woke up from his stupor. He shook his head. The Golden Demonic Tree was not going to stay quiet, and in fact, it was the exact opposite. The moment they attacked, the Golden Demonic Tree had noticed them already and already launched its counter attack.

It merely did it silently.

"We only have a minute, and I'll explain to you how to handle the Golden Demonic Tree. Both of you must listen carefully unless you want your souls to be trapped forever within the Golden Demonic Tree." He replied.

Chapter 35

The illusion of the past

The sun was at its brightest under the clear sky in this spring.

During April, the viridescent grass extended itself to the end of Bruglas's river. Verdant and luxuriant trees grew in the forest, and one could find a watermill or sawmill at the golden currents of the river's turn.

The crystal clear water flowed along the pebbles in the stream, crossing over the pine mountains and then continued to the Vieiro area in the north. To the natives who lived there, this river was like an endless song that carried the wisdom of the ages.

The past Brendel believed in that story and he traveled along the river to listen to the sounds in the forest. There were bears residing in it, but it was difficult to spot them. In his memories, this was the place where his grandfather loved to bring him in the past.

And in the current Brendel's memory, this was a newbie's region that he was instantly familiar. Most of the creatures were low leveled while the bears were the Bosses of this area, and dropped quality hides.

The two memories had meshed together and sprang up in his mind here.

Just a few minutes ago where he recalled the strategy to fight against the Golden Demonic Tree —

"Freya, Romaine. I'll keep things short. Both of you might have realized that the Golden Demonic Tree's real power is the Soul Energy within it. This is the reason why it is able to control so many Rotten Beasts and Demonic Trees."

"Soul Energy?" Romaine asked.

"Don't interrupt Brendel," Freya said.

"Sorry."

“Yes, Soul Energy. The ability to spy on thoughts and gain control of people’s hearts. The Golden Demonic Tree is able to create grand illusions and detain the souls in there.” Brendel replied: “The truth is when we fought against the Demonic Trees, the Golden Demonic Tree has already started to affect our thoughts. It is always dreaming, and its dream shall merge with us very soon.”

“Dream? What does that mean?”

“Very soon we will enter our own dreams, and you will see something unbelievable in it. Before that happens there are crucial points that I need to tell you...”

Brendel pointed to the center of the valley. The Golden Demonic Tree was becoming more beautiful in their eyes. The branches extended everywhere, seemingly unleashing a vibrant life towards the world. It was a sign that it was spreading the dream world towards reality.

In the game, the Tree Shepherd bestowed the Golden Tree a drop of blood from the Gods to awaken the powers within it, but the Elven tree also slumbered into an eternal dream. The contents of the dream was a world of darkness and ghastly whispers, and any normal mortals would sink into madness just by catching a glimpse of the world.

This world was considerably fatal to the players in the game. Once they entered into it they were prone to death anytime. But in order to defeat the Golden Demonic Tree, they had to enter this dream.

This was the first stage of fighting against the Golden Demonic Tree, named Phantasmagoria.

This stage was once considered to be the hardest battle in the game, but the guild ‘Freedom’ solved this problem by using a trick. It was a rarely known secret early on, and Brendel returned to this area once again when the secret was distributed widely. It was also a coincidence that his resources at hand allowed him to complete the first stage, but it was probably insufficient for the second stage.

When the first stage ended, he would have to seek victory by using their real abilities, and he thought it was difficult for their current strength.

[The players who attempt this dungeon have an average level of 25. I’m only at level 10, and the girls’ levels are definitely below me. Even with all our rare equipment, it would be difficult to finish the boss battle in 15 minutes, and after that period of time,

the Rotten Beasts will arrive.

The Holy Sword would be my trump card. If I make every strike count, then it might just be possible to take down the Golden Demonic Tree within that time frame, barely.]

“Crucial points?” Freya’s voice brought him back to reality.

Brendel took a moment to recall what Freya said, then nodded: “The Golden Demonic Tree’s dream will invade our own, but you must remember you are the ones who control the dream. Regardless of how it constructs your dream, or create the most fearsome of beasts, they would never go past your limits.”

[Back in the game, the Golden Demonic Tree will create the strongest monsters that a player has met and recreate that dream. In addition, there were several other negative attributes added to the mix,. With every injury and mistake made, the negative attributes would increase while the enemies become even stronger. This ends up as a loop where the enemies become stronger while the player becomes weaker and finally gets defeated as a result.]

Brendel did not know how these negative attributes would present itself here. But there is only one answer. They had to be brimming with confidence and ensure that they are in their best conditions to secure victory.

He pointed at his temple and looked gravely at the girls: “Gather your concentration and keep your determination up to fight. The human’s ‘Will’ attribute.”

“‘Will’ Attribute?”

“Don’t interrupt, Romaine!” Brendel snapped in exasperation: “I’m talking about willpower. A human’s willpower can be unstable, and it will fluctuate based on your conditions. Gather your concentration and hold on to your determination to keep on fighting. That way, your willpower will always remain at its peak. As long as your willpower holds steady, the Golden Demonic Tree will find it difficult to bring about your negative emotions. Don’t get controlled by that negative emotion, otherwise, there would be dire consequences.”

“How dire?” The merchant girl looked at him with bright eyes.

He did not reply. He was afraid his answer will make them tense, and that was also a negative emotion. In the game’s lore, defeat would mean that their souls would be

detained eternally in the Golden Demonic Tree, until it was purified by flames into ashes, where the souls would finally be released. But their bodies would not have survived the loss of the souls.

The surroundings were starting to become foggy.

Brendel still had one more rule that he did not manage to finish explaining. The first person who woke up had the ability to enter another person's dream and signal to the person, boosting their confidence and faith to allow them to defeat the dream more easily.

Each person had only one chance to do something like that, so there was a tactical placement; The strongest individual will enter the dream first, then the second strongest, the third strongest and so forth. That way the strongest person will be in time to aid the next person. This allowed for fewer members to be defeated in the game, which was the trick that 'Freedom' discovered.

Brendel quickly decided the order.

"I'll be first to enter the dream state. Next is Freya, and the last is Romaine."

"How do you enter the dream state?" Freya asked.

"Just close your eyes for a while and you will be pht—" Brendel bit his tongue when he saw the merchant girl actually closing her eyes to try it out. He immediately used his forefingers to pull the corners of her eyes to bring up her eyelids.

"Ah!" She uttered a short yelp as Brendel flicked her forehead.

"My esteemed lady! Curiosity kills the cat!"

"S-sorry."

"The dream world that's filled with magic and spiritual powers is very dangerous. You must be cautious. I'm closing my eyes now."

He sighed. Since he had the most experience amongst them, he should naturally be the first one to enter the dream.

Freya had many mental barriers right now and she was in greater danger, so he had to

quickly aid her without any errors. On the other hand, Romaine should have the easiest time escaping from the Golden Demonic Tree's control, and with Freya's help, she should have no problems at all.

The first stage was five minutes in reality. In the dream world, it extended to half an hour. If they were not able to free themselves in the dream world, they would be lost forever and detained eternally.

This looked like a very strong plan to him, and at the very least he did not spot any problems on the surface. If he succeeded there would be a generous reward from it, and they would have sufficient time to move within the fortress.

There was no one who knew better than Brendel about the fortress's situation and how the future would turn out. Every bit of extra time meant additional hope in finding Romaine's aunt and successfully escaping from there.

He patted on the 'Thorn of Light' on his waist and breathed deeply. The dream world was incredibly realistic. The scent of the river's wet earth filled his nose, a taste that belonged to the Bruglas's April grasses and forest trees.

But what did it mean for the Golden Demonic Tree to throw him here? Did it think that the strongest creature he met was the old brown bear in this forest?

If that was the case, it was merely a rare level 16 elite, and he could easily defeat it.

But in his memories, it was never easy with the Golden Demonic Tree. If anything, the creatures that were corrupted by the 'Blood of Gods' were the most malevolent creatures in this world. There was no reasoning to how evil they were.

[If I counted the time correctly, I should be entering a plot event right about now right?]

Even though he had been in this world for a few days, he was still using terms unique to his previous world subconsciously.

At that moment, he heard a series of sounds where metal struck each other. His ears moved. At his current level 3 Military Swordsmanship, he was able to discern from his ears that two people were fighting.

[But it doesn't sound like a duel, but mere practice.]

He did not choose to evade this event as he knew that it was pointless to do so. Furthermore, avoiding danger meant that he was fleeing and counted as a negative emotion, which might be used by the Golden Demonic Tree. He followed the source of the sound and discovered they came from the nearby watermill and logging mill. When he drew in a little closer and looked across the water wheel, he saw two surprising figures.

It was an old man full of silvery-greyish hair with long sideburns. He wore a deep blue colored uniform with a familiar emblem, and there was a sword in his hand. His figure gave an indomitable impression, as though he was an immovable mountain. But what made Brendel's heart skip a beat was his expression, and his eyes displayed an unassailable will behind them. If anyone with a guilty bone in his body saw him, they would immediately avert their eyes away in contrition.

The other person was a boy holding a wooden sword. He looked no different from other boys, but the meaning was different in his eyes.

This boy was... Brendel.

More accurately, it was a young Brendel.

He raised his head in shock as he realized who the old man was. That was definitely his grandfather, a veteran of the November's war and one who had received the Candlelight Emblem—

[Holy shit! The Candlelight Emblem from the Holy Cathedral of flames isn't something that can be gotten easily—]

His heart quickened as he realized that the dream world was a little different from the game. But with that hesitation, he realized the aura from his grandfather was becoming stronger, even affecting his mind.

"I'm being hit with negative emotions!" He immediately realized he was affected subconsciously.

It was completely different in the game since there was no way a game could affect the mind, but right here in this real world...!

[This is going to be much more difficult compared to the game with this...]

Brendel gritted his teeth as he checked the bag on his belt. Fortunately, he still had a trump card. Even though this was utterly unexpected, it was still in his control.

He calmed down as he realized this.

The old man's eyes stopped on him. He stared at him for a moment before speaking.

“Lad, are you qualified to inherit everything from my grandson?”

This sentence made Brendel's body tremble.

Chapter 36

Surpass me

Brendel's mind was greatly shaken. It was his biggest secret in this world. Even though the old and new Brendel had merged together, it was hard for him to explain how the two memories merged together. Even he willed himself to accept everything, there was still a subconscious barrier remaining in him.

[This secret that I wanted to keep locked inside my heart is ripped out instantly by the Golden Demonic Tree... No, that's not it—]

He immediately shook his head. It was impossible for The Golden Demonic Tree to break it open so quickly. That creature was just using the past Brendel's memory— Why would Brendel's grandfather say something like that to him?

[I'm my own enemy here. Brendel's grandfather must be talking to the old Brendel, and it's nothing more than a coincidence.]

He shut his eyes and took a deep breath. The feeling that his defenses were completely exposed to the enemy disappeared after realizing that his deepest thoughts in his mind were not revealed yet.

He calmed down quickly.

He had deflected this first attack made by the Golden Demonic Tree by chance, and his current mentality actually stabilized. He gulped and cried inwardly that he was lucky.

He pulled out the 'Thorn of Light', answering the old man: "We would know whether I have the qualifications once we crossed swords."

The old man nodded: "Very good. Now you're acting more like a Cadirosso. There are many people in this world who brag too much, and I don't want to see my descendant acting like a useless fool."

Brendel's mind responded. This was not an attempt to undermine him. His grandfather's reaction was surely a reflection of his own surging confidence.

[This is a good sign. It means that my Willpower is recovering to its peak condition.]

He indicated for his grandfather to make the first move. Even if it was a dream, the opponent was someone his senior. Being polite showed off his confidence, and so he did it.

Within this dream world, the person who made the first move did not represent that he would gain the upper hand. It was possible that it was a trap arranged by the malicious creature. Only by guarding the weaknesses tightly would deny it the chance to invade the mind.

The old man nodded again and he shifted his left foot forward, and the sword on his left shoulder. This was the strongest form within the Military Swordsmanship. When Brendel saw that, his forehead went numb because he could not see an opening at all.

[Even back in the game I did not train Aouine's Military Swordsmanship to this level, who the bloody hell was your grandfather!]

This thought passed through his mind for a single instant, and he felt the sword in his arm become a little heavier. He yelled expletives in his mind; this slight gap was actually caught by the Golden Demonic Tree.

[Are you fucking serious!]

He went into a defensive stance.

He could only choose to use something that was more familiar from the Military Swordsmanship because he did not have any other swordsmanship with levels in it.

Against a veteran opponent, there was no meaning to use flashy techniques from the higher levels. Without adding more levels to the skill or reaching the required stats, it was full of flaws in front of his grandfather.

Brendel was also an experienced warrior and understood his position clearly.

There was no indication from the old man, but he made his move with the sword flashing at Brendel. His sword was not very fast, but the skill behind it was impeccable. There were no flaws in the attack and appeared like an ordinary swing, but one would feel that the sword could strike from anywhere with the next attack.

The air escaped from Brendel's lungs.

[This is the swordsmanship from Brendel's grandfather? Then it's no wonder he could get the Candlelight Emblem. This level of skill makes it possible to keep a flow of attacks if it's not dealt with properly... No wonder Brendel's innate skill with the sword was so impressive, for an NPC anyway. If this old man had a better lineage, he would definitely receive the title of a knight.]

Brendel had no way to counter, so he tried sealing the next attack instead. There was a loud clash from the swords, and Brendel staggered from the strength of the opponent. His mind panicked and before he could stop his thoughts, he felt the opponent's sword growing heavier.

[Holy fuck, you god damned Golden Demonic Tree!]

Brendel certainly knew what was going on. It could not be compared to the game's version at all. This was a true puppet master, not that rubbish AI in the game. But Brendel did not feel scared at this moment and was overflowing with the will to fight back.

He stared at his grandfather's eyes. The latter's expression was perfectly calm like still water, as though he could read someone's heart.

He suddenly felt puzzled. Why did such an outstanding grandfather leave such a faint impression in the old Brendel's memories? Even when he saw him for the first time, he had to look at the young Brendel's memory to confirm it was his grandfather.

[Something's wrong.]

He searched his memories again.

The old Brendel's memory of his grandfather was a rigid person who was not fond of speaking or laughing. The next impression was the Candlelight emblem and the aura as a veteran from the November War. But these memories were not as vivid as the ones like the painting and his old home.

[Both grandfather and grandson lived together for several years, so why does he appear to be so estranged to Brendel when they meet again under this situation? The past Brendel isn't supposed to be someone who would forget his own grandfather's appearance.]

He fended off the old man's sword once again and the sound between metal sang out. He felt the opponent's sword grow heavier again, almost to the point where the sword nearly left his hand. He felt a shock in his mind, and he looked at the old man again.

His expression had become strict as if he was displeased.

He read the warning message from the system in his mind as a penalty was applied.

[What the fuck! This is self-doubt!]

He received another blow to his mind, and the defense in his mind grew from a tiny crack and spread outwards. The youth's defense became more and more flimsy, and the old man's strikes knocked him over to the ground. His blood grew cold as he quickly rolled over from the impact and got up.

But when he turned back, there were no grassy plains anymore. It was a gray house. Indeed, it was the old house in Bucce, where he woke up that fateful night in this world.

Brendel's perspiration gathered on his forehead. This meant the Golden Demonic Tree had invaded further into his mind. He could not help but reach into the bag on his belt.

But he hesitated and questioned himself if he wanted to use a solution that was not part of his strength.

There was a sudden reluctance in his heart. He looked at the old man's face. His grandfather still had the same strictness on his wrinkled face, but there were signs of disappointment.

The disappointment pierced his mind.

It was as if the twenty years of the real Brendel's memory had suddenly become clear and emerged from his body; his former self wanting to fight his grandfather.

"Let me fight!" A voice said.

He suddenly felt this thought growing in his mind and knew that it was the old Brendel's feelings affecting himself. He was merging into this world and with the memories of his loved ones.

But he shook his head.

[No, It's possible that the Golden Demonic Tree is utilizing my weakness. I have to use that technique to leave this dream world.]

But when he placed his hand over to that position, he received a shock. The old man's disappointment had become more apparent.

"...But it's not right to deny the past Brendel's wishes." He muttered to himself.

[But you must understand, the Golden Demonic Tree is using his weakness.]

"Even so, he's part of me now."

[You will fail.]

"But succeeding here doesn't mean that my weakness is gone."

Brendel suddenly became quiet. He realized why Brendel's grandfather had not spoken even once after he pulled his sword.

The old man had many chances to defeat him, yet he only looked at him with disappointment. He said nothing and simply waited quietly.

Brendel felt as if lightning had streaked across his mind and lit up every dark corner in his heart. This was not the Golden Demonic Tree's handiwork of pity.

[No, this place is the absolute sanctuary that the past Brendel had in his memories! The Golden Demonic Tree isn't capable of utilizing this place!]

Then why?

He took another look at the old man's face. In the dark corners of his face, was it still only disappointment?

Of course, it was.

He felt his whole body tremble. Why did the old man feel disappointed?

"Because it's the endless expectations that the grandfather had. This is the old Brendel's memory of his grandfather. The latter was strict and full of expectations. His eyes are full of disappointment, but it is not to censure the boy. It was in hope that the

boy could understand his feelings behind this expectation.”

“The old man wanted to let the boy know his love for him, and the boy knew deep down in his heart that it was so.”

Brendel raised his head and gripped his sword tightly. He bit his lips and forced himself to hold back his tears.

The youth thought he understood the former Brendel’s world but realized he did not understand it enough.

“Brendel, remember what I told you? Your back must be as straight as your sword. The men of the Cadirosso family must live proudly. You are my grandson, and the best amongst the rest of them.”

The old man raised his swords again.

“Come, let me see what you learned during ten years when I was gone.”

He nodded, unable to stop the pouring tears. These were his grandfather’s words, but they were also not. This was the answer the old Brendel’s heart wanted to have and the path he wanted to cross.

Brendel took a deep breath.

The two swords crossed each other —

“Stand up Brendel. How can a Cadirosso be so weak?”

“What are you crying for. Would a little-torn skin kill you?”

“Speak up, how do you want me to punish you this time?”

The grandfather in his memories who sat strictly on the seat of the elders, who sat silently and looked at him with disappointment.

The grandfather in his memories who was always dissatisfied with seemingly everything that he did.

But the old man in his memories finally walked the last journey in his life. The Brendel

who was a child stood before that bed, feeling his Grandfather's hand gently placing over his head and stroking his hair, before it finally lost its strength and fell across his small face.

It was a rough hand, but it made the boy feel that his grandfather could be relied on. His last sigh at the very end, was it still disappointment, or hopeful expectation?

Brendel felt the dream state dissolving around him. In his hand was a fading Candlelight emblem that was turning into ashes. He did not speak for a long time.

“Thank you, elder.”

TL: So in case it's too subtle, the reason for the old Brendel's weak memories of his grandfather, is because he perceived his grandfather as one who only saw disappointment in him, and at the end of his memories the lines blurred because subconsciously he realized that his grandfather might have loved him deeply, which became the basis for that sanctuary where the Golden Demonic Tree could not breach (the old man did not want to hurt Brendel).

New Brendel realized the truth at the very end and accepted the old Brendel's memories and feelings. If I have to take a guess at what the grandfather and old Brendel wanted, the title of the chapter is probably a huge hint.

Chapter 37

Awakening

Brendel opened his eyes after waking up from his grandfather's dream. He felt his forehead was completely cold from the perspiration. He looked up at the gloomy sky and breathed out slowly. There were immediate ways to shake off the dream prison, either by using equipment that strengthen the willpower attribute or special abilities. An example would be his innate talent, 'Unyielding'.

But he realized subconsciously that it was not the best solution.

Regardless, the past memories of the old Brendel had merged together with his own. He was no longer just purely Brendel or Sophie, and they were now one and the same in one body. If he ignored the old Brendel's weaknesses, then one day he would be unable to look at his own weaknesses.

He needed to recognize for what he was now, to be able to accept everything that happened in his past.

This growth was not limited to just his mind— Accepting Brendel's past had benefited him a great deal. Brendel's grandfather personally taught his grandson his swordsmanship, but Brendel had subconsciously sealed his own memories because he had given up on himself.

With all the memories of the young Brendel unlocked, the swordsmanship that he had learned merged within his soul.

[Just exactly what sort of swordsmanship is this?]

The past Brendel had sealed off his grandfather's swordsmanship because he deemed himself unworthy to use it. Even so his innate talent in the sword enabled him to become the best fighter in Anchorite's militia batch.

The current Brendel opened his character window, and saw it had changed from before:

Civilian Soldier [Military Swordsmanship (Level 3+1), Grappling techniques (Level 3), Tactical Theory (Level 0), Military Organization (Level 0)]

The levels in the ability panel could not go past the level of the profession, but equipment and mission rewards were exceptions. A normal human who trained for 30-40 years would have the same level 4 Swordsmanship, but it was impossibly rare to find it on an eighteen years old youth.

Brendel felt that if he managed to completely absorb what his other grandfather had taught him, he would have increased his level 4 military swordsmanship another 30% more in the XP panel. When he recalled the old veteran's swordsmanship, he felt a chill creeping behind his back. That was at least a level 10 Aouine's military swordsmanship, and the old veteran was definitely a legendary figure.

Brendel sat up from the ground with complicated thoughts. He looked across the mountain valley. The fog surrounding the Golden Demonic Tree felt like it had dissipated a little, indicating that the power of the dream world was weakening. When he looked at the girls, he found they had their eyes closed tightly, occasionally creasing their brows.

Romaine's face was pale, but her expression was very peaceful.

[Good. It seems that her situation is not as bad as I thought. Once she receives a mental boost, the Golden Demonic Tree's first stage would not be difficult to deal with.]

He went over to Freya and pressed his finger on her forehead. He hesitated just a little before selecting 'Faith'.

The Golden Demonic Tree utilized negative emotions to bring people into a trap that it created. Players had to use positive emotions to handle things. From how he looked at Freya's usual performance, he believed that her determined and resolute ways were just a form of protection to hide her weaknesses. He hoped that she had more self confidence, as it would allow her to mature into the Goddess of War.

...He suddenly realized the girls were currently defenseless. It was easy to take advantage of the girls. He could not help but look at two girls who were deeply asleep. The translucent appearance on Romaine's forehead made him want to kiss it.

His heart beat painfully in his chest, and he quickly stopped his thoughts. Even though he liked the merchant girl, he was not a shameless person. He rubbed his forehead as

stranger thoughts flared up in his mind.

Then he thought about his dream again to curb his stray thoughts.

His mentality was different after leaving that world. He felt like he had become stronger from that feeling of loss. He knew that he was not going to turn back to his past world now, and the meaning in his life was to finish walking the road before him—

After understanding the past Brendel's desires, he was going to plan his own road. He knew the 'War of the Black Rose' was about to end soon, as the battle in the game only extended from the end of May to the end of July.

None of the nobles wanted to be involved in this battle.

This coincided with Madara's plans as well. It was an unprecedented change for Aouine when Madara defeated the kingdom successfully, but Madara did not wish to provoke the Alliance of Light, and they had to retreat at some point. Since neither of the two kingdoms wanted to continue a battle of attrition, they opted for a truce.

It was somewhat of a farce, and Brendel knew that the Aouine he wanted to fight for was not the current Aouine.

He was waiting for the Regent Princess to take over the throne.

And during the time he waited for this event to take place, he would take his own actions. He knew that after the war ended, the royal family would want to commend people who stood out in the war, establishing heroic figures to assuage the hearts of the citizens. But he was uninterested in this title, and more to the point, he was indifferent to the antiquated system.

[But allowing Freya to take up some training in the capital is a good idea. What should I do in the meantime?]

Brendel pondered on the future. In front of him was the beginning of a chaotic era. He had limited strength on his own and he needed a land of his own. He had to gather people to support his ideals, and by using his own knowledge in the world's future events and his own familiarity with it, he could definitely make his territory grow quickly.

[So where should I start? Walk down the path of Aouine's internal affairs?... No, never mind about the fact that I won't realize my plans in time, I don't want to be involved in the upcoming wars too early. I have to restrain my actions so that I don't stand out and get discovered by powerful factions.]

[Becoming the lord of some existing region is also a no, with the same reason as above. Another road I can take is to become a pioneer. Both the players and NPCs in the game had pioneers. In this dark world, not all lands are controlled by the nobles. The borders of the kingdom, the areas in between the civilized and savaged areas, and there were many other lands that had not been tilled, were ready to be taken]

[There's a certain government decree, once a pioneer found a new land of their own, they could receive a position of nobility based on their size of the lands.]

These titles, however, were not to be used as hereditary titles, and most of the lands would ultimately be taken back by the kingdom and the holy cathedral after three generations. But there were still many people who were taken in by this route, and they gambled everything to find a land. Adventurers, mercenaries, illegal merchants, and even paladins from a legitimate background, as well as clergies, there were no differences here.

When he thought about the available lands, he became excited. He knew of many such lands near Aouine's borders, and even though there were differences between them, all of them were valid choices. But when it came to the time to choose, he hesitated.

[I don't really require a good location with a strong advantage in development, the key thing is to have a clandestine area, so it is best to choose those lands with 'relics' in them. Since I'm lacking in manpower and resources, I could also save a lot of effort by taking these areas over.]

He continued to go through his memories and finally decided on a place. It was a land that was remarkably famous in the game, but the players who owned the land committed a fatal error and allowed his enemies to burn it all down. It was a famous topic in the forums that did not die down and continuously brought up all the time.

He could envision countless people saying: "If 'Valhalla' was still around, it would surely be another different landscape right?"

He felt thrilled at this idea. He had also thought of this moment himself. If that

legendary land was not destroyed, then the final development phase would have gone beyond anyone's expectations.

[To think that I have a chance of realizing this fantasy with my own hands!]

He continued to fantasize wildly by himself, before realizing the person in front of him moved a little. Freya then opened her eyes and saw Brendel putting his finger on her forehead. She was puzzled for a moment before it disappeared quickly. She quickly woke up from her stupor and retreated backwards, blushing and looking at him.

Even if she did not say anything, Brendel was able to read the words on her face:

“S-shameless lout, what are you doing!”

He shook his head and wanted to explain, but Freya abruptly reacted like she had recalled something. Her blush deepened another shade: “Sorry, I...”

“It's fine, alright, quickly give Romaine an alarm clock, and tell her to wake up.” He pretended to ease things over.

“Alarm clock?”

He coughed as he realized he had forgotten to explain. He explained the origin of 'Faith' and its uses in a hurry. Freya's expressions became tense when she finished listening to the explanation that he thought was simple.

“W-why didn't you let Romaine use it first?” She asked and stood up anxiously.

He was momentarily stunned.

[Hm? No matter how I slice it, you have a weaker mind, Miss Goddess of War-]

But before he finished his thoughts, Freya had already rushed over to Romaine's side and picked her up.

She still had a peaceful expression, but Brendel discovered two streams of tears from Romaine's face when Freya picked her up. His mouth went wide with shock.

“What's going on!” He could not imagine that Romaine actually cried.

“I’ll tell you later.” Freya took a deep breath and put her hand on her forehead, but there was no reaction. She was taken aback for a moment and immediately said: “Turn your head away!”

“What for?”

“Turn away, hurry up, and no peeking!”

Brendel’s left eyebrow went up but he immediately nodded. Unfortunately, his curiosity was actually no less than Romaine, and after a while, he spied behind his back. He saw Freya hugging Romaine with their foreheads touching each other, and Freya muttered fretfully: “Little Romaine, hurry up and wake up. Have you forgotten our promise?”

He froze for just a little while. He did not expect the merchant girl who spoke whatever was on her mind to have her own secret, even though he knew they had a very good relationship. But he found Freya’s eyes glaring furiously at him before his surprise was over.

“Apologies, someone else inside me insisted on looking.” Brendel tried to blame someone else.

“Y-you devious, outrageous scumbag!” Freya lambasted him with crimson cheeks.

“Sorry, sorry.”

Chapter 38

The battle for time

Romaine's conditions were not as optimistic as Brendel had imagined. With each passing second the atmosphere became more intense, and he realized that there must be a secret that she kept in a heart— and a secret that was so deeply hidden away in her heart would ultimately present itself as fatal in this dream world.

There were only the sounds of Freya and his anxious breaths while the merchant girl slept quietly in her arms, and Brendel found himself completely afraid— that Romaine would never wake up from her slumber.

He looked at the Golden Demonic Tree, the connection between the dream world and reality was becoming weaker, and it was going to wake up anytime.

“Brendel?”

Freya's fists were clenched into a tight ball, and she had trouble finding words to rouse Romaine from her anxiety. He said they had only five minutes, but Romaine still looked like she was deeply immersed in her dream. Yet Freya knew she could not blame the youth, because she was the only one who knew Romaine's secret in Bucca.

She was starting to regret that she did not tell Brendel, but how could she know that this dream world was so complicated?

However, Brendel did not fall into a spiral of confusion and thought quickly. He suddenly threw the ‘Thorn of Light’ over to them.

“Let her hold this.”

“What?”

“The sword has the ability to purify darkness, let her hold it.” Even though his lips uttered these words, he knew in his heart that the Elven Sword only added 1 OZ of ‘Will’. He could only hope that it was enough to bring her out of danger.

[Mother Marsha!]

He prayed to the highest holy figure in his heart, begging her to be more merciful to Romaine. Perhaps it was the sword, or perhaps it was his prayers to Marsha, not long after, she actually woke with a moan.

She blinked and rubbed her eyes to look at the two of them, looking blankly for a while, before speaking happily: "Freya, you're already up. You know, I had a nightmare earlier!"

"Ah!"

Freya was still in a daze, then she yelled from the bottom of her heart. She did not hear what the merchant girl said at all, but simply hugged her and cried. She had believed that there was no hope left but Brendel's solution really worked.

"Romaine, you idiot!"

"W-what did you say?! I'm not an idiot!" Romaine seemed to have received a fatal blow, and she flailed her limbs in indignation.

Brendel was much calmer than Freya. The aid from the Thorn of Light and another person's 'Faith' should be able to wake her up from the dream world no matter how deep she was in, but he was more worried about the aftermath of this situation.

But he knew that she was fine from her silly reaction.

"Alright, it's fine to stop your tears now." He continued: "The Golden Demonic Tree is going to wake up any time, and if there is anything to else to say, we should save it until the battle is over."

Freya wiped away her tears and nodded.

"What should we do, Brendel?" She asked.

"We're not the main protagonists in this battle, but a Rock Wurm in this valley--"

"What's that?"

"Let me finish, Romaine! The Rock Wurm is something from that is born (Earth

Element Type) as a Element Creature. It's a natural enemy of the Golden Demonic Tree, but before the Rock Wurm becomes a mature adult, the Golden Demonic Tree is able to force it outside the valley by controlling the roots in the ground. It takes about 80 to 120 years for a Rock Wurm to become mature but we can't wait this long, so we need to help it."

"Help it?" Freya asked.

Brendel received the Elven Sword from Romaine, and he replied: "The Golden Demonic Tree's body is very frail. The only attack it has is the roots extending from the ground and impaling its enemies. We need to force it to attack us and the more roots it takes out from the ground, the less it has to fend off the Rock Wurm. Once that happens, the Rock Wurm is able to enter the center of this valley."

"But we only have ten minutes. The first batch of Rotten Beast will arrive in ten minutes, and if we still have not killed it in that time frame, you must run towards the west side without hesitation. There's a passageway there that's quite visible."

"What about you?" Romaine looked up at him.

"Protecting the rear should be left to a gentleman. This is the ladies' prerogative." He softly poked her bright forehead with his finger. He looked back at Freya who was tying up her ponytail in preparation for battle. She noticed his gaze and nodded.

He paused momentarily as he expected her to demand staying behind. There was no reluctance on her expression but a steady gaze.

[It looks like she matured from the dream world.]

He smiled happily as he saw a scintilla of the future Goddess of War's presence on her. Then he turned back: "Romaine, wear the ring I gave you."

The merchant girl immediately raised her hand smugly, waving the black and white ring clearly.

"Your task is to listen to the tremors from the ground, if you discover anything you must tell us straight away."

"Understood, Brendel."

“Then let’s move out. Once we cross the array of rocks below us, we will approach the Golden Demonic Tree. Pay attention to the formation below, as there’s a broken layer that will delay the Golden Demonic Tree from discovering us.” Brendel started moving as he spoke, and ran up to the protruding boulder, then signaled to Romaine and Freya to come over to him.

Freya grabbed Romaine’s hand and went over. She did so to prevent her from running around the place and to protect her at the same time. Also, she wanted him to concentrate on his task, and once the opportunity presented itself, they could attack the Golden Demonic Tree.

The three of them quickly rushed towards the indicated spot. He did not remember wrongly as they did not receive any attacks. But once they crossed the zone, Romaine immediately heard something from the ground.

“Brendel, there are noises in the ground.”

His heart thumped loudly, and he immediately yelled: “Scatter, scatter now!”

Freya instantly pushed Romaine to the sides, and the three of them separated from each other. Two thick vines sprang from the ground. The Golden Demonic Tree did not expect the insects here to foresee its attack, and the roots received Brendel’s attack without being prepared for it.

The youth cleaved into the center of the vines that were as thick as a bucket. It bit deeply into them, and silver flames immediately burst forth, burning them with a crackling sound. The Golden Demonic Tree trembled in pain from the attack, and the entire valley reverberated with a buzz.

[It’s calling for reinforcement again.]

Brendel’s heart sank. Time was running out. He looked back and saw Freya dodging the vines gracefully, and countered by slashing onto them. Even she only managed to cut through a third of the vine’s body, the clean attack impressed him.

[A great improvement in her swordsmanship. She benefited a lot from the dream.]

“Brendel, there’s another sound!” Romaine had moved towards the edge of the battlefield before turning around and yelling.

“How far?” Brendel yelled subconsciously, but immediately noticed his mistake. He had treated Romaine as a ‘Nightingale’ in the party, but she was only more sensitive in her perception and not a professional scout in the game.

“70 to 100 meters, probably.” Romaine thought for a moment.

“That far?” Brendel was taken aback slightly, before chopping off the vine that was attacking him. The remaining stump lost its vitality and sank down lifelessly; the place where it was cut off was burned black.

“60 meters.”

Brendel hesitated for a while, even though he found it a little incredulous, he decided to trust her: “Freya, enough! Do you see that small path over there, prepare to go over there.”

Freya’s actions only stopped for a split second before she raised the sword over her chest, and defended against the vine who whipped her over to one side. The ‘Feathers of Wind’ lit up and became a web of light, negating most of the impact and she rolled on the ground several times before climbing up. She was already at Romaine’s side.

“Romaine, let’s go!” She grabbed the merchant girl’s hand and ran to the indicated location.

“Ehhh! What about Brendel?”

“He will definitely catch up.”

[Oh? That lass has finally learned to trust me and not overextend herself.]

Brendel was relieved. He was afraid that Freya would make things complicated by staying behind. The vine that attacked Freya went after her again, but Brendel severed it into two from the earlier opening she made.

He did not dare to stay behind any longer with the enemies cleared. The movement below the ground was loud enough that he even could hear them, proving that Romaine’s judgment was accurate. But he was still surprised, how could that ditsy girl hear something at least 70 meters away?

[If I calculate it... that’s at least 5 OZ worth of perception.]

That thought only appeared for just a split second and he immediately ran away. It was not hard for him to catch up to Freya and Romaine, but the three of them were constantly interrupted by the roots appearing.

Then suddenly, they heard a huge boom at the southern valley, and all the vines that were attacking them pulled back.

Brendel did not need to say anything, but the girls knew that the Rock Wurm had joined the fray.

“Did we win?” Romaine asked in delight.

He shook his head. They still had to enter the heart of the valley. In the remaining time, the Golden Demonic Tree would constantly measure which side was more threatening and move its numerous roots to stop them. This defense would not last very long and ultimately end in their victory.

As long as they managed to do it within the time frame.

There was less than five minutes.

Chapter 39

The death of the Golden Tree

There was a blast at the southern side of the valley, and another blast half a minute later.

Brendel strained his ears and he confirmed that the Rock Wurm had passed through the valley which was heading inside to the Forbidden Garden. This creature that was clad in a rock armor had uncountable needle-like teeth shaped like a whirlpool for its mouth, easily passing through the earth and tearing up the hardest rocks.

He had seen a mature Rock Wurm in the game before. It was thirty meters long and there had to be at least three people to surround and fight it. The defense of the creature was astonishingly high, even a 40 OZ Vran Sword was not be able to pierce through the rock armor and do damage.

[Damn it. Two sounds. If the BOSS causes the Rock Wurm to take a long detour, its attention would be on us again.]

The roots of the Golden Demonic Tree in the forbidden valley extended nearly a kilometer, and factoring in the Rock Wurm's fastest speed, Brendel estimated that it would at least require two minutes and thirty seconds to burst out of the ground.

[We're nearly at the center of the Forbidden Garden. Once we finish bypassing this uneven ground, we would be able to reach the main body of the Golden Demonic Tree. If this BOSS does not interfere with us, that is.]

There was two minutes left.

But he knew that the Golden Demonic Tree would definitely try and stop them. Before he finished his thoughts, there were crackling noises coming from the solid ground. They were in such close vicinity of the Golden Demonic Tree that its actions came without warning, and Romaine was unable to warn him in time.

The three of them felt the ground sink before them, and the prepared Brendel stabbed the ground with the Elven sword to support himself, while his other hand prevented

the merchant girl from falling down. When he looked to the sides, Freya was half kneeling on the ground as she tried to steady herself.

Before the three of them had the chance to relax, the ground sank once again with a crack visibly forming before them.

“What is it trying to do?” Freya nearly fell backwards and asked uneasily.

“It’s trying to kill us, concentrate and follow me.” He pulled Romaine up from the ground, tore out the sword and sheathed it, then lifted the merchant girl with his arm and jumped over the crack caused by the roots.

Romaine’s face was like a red apple when she found herself hoisted by his arm, and her eyes were opened comically and she did not dare to let her breath out.

Freya also wanted to jump up, but the Golden Demonic Tree was ready with an attack. The roots emerged from the ground and struck her across the chest. If it was not for Brendel’s swift reactions to pull her back, she would have fallen into the crevice along with the rocks and mud.

“Thanks.” Freya shrugged his hand off and thanked him.

“Now is not the time for words.” Brendel pulled his sword out and cut an incoming vine whip into two. “Move ahead. We’re nearly at the tree.”

There were snake-like tree vines appearing in front of them when they finally reached in front of the BOSS. The crevice behind them was gradually becoming bigger, but Brendel was used to this scene.

[You might have given me a surprise during the first stage but it looks like you have ran out of tricks.]

The ability in the game was an extensive AOE attack to rip open the ground, but that did not mean it could not be countered.

“Look carefully!”

He shouted to Freya while holding on tightly to Romaine. He watched the vines carefully, letting the ‘whip’ pass by, then grabbed tightly onto it—

The Golden Demonic Tree apparently did not expect that. It tried to curl up the vine and shook it back and forth, trying to throw Brendel away.

But the youth held tightly onto it with one arm. Both Romaine and him bobbed up and down as the vine tried to shake him off, but it was a futile attempt. The BOSS finally got impatient and raised the vine up high, gathering momentum, managing to throw him backwards. Yet he utilized the momentum from the swing and landed thirty meters away from the crevice safely.

His high stats in strength allowed him to possess four times the strength of a normal human, while his nimble agility allowed him to handle the tree's sudden movements, and his robust physique allowed him to absorb the impact. If it was a normal person, their internal organs would have ruptured from the landing, but Brendel only felt slightly unused to the feeling when he landed.

This was the advantages of having high stats, and he knew that everything he did had meaning to it when he landed safely.

He immediately shouted to Freya: "Follow me!"

He pulled the merchant girl along without stopping, heading towards the Golden Demonic Tree.

"Brendel, wait— I can't catch up."

But he could not afford to listen to what the merchant girl said, as the ground suddenly erupted in front of him with a crashing sound when he turned at a corner. Numerous vines sprang forth to form a web, covering the Golden Demonic Tree.

[Shit! There's less than one minute left.]

Brendel paused for a moment, while Romaine gasped for breath behind him. She looked up at the tree in front of her; no matter how she looked at it, its appearance looked like a Golden Apple Tree made by the gods.

He studied the web carefully. It appeared to be identical to the game. The countless vines wiggled for a moment before they attacked him at the same time.

With a roar, Brendel unleashed his attacks without reservations, the Elven sword flashing with a phantasmal silver fire in a blinding speed. Each of his slashes

accurately severed the numerous vines that assaulted him in succession into halves, which in turn burst up into flames and turned to ashes. Then he released Romaine and took a step backwards, raising his sword with both of his hands:

“Power Break!”

One step forward.

Brendel felt an overwhelming strength spreading from his shoulders to his arms and hands, and he sundered the web in front of him in a beautiful silver arc. The blade seemed to compress the air from two sides, forcing a screaming explosion of wind to sing from the sword. The web of overflowing vines broke apart like a sea of rotten firewood, and there was a large depression from the center of the web.

Freya staggered across the uneven ground and rushed towards the tree from behind, where she managed to see this scene in front of her. She always thought she had seen his limits every single time when he was in action, but this was the first time she saw him using this explosive power.

The Golden Demonic Tree was unable to block them any longer, and could only watch them break into the heart of the garden.

“The two of you attack the trunk and roots and I’ll attack the main body—”

He took out the Card of Fate, and spoke in his heart: “Activate the Holy Sword!”

.....

Even in the summer time, the Silver Claw Fortress was still covered by a layer of frost. It was built on the Corcov mountains in order to oversee the savages in the forest. But after the Balta province was built, it was used as one of the royal family’s villa.

There was an ancient pine tree in the fortress’s diamond shaped garden. It had miraculously survived from a fire within the Silver Claw Fortress, and the owner thought it was a good omen. Thus the tree was kept after the fortress was rebuilt.

And under this pine tree, a solemn atmosphere extended from it.

A adolescent girl was standing there in a thick uniform of the knights. She had beautiful silver hair, and her half pointed ears proved that she had another bloodline

beyond a human, but she did not have the elegance and aloof beauty of an elf.

The fifteen-year-old girl wore a somber face, holding on tightly to a black and heavy longsword with both her hands. Her stance took on the form of an Aouine's knight's defensive posture.

She pursed her lips tightly, ordering the younger boy in front of him: "Haruze, attack me!"

A tone that denied any refusals.

"Older sis..."

"Attack!"

The young boy could only force himself to strike with the sword. But the girl cleanly parried his blade and pushed his chest with one hand, making him fall straight onto the ground.

The surrounding servants audibly breathed inwardly.

"Again!" The girl's expression did not change as she spoke.

"Sister, I..."

"Stand up, again."

The boy could only stand up. He took one step backwards, before gritting his teeth and charging over again. But the girl with the knight's uniform passed the sword from her right hand to her left and simply swung upwards, easily knocking her opponent's sword away.

"Why did you get distracted?"

"Sorry."

"Again."

.....

Ten minutes later.

The young girl went to the dressing room. She allowed two maidservants to remove her heavy uniform. Her perspiration and hot air were visibly seen in the cold air. She did not turn her head and simply asked: "Where is my father?"

"The Madara's envoy has arrived, your royal highness."

"His majesty is meeting Marquis Kluge in the secret meeting room." Another maidservant replied with her head lowered.

The girl looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was cold and void of expression. She changed into a dress, inserted her hand into her long silver hair and sent it backwards. She raised her head and said:

"Bring me to Gammel." She had thought there would be a chance to turn the battle around, but the wily Marquis Kluge was someone who could not be trusted. She had to find a trustworthy confidant to speak about this, and not in front of these servants.

"Yes, your royal highness."

This was the beginning of June in the 'year of bustling summer leaves and flowers'.

.....

Brendel looked at the Golden Demonic Tree's branches which were gradually losing its color. They weakly drooped down and he knew this terrifying monster had reached the end of its life. He felt mentally tired. He had paid two EP to maintain the holysword, and that effect seemed to have affected his mind as well.

He was a warrior and not a wizard. Even then, a specialized wizard at his level would only have ten plus EP.

Freya and Romaine sat down at one side with their stamina completely drained. Freya had injured her arm a little but she was otherwise fine. In comparison, they were delighted to have defeated an impossible foe.

Both of them looked curiously as they saw Brendel walking forward to the Golden Demonic Tree.

[Power Break!]

He swung the Elven Sword across the trunk of the tree. The dying Golden Demonic Tree was nothing more than an oak tree now, and it was unable to resist Brendel's 7.7 OZ worth of strength. The meteoric strike tore the upper body of the tree away and it splintered everywhere as it crashed onto the ground.

The girls called out in surprise, not understanding what he was doing.

Brendel knew that the Golden Demonic Tree hung its dead preys on the tree's crown and slowly absorbed the mana from them. Despite the passing years, there might be some loot on it.

Brendel walked over and he saw a card on the floor with his first glance.

Chapter 40

The war in summer

After the dust settled, Brendel immediately saw the palm-sized card on the ground. He picked it up; there was a tree painted on the face of the card. It was depicted as a majestic tree where a mysterious sheen extending from the body of the tree towards the crown. On the upper left of the card there was a VII written on it, but there was no crystal representing any of the elements.

Brendel looked puzzledly at it, but he immediately called up the character window and scanned it.

The depiction on the cards changed an overlay:

The secret grounds of the Holy Tree

(The Forbidden Sanctuary of the Elves VII)

[Basic Forest]

Adds 1 Water EP every week into the Elemental Pool.

Tapping: Creates the landscape of a forest.

‘My soul returnth upon to my homeland’

“This card is called ‘The Forbidden Sanctuary of the Elves’?” Brendel looked pensively at the card. There was no description to activate the card.

[Does it mean that keeping this card in the deck will automatically generate 1 point of water EP? But what if I don’t have an Elemental Pool? Even ‘tapping the card to create a forest’ needs some analyzing. But now is not the time to try experiments here. Although the servants of the Golden Demonic Tree are going to scatter and wither, the Rock Wurm will absorb the remnants of the Earth Element and mana. After which, it might pick a fight with us.]

He kept the card away and thought about the Mana Resonation earlier.

[There should be another card from the Knight Deck nearby. Unfortunately that resonation is caused naturally and cannot be repeated manually, otherwise I might be able to search the area using this method.]

He called out to Freya and Romaine to gather some of the tree's acorns. Mature acorns could be used to make high grade Mana potions which were highly prized in the game. Unfortunately there were only a few of them there were mature, and there was no chance of getting an endless supply of the mana potions.

He walked over to another location and pulled apart the leaves, discovering a pair of defensive gauntlets. They added 2 bonus defense points but there was a requirement of 2.5 OZ strength. They felt weighty in his hands, and he let Freya test it out as he hoped that she would be able to withstand more attacks. However, once she received the gloves, both her arms were pulled down by the weight. She returned the gauntlets with regret.

"That's a shame," Brendel shook his head: "If you're able to wear this along with the Half Plate of the Wind Empress, any swordsman below the Iron Grade will not be able to harm you."

"Sorry."

"What's there to be sorry about, even the majority of the people in the guards are not capable of wearing them." Brendel said as he wore them himself. Freya noted the details in his words, and was slightly taken aback. Did it not mean that he was amongst the top fighters in the guards?

In truth, Brendel completely surpassed Bretton or any of his subordinates.

The three of them continued to search the tree's crown. Romaine found a short sword that added 0.1 OZ to agility, Freya found an expensive 22 OZ magic ring that required 1 MP to cast a layer of flames on an equipped sword.

The rest of the items were mostly junk that lost its mana long ago. Brendel cut away the bark to find the Heart of the Golden Tree. He was disappointed to find that it was still in a crystal form, compared to what he had received in the game as there was a difference of three years. He became alert when he discovered this factor and he could not use the knowledge from the future to look at the things that were in the present.

[This world is the real deal. History is going to progress slowly here.]

When he took out the 'Heart of the Golden Tree', he felt a slight breeze coming from the Golden Demonic Tree. He raised his head and saw eight golden colored lights flying from the tree to his chest.

[800 XP.]

Brendel was momentarily stunned. Even though the XP gain was not a lot, he still felt a grave impact every time he received the experience points. There was a system that existed in this world which made him grow stronger every single time, and he clearly felt the difference when he leveled up.

He was still reveling in his monologues when he saw Romaine running over, carefully holding something in both her hands like she was going to present a gift. All the equipment they found were identified by Brendel, who quickly discerned the history and identity of the item with just a single glance. It was also why Brendel became a walking encyclopedia in Romaine's heart.

"Brendel, you're looking for this right?" She held up the card with both her hands and asked carefully.

He looked at the card in her hand. The patterns on the card were gray in color, and the painting on it depicted a tall knight with a squire by his side wearing a long robe. The color of the card was the same as his 'Holy Sword' card. He immediately recognized it as the card that resonated, and when he received it —

Highland Squire

(Knight IX)

Water EP 1

[Human/Scholar, Grade 8 Living creature]

When Highland Squire comes into play, add 1 point of prestige every week.

Maintenance: When this card comes into play, pay 1 Water EP/day.

'The bravery of the Highlands'

[This is a summoning card. This Highland squire is a scholar, and the description probably means that it was an apprentice squire from the Karsuk's Highlands. The alliance between the Karsuk's wizards and knights had existed for more than two centuries. Grade 8 scholar... It's not amazing, but using it at the right timing would be a great help.]

He looked at Romaine who was looking at him with great expectations, and smiled: "Thank you, this is really useful to me."

"No problem." She said happily.

At this time Freya came running from the north and worriedly said: "Brendel, Romaine, I think the Rock Wurm is coming from the north, should we avoid it?"

"The Rock Wurm?" Brendel considered for a moment. He had originally planned for them to take a rest for a while, but he did not expect it to move so quickly. Even though it might not attack them, it was better to choose a safe approach.

He nodded: "The two of you should leave first. I'll arrange something to prevent that thing from chasing us."

The Rock Wurm relied on its ability to smell mana and vibration to determine the location of its pray, therefore scattering mana objects would be able to draw its attention away. Brendel waited for the girls to leave before taking out a Holy Potion and piercing a small through it with his sword. He placed the potion at one of the crevice in a boulder, then checked his surroundings. He confirmed that he did not miss anything and retreated alone to the west.

He considered the possibility of Madara sending a small squadron to investigate the Mana Resonance. By that point of time, the Rock Wurm which would stay here will teach a lesson to these skeletons and avenge Bretton and the other guards.

.....

The sixth month of the Year of bustling summer leaves and flowers. Events progressed without diverting from its course as according to Brendel's knowledge.

The secret emissary reached the Winter Claw Fortress. The Sixth King of Aouine accepted Marquis Kluge's suggestion not to receive the emissary, and thus the War of the Black Rose quickly went into its second phase.

On the battlefield, the Karsuk province formally faced Madara's twin armies, 'Winter Solstice', 'Black Crow'. They gravely threatened the province, and Duke Orkin and the messenger who sent out his letter, wept and stated the morale of the soldiers were going to collapse if they don't receive any aid soon.

At the same time, at Karlman's mountain regions further to the north which was close to the sea channels, a group of undead army advanced secretly in light armor.

And the province in southern Grinoires, Fortress Vermiere was facing repeated attacks from Incirsta's grand army. The region in Bucce was in a bizarre silence. A commanding officer, Earl Pola, once sent a letter of inquiry to the 104th swordsman platoon in Fortress Riedon, but the final reply was:

"Everything is fine."

.....

It was the first day of the sixth month. Brendel and the girls proceeded through the secret passageway in the Forbidden Garden. They rushed towards Fortress Riedon, racing against time. They already discovered signs of undead activity, but the scale was small, and it appeared that undead scouts were nearby Fortress Riedon.

This made the small party tense. They were ahead of Madara's forces by a step, but they did not know how far ahead they were.

And on the midnight of this day, Brendel led them out of the final section of Mountain Zevail's pathway. They found themselves out of the forest, southern of Fortress Riedon in a place called Vendeck. It was a small mountain that oversaw the Pine River and Webster River. The lights from Fortress Riedon made it appear like it was a dazzling jewel, quietly lying on several miles of the mountain valleys, illuminating the stretch of rivers.

The girls lost their breaths when they saw this scenery. They had constantly imagined how Fortress Riedon looked like, but they did not expect the place to look like the night sky in the darkness.

But Romaine suddenly poked Brendel's back and whispered:

"Brendel, there's an army behind us."

“Army?”

“Yes, look to the north. We just passed the valley this afternoon, can you see it?”

“That’s ten kilometers away, and it’s so dark, how can you see that place clearly? My noble lady, please don’t joke at this time!” He sighed in a exaggerated manner.

“But I can see it.”

“Brendel, Romaine might be telling the truth.” Freya interjected.

[...Of course I know she’s probably right, I already seen her perception first-hand. I’m just joking to ease the tension. You’re going to become old quickly if you’re always so serious, Miss Future Goddess of War...]

Chapter 41

Spy

He looked back at Romaine, and found that she was looking back at him. Her eyes which were full of curiosity made people feel uncomfortable at times, but Brendel was truly fond of her and found her mannerisms to be cute.

He contemplated for a while before replying: "Let's stop here for a while."

"Stop for a while?" Freya asked: "But the Madara's forces are right behind us, and they would arrive about two or three hours later. We don't have much time, Brendel."

But he shook the Seal Ring in front of the girls and answered: "It is now midnight. The city will be on full alert, and just having this alone does not really say anything. If we are treated as the Madara's scouts, everything would go wrong, understand?"

"T-then, what should we do?" Freya thought that all her efforts that she put in should have a little use.

He glanced at her. In his mind, he knew clearly he was full of crap. Fortress Riedon did not notice Madara's invasion? That might not be true! The nobles would not neglect their own safety, what they wanted was to hide inside the fortress and stubbornly defend until reinforcements arrived.

He remembered in the Year of the Hidden Beasts (Year 342), the undead army swept across the east of Karsuk, leaving the entire region void of life. The governor of City of Silver Horses ordered the gates to be shut, ignoring the pleas of the eastern region, causing the refugees to flee to the west. In the end, that stretch of land was still empty even until now.

Even so, these city lords did not receive any censure or blame, or perhaps the royal family had no power left to rebuke the lords since the ascension of Aouine's previous king. The girls did not understand what happened to the Karsuk region, but he knew what happened.

His true intention was to rescue Romaine's aunt, and possibly a few others if he could,

but reporting to the army of Fortress Riedon? He had never placed hope in this aspect, and he certainly did not think himself as a messiah.

Rather than hoping the nobles would listen to reason, he would rather bet on pigs flying in the air as a better possibility. There were many clashes amongst the players and the arrogant nobles in the game, and even until the political changes in the twelve month, they were still fighting it out.

He did not even have one good impression of the bastards at all.

When he considered the pieces in his mind, he realized that Freya might see things differently. He spied on her with the corners of his eyes. She was staring vacantly at the campfire — The countryside girl still believed in this country. It was not a bad thing, but he was worried that she would be impulsive when it came to the critical juncture.

And even if displayed the facts before her, she might not believe him. This would only lead to a rift between them and he did not wish to argue with her. He continued to mull things over, then a sudden idea hit him.

[There are some moves I need to consider in advance for this plan.]

He pretended to think a while longer, then answered: “I have thought things through. It seems like we don’t have much of a choice. We are still Aouine’s citizens and we cannot avoid the dangers here.”

“But,” He paused: “We need to prepare for every situation.”

His logical and grand speech made the girls nod in agreement. Even Freya’s attitude softened. She looked at him with appreciative eyes, suddenly finding that he was not such a shameless lout.

Only the Gods knew that Brendel felt relieved after his speech. He realized that he finally found a way to bridge himself to his past and the current Brendel. He was never a person to be mired in rules, but the recent days made him feel that there was a huge hand continuously pushing him from behind, and that made him feel breathless at every turn.

But with his growing strength and the baptism from the Golden Demonic Tree’s dream, he finally felt the carefree feeling from the past returning to him. This made

him feel like things could be solved easily. His thoughts also had the addition of the former Brendel's flexibility.

He took out the black gargoyle statue which still had a small crack on it.

He said: "You need to be prepared as well. Turn your ring to face inwards, Freya. Your fire agate is too conspicuous. Little Romaine, you need to keep your dagger close to your body. The lazy guards won't search too close for it."

"Do I need to turn my ring too?"

"That's not necessary, nobody will want your cheap ring."

"Brendel, these people are the guards of the fortress! Why do you look like you don't... trust them too much?" She asked.

"...I had never trusted them in the first place. Once we reach there you will understand what I mean. In any case, just follow what I said for the time being."

Freya had never entered the city and felt that he was overdoing things. But she could only choose to believe since he was the leader of such things now.

Brendel took out various trinkets while he explained. The only thing that he had not identified was the trinkets from the fallen noble. He found that the pipe was only a common item and he he threw it away. He did not know what the dark gray colored stones were, but there was bound to be something that he did not recognize since there were thousands of different materials.

But the crystal beads were interesting. He discovered they were the containers of a spent soul gem, or more accurately, a storage spell item. The spell inside them should be a silencing spell, an appropriate magic to use for going around the monster's nest during adventuring.

But what made him feel awkward was the inability of activating the storage spell items since he was a warrior. He hesitated for a while before keeping the cards and the items away, so the greedy guards would not take them away later on.

He checked the night sky. It was still early.

They started to leave Vendeck from the east, and there were signs of bright stars

illuminating the buildings in their path. They were mostly farms distributed on the two shores of the Pine Forest, one after another. There were also inns in the outskirts, which only adventurers and illegal merchants would patronize these buildings. Many NPCs treated the players like they were grave robbers, since it was true that the majority of them had done something similar.

They walked in the wild for approximately an hour, and suddenly Fortress Rideon appeared right in front of them. There were fire baskets at the towers, which lit the surroundings dozens of meters away. Brendel told the girls to slow down, and to gradually walk out of the darkness into the edge of the light.

The guards were chatting with each other, and there was even a faint snoring sound. He was particularly sensitive to the noises, and he furrowed his brows. There were approximately seven or eight of them in the tower.

Once the three of them appeared, the chatting ceased.

“Identify yourself!” The guards looked warily at them for a while, and one of them revealed himself with a helmet and demanded them to answer. Romaine squinted and looked up, finding a black pine symbol on the helmet’s top.

Brendel had once explained to her that the black pine symbol represented the local forces, while that white-mane something army was a symbol of a wolf. ‘Brendel really knows everything’, she thought.

“A men and two women. We came from the forest. Sir, we saw something strange there. Me and my wives are completely scared, and we want to seek refuge in the fortress!” Brendel raised his arm and shouted loudly.

Freya who was behind listened in fury and embarrassment, what was ‘a man and two woman’, the crudeness of it all! When she heard him saying they were his wives, she finally stabbed Brendel’s back with the sword’s hilt, this damned bastard must have done it on purpose!

Romaine looked like she was fine with it, perhaps even feeling that it was a good thing to be Brendel’s wife.

Brendel could only suffer in silence. This was the only way to make the guards lay down their vigilance. They did not look similar to each other in appearance, and he could not possibly say they were siblings.

“Are you carrying weapons?” The guard asked again.

Freya tensely held on to her sword when she heard that question, but Brendel calmly answered: “We dare not set foot in the forest without weapons, sir, and we also trained as militia in the past.”

The tower became silent, and there was a long pause.

After a while, a basket was let down from above, and the guard shouted: “Take off your weapons and place them in the basket. We will receive you one by one.”

Brendel nodded to Freya to let them do the same. Even though the ‘Thorn of Light’ was more elegant in appearance, without activating the sword it did not look like a Magic Sword. Once the weapons were handed over the basket lift was sent down. Brendel was the first to go up in case something happened to the girls up there. Freya allowed Romaine to go next, and finally she was the last one to be pulled up.

She sat down on the lift’s seat as she was pulled up, but when she reached the top of the tower, she saw that Brendel and Romaine were restrained with swords on their necks. Two of the guards pulled out their swords and walked over to her.

“What is this?” Freya asked in astonishment. She cast her gaze at Brendel, but he looked away and did not answer her query.

She panicked a little. Brendel was always the leader of the group, but now it was as if she became the decision maker. What should she do? Let the guards restrain her? Was this the way how they did things?

[Brendel, answer me, what the hell are you thinking, damn it!]

“Take them away, these people are Madara’s scouts!” At this moment, she suddenly heard someone barking orders from the corner. She was greatly taken aback, and spoke without thinking: “You knew that the Madara’s army was attacking?”

Brendel’s expression was one of tragedy. Even though she had grown, she was still a naive lass who had not seen the various aspects of society. A few mere words was enough to make her lose her composure. She might feel there was nothing wrong in her question, but the guards in Fortress Riedon was afraid of people from Bucca reporting the situation.

They wanted to suppress this information in order to shirk the responsibility.

Brendel knew that all too well. These people thought they could rely on Fortress Riedon's tall and sturdy walls, but none of them knew the war was going to advance in a direction beyond their wildest dreams.

"Wait, we're not Madara's scouts!" Freya argued: "We're Bucce's militia, we have the Seal Ring of the Bucce's guard captain!"

But the voice completely ignored her and yelled: "Restrain her now, what are you waiting for?" The person walked out from the darkness, bearing a dark armor, with the feather on his helmet indicating that he was the leader of the guards.

The perverted middle-aged man stared lasciviously at Freya, his mind thinking that he had gotten something good. He believed that Freya was telling the truth as she was still wearing the militia's armbands, but he had other plans in mind.

[How interesting. To think there's such a fine woman in that poverty-stricken Bucce.]

He stroked his chin.

Chapter 42

Middle-aged person

Brendel looked at the helpless Freya who did not know what to do, and he guessed that she should have a certain understanding of the guards' true appearance by now. It was still not enough, so he continued to wait and let her see with her own eyes and understand what kind of plight they were currently in.

He did not wish to break her love for this kingdom, but there were times where such emotions were insufficient and would only lead to a disaster. He hoped that Freya would learn to be calm under desperate situations. If there was a need to protect the girls, he would do so should the guards intend to harm them.

He continued to wait for Freya's actions, but suddenly realize her gaze was someplace faraway. He paused slightly before he followed her line of sight.

He then noted that the place she was looking at was the 'Eastern Camp' in Fortress Riedon, and saw a group of people varying in height tightly surrounding a tall man. Behind him was a group of the 'White Mane' light infantry.

Brendel suddenly felt things were turning interesting. He did not expect to have such good luck, and he felt like he found a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Freya was certainly quick to have noted these people with authority, and he nodded inwardly as he guessed what Freya was thinking about.

From a normal person's point of view, Freya's reactions were correct.

He turned back to Freya and saw the two guards were about to pull out their swords and close in on Freya. She jumped into the tower and rushed for the weapons.

The two guards were startled and hurriedly readied their swords to fight her, but Freya abruptly closed in on them and grabbed the first guard's sword wrist with her right hand.

They had not expected her to resist when her companions had already been captured and was caught off-guard by the series of events.

She then swiveled her body to the side and struck with her left hand at the other guard's armpit, then grabbed onto his sword and kicked him backwards as he cried out in pain. Her actions were done in a single stroke, almost as if it was done in the blink of an eye.

The first guard pulled away from her grasp, but she was ready with the stolen sword and thrust three times at him. With the growth she had gained from the earlier battles, she forced him back all the way to the wall, struck him on the head with the sword's hilt and caused him to slump lifelessly onto the ground with a bleeding head.

She then turned around again, her intimidating air frightening the other four guards and their captain, and they stepped backwards at the same time.

Freya was displeased. She had always thought that the soldiers in Fortress Riedon were as amazing as Brendel, but their standards were actually this terrible!

Brendel applauded her in his heart. The soldiers in this fortress were only at the standard of veteran militia, but her current prowess was enough to become one of the guards. Furthermore, she had the qualities of being calm and steady now.

He eyed the 'White Mane' light infantry.

[But if she underestimates the kingdom's regular army, she is going to be in trouble. I'll keep an eye out for her decisions. Right now —]

He suddenly grabbed the two guards next to him and threw them out before they could react. He took hold of the Elven sword next and knocked the longswords of the guards who were holding Romaine away.

"What do you intend to do?" He ignored the sobbing guards on the ground and the other stunned guards, then grabbed Romaine's hand and went over to Freya.

Freya glared at him for a few seconds, then looked at the camp. Her intentions were clear enough.

"Over there? That's fine, it's good to go straight to the boss than to waste time with the summons." He laughed.

"What does that mean?" Romaine asked curiously as she rubbed her wrists. The guards used a lot of force to restrain her and her wrists were numb.

“I mean, let’s hear out the lords.”

Freya felt that he was trying to hint at something but now was not a good time to refute his words. She looked at the frightened guard captain with disgust, then proceeded forward by jumping out of the tower.

“Brendel, Freya looks like she’s angry.”

“It’s fine, let’s just catch up to her.”

The Golden Apple Lord, Esebar, had a pleasant day until he saw the current events unfold before his eyes.

He watched the girl charge forward to him and was taken aback for a moment. The soldiers behind him rushed forward to surround her and the other two people behind her.

Esebar looked at their attire and found they were dressed like they were from the countryside. After a blank moment, he felt anger rising from his chest.

[What are these fuckers doing! How dare they let these filthy countryside swill intrude here, who’s the captain on the duty here, I’ll skin his hide!]

Esebar’s face went red with anger, ready to explode, but he felt someone poking him with a cane. He looked back and saw the revolting businessman, Sir Burnley. He had no wish to talk to this penny-pinching podgy bastard. Burnly was constantly filled with the stench of copper, and his face was hideously decorated with layers of fat, but Esebar at least understood they were on the same side.

Burnley pointed at Freya’s uniform, and Esebar received a jolt when he saw Freya’s emblem.

[Bucce’s militia, didn’t the report say that the Madara’s army had reached Beldor Forest? How did they come over here?]

He cast a glance behind him, hoping the person with high authority did not notice the commotion here. He grabbed his sword tightly and barked at the soldiers around him: “What are you waiting for, capture these assassins.”

[Assassins?]

Freya was dazed by his words. Her eyes were wide open with surprise and she wanted to argue back, but the clear rings of swords being pulled out by the guards pierced her heart painfully.

“What is happening here?”

At this moment, a low and solemn voice interrupted them. The soldiers parted sideways, and revealed a middle-aged man with sunken eyes and a tall nose; his face cold and dark. He held a golden cane in his hand and looked at everyone in the vicinity with a haughty gaze.

Esebar took a deep breath and cursed in his mind. His brain worked quickly and answered without changing his expression: “There are a few commoners who barged in, and they might be assassins.”

“Commoners?” The middle-aged man furrowed his brows.

“My lord, we are not assassins. We’re Buccé’s militia and we are here to report th—”

The middle-aged man showed signs of loathing, and he interrupted her: “What is your name.”

“F-Freya.” She lowered her head when she saw his cold gaze.

“How about you?” He asked Romaine who was beside Freya.

“I’m Romaine, Mister.” The merchant girl blinked and replied.

A few people giggled in the crowd but they quickly stopped themselves. The middle-aged man did not change his expression, but merely waved his hand and said: “Take them away, I’ll decide everything once you are done with the questioning.”

“My lord, we...” Freya raised her head in a panic to try and explain.

But he did not bother to listen to her and let the guards surround them. But a few moments later, he spoke again.

“Hold on.”

As if there was a hidden power behind his words, everyone stopped what they were

doing and looked at him.

“Bring that man’s sword to me and let me take a look.” He pointed at Brendel with his cane.

‘Sword?’

The soldiers were momentarily confused, then looked at Brendel’s sword and noticed its design.

[Fuck, that’s an Elven sword which is reputed by its beauty. This is commonly traded amongst the nobles, damn this greedy bastard. He wants both the women and the sword!] Esebar cursed in his mind once again.

What made him angry was the status that he had. His rank was much higher than Esebar, and he could only give up as he could not afford to offend the powers behind him.

Brendel looked at Freya and saw that she was lost and disoriented. He knew it was about time to end the farce, but he still maintained a poker face and shrugged.

He handed the sword over obediently.

[This man is at least sensible.] Esebar approved this action.

A soldier carried the sword over with care, and presented it with both his hands to the middle-aged man, who read out the Elven words on the sword:

“(Thy sword shall burst forth from light, and strike thy enemies with terror)”

He raised the sword up and the Elven sword shone in his hand. The people surrounding him took a deep breath. It was a magic sword, and the nobles cast their gaze on Brendel and the others. They felt they were assassins as no militia would have a magic weapon.

The middle-aged man looked at the glowing longsword and smiled for the first time. He looked at the merchant Burnley and said: “Sir Burnley, you have a discerning eye for these sort of things, can you tell me this sword’s history?”

The fat noble quickly moved over to him with his wobbling body to ingratiate himself

in front of him: “It is true that I have seen a few Elven weapons, but it is you, my lord, who has a discerning eye in your circle.”

The middle-aged man gave a cold laugh and said: “Then for the sake of this sword, treat them well tonight. I’ll interrogate these assassins myself. You would best take care of the ladies here, and tell your captain Granzon what I said here. Do not think that I am ignorant of the dirty things they do.”

His words became colder and colder, and actually caused the soldier in front of him to shudder. But the other people around him revealed a meaningful smile. The more evident the lord’s attitude was, the better it was for them.

It was merely a sword and two women after all, and they were more interested in waiting for other opportunities.

Freya raged with anger and it showed on her burning face. She took a deep breath, clenched her teeth and fists, and for a moment Brendel was worried she would do something rash.

Brendel looked up at the middle-aged man as he swung the glimmering sword about. He creased his brows as he tried to recall this person. It looked like he was a high ranking person but he could not remember his face.

[This person’s reaction is interesting. Well, the fun part is coming right up.]

When they were taken away by the guards, he clearly heard the middle-aged man ask:

“Alright, let us get down to business. Mister Esebar, when do you plan on letting me go out of this city?” His voice was cold with a tinge of sarcasm.

“My lord, this is a dangerous time right now, the Madara forces have already arrived at Stronghold Vermiere. The sidelines of Bucca might fall any moment and it is currently too dangerous. This is especially so when you are a chief councillor for the king, and we cannot let any danger to befall you.”

The middle-aged man smiled without saying anything else.

Chapter 43

Not a highland knight?

The captain of the guards led them into the cells, then threatened Brendel's group coldly with a few lines and left. Freya was fuming mad but Brendel sat leisurely in the darkness. He observed his surroundings with the torches' ambient light.

[This is the second level of the prison's location. 32 Rooms, with 4 wardens comprising of the 104th swordsman squadron's light infantry. Hahaha, this reminds me of the PK that I did back then in the game. It's not the first time I visited this place, and I was imprisoned in the third level. The players were terrible outlaws in the eyes of the NPCs.]

He took out the gargoyle idol from his pocket and felt all over the surface. The cracks were nearly gone. He finally turned back to the opposite cell and asked in the complete darkness: "Freya, Romaine, are you alright?"

"Brendel, how long will we be locked up?" The merchant girl's voice came over with slight unease.

[Hmm? She sounds a little scared. These girls should be safe although it's a little dark. How should I put her at ease-]

Suddenly a dull and loud thud echoed in the darkness.

"Damn it! These damned bastards, why did everyone in Buccie try so hard for these people!" Freya punched on the wooden bars in fury.

"The ones inside, stop that shit right now! Do you want to be whipped?" The warden immediately warned with a menacing voice.

Even though Freya wanted nothing more than to punch the bastards outside one by one, she recognized her situation she was in and took a deep breath to calm down.

"Brendel, what are we going to do now?" She asked softly.

Romaine immediately cut in and asked: “This is the Black Prison right? My aunt said there are some people who get locked here for their whole lives without seeing the day ever again. Brendel, are we going to have the same fate?”

“Romaine, just shut up!” Freya answer in the place of Brendel.

He smiled: “Do you still have any hope in them?”

“I hope that everyone of them dies!” She replied in a rage.

“But if we don’t get their help, Fortress Riedon will be in danger.” Brendel stood up and walked to the prison’s door and said quietly.

She was silent for a while.

“I have done my best,” She said: “I don’t have an infinite pool of stamina and I can only do much for Bucce.”

[Very good. Looks like the ‘Goddess raising’ plan is working well. I definitely need Freya to help me in the future. It’s good that the amount of trouble that I took was not a waste.]

“It’s good that you thought things through.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“Yes, the two of you back away a little.”

It was precisely because he had a way to escape that he dared to enter this place.

The next night was a true nightmare but the nobles in Fortress Riedon did not know that. Freya had brought the final chance right before them, but they locked the group up under a false reason.

[These nobles really are digging their own graves and jumping into them,]

“Wait, Brendel, w-what are you thinking of doing? Don’t do anything rash, this is the prison!” Even though Freya wanted the nobles to die, she was still a citizen and did not want to commit treason by escaping out so openly.

“I know what I’m doing.”

“What do you know! Ah, Romaine, persuade him!” She lowered her voice. She wanted someone, even the wardens, to stop Brendel’s crazy actions, yet somewhere in her mind, she did not want the guards to notice the commotion inside the room. She was deeply conflicted for a moment.

“Brendel, I also want to escape.” Romaine answered.

“Shut up!!! I did not want you to persuade him in this manner!” Freya was in tears as the two of them did not seem to understand what their actions were going to bring about. Escaping was punishable by death, and she did not know what to do when the two of her best companions were about to become wanted criminals.

Brendel took out the ‘Highland Squire’ card and threw it onto the ground. He paid it with 1 water EP (elemental point) provided by the ‘Garden of the Holy Tree’. A burst of smoke came and went, and a youth carrying a large number of scrolls with a long robe patted his sleeves, and walked out from the smoke.

[It’s impossible to store EP without an elemental pool. The EP generated from the Earth card will be lost but I can pay it directly within this week.]

“My name is Ciel, my lord, I am pleased to serve you.” The youth looked at him and bowed deeply.

“Are you a highland magician?” He asked.

“An apprenticed.” The youth corrected him earnestly.

Brendel discovered that he was able to perceive his stats, so he called up the window to take a look.

Name: Ciel

Class: Highland Magician Apprentice

HP: 16

Mana: 8

Magic spells:

Basic Creation (2 MP), Mana Arrow (1 MP)

Knowledge:

Basic Magic, Creation Magic, Basic knowledge in geography and locations, Sigil Magic
1 OZ.

“You learned Conjunction Magic?” *(TL: It translates literally to Law Magic...)*

“Yes.”

Conjunction wizards was a type of generalist wizard, and they focused on Conjunction principles. The magic manipulates the line between the material world and the world of laws, with gems as a medium of power to create a spell.

There were nine different types of wizards in *The Amber Sword*. Conjunction Magic, Elemental Magic, Chord Magic, Shaman Magic, Sigil Magic, Holy Magic, Astral Magic, Necromancy and Leyline Magic. Each type represented a different set of magic, but majority of the people were unable to differentiate between them and classified them as merely wizards.

“Brendel, is someone talking to you?” Freya suddenly stopped and asked.

“Yes, it’s my attendant.” Brendel replied.

“Attendant?” The girl was confused.

Brendel took out the soul crystal that stored a ‘Silence Sound’ spell which affected ten feet of its surroundings and threw it at the youth: “Activate it.”

A warrior could not use a magic item but a wizard apprentice obviously could. Ciel caught the crystal and supplied 1 MP into it and the surface of the crystal should a little. Freya suddenly realized she was unable to create any sound, and her heart beat furiously in the presence of the mysterious magic. She reacted the same way a normal person would, especially so when she did not know it was Brendel who did it.

Ciel nodded to his owner.

Brendel turned to the wooden bars that were thicker than his arms and punched it. He had raised his Mercenary to level 8 and Militia to lvl 6. With his overall level of 15, he had 5.4 OZ of strength and with Power Break added to it — *(TL: + 1 villager level)*

The sturdy bars broke from the center and flew violently against the opposite bars, continuing its momentum and bounced twice without any sound. The two girls watched it break with splinters and dust flying everywhere. He walked out from the cell and Ciel followed behind him. He grabbed the steel chains from the other cell and pulled it like a rope. It changed its shape from the force and broke apart link by link, then he opened the door and waited until the magic's effect was gone.

"Oh, do you ladies want to stay in here a little longer?" He stood outside the cell and looked at the surprised girls and asked cheekily.

"Y-y-you, broke out?" Freya could not believe what she saw, this was too lawless! And he was too skillful with this which was probably because it was not the first time he did this!

He only grinned. He escaped countless times in the game, and he even succeeded escaping from the harbor Ampere Seale's prison fortress.

[Back then the forums were even roused by the players who managed to escape from Kirrlutz's capital's prison.]

"And who is he?" Freya noticed there was someone else beside Brendel.

"My esteemed ladies, I am Sir lord's squire." Ciel lowered his head and greeted the two girls.

"Squire?"

"Sir lord?"

They nearly failed to control their voices, what was going on? Was there a secret passageway, why did Brendel mysteriously became a lord and even had a squire?

Freya patted her face to check if she was dreaming. If that youth who stayed in that old mansion suddenly became a lord after a few months, then she should become a Goddess of War too right?

“H-how did you come in?” She blurted out in a hurry.

“Like you can see, I’m a magician.” Ciel answered without skipping a beat. Brendel greatly appreciated that, this bugger had a level of bullshitting that could compete with him.

“A magician” Freya was taken aback.

“Y-y-you are a Highland Knight, Brendel, you’re actually a Darnian!” She looked at him with disbelief. There was one place in this world where a magician would become a knight’s squire, the Karsuk’s region where the Highland Knights had allied with the wizards for more than three hundred years, forming Aouine’s strongest forces and known as the White Knights. They were legends in every household.

At this moment Freya believed that Brendel was a noble youth from a high ranking knight family.

[No wonder, no wonder he was so amazing. He was so calm in every situation because he was a knight.] She suddenly lowered her head.

[This bastard is a noble, yet he came to me and Romaine who are just commoners, he must be up to something bad!]

She immediately linked the bad deeds that she heard from her aunt and jerked backwards.

Brendel obviously did not know what was going on in the girl’s creative mind, and merely thought she could not accept the events that had transpired. In fact he thought that if they felt better with this explanation, he could skip the trouble of explaining himself. He shook his head and looked at Ciel, who also looked back at him.

Reality was always so troublesome.

“Alright, you two girls, it’s about time to go” Brendel looked at Romaine who was hiding in the dark with her bright eyes looking at him curiously. He shook his head and asked: “You are not going to plan to stay here till dawn right?”

“Brendel, are you really a knight?” She suddenly asked.

“No, I’m just Brendel.”

“Okay, then I’m coming out.”

“Please—“

Chapter 44

Not jailbreaking?

The three remaining people came out from the prison. The girls looked on as Brendel easily handled the patrolling wardens, and the entire process was silent and practiced. Freya had her suspicion that Brendel had special training as a Highland Knight, but was it necessary to train to do something like this?

After the wardens were settled, the four of them walked towards the central area of the level. The guard who kept watch of the keys was surprised when they saw them coming out from the darkness, and subconsciously pulled out the sword from the wall.

Brendel immediately raised his gauntlets he stole from a warden and charged over to him. A blue shimmering glow washed over the gauntlets as he blocked the guard's sword. The blue light was around the size of a soccer ball, and there was a force from within that pushed away the sharp blade.

Brendel grabbed the sword away when the white mane light infantry became surprised, and pushed him back to the wall with tremendous force. A dull thud and a withering gasp could be heard as the guard fainted. Brendel saw that the guards were merely normal soldiers, so he did not use fatal force and simply knocked them out.

Freya blurted out after she watched him knock down the final foe: "I can't believe you're so strong. If I did not see you in action, I would still be naive about the strength of the knights."

"You don't have to look down on yourself. A mid white-ranked swordsman is more than enough to handle the guards." Brendel searched for the key to go up the next level on the warden.

"White-ranked swordsman?"

"It means unranked," Ciel explained next to her: "The blacksteel, silver, gold swordsmen rank counterparts are, squires, knights and veteran knights. The blacksteel swordsmen are Aouine's knights' reserves. If there are any nobles with slight potential, they would be sent to great noble families to become squires."

“According to tradition, a grade 1 ranking swordsman enjoy the authority of not taking off his hat when they meet low ranking nobles like squires and lords, but this tradition has stopped approximately fifty years ago. Any rank that is below the blacksteel swordsmen, would be unranked. Typically the army guards, militia are of this level, separated only by the words of ‘upper’ and ‘lower’.”

“So this is how it is classified.” Freya stood pensively. Just a while ago her mind was still mired in being the top militia swords user, but now her horizons have broadened.

But Ciel was not done yet as he had seen through his lord’s intention to nurture the girl, so he continued: “A blacksteel swordsman represents a grade 1 power, silver swordsman as grade 2 power, gold swordsman as grade 3 power. Our wizards counterpart are cantrip wizard, first circle wizard and second circle wizard. There are also similar distinctions for the priests and other professions, and these distinctions are not of a country’s standards, but from the Holy Cathedral of Flames’s strict rules.”

The girls blinked repeatedly as they received the lesson. It was not actually uncommon knowledge for the commoners, but Buccie was simply too isolated.

“The strongest kingdom like Kirrlutz and Bansel, their standing army’s soldiers are comprised of the blacksteel rank, while most of the captains are of the silver rank. In comparison, more than half of Aouine’s border army’s soldiers have not reached the blacksteel rank, and even an appointed captain of the knights is at the intermediate blacksteel rank.” Ciel intentionally pointed things out.

“Ciel, if you spread this, our heads would be chopped off.”

“My lord, if you are not afraid of being executed, as an attached squire I would not be afraid too.” The youth lightly replied, before continuing: “My lord should also have the standards of a blacksteel rank. It is a very rare thing to see with your lordship’s age, and Ciel is very pleased to have the chance to follow such an outstanding person.”

[If I’m going to compare to the people with the ‘enlightened’ or ‘chosen’ status, or even the ones with knight talents, I’m nothing much at all. Then again the results that I accomplished are quite puzzling indeed.]

Ciel did not know the circumstances, but since Brendel felt good from the praise he did not reveal anything.

Especially when it came to the girls’ amazed gazes.

Ciel looked at the guard on the floor and asked softly: “Number 5, 17 and 22, these seems to be other prisoners in these three cells. Should we let them out to aid us in our escape, my lord? If the outside area is the soldier camp, the more people we have, the better our chances to escape.”

Freya glared at him. Brendel had talked about other stuff during their temporary stay in the cells. The people who were locked here were guilty of terrible crimes.

“No, it will affect my plans if there are more people.” Brendel said confidently.

“As you wish.”

Brendel turned his head back: “Romaine, do you know where your aunt is?”

She shook her head: “I don’t know exactly either, she only said that she would be staying with a relative.”

“Where is that relative staying?”

“The location is at Ponoa’s market. I heard that person is a distant relative of my aunt. He’s a small fur merchant called Hood.” Freya said.

Brendel glanced at Romaine: “Your family certainly has the tradition of having merchants.”

Romaine merely smiled sweetly.

Since Brendel had the desired location, it was easy to decide on the next step. The first level of the prison was even smaller, and there was only one warden there. Brendel was certain that there were four wardens in their level because of them. He quickly settled the warden here and they proceeded upwards, and found themselves in the inner soldier camp.

He was familiar with this area, and he led his party swiftly to the warehouse and retrieved Freya’s half plate. They then equipped themselves with a sword. He found that it was a pity that the soldiers who fainted did not provide XP, otherwise he would have woken them up and knocked them a few times.

Ciel repeatedly gave the advice of freeing the other prisoners to let them escape from the riot: The reason was very simple, it was easy for them to handle one or two white-

maned light infantry soldiers, just rush them from the shadows and they were down for the count. But once they got to the outside camp, it was impossible to escape with just the four of them.

But Brendel denied it.

In the midst of their discussion, Brendel had already led them to the highest point of this soldier camp; a tower. He opened the wooden door at the peak, and there was an open pathway in front of them. This tower was used as a last minute resort to aid the walls, and one of the areas overlooked approximately a fifth of the city.

But he was not here to look at the scenery. They had incapacitated seven guards along their way, and according to the standards of the white-mane army, they would discover that there was something amiss after ten minutes. He looked up at the sky. The sky was beautifully illuminated by the moon and stars, and despite the thick clouds, the shape of the moon could still be seen.

“What are you doing, Brendel?” Freya poked him from behind. A stray thought appeared in her mind and she wondered if this fellow actually broke out of the jail just to see the moonlight. Even though it was probably unlikely, but looking at the crazy actions that he did in the past few days, it might be possible.

She looked at Ciel next, and the youth also had his hands behind his back and looked up at the sky with his lord silently. They certainly had great coordination with each other.

“The moonlight tonight is pretty good.” Brendel answered.

“You—” Freya really wanted to punch his face to see if he could still laugh about it.

“My aunt said that the moon’s name is Luca, and was born because of Iren, a goddess. Because there is a moon, this world became mysterious.” Romaine also looked up at the moon and commented.

“Your aunt knows a lot,” Ciel also added in: “There is a secret amongst the wizards, a book called ‘The annals of darkness’, which described the things that happened long ago in the past.”

“Are you saying that Romaine’s aunt is a wizard?” Freya was stunned.

“That might not be so, it might be possible that she is someone related to magic. Some witches in the rural areas have also heard of such rumors.” He replied.

Freya’s eyes went to Romaine, but the latter did not seem to hear any of their talk and simply looked at the moon. Freya did think that Romaine’s aunt Jennie was indeed a little mysterious. She frequently brought strange things back to the village, and the villagers said she was a witch and did not really communicate with her family.

While Brendel listened to their conversation on one side, he suddenly heard strange words in his mind:

XVI: The Tower

The fallen ‘moonlight’ that devours light.

He was momentarily dazed for a while, and thought he was in an illusion. He quickly shook his head, but could not stop but remember that dream when he was unconscious.

In a scenery filled with ghastly darkness, isolated from the world. There was only a moon shining on the tower in the midst of a black lake, signifying the beginning and end of his dream. There was when he met Freya.

But when he was about to mull over this thought, the merchant girl suddenly said: “There’s something coming over, Brendel.”

The three of them looked around in alert.

After twenty seconds, they heard a low and dull sound of wings flapping. Freya was in vigilance and unease, but Brendel and Ciel were relaxed.

Brendel looked up, and the next instant a gargoyle broke through from the clouds. The rock devil with its wings extended contrasted deeply from the bright moonlight, and became a figure that was full of intrigue.

“Brendel, it’s your gargoyle!” Romaine recognized it immediately.

“Yes. Are you afraid of heights?”

The merchant girl hurriedly shook her head.

“W-what are you going to do Brendel?” Freya immediately thought of something and her face paled immediately.

.....

The Golden Apple Lord barged into Burnley’s home with a grave expression. This noble who was famed in the industry was checking out a finely crafted bronze armor with a magnifying glass. Any armor that was in the ancient era of ‘The Returning Light’ was prized by all collectors.

Burnley unhurriedly laid down his magnifying glass, glance at his partner with slight ridicule: “What happened, did that fellow went out of the city with his men?”

“It’s not something as serious as that, but the criminals tonight escaped!” When Esebar said this, he was so furious that he punched a random spot. He was actually not furious over the escape, but it was another madman who intruded his home and yelled at him.

“That is certainly a small matter. How did they escape?”

“I’m not angry over this.” The Golden Apple Lord shook his head and took a deep breath: “I’m angry over that ‘Tiger’ Luc Beson actually created a din in my home, saying that I locked a Highland Knight’s descendant in his prison and I caused him trouble!”

“Highland knight?” Burnley paused.

“Yes, he said there was a Highland Knight amongst the three, and his magician squire came to rescue him. Holy Mother Marsha above, he ran over to me and demanded to have him, saying that man must not be harmed and added to his army.” The Golden Apple Lord was in delirious anger when he spat his words out.

“And in conclusion?”

“The conclusion, the conclusion is I have to bring him to settle this! In the middle of the night, this bastard is just too much!” He roared.

“Don’t be too impulsive, let Granzon handle this. I’ll move some men from my personal army to aid you.” Burnely smiled and answered.

The Golden Apple Lord looked thankfully at him. It was the first time that he felt this rotund face was not as hateful. But after a while he reminded him: "I still have one more matter. I recently heard you moved a batch of armor to the city? You need to be careful. Even though it's not a big matter to raise your own forces, you have to be careful of your secrets falling into your enemies' hands."

He looked around the room.

"It's just a personal hobby." The industry specialist continued to smile.

Chapter 45

Night scenery

Brendel and his squire jumped down from his gargoyle, and they saw Romaine and Freya with a pale face in the alley. The latter was glaring at him with a hateful gaze. Brendel found it a little funny that the Goddess of War was afraid of height, and discovered that she resembled the girls in his party in the past due to her frightened expressions in the air.

“Alright, I’m going to talk a little about our current situation.” Brendel was afraid that Freya would seek revenge on him and rushed to speak first.

Freya lightly scoffed when she saw through his trick. She turned her head away and could not be bothered to argue with him.

“We have already delivered the news, it is up to the nobles to take action or not; the next thing we must do is to find Romaine’s aunt and escape from Fortress Riedon, but it will not be easy to do so.” Brendel gestured upwards to instruct the gargoyle to go up to the rooftop and survey the surroundings. He had tried every night to test out the keywords to activate the gargoyle and he finally discovered one that was of use.

However, he still lacked an attack command.

“Freya and Romaine are registered militia, so your relatives at Fortress Riedon will seek to record your names. If we go directly to Romaine’s distant relative, we might be discovered right there, especially when we don’t know if he could be trusted.”

“Isn’t aunt Jennie going to be in grave danger?” Freya asked.

Brendel glanced at Romaine. She did not say anything and was lowering her head to play with the corners of her sleeves.

“Overall the opposition will also have a reaction time, but if we are going to do these things one at a time together, our chances to fail will be significantly higher. In order to save time, we need to move separately, and each of us need to confirm what our own roles.”

He took a deep breath. He had taken on the role of a leader just like in the game once again. But now that the fate of other people was in his hands, he felt a scintilla of tenseness.

His gaze overlooked the three faces, then pointed:

“Freya will go and contact Romaine’s relative.”

“Me?” Freya pointed at herself puzzledly.

“Yes.”

“But I only know he is staying in Ponoa’s market. I don’t even which street it is, in fact I don’t even know where the market is...?” She said with a troubled expression.

“You can ask around for the directions. Ponoa’s market is nearby, just walk out of this alley and you will see a pub called ‘The Red Bronze Dragon’s story bar’, and you can seek news in there.” Brendel suddenly smiled: “But you need to be careful, the mercenaries’ hands in the bar might not be very proper, don’t get taken advantage of.”

Freya’s face went into a flaming red, and she glared angrily at him: “Sh-shameless... lout!”

Ciel was giggling in one corner. He thought his lord was quite interesting. Nobles hardly went to such a low-class area like a pub, but it seemed that Brendel understood the kingdom from the top to the bottom. Wizards liked to be with intelligent people, especially with people who were knowledgeable in many things.

“When you find the merchant called Hood, don’t reveal your identity and give him a little time. Invite him to the pub and let us meet him there. Take note of his reactions, and you would know if he is reliable. If you discover the presence of the army, there’s no need to worry. They won’t move until they are clear of our relationship, since they want to bring us all down at the same time.”

Freya thought about it for a while, as if to check whether she was able to do all these, then finally nodded.

“Then what about me, Brendel?” Romaine blinked and asked.

“You will help us get a horse carriage and wait for us at the north gate. There are only

two hostels in Fortress Riedon, so it is very possible these areas are being watched. If you discover any problems with any one of them, then you can just go ahead to the north gate alone. No matter what happens, we will leave the city in the morning. If we are lucky, we can escape before the order is given to lock the city gates.”

The merchant girl nodded readily.

Brendel then took out some money from the noble’s relic from The Forbidden Garden, and split it into half and passed to them: “The things that you are about to do might require some money. Here is thirty silver coins, each person with half of it should be more than enough. And if it is possible, purchase some food as well, Romaine.”

The merchant girl nodded earnestly.

“Then what about you, Brendel?” Freya asked.

“Your independent actions might be too difficult as the White-Mane army might be able to spot the two of you anytime. Ciel and I will visit a few ‘Old Friends’, and draw the attention of the Fortress guards.” Brendel said unhurriedly.

Only the Gods know how much determination Brendel had when he spoke. He was used to danger, just like leading the girls and himself out of Zevail’s pathway, but he had never thought himself as a hero or a messiah.

‘A detailed plan might fail, not to mention a desperate one.’ This was his guild leader’s advice to Brendel in the game, and became his proud motto.

This time, even he did not know how much risk was involved. But he had promised Romaine in his old home, and there times that he had to keep his promise as a man. He felt that his desire to fulfill his promise calmed him down. He would definitely succeed.

“Are you crazy, Brendel!” Freya understood there was something wrong in his words, and her eyes went wide with shock: “Y-you’re going be sentenced to death by hanging, what are we going to do?”

She suddenly realized her words were a little ambiguous and she blushed, trying to explain: “I mean, I don’t want to be like you and become a bandit...”

Brendel felt the tsundere girl was a little cute: “Don’t worry, I’ll invite you to join me

when there's a chance."

There was definitely a chance, but he did not know how much of a chance he had to persuade the future Goddess of War to join him.

"None at all," Freya said with spite: "You should stay with Romaine, I'm worried for her."

"There's no need to, I trust little Romaine."

The merchant girl's eyebrows went up, and she was secretly delighted.

Freya was grinding her teeth with anger. She knew that this bastard knew that she was worried about him, but he wanted to force her to say it out loud. And the more infuriating thing was, he might not listen to her even when she said it.

"Fine. I can't be bothered." She lowered her head and flung her ponytail backwards with her hand: "B-be careful."

The merchant girl gave him a small gesture of 'Everything's okay', and this was learned from Brendel two days ago: "I'll wait for you at the north gate, Brendel! The future great merchant's horse carriage will move only when Brendel's in it~"

Brendel felt his heart skip a beat, and he smiled at her.

.....

In the White-Mane army's camp after ten minutes of the breakout—

"You said you did not hear anything at all?"

Luc Beson picked up a broken piece of wood and pointed at a section and asked: "From the damage, this looks like it's at a Rank 1 strength. A blacksteel swordsman broke down our prison's door, and you are telling me that none of you heard it?"

The 'Tiger' Luc Beson was 45 years old, with dusky skin and a prominent forehead that looked like it was sliced with a knife. His high cheekbones came from his half highland bloodline. His face was slightly flattened, thin, and his deep gaze held a hint of wildness. Luc Beson had been the captain of the 104th White-mane swordsman army for ten years. If he was to advance he would have to rely on his reputation in his

army and his successes.

But he was politically inclined to the Evertons, which was also the restoration faction, and it was the truth that the White-Mane army already became Earl Pola's personal army. His position in the army was not welcomed, but this did not hinder him from displaying his prestige to his subordinates, and he was not the whelps that came from some noble backdoor.

The general's words immediately made the lower ranked officers look at each other. Especially the wardens who were in charge of the security tonight, who went red. There were the White-Mane's infantry, wearing a blue army uniform, with a pointed helm who walked in and out of the room. The greatest difference they had from the guards was the sigil on their shoulder; a white patch of wolf fur.

This unique decoration was awarded to this army who participated in the 'Hastings war' where they did not retreat from it. It was also where the army got their fame from.

"If he is a highland knight, then his squire might be able to do something like that." Someone said.

"In the White-Mane's army, it is not important what your opponents did, it is what you did. A response time of ten minutes, are you the militia?"

Luc Beson's rebuke immediately silenced everyone.

At this moment, an army officer brought his attendant and announced himself. He pushed the door open and brought with him a stack of goatskin papers: "Captain, we checked the Bucces' militia. There is indeed a Romaine and Freya recorded in it, but the youth called Brendel does not seem to be a Bucces' local."

Luc Beson confirmed his thoughts, and he tapped the table with his fingers: "And?"

The attendant walked near him and said something to his ears, and Luc Beson nodded. He asked again: "What is the answer of his majesty's secret missionary?"

"The earl did not say, but he hinted that we should execute him." The officer answered.

Luc Beson was slightly surprised. A kingdom's missionary would take offense over a commoner? He rubbed his chin, trying to read the meaning behind everything, but

before that the entire room was buzzing with debate.

“Really, but why would that old bastard be angry over that commoner?”

“I think he might be interested in the two women, that perverted bastard.”

“A useless jester, I saw him admiring that Elven sword.”

“A bumpkin who had never seen the world.” Someone laughed with derision.

Luc Beson immediately smacked the table, and the officers stopped talking. He wanted to censure them again, but someone else pushed the door open, a soldier from the outside.

“Captain, the local parliament is on fire.”

“A damned diversion,” Luc Beson cursed inwardly and stood up to issue his orders: “I’m giving you ten minutes. The second and third squadrons are to gather with the fastest speed!”

The officers stood up.

He pointed at one side: “The two of you, monitor the areas of interest. McLemore, your mission is the hostels, all of you should know what to do, do not alarm them.”

The three of them who were appointed lowered their heads and answered. They did not dare to waste any more time and immediately left the room.

“Captain, how about lord Esebar?”

“There’s no need to remind him or the others, that bunch of bastards must have ran to their missionary and bootlick him. They must rely on one side, right.”

The captain’s words made the room echo with a riot of laughter.

Chapter 46

Lv up

‘The Red Bronze Dragon’s Story Bar’ was a pub located between Ponoa’s street and the Traveller’s bridge. It ran through the night and welcomed all manners of people, mercenaries, adventurers, prostitutes and dubious merchants.

If one was able to tolerate the chaotic environment and vulgar talk, this was indeed a good place to find entertainment. There was cheap beer, waitress who wore revealing clothes, and food to fill the stomach. Even if one was to drink a whole night, he would not spend more than a few copper coins, and not worry about the guards hauling him to prison.

But Freya trembled when she walked towards this dirty area. The countryside lass gripped her sword tightly, her mind filled with Brendel’s hints.

She lowered her crimson face, carefully walking through the gaps of the crowd. She felt her ponytail hair standing up from the anxiety in her heart. Her thoughts spiraled into every direction. What happened if someone was to molest her? Chop his hand off? Stab him?

She spied on the waitresses who wore revealing clothes, and felt her ears burn. She could only think of ‘How could they wore something like this! Do they have no shame!’.

She walked over to the bar with both hands on her sword, and the plump bar owner who was sitting down with his hand supporting his cheek sized her up, from the top of her head to her feet.

“This place isn’t for you, little missy.”

She finally noticed that Brendel lied to her. She gritted her teeth and her sword clattered from her trembling hands with fury. But she did not want to vent her anger in front of a stranger and asked with her lowered head: “Excuse me, I’m here to gather information on someone...”

Leto looked at the girl’s head that was so low that it was going to reach the bar’s

wooden structure, and he could not help but chuckled.

“This bar is indeed the place for information, but little missy, we’re not free!”

“I know, I’ll pay for the information. Please help me.”

“Very well, who’re you looking for?”

“Hood, a fur merchant in Ponoa’s market.”

“That fellow, huh. Are you his relative from the countryside?”

Freya shook her head hastily: “No, someone asked me to pass a letter to him.”

Leto shook his head, but at this moment, a group of guards walked hurriedly outside the bar’s doors. He keenly felt the girl’s body shook slightly. He had been the owner for over a decade, and his observation skills were unmatched in the vicinity, and he found there was something unusual with this small detail.

And as if it was turning into a real-life play, a guard actually walked back and shouted just outside the door: “Oh right, Leto, did you see any suspicious people around?”

Leto stood up. He saw the girl was pretending to be calm in front of him, but her fingers were turning white from gripping the sword. He sighed and asked: “Are they finding you?”

Freya looked up in surprise, and she was ready to draw her sword.

“You don’t need to be tense, this is my professional habit.”

She looked on in a daze, but recovered instantaneously and quickly said: “I-I have money, can you hide me?”

“A hundred Tor, do you have it?” Leto asked with a smile. His bar had many dubious characters around, and it was a common thing for him to hide a criminal, furthermore he found this lass to be interesting.

A hundred Tor is a silver coin, and she nodded quickly. She quickly walked to the back of the bar and Leto had her hide into a wooden barrel. A few of the guards also went with the first guard and they entered into the bar.

None of the patrons in the bar wanted to look at them, and they naturally would not point fingers. There were rules in various places, and even in this low-class place, they had their rules.

This was the 'gray' area. The guards in the city would seek information, but the merchants and thieves would also do the same. They know of each other's existence, but they held by the rules and did not deal with them in the open.

This was the rules of a game.

While Leto stood by them, the naive Freya had a different mindset. When she hid into the dark barrel, she immediately regretted.

[Freya, what the hell were you thinking! Didn't you even consider that he might betray you? Are you even a captain of the third militia squadron?]

She listened to the conversation between the owner and the guards with a tense heart. She was gravely afraid of the cover suddenly opening and hauled out. Even though things were not stated out directly, she knew what fate she had if she was to be caught.

But after a while, she heard someone knocking on the barrel.

"They are gone, come out."

Freya opened the barrel a little and took a look. The guards were indeed gone, and she relaxed with a sigh of relief. Then she noticed that everyone was looking at her with a bemused expression, and a few of them even raised their glasses with respect.

"Not bad at all, a little lass actually dares to against the bastard soldiers in the army!"

"Here's a drink to you!"

Freya turned to the owner with a red face: "Thank you."

"There's no need to thank me. That's a hundred Tor." The fat owner laughed and beckoned to a girl in the room. A girl with tanned skin with braids came to Freya's side.

"This is my daughter, let her take you to Hood's home. Ah, that's right, little lass. Let me give you an advice. Don't move alone in the middle of the night, where are your companions?"

She thought of the lout, Brendel, and she wanted to get angry but could not do so. She realized that he was trying to hone her views of the world, and just thinking about her display earlier, she could only bury her head in the sand.

“I’m Sue.” The girl looked at her and offered to shake her hand: “I usually help father to look after this shop, but I’m free now. Come with me.”

“Thank you, my name is Freya.”

.....

“Someone is trying to take advantage of the situation, my lord.”

Ciel said and looked at the fire from a distant building.

Brendel creased his brows. He did not think there were other factions in the city. The huge fire in the parliament did not help him at all, and in the contrary, it created considerable trouble for him.

But this timing was really well done. It had to be done internally, and at the very least knew that they had escaped.

He thought about the situation back then, perhaps it was a noble from that night.

[But who? What are his goals?]

After a while, he shook his head and tossed his random ideas out. Even though he was displeased from being used, but as an unimportant character he did not have the right to be displeased.

“I hope this wouldn’t bring us too much trouble.” He said: “But perhaps we would not be affected. It might be good if we received help, let’s mind about our own tasks.”

“But my lord, you have not told me what we are going to do.” Ciel said.

“Someone borrowed my sword, so I have to collect it.” The King Oberg the seventh that Brendel knew was not a generous king, but he did not know how close he was with his close aides. *(TL: I’m not sure if this king refers to the current king or the next future king. In chapter 40, it was Oberg the sixth.)*

“Who?”

“An earl.”

Ciel snorted: “I have never seen anyone more lawless than you, my lord. Do you really think that your neck is stronger than the rope?”

“When we escaped we are already going to be executed by the rope. If that is the case, who is going to care whether it’s one or two ropes?” Brendel laughed. He was quite anxious in truth, but he discovered that his squire was quite funny.

“That is certainly true, but what is my lord going to do?”

“Attack from the front, it’s best to make the commotion as big as possible.”

Ciel looked at Brendel closely. Even though Brendel was making small conversation, his pale face and clammy-looking hands betrayed the tenseness in his heart. Even so, he was still planning things out calmly and steadily.

“What is going to happen if you die?” Brendel asked after thinking for a while.

“A card which dies in the battlefield will go into the graveyard. Before my lord is able to pull out from there, I will stay there forever.” Ciel said.

“If that’s the case, I have to be more careful.”

Brendel said as he estimate the remaining time in his heart. After calculating everything, he raised his hand to grip onto the flying gargoyle in the air. Ciel also grabbed it.

The two of them looked each other and nodded. The gargoyle flew quickly into the air, and under the cover of the night, they flew towards a small forest within the fortress.

The wind whistled past them, and Ciel asked: “My lord, are you certain that the earl is staying in a forest like this? And not the within that small castle?”

Ciel pointed to a small castle between the Pine River and Webster river.

“What did you say, I can’t hear it through the wind?”

“I said, did my lord fly in a wrong direction?”

“Me? Of course not, did I say I’m going to pick a fight with the earl right now?”

“Then what are we going to do?”

“Of course it’s to level up! A workman must sharpen his tools if he wants to do his work well.”

“Level up? Is that some form of ancient language?”

“Shut up! Let me tell you this. In a game there are always three things. Technique, equipment and stats.” Brendel shouted in the wind: “When you look at these three things, one of them is bound to help you. If you are going to become a full-fledged wizard one day, you will thank me for telling you this secret.”

“Game?”

“Human life is like a game, and a game reflects the human life, do you get it?”

“I somehow get it. My lord is truly wise.” Ciel said with a lying face. He could only think about the freezing night air and he felt his limbs were turning into ice.

Brendel stared at the forest and calculated again.

[At most there is 15 minutes left.]

.....

In the castle.

The middle-aged man sat on the sofa and observed the slender sword in his hand, before placing it down. His expression did not change and still retained a cold demeanor. But the chill in his eyes were more apparent.

“What do you think?” The figure behind him asked.

“This should be that sword. I don’t know how that young man got it, but he must disappear from this world. But the two women beside him, I’m very interested in them.”

“It’s fine to have a hobby, but the key thing is not to let it interfere with your job.”

“If I don’t give them hints, how would those short-sighted fools think of using my name to do things? Since they were the one who killed, whether if it was bootlicking me or not, no one would suspect me. All that is needed is a suitable reason. As for that man’s reputation, when did we ever care?”

The middle-aged man thin lips curled into a cold smile: “And you also said it, it’s fine to have a hobby.”

That figure smiled in return and his eyes went back to the sword: “Have you found anything?”

The middle-aged man shook his head: “It’s never that simple.”

Chapter 47

Babasha

Brendel commanded the gargoyle to release them, and Ciel and him fell onto the soft meadow in the area. They were in a silent forest of a mountain peak, and what entered their line of sight was a crooked wooden house like a house from the slums. It was two storey high, and there were rays of yellow light from candlesticks pouring out from the gaps of the wooden planks.

“My lord, is this the place that you where you can ‘lvup’?” Ciel rubbed his sore wrist from the gargoyle’s grip as he carefully studied the house before him. His face was full of serious suspicion: “I do not wish to question you my lord, but no matter how I look at it, this place looks similar to the witches’ houses in Bunoxone.”

“You are not wrong, there is a witch currently residing in this house.”

“Oh, the witches do indeed have a way to raise the powers temporarily.”

“No, that temporary power is not sufficient.”

“Then my lord’s goal is spiritual magic? It is indeed a power that can be used under emergencies. But my lord, these spirits are difficult to control, and even though I can think of several ways to deceive them, I have never tried them out—”

Brendel already started to walk towards the wooden house, while the young man followed him from behind quickly and continued to speak.

“Ciel, tell me your methods the next time. This time however, we’re here to make a transaction.”

“Transaction?”

Brendel reached the door and readied himself mentally.

He was the only one who knew that the witch called Babasha was nothing more than a cover for something else. When the nobles designed their fortresses, they tend to

make an emergency passageway, and the former owner of the pine fortress and duke of Grinoires created a secret passageway to this hill, due to the numerous enemies he had in the political circle.

And Babasha, who was the duke's witch advisor, naturally protected the passageway. This secret was only revealed after the Second War of the Black rose, where players failed to reoccupy the pine fortress and sought for an alternative way, leading to the discovery of the fortress's blueprints.

Brendel was very familiar with the level 32 witch. When he was grinding in the fortress, he was still inexperienced in the ways of the game and loved to gamble, so he fell prey to the old witch, as her place was the only shop that sold secret goods.

This time, however, he had to try and curb this witch so that he could execute his plans. His right hand was constantly on his sword's hilt, and his fingers were cold from his tension.

He hesitated for a while, but knocked onto the strangely bent door three times.

There was a voice that quickly came from the second storey, old and sharp: "Who is it, if you want a divination come again tomorrow."

"I don't want a divination. I have brought something along."

"Do you know the rules if you're here to do a transaction?" The voice replied after a short pause.

"I have what you want, witch."

"Is that so? Then you better have brought something that I want, otherwise I'll tear your beating heart out and feed it to my dog." The shrieking voice sounded out from the second storey to the first storey, along with the sound of someone walking down a light of stairs.

The door quickly opened, revealing an ugly old face. The witch raised her pointy hat and looked at him with a pair of cloudy eyes. "Speak quickly."

He did not even think and quickly drew his sword and placed it on her neck. His action surprised the two people beside him, and Ciel broke out in a cold sweat: Was there anyone who did a transaction like this?

His whole body was as taut as a string when he drew his sword, and he felt a little weak when he succeeded in his action. He exhaled his breath in a hurry. If he was slower by a slight moment, Babasha had more than ten spells to turn him into dust.

But fortunately, perhaps even this witch had underestimated her guest. Because of her powers of a First Circle wizard, she did not see this lower Iron-ranked swordsman as a threat. Perhaps Babasha still thought that she might have a chance even if the sword impaled her, but for Brendel the battle was already decided.

Ciel quickly compared Brendel's actions. From escaping the jail and seeking the duke, all that he did could not have compared to this moment. Babasha was a First Circle-ranked wizard, and Mother Marsha above, she could easily defeat ten of himself.

And yet his lord's first action was to place his sword at her neck.

"Young man, what are you trying to do here." Babasha's countenance turned cold and demanded in a shrill voice.

"By the time your little finger completes the Third Movement of the spell you're planning, I will pierce my sword through your heart. I have always heard the witches say that the heart is a human's source of life, and reacts to the Three Corners of Mana. I had always wanted to test whether that is true. If I am you, I will stop that foolish act immediately."

Brendel's chilly voice rang through the air, and Babasha and Ciel's expressions immediately changed drastically.

[This old witch was actually casting magic. I didn't even notice it at all, and that must be a powerful spell. But how did my lord noticed her actions?]

While Babasha was thoroughly shocked. A swordsman who did not even a have a shred of mana recognized her spell, and even saw what stage she was in at casting the spell.

[Did the world somehow change when I was not paying attention?!]

Her attitude changed.

"What do you want?"

“The duke of Grinoires does not appear to have any friends in the capital. My guess is that he loaned it to the earl because he is someone close to the king. If that is the case, why do you need to give your life up for a stranger?”

Even though Brendel was sure of his actions, his sword hand was still trembling slightly. He continued to observe Babasha’s every movement and eyes, afraid that she was up to something. Even though a level 32 witch should have no secrets to him, his perception was too low and could only guess what she was up to.

[It’s a fight to see who have the bigger galls.]

Babasha’s expression changed again: “What are you talking about?”

“My demand is very simple. I want you to swear an oath upon your Star. Let me use the passageway to the pine fortress just this once, and I will also not speak of this passageway to anyone.”

The witch looked at him liked he was a devil.

[The secret passageway was only known to the duke and myself. Even his family members did not know, so how does this man know? Is he the illegitimate son of the duke?]

“What if I say no?”

“I do not wish to kill you.”

Babasha finally realized that she had no room for negotiation. She thought for a while and prepared to swear to the Throne of Witch King with her finger pointed at the star, but Brendel shook his head.

“Babasha, isn’t your Star sign the Long Snake?”

The witch’s body shook visibly. She looked at his jet black eyes. It was as if all her secrets were revealed under his sharp gaze. A witch’s star sign was a witch’s greatest secret, and she had only told the duke to gain his trust. She felt that Brendel was more and more mysterious, and did not dare to pull off any more tricks, and swore an oath to her star sign.

Brendel finally relaxed himself, and realized that his back was completely soaked with

perspiration. He spoke to Ciel:

“Ciel, go to the bookshelf located at the back of the house, and take the very first scroll on the right side, the box on the second shelf, and three reagents left from the third shelf. Do not touch the rest.”

Ciel was completely impressed with his lord at this moment, and even felt that he was becoming more of an enigma.

Babasha felt she had fallen into a bottomless abyss. The young man in front of her actually knew what was useful on her shelf, and the other items were full of evil curses.

When Ciel opened the box he yelled in delight: “These are element crystals. My lord if you take some time to absorb them you can use the elements directly.”

But Brendel shook his head. He simply went over and picked up the dusty reagents and asked: “Do you know what these are?”

Babasha also looked up puzzledly. Even she did know what they contained. She was able to feel that was a mana ripple from the reagents at her level, so she had kept it for decades and there was a thick layer of dust on it.

Some reagents are poisonous or if the method to use them was wrong, it would also be fatal. Magic was a powerful, mysterious and dangerous thing.

Ciel took a while at to look at it, but he shook his head.

“This is a mana potion, how can you not even recognize this?” Brendel wiped away the dust with a little dissatisfaction, revealing the pale blue liquid.

“Impossible!” Babasha and Ciel were shocked.

“What are you surprised for, aren’t they just mana potion? I want to ask you now, this three mana potions’ effectiveness can raise your mana pool four times. Discounting the change in your powers, what is your wizard rank after having four times the mana pool?”

“A middle-ranked wizard.” Ciel replied in a hoarse voice.

“Therefore, this is one of the targets I was talking about. Consider yourself as a middle-

ranked wizard even before you use the potions, although the truth is you're still an apprentice, understand?"

Ciel nodded subconsciously.

[That's a mana potion, even called as the 'Wizard's Gold'! This item was created using high alchemical skills, and it is as hard as making a holy potion. I only saw these potions in scrolls, but my lord is just throwing them at me without a second thought?]

Brendel took the lambskin scroll taken from the shelf: "There is an Arte scribed into the scroll here. The air around the sword's edges would become sharp after using the technique. It is also one of the methods. Do you understand what I mean by 'lvup' now?" *(TL: Arte = Ougi = skill = ability, you get what I mean)*

"Learning a skill isn't something that is done within a day, my lord. Is there any point in looking at it just before—"

Ciel immediately refuted, but he saw Brendel glancing at the scroll and then discarding it instantly. As the scroll fell onto the ground with a rustling sound, the latter stood there blankly for a few seconds. Then suddenly he swung his sword at the door. With a cracking sound, the door split into two and flew outwards ten over meters before falling onto the ground.

Ciel's mouth hung there as if his jaw was about to drop to the ground.

Brendel furrowed his brows. Just learning the skill took 153 TP. This was not even a subclass's skill, but the amount of points required to learn it was just ridiculous. The prerequisite to get this intermediate sword skill without a scroll was level 25, and the amount of XP spent was going to be impossible for him right now.

But he definitely considered it to be worthy of the points. There were only ten over intermediate skills he learned in his previous life, and half of them came from his own profession. He had nearly gotten this scroll back then, but because of his bad luck he missed the opportunity to get it.

Regardless of the next action in his plan, this technique was necessary to get.

He lowered his sword and looked back at Babasha: "I'm borrowing these things for a while, are you fine with it?"

Rather than borrowing them, it was more like robbing. But this witch was not something of a good person either, so he did not feel guilty about it. But with a simple line, Babasha knelt onto the floor with a thudding sound, lowering her forehead until it touched the ground and said:

“The black prophecy said, only the Dragon of Darkness is able to see all the secrets of a witch. All methods that are used before are nothing than mere tricks. The ancestor of Miirna, you have returned—”

This time Brendel and Ciel were stunned.

Chapter 48

Infiltration

The Dragon of Darkness was the sworn enemy of the four saints in the holy war. It was especially true for the King of Fire, Gatel, who wanted revenge for his kingdom's demise. Even though he was confused with the witch Babasha's words, he did not acknowledge her words. A small misstep would make him the enemy of the world.

"The Dragon of Darkness, Odin? I do know that the witches see him as the guide towards the Fate of Darkness, but I have nothing with it."

He looked at Babasha, but she still bowed down with trembling fear. He was slightly taken aback at her reaction, but suddenly realized he made a mistake with his words. He had forgotten that the people in this world had deeply revered the Gods and the mysterious powers, and even if they were enemies of them, they would not speak of them lightly.

He completely did not accept them as a player, while the other Brendel's memories influenced his choice of words. When he spoke of the names, he naturally spoke of them like they were equals.

While this action did not appear to be anything wrong to him, it was an offensive remark to Ciel and Babasha's ears. But the current circumstances were at a subtle state. Babasha was in a state of deep fear, while Ciel regarded his lord with exalted eyes, and hearing Brendel's reply made them feel that he was hinting at something.

Brendel noticed that point and he shook his head: "Forget it, you're free to think whatever you like. As long as you do not interfere with me, and simply wait here until the sun is up."

Babasha's forehead still laid on the ground and she did not dare to move even one muscle.

Brendel gestured at the stunned Ciel, then told him that there was a hidden trapdoor under the table nearby and asked him to open it. The young man moved the table with a skeptical expression, and took away the carpet that was under it. Indeed, there was

a trapdoor there.

By this moment Ciel did not feel any surprise about his lord's omniscience and could only conclude there were things in the world that could not be explained with human means.

He reached for the handle and pulled it up with effort, revealing a dark hole with a spiraling staircase.

"My lord, are we going to go in right now?" He asked.

"Of course, what else do you think was going to happen?"

"Oh? But Fortress Riedon is so big, isn't there any other place that allows us to 'lvup'?"

"Do you really think magic items are like 'Big White Vegetables' that you can pick up from the ground anytime you want to?" *(TL: Literally TLed as cabbage.)*

"I meant 'Lettuce', you know that right?" Brendel rubbed his forehead as he realized he misspoke again. There were slight differences in the terminology in this world.

"Of course, but it is very different when my lord speaks of it. Big, white, vegetable, it must have been derived from the ancient language, even the pronunciation sounds close to it."

Brendel could not suppress his laughter. He did know of other secret areas in fortress Riedon, in example, the underground church and the well known 'Tower of Winds'. However, there were Guardian Bosses' restrictions to them, while Babasha was a NPC where he could use crafty means to get an upper hand. After considering many times, he decided to give up on the rest of the locations.

Right now the ideal dream would be to acquire all the items that he knew, while raising his power at the same time, but there was just not enough time. His current goal was to survive the war, and not to gather items at a leisurely rate and wait for the war to be over.

Once the war was over, he had plenty of time to gather XP and prepare the best equipments for himself before Aouine's internal civil strife. After checking through his plans, he concluded that it was possible for him to become one of the strongest in the continent.

As a player, he recognized that stats, equipment and techniques made up the system to become strong.

He picked up the box that was beside him, transferring all the Element Crystals into his bag at his waist:

12 Wind Crystals

1 Fire Crystal

3 Water Crystals

Each crystal contain 1 point of energy.

After sweeping off with Babasha's collection and acting like a professional robber, Brendel even took Babasha's candle and went into the passageway. The witch's candle was also a magical item, which could teleport someone to where its light reach. This was a secret that was only known amongst the witches, but it was not a secret to him.

The passageway was approximately 1.5 kilometers long, and most of the passageway only allowed one person to enter at a time as it was very narrow. At the areas where it became bigger, there were three poisonous spiders the size of human beings. The witches normally did something like this, raising beasts for them to become their guards. Babasha put them there to please the duke, but they were a total of 9 XP to Brendel.

The end of the passageway led to the cellar. After Brendel reached there, he started to search for the switch and used it, and the shelf holding the wines slid to one side.

The two of them sighed with relief after walking out from the passageway. The stale air and accumulated dust were hard to adjust to, and Ciel thought his lungs were covered with a thick layer of dust after that ordeal.

"We took a little longer than fifteen minutes, my lord." Ciel took out a watch and glanced it after coming from the passageway.

"That is fine."

"Hmm?"

“I originally wanted to go the duke’s treasury, but we probably have to give on that. But the collection there are just some paintings and jewellery, they are not really useful.”

“My lord is truly decisive. Not everyone can remain unmoved by the treasure in front of them.”

“No, you’re mistaken, Ciel. I mean that you can just take a few of them on our way up, I’ll tell you which items are the real deal.”

“.....”

Ciel was surprised at his lord’s unreadable greed, but he did not know that it was not his character, but simply a player’s subconscious action.

The two of them continued up the stairs and stopped at the same time to go over their plans. Brendel extinguished his candle and passed it to his squire, then placed his hand at the cellar’s door to the outside. He activated his skill and the door knob broke apart with a cracking sound.

Then he immediately pushed the door outwards. The two guards that were there turned their heads in dumb surprise, while Brendel’s other hand had already pulled out his sword. With an elegant swing with silver light trailing behind the sword, the guards’ half drawn swords were knocked away along with their sheaths.

They became fearful and wanted to run away, but he could not allow them to do so, and chased them from behind and ended their lives with a stab to each person.

This was the first time Brendel killed someone.

He did not think at all when he killed them, and his mind was blank when he did so. He felt he was even calmer than his normal self. If he hesitated, Ciel and himself would end up in a dead end, and in this life and death situation, he did not consider what Romaine or Freya would do.

His survival instinct was more than enough to make him do it.

Yet after he killed them, he suddenly felt dizzy as if he could not breath anymore. He tried to steady his body and forced himself to inhale, but he was rooted where he was and could not move. The blood dripped onto the floor.

At that moment, different thoughts went through in his mind and allowed him to gain a perspective on the situation he was in. The fleeting moment of chaos was merely to find an excuse, and when he found one he felt a little better.

“My lord?” Ciel noticed his strange behavior.

Brendel raised his hand to indicate he was fine. Even though he planned to bring the two corpses to the cellar to hide them, he did not have the mood to do so anymore. The best he could do was not to look at their bodies.

He did not develop a fear after killing them, but he could not accept the sudden blow.

Then he suddenly realize there was no XP for killing humans. Even though he desperately needed the XP, he felt consoled by the fact he did not gain any. His mind rejected the notion of getting XP from killing humans.

[No matter what, I am still a human being. Trading a human life for mere XP is not something I can accept.]

“We’re going to move separately now.” Brendel took a deep breath and replied.

“As you command.”

“I’m going to seek the earl and create trouble along the way, you should go to the other end and strike the alarm there.”

Brendel said as he mentally counted one to a hundred in his mind. When he counted to thirty, he had already calmed down.

“Strike the alarm?”

“Have you forgotten what I said? We’re going to attack directly, and the bigger the commotion the better it is.”

“Are we going to go back where we came from?”

“No, we must kill our way out.”

Ciel was flabbergasted: “Why?”

“The guest room is at the fortress’s upper levels. We only have time to escape from there, but if the White-Mane army brings along archers, then we’re going to need Mother Marsha’s blessings.”

Ciel nodded and prepared to leave. He did not ask any further questions. If he had to satisfy his curiosity he did not need to become a squire. The knights and their squires had to be ready for battle with their skill sets.

But Brendel took the initiative and called him: “Wait, why are you in such a hurry?”

“What is it, my lord? Is there anything else?”

“Of course. If you go up the stairs and turn left, you will find a corridor, and there are genuine artifacts towards the end. If you see something that is easy to carry and sell, just feel free to take them.”

“.....”

Ciel stared at him for a while and finally spoke: “I take back my words, my lord.”

“What words?”

“‘Not everyone can remain unmoved by the treasure in front of them’, it should be, indeed, everyone is moved by the treasure in front of them.”

No, you see Ciel, I have the responsibility to take up on the burden on little Romaine and her aunt. It’s not easy helping a family and it’s a man’s responsibility and I really have my reasons.

“Please leave your words to the duke, my lord. Please do not worry, I learned appraising in Buga. I’ll pick the most valuable objects.”

Brendel blinked twice, then made a wolfish grin.

Chapter 49

Sword Arte

Since Brendel did not intentionally try to be stealthy, he was discovered at the courtyard in the first level by a patrolling team. The seven guards tried to flank him, but Brendel killed three of them easily and the remaining four scattered, alerting the fortress of an invader.

There was a total of thirty two guards within the fortress, and the majority of them were mercenaries. The leader of the guards was mercenary captain from Randner, with the capability of a mid level Iron-ranked swordsman with commanding abilities.

Thus, when Brendel entered the second level, he was ambushed at the dining hall with eleven guards waiting for him. The first moment he pushed open the door, the central lamp in the hall was lit up, with the archers in the floor above immediately raining their arrows down below.

With such a close distance, the arrows were already at his face once they left the bows, and he was only able to guard his face, chest and abdomen. His gauntles flashed a faint blue and some of lethal arrows were deflected, while several of the arrows brushed across his arms and thighs.

[Fuck!]

Brendel gritted his teeth and cursed. With 4 OZ worth in his physique stats, he was able to automatically turn the lethal damage into normal damage. The wounds that were supposedly inflicted became nothing more than bruises. Even so, the pain he received did not lessen.

If this was a normal situation, Brendel would have chosen another path as he knew that there were going to be guards ambushing him from the floor above. There might have been guards at the stairs at the side sections, but the situation would not be as treacherous as this location.

But this was a different situation.

He swung his sword at diagonally, and a transparent rippling wave came from his blade. A huge crash echoed in the hall as half of it was struck by his sword. The candleholders, plates and utensils on the long dining table were propelled forward from the wave, while the ceiling's chandelier exploded into shards. The railings on the corridor cracked and shattered into pieces.

The guards were cut open by the wave and they fell back lifelessly.

'The White Raven Sword Rave', Aouine's Royal Court's sword arte. This secret technique was a rare ranged ability that a warrior profession could learn in the early period. At level 0, the sword arte was able to reach approximately five meters away, with a even bigger cross-section impact. At level 25, it was able to strike at the enemies hundred of meters away, and it was comparable to a swordsman who had awakened the Elements within him.

The expenditure of this arte merely used 3 points of stamina, a mere fraction when compared to unleashing the Elemental Powers. It was the reason as to why so many people pursued these techniques.

This unworldly attack made the remaining guards in the living room fall into a deathly silence. It was only when a piece of broken wood fell from the second floor onto the ground, that woke everyone from the stupor—

"Knight!"

"A paladin!" *(TL: Literally 'Holy Cathedral knight', but as people have suggested, it's paladin.)*

"Mother Marsha above! Ser Arnon, let's retreat!" The guards yelled out as they lost their morale and retreated.

A sword aura was the basic technique of a warrior who had awakened his Elements. According to tradition, the Cathedral of Flames would grant them the official title of a knight, and to differentiate them from the various kingdoms' conferred title of 'knights', they were called Paladins.

Even a tier three ranked swordsman could not fight against the Knights, not to mention ordinary people like them. Unless there were enough people to drain their stamina, there was no use in fighting them.

“It’s not a fucking paladin!” The team leader Arnon pulled his closest aide back as he swore loudly.

[That was a royal swordsman, are we embroiled in some shitty political battle?] (TL: Literally “palace swordsman”)

He lived up as their leader as he was much more experienced than them and guessed otherwise. He even knew the noble lord upstairs was a close courtier to the king. Even though this was not the first time he got involved in a political war, this was the first time he saw a royal swordsman.

[He used the highest grade Royal Arte, and that was one of the powers only the Crown would have. A low Iron-ranked swordsman possessing such power...]

For a single moment, Arnon was envious of him, but he quickly remembered his responsibilities. He raised his head up to check his surroundings. Brendel killed four people with that single strike, and the remaining guards either ran away or were too scared to move.

Arnon did not have any time to feel the loss, and he stood up with a hand gesture as he shouted: “Retreat! Retreat! Find the people of the spiraling staircase and get them to fall back. That place can’t be held anymore, we’re going up to the next floor.”

The remaining guards finally cleared their minds and immediately ran to the doors. Some of them threw away their bow and arrows. Arnon felt demoralized when he saw this scene.

“Fucking hell, these nobles are just made out of trouble!” He cursed as he turned back and slapped the aide who he just pulled back. He screamed at him as the latter shook off the fright: “Inform the Fortress’s camp and sound the alarm, do you understand!”

“Sounding the alarm, but the earl said that was used to warn the entire city right?” The aide was confused.

“Shut the fuck up! If this ‘guest’ dies, we’re all dead, do you hear me?!”

The aide paused and then nodded urgently. He was scared of the enemy having accomplices, so he did not use the staircase, but climbed down using a rope quietly. Even though it took a little more time, it was definitely safer.

He knew which camp Arnon was referring to. There was a group of White-Mane infantry dedicated to the defense of the inner fortress. Even though they usually looked down on each other, he still hoped to see them as quickly as possible.

But before he even saw them, he discovered to his shock that there were two guards wearing deep blue uniform lying dead on the ground. He immediately realized the enemy had allies.

But he was still late, a beam of white light shot from the camp's second floor, piercing through the aide's chest. The magic arrow threw the body meters away and struck against a pine tree before it collapsed into a heap.

Ciel stared at the window's hole for a long time, before confirming that he was completely dead and he had no other allies with him. He took out his watch and looked at the time, then looked back at the rope leading to the watchtower nearby.

Arnon did not know that his aide was killed, or even the team of White-mane infantry was wiped out completely. He still clung on to the hope of his men resisting a little longer until there were reinforcements.

They were currently defending on the staircase which led to the third floor. Behind them was the guest room, and they were cornered with no place to escape to. Even though he looked down on the servants, he envied them as they were able to hide in some random place, while he had to stay behind and defend as he was the leader of the guards.

If the earl was killed under his watch, he would have to change his name and become a bandit.

The young swordsman quickly appeared in front of him.

[A few more minutes left. But it is strange that these people are so weak. I thought I would have a lot of trouble fighting my way through. The leader at at least a mid Iron-ranked swordsman, and he should be the one holding the advantage...]

Brendel estimated the time. There were a few minutes left.

[...Maybe I'm thinking about this wrongly. I naturally received the techniques that came along with the profession, and I thought that the others would have the same thing. The guards that are stationed here, most of them are comprised of militia

members, learned some terrible swordsmanship, and the remaining techniques they have come about from practical battles.]

[No matter what, I can't be merciful here. These guards understand what it means to protect the earl, and there is no other choice left for us here.]

The archers readied their bows and fired their arrows, and he casually flicked away the arrows. In truth, he only needed to fend off Arnon's arrow, as the rest of them were no threat to him.

"First squadron, advance!" After seeing that the arrows were of no effect and Brendel was coming closer, Arnon could only steel himself and lead his men onwards.

The seven men who were in the first squadron cursed Arnon for being shameless. Why was he not the first one to go up first? Even though they thought they were going to die, a shadow streaked past them.

They turned back subconsciously, only to find that the Death God had bypassed them to their captain—

Arnon came from a military background, and learned Aouine's formal military swordsmanship but other than that he had not learned any techniques. Despite this, he had crossed blades with a Sun Knight, and knew that there was a technique called 'Charge', which allowed one to increase his acceleration many times in an instant. He felt the hair on his skin stand up, and he raised his sword up and blocked in front of him. The experience from his countless battles saved him, as two swords clashed together—

"As expected of a mid level Iron-ranked."

Brendel gauged the opponent in front of him. There were almost no signs of the opponent raising his sword to defend himself, and this was definitely an experienced fighter. A NPC like this in the game caused great trouble to him when he was around level twenty back then.

But he was no longer that novice from before.

Brendel reacted quickly and did not allow his opponent to have a chance to rest. He brought his sword over his head and swung it down.

[Power Break?! Who is this crazy bastard! First he used a Royal Arte, then a knight's technique, now it was a warrior's Power Break, has the world gone crazy?!]

Arnon's heart nearly stopped and the blood in his veins grew cold. If it was someone else, that person would have died without understanding what had happened.

As soon as he saw Brendel's technique, he did not have the notion to counter-attack anymore, and immediately went into the most defensive stance he knew. When the two swords crossed again, both of their swords bent into an exaggerated form along with a ear-splitting metallic scream. Brendel stood firmly at where he was, while the leader stumbled back seven steps, and nearly fell onto the floor.

Arnon had 9 OZ worth of strength and logically he should be able to tie Brendel down till the reinforcements come, but the situation was different due to the power of the techniques.

With Arnon's retreat, the guards at both sides finally took action and tried to flank him, but with Brendel's casual flick, a wind slash struck them and cut many of them down.

He continued to move forward, and Arnon threw the sword in his hand onto the ground without any hesitation and shouted: "I surrender!"

Just as he finished his sentence, the alarm outside rang loudly.

"If you surrender then throw down your weapons and get lost!"

Brendel bellowed.

The guards felt as if they were saved, and they threw the weapons in their hands down and ran away. Their hands were already trembling from the fear, and their last shred of morale was gone when their leader agreed to surrender.

Chapter 50

Earl

The huge brass bell was hung on the giant watchtower in the Pine Fortress, and when it was struck the sound transmitted throughout the city. The ringing sound was like an invisible wave that spread everywhere, and the slumbering streets were infused with energy, and everyone woke up.

There were many who went to the streets in surprise and asked what each other what happened.

Luc Beson who was waiting for news within Fortress Riedon's soldier camp, heard the alarm clearly from the window. When he turned his head to look at the brightly lit city outside the window, his expression turned. He did not wait for the soldiers to come in with their report, and he pushed the door open and rushed outside, yelling:

"Are you all deaf? Get up right now! Gather up! Let the second and third company follow me to the Pine Fortress immediately. That fucking retard Esebar!"

Everyone looked at each other.

"Commander, the city gate?" Someone asked.

"Are you a moron? Other than that highland knight, who else is able to attack the Pine Fortress. That idiot Esebar hid the news of the prisoners' escape, now he's going to face the consequences," After he vented his anger, his tone was less severe: "If anything happens to that person in that fortress, be prepared to face the king's wrath. I don't want to be the scapegoat in this matter if someone is after him, so all of you had better get the target! "

Everyone was stunned for a moment, before rushing off to get prepared.

Luc Beson sighed.

[But this is a Highland Knight, and with his wizard squire, this will be difficult. The Highland Knights have always been independent, and even during the strongest era of

the Corvado's kingdom, the royal family was unable to control these self-serving bastards. Can we really stop him?]

He cursed Esebar and his female relatives again.

Freya followed the girl and they walked across a very long and dark alley. When she heard the sound of the ringing bell, she turned her head back subconsciously and worry showed on her face.

“What’s the matter?” The girl, Sue, asked.

“Sorry, it’s nothing.”

“A war is coming.” Sue suddenly said.

Freya paused for a moment and looked at her puzzledly.

“The nobles have ordered the bell to ring only where when there’s a war happening. Even though nobody talks about it, but they know everytime the bell rings there will be a war.” Sue said softly.

“You mean to say they know there’s going to be a war soon?”

“They? Are you referring to the nobles? Of course they know, they have their own information network. Usually once the rumors start circulating in the city’s bars, they would have known them already.”

Freya did not reply but clenched her fists tightly. Her eyes stared at the ground, with a cold fury emanating from them.

“Why hasn’t the city reacted?”

“Even if there is an reaction we wouldn’t be able to see it, but the nobles would have prepared for it. Fortress Riedon is a place with strong walls and defended by the kingdom’s army, so the people in the city are not too worried about it. However, the prices of bread and wheat today has increased by ten percent. This is something that is not usually seen.”

“What happens if Fortress Riedon falls?”

“How could that be?”

Freya could not help but recall Brendel’s firm attitude and words. She shook her head to drive the notion away, but she still replied.

“I have a friend who says that Fortress Riedon will fall.”

“Then he must be a liar.” Sue answered calmly.

After Ciel struck the bell, he moved to the camp’s peak tower. He glanced at the city’s river from the wall, then watched the street as soldiers gathered there. He was not able to ascertain the faction of these troops due to the darkness, but he guessed that they were the nobles’ private armies.

His foremost concern was not these troops, so he surveyed his surroundings again, and spotted a suitable location after a while. It was an area within the fortress. He lit the witch’s candle in his hand and recalled Brendel’s method.

“Et’ham.”

The first syllable invoked the Dark Abyss’s powers, governed by the Twin Goddess Iren. This particular power was used by the witches as a medium to invoke the candle’s power. Ciel raised the candle up, allowing the light to travel approximately fifteen meters away.

He picked a tree in his mind and he was instantly dragged forth into a path of light. When he came back to his senses, he found he was at the top of the tree.

“Incredible. As expected of the witches.” Ciel glanced around and he picked another tree.

After repeating seven or eight times, the candle in Ciel’s hand had burned to the point where only a small stump remained. He raised the candle a final time and selected a fortress’s window, and he was covered in darkness when he traveled to the area.

He shook his head to drive off the dizzy feeling that was caused by candle. He could

faintly hear the fighting sounds in the area that was in front of him.

[It's a little late, but that should be fine. My lord has already given me some leeway.] Ciel comforted himself, but he did not know Brendel wanted to stab him with his sword for failing to appear.

----- A few minutes ago -----

When Brendel pushed open the heavy oak door, he did not see the Earl whom he expected to hide in one corner and shiver. The room was well lit by the candles that were made from suet, and the latter was sitting comfortably on a couch. He wore a formal woolen attire that was ironed to the point where there was not even a wrinkle on it. He raised his head and looked at Brendel with a haughty look, and in front of him was the Elven sword.

Brendel was slightly surprised at this scene. He did not think that the Earl was this brave, but immediately became cautious after thinking it through.

[He's not even affected in the least bit. Something is wrong.]

"I didn't think it was you, lad. I thought it was the assassins from the trash factions in Acobs Fortress— Ahh, but you could also be the assassin that they hired. Please, tell me the truth." The middle-aged man furrowed his brows but his tone was even.

[Acobs Fortress? This bastard isn't with the Royal faction?] Brendel's mind was whirling in confusion, but he shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, your Lordship. But if you would cooperate with me, I'm not interested in killing you, to tell the truth."

"Oh? You're not interested in killing me? Then I must thank you, but it's such a pity. I'm very interested in killing you—" Before his words ended, a crossbow suddenly appeared in the middle-aged man's hands; Brendel's eyes caught the arrow with a ghastly blue gleam and realized there was poison on it.

But he was already prepared as he knew the nobles' tricks very well. He knocked the arrow away with his sword with a ear-piercing clink, and before he had the time to relax, he heard a rushing wind behind him. He subconsciously blocked the attack with his sword—

There was a loud crashing sound.

Brendel was thrown onto a shelf at the wall and he was smashed against it. After a continuous series of wooden din, he climbed out of the wreckage with gritted teeth.

[An Iron high-ranking swordsman. Fuck. He still ambushed me too. Have you no shame? If it's not for the fact there's fucking SOBs in the game that didn't know the meaning of shame, I'm dead meat!]

Brendel felt the fear rushing at him when he got up, that was a close shave for him. He calculated the risk in his mind again, an opponent of this caliber was troublesome.

[15 OZ worth of strength. Even if I used power break I might not get the upper hand.]

But his opponent and the middle-aged man were also shocked. Their ambush which should have worked, failed completely. Even though Brendel was appearing to be in shabby condition, but everyone knew that the wounds on him did not really mean anything.

The middle-aged man furrowed his brows again, but spoke mockingly after a while: "I didn't expect a maggot-looking commoner to have some capabilities, but this doesn't change the ending."

He picked up the Elven sword from the table and laughed coldly.

"You should have already noticed my guard's abilities. You're not his match. But it's quite obvious, how could a dirty commoner like yourself own a treasure like this? How about a trade, cut off your disgusting hand that touched this sword, give me your two companions and I'll let you live. I promise I'll treat them well enough, at least comparable to dogs, hahahaha—"

He said as he laughed manically.

Brendel's breath was released in a cold mist, a blazing fury growing in his eyes and his entire demeanor changed.

Even though he knew the earl was antagonizing him on purpose, he could not suppress the rage that was brewing within him. In this world, Romaine and Freya were the earliest people that he met, and everyone in the third militia squadron, had become precious to him.

And the other's Brendel's grandfather had become his biggest driving force in this world.

[How can I let you continue spew all these fucking nonsense!]

The fingers on his sword turned white from his grip.

The other two men looked delighted from Brendel's expression, and the middle aged man gestured with his hands behind his back.

"Ulysses, corner him!" The middle-aged man commanded him.

The tall swordsman immediately pressed forward. His skill in the sword was considerable, and there were no openings in his attacks. He smirked as he saw Brendel's body leaning forward and adopting the most aggressive stance in the military swordsmanship, and his eyes were on the middle-aged man.

It was a mistake for Brendel to be so impulsive.

Ulysses moved even closer, waiting for a chance to get a clean kill. He could almost see the opening in Brendel's side.

"Ulysses!" The middle-aged man suddenly shouted and Ulysses suddenly spotted an opening in Brendel's flank as his attention was taken away.

The grin in Ulysses had not appeared fully, and Brendel's silver ring on his thumb was in front of him—

"Oss!"

There was no chance to evade. Tendrils of air converged onto one point and formed spiraling lances, directly striking his face, chest and abdomen, and they were bent in a bizarre way. The immense wind pressure smashed him into the ceiling and there was a loud explosive sound. The candle flames were all extinguished and the room immediately dimmed. Gravel and concrete bits fell down, along with body parts and blood.

Before the middle-aged man was able to respond from this sudden change, a sword was placed at his neck

“Speak, how exactly do you want to die.” Brendel asked coldly.

“...You dare to kill me?” The middle-aged man pushed down his fear and said.

“Why would I not dare to do so?”

“I’m Earl Dunn, one of the important minister serving the king directly. Do you intend to be enemies with the entire Aouine?” Dunn’s eyes were like a poisonous snake as he glared at Brendel. “Not only you, your companions will be subject to the same crime.”

Brendel paused for a while and fell into deep silence.

Dunn continued to speak.

“I can release you and your companions, but for the sake of my reputation, you must leave your Elven sword behind.” Even though Dunn promised him, his eyes were full of deep hatred.

Brendel finally let out a mirthful laugh. He looked condescendingly at Dunn as if he was a moron. “Your lordship, just what exactly did you think I was doing?”

Dunn paused.

“I was thinking, some living creatures are just hopelessly stupid, even when death comes knocking on their fucking door, they don’t even realize that.” Brendel shook his head: “Killing an important minister? Escaping from prison? Nobody would even care about these trifling things, because history will be written like this—”

“In the year of the bustling flowers and summer leaves, the sixth month on the second morning, Madara’s army conquered Fortress Riedon. Earl Dunn, the Golden Apple Lord and the captain of the White-Mane army, Luc Beson unfortunately perished in the lines of battle for the kingdom.”

“I, am nothing more than a guest here.”

Dunn’s eyes went wide as he looked at Brendel as if he saw a ghost.

“Do you think I’m lying to you? I don’t have the mood to joke with you. Since you’re unwilling to cooperate, then it’s time to lend me your head.” Brendel finished speaking and lopped Dunn’s head off.

Chapter 51

Wealth

Brendel fell down onto the ground on his butt.

The series of battles had caused him to go weak in his knees, and there were no real advantages to be gained from them, and these actions that he took did not match his personality at all.

His eyes were randomly cast upon Dunn's headless body, and then he stopped moving. His eyes were glued on the ring on his middle finger.

This ring was a long snake biting its tail in the form of an 'O' letter, and Brendel's eyes went wide with shock.

"Fuck me, are you serious?! This bastard is a member of 'Origin'?" His hand went for the 'Thorn of light' on the table, but he was late by a heartbeat: The snake on the ring moved and twisted, then a chilling voice echoed in the room.

"Very good, you bastard. Even though I don't know who you are, you will not live for long—"

The shrieking voice abruptly started and ended. If Brendel did not know what this organization was, he might have thought he was hearing things.

[Origin... This organization is similar to the 'Tree Shepherd', except they are even more mysterious than the latter. Back then in the game's history when Saint Orso overturned Aouine, they were already present. No one knew what their goal was, but more than half of the in-game high level missions were related to this organization—
]

Brendel knew that the high level members in this organization were able to sense each through the 'Ouroboros' ring. Once someone died, the members would immediately know and choose a new person to replace him.

And what awaited next was endless revenge.

“Damn it. These bunch of bastards again, Mother Marsha, are you toying with me?” Brendel got up with the support of the Elven sword. He had a difficult time in the end game as he had also killed one of the high ranking members, and the circumstances surrounding it was similar to what happened here.

“My lord, are you in here?” When Ciel arrived the battle was over, but he thought his lord would have easily ended things and wanting him to gather here was nothing more than a polite instruction.

But Brendel’s anger boiled over when he heard the voice. If he wasn’t alert enough, Ciel would have seen a corpse or turned back into a card after he died.

He throw a piece of the rubble at him, and the surprised apprentice dodged to one side.

“Woah! My lord, please listen to my explanation—”

“Save it. Don’t do that again.” Brendel’s feelings were soothed after he scolded Ciel. There was at least one advantage for him right now. Madara would raze this place to the ground and ‘Origin’ would have a hard time finding out who killed Dunn. Even their organization was big, but they were not omniscient.

With that thought in mind, he felt much calmer. If they could not find him, then they would not be able to exact their revenge.

“How many mana potions are left?” Brendel asked.

“I didn’t use one at all, but I’m really drained.” The young man smiled shyly as he did not wish to say that he did not use them as they were too precious.

Brendel cast a disapproving look.

“We’re going up to the rooftop, drink one potion on the way up. This mana potion isn’t instant, and before the next battle begins, I want to see you revived with completely recovered stats.”

“What is ‘revived with completely recovered stats.’?”

“It’s very simple. A wizard without mana has no difference from a dead person. When your mana is full, you’re revived with recovered stats.”

“Even that’s a little cruel, but it seems like it’s true from a certain point of view.” Ciel nodded.

“Naturally. Do you think I have the time to bullshit with you?” Even though Brendel was not a wizard, he was still able to teach Ciel till he was at least level 40. But he felt a little puzzled.

[Why is this guy and Babasha placing so much importance on these mana potions? Even though it’s slightly expensive, there is no need to treat it with so much importance right?]

“My lord’s words are very right.” Ciel was completely convinced.

Brendel walked over to Dunn and brought the Elven sword near to his corpse. There was a glimmering light on the sword that looked like it was able to reveal the color of the blood on Dunn’s clothes.

Brendel frowned and thought back on everything, then nodded.

“My lord, what are you doing?”

“I’m saving myself.”

“Saving yourself?”

“Stop wasting time and follow me. Tell me what you discovered too.” Brendel knew that he could not let Ciel to be proud of his achievements, otherwise there would be mistakes made the next time.

As the two of them moved off, Ciel reported what he saw to Brendel. When he heard that the nobles’ armies were gathered outside this fortress, he was worried and pleased at the same time. It was going to be difficult to escape from so many people, but on the other hand Freya and Romaine’s situation would be much easier. Even though he wanted to let them grow on their own, he was still worried about the girls.

After walking for a while, he suddenly remembered something.

“Ah, right. Ciel, what about the things I told you to do?”

“What task is that?”

“A task where a highland knight requested his squire to gather some stuff so that he could pay for living expenses.”

Ciel got excited when he remembered it: “My lord, I picked up some wonderful stuff.”

“With my lord’s expertise, I’m sure you have heard the name Lamona, the little princess of Saint Osor. But her most famous reputation isn’t this title, it was during the time in Kirrlutz where she worked as a court artist. She painted Vaunte and the artwork’s name is ‘The voice of the souls’. She was a founder of an artistic style and was a grandmaster. I truly did not expect this earl to be such a fan of her work. There were many treasures in his collection.”

“No, I have never heard of this name. I am only interested in how much it can sell for.” Brendel shook his head. Most of the gamers are more interested in grabbing gold and silver artifacts. When he thought about it they were really like barbarians.

“Such uncivilized behavior, my lord, uncivilized!” Ciel shook his head with distaste. “But it should be fine to sell this in the black market for a few million coins.”

“Barely passable.”

Ciel was a little crestfallen when he saw they he did not have the same hobby as Brendel, but he still tried to be enthusiastic and took out a book from his magic bag. “My lord, I also got this book.”

“What is this?”

“This is a book to keep magic cards. There is something special within this,” The squire took a card out after he opened the book: “Look at this my lord.”

Brendel had guess what it was when he saw the card, but he was only able to confirm that it was a Card of Fate after Ciel passed it over to him.

It was a green colored card which represented the wind series. There was a ‘X’ on it on the top left hand corner, while there was a triangular shape with glowing lights painted on the card. There were different lines on the three corners—

Ta’m – Target of the spell

Stau – The magic to invoke the spell

Ee – The eyes of the god that governed magic.

The required cost to use this card was three wind crystals.

Brendel flipped the card and used his system on it.

(Magic Control)

(The High Tower X)

(Wind element 3)

(Instant spell)

(Choose a target for the spell and choose another target to receive the energy.)

(Your magic shall be controlled by the High Tower guard, Ordo.)

Ciel observed Brendel's expression and explained when he found an appropriate time for it. "This is a rare White Magic card, my lord. It looks like we have good luck."

"A White Magic Card?" Brendel asked.

"It means that there are no prerequisites in using this card."

"It doesn't need a cost to use this?"

"No, my lord. There are many magic spells and cards in the Cards of Fate. Other than the basic land cards, you have to under a certain condition. The knight cards, as an example, can only be used by knights or warriors who walks 'The path of bravery', so my lord is able to use that."

"And a white magic card can be used by anyone?"

"Exactly, my lord."

Brendel rubbed his forehead. He remembered the scene in Gerald's tomb and wondered if there was anything related to this. He had never heard of these cards in the game, and today was the first time where he thought about this in detail.

Chapter 52

Little Romaine couldn't possibly take such a risk

Romaine raised her head and looked at the wooden signature board. Her face was slightly flushed under the cold night air. Even though it was early summer, the temperature in the highland area during the night time was very low.

The wooden signature board had turned black from decades of rain and wind, and on it was a running horse. She did not recognize the words on them but she guessed she was at the right place. Both her hands were placed on her precious bag, and she rubbed her leather boots together.

[This should be the place right? That 'Running Horse Inn' or something?]

With the alarm that came from a distant place, a group of patrol troops passed by her. The merchant girl was not afraid and curiously observed them. and watched them leave the area. When the alarm finally stopped ringing, she let out a small sigh and stepped into the inn.

The owner of the inn was a dwarf. He appeared exactly like the Dwarves depicted in stories, with a long bush beard with wheat color, and they were braided together. On the dwarf's neck were bronze chains. Intricate patterns and Dwarven words were carved on the chain rings, depicting the family name, birth and given name.

Famous family names like 'Firebeard', 'Rocksigil', 'Orichalheart' would even create the precious and heavy gold chain for each member.

These chains were a proud symbol just like their beards, and the Dwarven families had centuries of history along with them. They would gladly wear the chain around and let the jangling chains sound out loudly. It was a rare sight for a dwarf to appear in the human society, and the inn's owner, Khodrum Barrock, made use of this notion and dressed himself up like a person of great importance, as well as spreading rumors through the use of coins. Many people visited this mysterious dwarf and his business naturally got better and better.

Khodrum wore a robe made of silk today, with three ruby rings on his stubby fingers,

as well as a cat-eye stone ring and an emerald ring. He had a nephew, a human, and was able to establish further relations with them. As to why the dwarf had a human nephew, no one really knows.

But his nephew who was serving in the white-mane's army was currently discussing with him in private along with his companion. The three of them had been talking for a little while.

"You're saying if I see a lass I should agree to any of her requests? Why is that? If she wants my entire fortune, am I supposed to give it too? No, no this suggestion sounds just too stupid." The Dwarven boss shook his head forcefully and grumbled.

"Uncle Khodrum, please listen to me properly. I'm not asking you to give her anything other than to prepare a horse cart for her. Don't alarm her and prepare another horse cart so we can follow her from behind."

"Only horse carts?" Khodrum looked suspiciously at his nephew with his beady eyes.

"Of course."

"Fine, will she pay?"

The young man sighed, but knowing his uncle's temperament, he quickly added on: "Of course she will, but don't haggle with her too much and raise the price too high. Please don't frighten her away, and if uncle helps me out, I'll be able to take the credit of capturing her!"

"I don't really understand, but you mean that you like that lass? I can consider give you a 0.5 % discount."

"N-no! It's something like this, this girl is actually a spy from Madara. She and her companions escaped from prison and should be seeking to leave the fortress as soon as possible. Captain Luc Beson tasked us to look at the paths that they would escape from."

"Then why don't you capture her directly?" Khodrum asked in curiosity.

Puck rubbed his temples. "Uncle Khodrum, she still has her companions, and in order to capture all of them, we want to follow her and catch them when their guard is down. Do you understand?"

“Not really.”

“Okay, in any case, I’ll top up the money if she pays any less. Please be at ease, uncle Khodrum.”

“Get her guard down, satisfy her request? I understand that.” The dwarf nodded.

Even though he had to nitpick at everything, the speed at which he cleared the task was very fast. He called the workers over and ordered them, then informed his nephew: “I already prepared everything. When is the girl going to come?”

“I’m not sure but I hope she’s going to come over to our side first, I don’t want to see that bastard Granzon looking down on me.” The young man sighed, then suddenly felt his companion patting his back with everything he had. He turned his head and saw Romaine. He immediately jumped up and pushed the dwarf towards the front.

“That’s her, she’s coming! Quick, uncle, everything depends on you!”

“Relax, young man. Don’t push me like a sack of potatoes, I have been doing this for thirty years and I know what to do.” Khodrum did not forget to brag.

When Romaine came in, she was looking all over the place with great interest. She had never seen a building that was mainly made out of rocks. She felt something familiar when she saw the pillars and walls, but then she spotted the dwarf whose beard nearly reached the ground.

“Are you a midget?” She asked.

“No, I’m a Dwarven person.” The inn’s boss corrected her.

“Mr Dwarven, are you the boss here?”

“I am a dwarf, not Mr Dwarven. Lass, do you understand the difference? And yes, I’m the boss.”

“I would like to rent a horse cart, do you rent them here?”

“Of course, what do you think I do here?”

“Do I need to pay?” Romaine was still looking curiously at the store.

“That’s a given thing. Doing a business has a transaction of coins and goods. We calculate the days of how long the guests want to rent them for, but strictly speaking, a horse rental inn typically rents them out for only a day. If the horse cart is damaged because of the guest, we will have to seek payment for it. Furthermore, our drivers have the right to refuse any orders that might harm their lives. When this particular rule and that particular rule occur...” Khodrum spoke without stopping when it came to business.

“How much do I need to pay if I want to rent for half a day?”

“Thirty coins.”

Romaine took out a blue-grayish pouch, turned it over and shook it. There were three copper coins on her hand. She raised her head and asked without any change on her face: “I only have this much, can I still rent the horse cart?”

“You can rent a horse wheel.....” Was what Khodrum wanted to say, but he suddenly recalled his nephew’s words, so he changed his tune stiffly. “Fine, even though this is short, lass, when do you want the cart?”

“I want it now. How do I get to the horse cart?”

“The cart is right behind. Here is your card number. Take it and you can find the right cart. Well, do you need me to bring you over?” Khodrum passed the copper card over in pain. He had not done a business transaction where he did it a loss for many years.

“Nope. I still have my friends waiting out there, and I have to ask them for their opinions. Can we finish the transaction now?”

“Of course. Finishing a transaction is my favorite thing in the world.” Khodrum dabbed his forehead. This transaction violated his principles in the worst ways. But for the sake of his nephew and his coins, he accepted it grudgingly.

Puck and his companion watched Romaine leave with satisfaction, and they ran out and he pulled his uncle and asked.

“Did you manage to do it?”

“Certainly, just think who your uncle Khodrum is? I have made transactions with man-eating devils before.” The dwarf described everything that had transpired, but Puck

smacked his forehead and yelled. “Marsha above, Uncle Khodrum, what are you doing, she definitely knows we’re here! She won’t sit in your horse cart. We have messed things up!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Uncle, which merchant would do business at a loss, operating at a tenth of the original cost, you overdid things uncle! She must have suspected from the very beginning, what else did she say?” The young man had a grim expression as he did not expect his uncle to mess things up with his good intentions.

“She said she had to seek her companions opinions.”

“Companions?” Puck looked at his partner and they went out immediately. The dwarf shouted behind them.

“I say, wait, you two little wankers, where’s my promised money!”

He was fuming.

“These youngsters nowadays have no respect for the elderly.” When he looked back, he saw one of his worker running over.

“Boss, the horse cart that you arranged has driven away.”

“The horse cart that I arranged, what cart?” Khodrum looked at his worker in confusion.

“The horse cart which you said to fulfill any requests that the girl wants. That girl is really pretty and polite. Is she Master Puck’s lover?”

“What!” The dwarf looked at the worker as if he was going to kill him.

.....

“Miss, where are we going to?”

The horse cart advanced forward with the wheels turning against the rocks. The monotonous sounds were accompanied with the scenery changing quickly, and the girl looked on with interest. But she replied quickly-

“I like the scenery around here, can we go to the south gate? Then let’s go one round to the north gate? Is there anything of interest around here?”

“Of course. We should pass by the Knight Everton’s residence.”

“Everton? Who’s that?”

“Knight Everton was a famous hero.....”

.....

Brendel and Ciel climbed up to the peak tower of the Pine Fortress. They took in a sharp breath when they saw the troops surrounding the fortress. The disorganized mercenaries had lit up their torch in a random order, and it looked like there were stars on the ground, forming a fiery dragon that coiled around the fortress.

The private army of the nobles had already broken through the gate and were advancing in the courtyard. The wind bullet that caused a loud explosive earlier had alerted them and they prepared to attack with force.

Both of Brendel and Ciel’s faces were slightly pallid. It would be a miracle if they managed to escape from this. Even though they could rely on the gargoyle, but it might not be able to fly high enough.

Brendel held his breath as he felt that things were spiraling out of his calculations. He pointed at another fiery dragon that was appearing in the distance: “Do you see that? The white-mane army is also coming over-”

“I wish that I didn’t see that, my lord.”

“That’s true.”

Chapter 53

The line between life and death

“Ser Esebar, take a look at this.” The leader of the mercenaries handed the brass telescope over to the noble after using it.

The Golden Apple Lord sat steadily on an Arreck horse.

Aouine’s cavalry troops once used them as the main choice as war horses, but they eventually switched to the double-footed flying dragons. Despite the change, the nobles still used rode the horses to represent their status.

Esebar received the telescope and looked into the distance with it, then passed to his ally, the businessman Burnley with an impassive face.

The Golden Apple Lord was not too anxious. Even if Earl Dunn died on their territory, the only thing that would get affected was merely their reputation. The nobles in this area prized actual power over reputation, and if the king sought someone to blame, it was naturally the bastard Luc Beson who was at fault, not the gentlemen here.

In fact, he wanted the Earl to get into an accident, but he did not dare to do anything that was too obvious. Right now, he merely gathered his private army and prepared to attack the keep.

But he needed to capture the person who invaded the fortress. If White-Mane army captured the invader instead, and if they doctored the military records, the responsibility would fall onto him.

Burnley took the telescope with a smile, looked through it and said: “There are people on the tower’s peak.”

“Makavu, get some archers over. Their status must be at least a white rank because the opponent is a Iron-ranked swordsman.” The Golden Apple Lord pointed at the top of the tower as he instructed the leader of the mercenaries.

“Understood, Ser Esebar. Just wait and see. Regardless of whether he’s a Iron-ranked

swordsman or a Highland Knight, we will definitely turn him into a body filled with arrows.” The mercenary leader answered and left immediately.

The nobles’ private armies split into two lines, allowing their leader to ride run over. Not far away the riders rode on their horses over from the river noisily, and the scenery was filled with chaotic dancing light.

The Golden Apple Lord narrowed his eyes: “These riders are really crass.”

“If they appeared here, does that mean that Earl Dunn is—” Burnley gestured with his hand across his neck with a beaming face.

“Hmph. A second generation from the Les Brulais family. The king favors him because of his lips. Thanks to that, he thinks nothing of the other ministers and everyone hates him because of his arrogance. Dying in the streets is a very normal thing for him.” The Golden Apple Lord snorted from his nose.

“This man is a reputed archaeologist who can identify items. The king looks favorably on him because of this.” Burnley corrected his partner’s mistake.

“He’s nothing more than a fool.”

A scout reported in while the two men discussed. The rider came to them with a weary war horse and he spoke: “My lord, the White-Mane army is here.”

“Oh? How many?” The Golden Apple Lord asked.

“Twenty of them. They appear to be the vanguard.”

“Block them outside.” He pointed with his horse whip and ordered the scout.

“Understood.”

As soon as the rider left, another came up to him and reported: “My lord, the archers are ready.”

The Golden Apple Lord nodded: “That should be enough. Get Granzon to break the fortress as soon as possible. I suspected they had the ability to fly a long time ago. Looks like my guess isn’t wrong, and this time we will definitely get them.”

“That is a Highland knight. How are you going to take care of it?” Burnley asked.

“This is originally a difficult thing, but since they killed that idiot so openly, even if he is a member of the White Knights on active duty, no one can save him.”

The Golden Apple Lord watched as a black figure landed on the tower’s peak, which then carried the two and flew over the soldiers’ heads. He looked at his soldiers and saw them readying their bows. With a whistle, the order was given and hundreds of arrows fired at the same time—

“Ahhhh, my lord! They have archers!” Ciel shook to his left and right as he yelled in fright.

“Cut the crap, I can see them with my own eyes!” Brendel answered gloomily. He struck down an arrow with his sword, and the force that transmitted over from it numbed his fingers slightly. His heart sank as he realized the opponents had Iron-ranked archers. The arrows flew at them from all angles and struck the gargoyle’s wings, and if they continued to go near them, he would have no way to handle the arrows.

“Fly to the ground.” He commanded with a low growl.

“Fly down?” Ciel’s eyes were wide open as he thought that his lord had become insane.

[We’re going to die!!!]

“We can’t fly back over and we can’t go back. We are completely surrounded by his men. If that is the case, we should fight our way out, perhaps we have a chance at surviving.” Brendel said calmly and stared at the immense crowd on the ground.

“My lord, you gamble too much.”

“Believing in your strength is called bravery, placing your fate on luck is called reckless. There is a fine line between these two things, and the key is to know how to walk on it. This is one of my motto in the game, remember this well.” Brendel replied as he looked at his squire.

“Game?”

“Didn’t I tell you this before? Life is like a game, a game is like life.” Brendel suddenly laughed as the weight lifted from his chest, and felt never more awake in his life.

The gargoyle flew lower while the whistling air passed by the two men. They were almost able to see the archers clearly by now. Another whistle resounded in the air, and another volley of arrows came at them. Brendel desperately tried to block them all, but an arrow slipped by and drew blood from his side.

The gargoyle turned a full circle and drew most of the firepower away. It boasted one of the highest defence as a level twenty creature, and even a fully charged strike from Brendel's ring did not manage to bring it down completely. These arrows did not damage it in the slightest.

Unfortunately, the agility in the air was nothing special, otherwise Brendel could order it to use various aerial maneuvers to bring them out of the siege. He thought for a while before taking a ruby out from his pouch. He had taken it from the Dunn's corpse.

"Is your mana at full capacity?"

"Yes."

"Then conjure a bow for me."

"Bow?" Ciel was momentarily stunned as he took the ruby. "My lord, I suggest to conjure a shield rather than a bow."

"Offense is the best defense."

"Then leave it to me-" The wizard apprentice nodded and raised the ruby. "Projection ability, conjure a bow with an equivalent exchange!" Countless light beams poured from the ruby and curved around it, then formed into a longbow.

The longbow had no physical body, and was merely formed with ley lines of magic. The string and the two corners of bow were written with complicated sigils and represented the laws of magic. The conceptual body of the bow was a principle of magic, and it was paid by converting the energy in precious gems. It did not require an arrow to fire a projectile.

"My willpower can only allow this bow to fire four times." Ciel said as he handed the bow over to Brendel.

"Let's try it out."

The third volley of arrows came again—

“What is this monster?” The Golden Apple Lord pointed at the dark creature with immense wings. Burnley’s eyes glinted, but he did not reply.

“That is a gargoyle, my lord. It is a masterpiece of Buga’s smiths, a type of war puppet.”

It was a mercenary who replied politely.

“That is a gargoyle?” The Golden Apple Lord’s expression changed. He drew in a deep breath. He had heard of Karsuk’s highland wizards were a connection left behind by Buga’s archmagi, and it appeared that the rumors were somewhat valid. His heart started calculating. It was still fine to offend a highland knight, but Buga’s archmagi were something else entirely.

“Ser Esebar, we have no choice.” Burnley’s eyes changed a little and tried to persuade him.

The Golden Apple Lord suddenly turned back and looked at him, and Burnley suddenly realized that he overdid things. The fat businessman laughed and shook his head. “But it is true that Buga’s wizards are not people to be trifled with-”

The Golden Apple Lord raised his head and felt uneasy.

Brendel and Ciel landed on the ground without suffering any additional injuries. Another volley of arrows came again, and Brendel cut them down with his sword. As soon as the raining arrows ended, he sheathed the sword and brought the bow up as he jumped onto the gargoyle’s back and they flew towards the archers.

Makavu was in the midst of the archers. He almost could not believe his eyes when he saw Brendel flying up from the ground area, but his experience in the myriad battles in his history brought about a sense of danger when he realized there was a gargoyle.

He immediately shouted to his vice captain: “It’s close enough, have the archers fire at will!”

The soldiers understood the meaning, and the riders from the sides prepared to surround the area.

The soldiers fired again—

Brendel took in another deep breath. There was no need for any bow techniques with the conjured bow, but he had trouble balancing himself on the flying creature. He aimed for a few seconds, then lightly released the bowstring. A white beam of light shot into the throng of soldiers five meters away from Makavu, shattering the rocks nearby into pebbles.

“Oh.” Ciel sighed as he watched.

Brendel did not panic and became even steady. He pulled the bow again and this arrow pierced two archers behind Makavu and the arrow exploded in the vicinity, hurting the soldiers around the area of impact.

He pulled the bow again. Makavu was already retreating in a hurry as he mistook Brendel for a wizard.

This arrow brought the vice-captain down from his horse. Brendel was becoming more accurate.

[This is the last arrow. They are about to counter attack!]

Brendel’s eyes followed Makavu with a grimace as he wormed into the crowd. He hesitated before unleashing the arrow into the archers, causing the arrow to explode. Due to the tightly packed area, four of them died, and the archers retreated.

Because of the chaos, there was an opening as they fled in different directions.

The gargoyle turned around and grabbed Ciel. This had given Brendel a little time and he felt that his judgment was correct. He then ordered the gargoyle to fly past them. Just when he thought everything was fine, a lasso came from the crowd and accurately looped around one of the Gargoyle’s wings.

Brendel was shocked and he turned his head around to spot the mercenary leader, Makavu.

Because of the unexpected turn of events, the gargoyle flew unsteadily in an arch, then descended nearby into the river. Makavu cried out in delight and released the rope. He did not care about his bloody palms and yelled out: “Now! Capture them!”

The situation suddenly changed.

Chapter 54

Breakthrough

The gargoyle skidded against the soft river ground ten over meters after it was forced down. The damage against this monstrous creature was minor, but Brendel and Ciel were hurled towards the ground with considerable impact.

The nobles' soldiers around them immediately became excited once they landed on the ground, and they swarmed towards them like angry insects. Even though they were a bunch of low ranking mobs, the riders' charge made them look terrifying. After Ciel stood up from the ground and shook off the sand, he received a shock after looking at his surroundings and immediately asked: "My lord, what should we do now?"

Brendel pulled his leg out from the mud and drew his sword. He yelled: "Cut the crap, create a wall now!"

This was the classic strategy of Aouine's wizards against the riders. The players' strategies gradually evolved from this basic spell as it was effective against inexperienced riders.

Ciel immediately understood and used a ruby and pointed to the front: "To halt, to counter, Wall of creation—" Strings of light extended everywhere and formed a wall. The strings of light disappeared and a firm wall made of air was created.

Most of the riders had no idea what it was and they charged forward. There were a few experienced soldiers who split into two directions while Makavu tried to command his troops to circle the enemies, but the noise created from the galloping horses drowned his voice.

The first row of riders crashed into the wall of air. The horses knelt onto the ground, while the riders were thrown upwards and crashes into the wall. The next row of riders trampled onto the first row and then stumbled to the ground. As the third row crashed onto the second row, the increasing pressure shattered the wall of air, and suddenly a great number of the corpses were propelled forward and landed near Brendel's feet.

This happened in a single instant, and the forceful impact frightened even Brendel and Ciel. They took a step backwards involuntarily.

Makavu cursed in anger from behind. The first row of riders were immediately killed, and the second row of riders were heavily injured. The third row of riders were mostly incapacitated and could not join back in the fray. Twenty odd men were never going to come back and rejoin his army, and he felt heartbroken by that fact.

He clenched his teeth and quickly bandaged his bloodied hands, then charged forth with a brandished greatsword. There were still ten over veteran riders remaining and he needed to lead them personally to suppress the two enemies in front, until the footmen were able to catch up with them.

[We need to target that wizard! If he continues to use his magic it would spell disaster for us!]

Makavu waved his greatsword twice, signalling his men to spread out and surround the enemies. He was fuming slightly when he saw their hesitant behavior. Each one of them was at least an Iron-rank, but when it came to the critical moment they were reluctant to advance.

“Charge! Attack as one!” Makavu understood he needed to spur them despite his anger.

He did not know that Brendel had been observing him for quite some time already.

[I fought more than enough times to know what you’re thinking. There’s no need to try and hide your tactics.] Brendel watched Makavu advance on an Arreck horse as he continued to issue out commands.

He spat out the sand in his mouth and tapped Ciel’s shoulder, then pointed to Makavu.

“See that man, coordinate with me at the right moment with a magic arrow.”

Ciel immediately shook his head. “He’s on a horse and I’m not that accurate.”

“No problem, you don’t need to worry about mana conservation, if you miss just keep on shooting.”

“Then it should be fine.”

Brendel checked the riders in his surroundings, grabbed his sword's hilt and readied himself. After Makavu and his riders circled once, Makavu raised his sword just like he expected.

[He's preparing to charge with everyone.]

Thirty meters.

Twenty meters.

Brendel was waiting for a chance like this. He went into a stance and unleashed his sword from the scabbard. Light burst forth along with a violent gust. Makavu saw the translucent ripple spreading forth along the ground, dragging pebbles along its path. Even though he had never seen the royal court's sword style, he recognized that danger was coming towards him. He immediately jumped high up from his horse.

As he went up in mid-air, Brendel's technique swept past the Arreck horse, and the giant horse suddenly stumbled forward and collapsed into a heap.

Its four limbs were severed.

Makavu drew a cold breath as he thought of a term.

[Sword aura—]

But before he could finish his thoughts, a beam of white light pierced through the air and struck his chest. A second beam stabbed his shoulder, the third beam impaled his abdomen, and the final beam of light went past him. Makavu changed directions three times before crashing down onto the sand lifelessly.

This sudden change made the riders pull their reins. They were not shocked by Makavu's death, but by the technique displayed before them. It was a signature move used by paladins. Their expressions changed into fear as they wondered who the young man was.

"You're quite accurate." Brendel sheathed his sword.

"Ho ho. But this credit belongs to my lord." Ciel answered with a straight face.

Brendel smiled when he heard that. He checked the scenery in front of him. Even

though the riders were stunned into inaction, he could not relax as he saw the shadows from the infantry in the Long Spear Forest.

He exhaled as he rearranged his plan. He looked to the north as he realized the only chance was in that direction. He was not sure whether he was able to pull it off but he pointed in that direction and yelled: “Wstry (Advance forth)!”

[If I don’t have any attack commands for the gargoyle, then I’ll use the move command as a substitute.]

The Golden Apple Lord watched the events unfold from a high view. His face was contorted into an ugly expression. Even though these troops were not elites, he had paid for them, especially Makavu. Even though he was a low-born, he was a strong commander and a capable fighter.

“A highland knight is indeed a highland knight. I didn’t really believe in the rumors of the legendary prowess of the White Knight army, but it looks like that was no falsity in it.” Burnley said with a smile of his face.

“Looks like Earl Dunn is most likely dead. I wonder if that ‘Tiger’ dares to take on this highland knight. But if he manages to do so, even a dead body would be disadvantageous to us, especially when we did not manage to find the two women.”

“I just find it strange as to why this particular young man needed to kill Dunn. If this man is really a Bucces’ militia, wouldn’t be better for him to use the Earl as a hostage? This is such a pity, we could have use Dunn’s social powers.” Burnley pretended to be dismayed by the events, but his eyes were laughing.

“Not necessarily. There’s no need to stand on any political factions too quickly. The matters between the royal family and the White-mane army are still undecided. But no matter what, whether that man is an assassin or had some other goals in his mind, I think that sword of his has something very wrong with it—” The Golden Apple Lord grabbed his reins and adjusted himself on the horse.

“That Elven Sword?”

Esebar wanted to nod, but suddenly saw his soldiers were splitting apart like they were avoiding a wave. He paused momentarily, then spotted a gargoyle charging at him. His words faltered as he pulled his reins subconsciously. He wanted to turn away, but because he used too much force as he was too tense, the horse actually stood up

in hind legs with a neigh.

“Lord Esebar, be careful!”

As the gargoyle was over twenty levels, its strength was higher than most Iron-ranked fighters, and along with its formidable defense, charging into the midst of the unranked soldiers was akin to a tiger charging into the midst of lambs. With the advent of this giant monster, the soldiers suddenly felt an innate fear taking over their bodies. One of them even yelled panickedly: “Dragon!!!”

Brendel expected the gargoyle to easily crush the soldiers’ weak formations, but he also understood that the situation would not last for long. The soldiers were momentarily confused, but once they recovered the gargoyle would not be able to fight against their number.

If they were well trained, whether the gargoyle could even handle ten soldiers was a question.

He needed to utilize the chaotic scene and prevent them from regaining their formation, and he acted on it quickly.

“Ciel, follow and cover me.”

He rushed forward as he finished speaking. The pathway made by the gargoyle was closing up as the soldiers wanted to block their enemies, but Brendel swung his sword forward, and the wind pressure was like a scythe going through the soldiers, reaping them like wheat.

The soldiers who were behind them fell back in fright as they abandoned all notions to continue fighting, creating a greater pathway than the gargoyle did. If Makavu was still around they might be able to form up, but their leader was now gone.

Brendel and Ciel quickly passed through the Long Spear Forest. If there were any stragglers who wanted to follow them, Ciel shot them down with magic arrows. He still had two bottles of mana potion, and the magic arrow spell was a cheap and effective magic.

Brendel raised his heads and faintly saw a group of nobles on top of the hill nearby. He saw Lord Burnley and issued another command.

“That fat bastard, ary — (Take) –!”

Before he finished issuing the command, he suddenly found a group of riders coming from the left flank. These riders wore deep blue garments with a pointed hat, donned silver armor with shoulder guards, along with a white tussle behind them. These were the light calvary of the White-Mane army.

The two groups realized that the ‘Tiger’ Luc Beson had arrived.

“Bacchus, Taron, take down that Madara spy!” Even the midst of the noisy army, Luc Beson’s calm voice still resounded clearly, sending a chill to everyone present.

Two tall riders came from the left and right at Brendel after Luc Beson finished speaking.

“Very good.” Brendel scoffed coldly in his heart and activated his ‘Charge’ skill, dashing past them in an instant. Bacchus and Taron stopped for a moment, and when they realized what happened and turned behind them, the young man had gone past them ten over meters.

Not only them, the majority of the White-Mane army were also stunned. The two men were squadron leaders and were low Iron-ranked fighters, and Brendel pulled away so easily?

Luc Beson’s eyebrows went up.

[Charge skill? This young man is also related to the Sun knights?]

He immediately raised his right hand: “Odin, Kline, stop him!”

Two riders advanced together. The squadron leaders were especially proficient in their riding skills, and even though they started off late, they immediately caught up with Brendel.

But before the soldiers could cheer for their leaders, Odin and Kline were already thrown off their horses. Everyone’s eyes went wide open.

The ones who had quicker eyes saw the event unfold clearly: The young man did not stop, exchanged a single blow with each of them, destroyed both their swords, and they were thrown backwards like they were knocked by a dragon.

“Power Break!” A person’s cry immediately made many people realize what happened.

Brendel did not hear or say anything as his attention was on Burnley. The gargoyle had already grabbed him. This was the key to escaping this dead end.

[Victory is at hand, right?]

Chapter 55

Sword, light

Along with a fearsome cry, the gargoyle swoop down from the sky and its hook-like claws latched onto Burnley's shoulders, then raised the ball-like figure into the sky. The businessman reacted subconsciously and tried to wiggle out of the gargolye's grasp, but realized he was in mid air and paled instantly and stopped moving.

Everyone raised their heads up. Even though they knew they might do the same thing as Burnley, they secretly despised him for his cowardice.

Brendel raised his hand up and yelled amidst the army without looking back: "Uom (come back)!"

When he finally looked behind him, the soldiers before him took a step back under his gaze. However, once they did so, they revealed that Ciel was surrounded by hundreds of spears.

"Don't attack me, I surrender!" The young wizard raised his hands up to show that he did not intend to resist.

[I say, can you be any more spineless?]

Brendel sighed once and shook his head. But Ciel did not seem to see his actions and blinked at him repeatedly, saying: 'Everything is up to you my lord, I already did my best.'

Brendel wanted to pull his hair out.

The White-Mane riders marched up and circled behind Brendel's back, as if they wanted to take control of the situation from the nobles.

The Golden Apple Lord from afar started cursing, but there a number of factors that prevented him from controlling the enemy before him. Makavu was dead, Burnley was dangling in the air, Granzon was still in the fortress. There was no one beside him that was of use.

He could only ride forth alone. The truth he was enduring the cold perspiration in his back. He was almost certain that the gargoyle was coming from him.

[But why did he capture Burnley?]

The Golden Apple Lord gestured and brought forth a few nobles along with him, riding towards the center of the army that surrounded Brendel. He stopped in front of Luc Beson. The two parties had nothing much to say as the tension between the nobles and regional army leader of Grinoires was too much for civility.

The 'Tiger' Luc Beson stood tall like a spear on the horse's back. He smirked as he looked at Esebar and the nobles behind him. He might be in the White-Mane army, but his heart was in the monarch's faction which sought to regain its power. The two parties looked down on each other, so he naturally did not want to waste any time on them.

He was more interested in Brendel and peered at him. The young man managed to create chaos in front of a big army, and managed to either escape or defeat his squadron leaders in the blink of an eye. But he was surprised to find Brendel's gaze was on him.

[Does he know me?]

Luc Beson frowned but quickly composed himself.

"Young man, I'll give you a chance to put the pitiful fellow, Lord Burnley, down to the ground. As you can see, your ally is in our hands." Luc Beson took over the entire situation once he spoke.

Brendel confirmed that he was Luc Beson after hearing his voice. He had heard of his voice during missions in Fortress Riedon before the first Black Rose War.

[The Tiger, Luc Beson. An upper silver-ranked swordsman, one of the stronger fighters in the entire Aouine region.]

Brendel did not dare to underestimate a formidable foe like him. His thoughts moved quickly. He glanced at Luc Beson and Esebar, knowing that his only chance at survival was on these two people.

This standoff between these two men was not by coincidence.

This rivalry between the nobles and the regional army was due to Aouine's unique political rule. As the country came from the splintered Kirrlutz, its rules were derived from the Black Bible. Due to the long history of the lords fighting one another, the fourth ruler of Aouine, Einz the first created the rule of having a regional army governing their own location.

The lords started to create their own 'country' like a principality. Within this 'countries' the lords enjoyed complete administrative power and their own laws. However, the king imposed a tax on all the mines, foresting lands and farms, while the nobles were free to impose a second tax. The nobles were also unable to hold their own private armies, and the defense was left to royalty or the regional army.

With this dual system of separating the army and administration, the royal family controlled all the states and created a strong kingdom. However, no matter how glorious Aouine was, there was going to be ambitious offenders that would plague the kingdom. When the royal family's authority waned, the opposers gradually appeared.

The first appearance of internal strife came around the rule of the 'Pious Disciple', King Edelweiss, sixty years ago. It was also when he was succeeded by King Corvado. Duch Arreck, who also had the same succession rights, was spiteful over this event, and when King Edelweiss passed away, the regional armies gradually started to support different factions.

When the royal family found that they were unable to control the huge armies, the authority in the capital started waning: And ever since the 'Year of the Empty Beast', the tax official was unable to gain access to a third of the lands. It was evident that the royal family's authority had been reduced to be a miserable state.

Duch Arreck had forced King Oberg the sixth to change a new set of defense laws, and they only controlled the minor kingdom's armies. Cifahd's black bladed army and Ampere Seale's eleventh voluntary calvary.

Under such circumstances, the royal family's hold over many areas were becoming weaker. However, the contest for power was becoming more intense between the nobles and the regional armies. In the Grinoires region, the earl and the archduke's enmity was well known as a source of entertainment in pubs.

And in Fortress Riedon, this conflict was present in the nobles and Luc Beson. They held the same attitude in abandoning Buccce, but Luc Beson was in a disadvantage as

he was weaker in political maneuvering and capability. Someone had to take responsibility for the failure.

But now there was a change when Brendel and his partners came along.

If they were truly Buccé's militia and they were still present for questioning, Esebar's excuses would become a lie, and it was a considerable matter for deceiving the king. Even if the royal family was reduced nothing more than just a name, the ministers in the capital would be able to legitimately use this as an excuse to turn on each other.

[And because of this... I have at least a chance to escape from this unharmed. Even if Esebar wants me dead, he had to seek Luc Beson's approval.]

Brendel felt a little sad. He knew that this would be the outcome but he was unable to explain it clearly to Freya. If she knew that the final conclusion was still to leave it to these warring factions, she probably would not be able to accept it.

[But even if it's sad, it's thanks to your short-sightedness that I can use this excuse.]

After hearing Luc Beson's words, he could not help but display a chilling smile: "That is certainly laughable, my esteemed nobles."

Everyone was stunned from hearing his conflicting tone.

"Laughable?" Luc Beson smiled from his horse as he looked down from the higher ground: "Why do you find it laughable?"

[Your grin is going to be wiped off soon.] Brendel beckoned the gargoyle to come to him, and held his Elven sword from the left hand to his right.

"Ser Luc Beson." He turned his head to him once again. "You want me to let down this fat bastard down?"

He smacked Burnley's face with his hand, recalling the events that happened two hours ago. It was when Earl Dunn took away his sword and raised it to take a close look— *(TL: OH? Gee, that event felt like it happened WEEKS ago. I wonder why.)*

The memories played back smoothly across his mind like a flowing river, calming him. He tilted his head and answered: "I find it laughable that, some people don't even know they are heading to the gallows. Do you really believe you can stay in Fortress

Riedon safely and Madara's army wouldn't invade Aouine's territory?"

"Madara?" Both Luc Beson and the Golden Apple Lord were confused...

"What are you trying to say exactly, you bas—, you fellow." The Golden Apple Lord asked while considering his status that was related to Buga's wizards.

Brendel did not want to waste anymore time, and he took up his sword and place it at Burnley's neck. Before he finished speaking, the Elven sword flared up with brilliant light.

"Lord Burnley's family is well reputed for its wealth and knowledge, can you tell me what history this sword has?" Brendel copied a certain man's tone with a cold sneer.

That fat man suddenly struggled with all his might in the gargoyle's grasp and tried to retreat backwards.

Brendel finally confirmed the suspicion in his heart and ignored him. He rebuked angrily at the two men: "This sword is called 'Thorn of light', a sword that was created admist light. All undead creatures are revealed by this sword's brilliance, but you short-sighted morons only sought to admire it, but forgot what happened when Earl Dunn took it."

"My esteemed nobles, do you really believe this fat pig is your ally? How remarkably laughable, you don't even know Tarkus have planted a spy amongst you—"

Luc Beson and the nobles were tongue-tied as they did not know whether this was true. Even though the White-Mane army's captain already believed Brendel's words, but he wished that it was untrue.

Brendel thrust the sword into Burnley's ball-like figure. The latter shrieked pitifully as his body rapidly shrank, and his appearance changed to that of a ugly and desiccated monster.

"A lich!" Luc Beson recognized this creature in an instant.

Esebar was even more exaggerated as his body sagged as he yelled. "Impossible!"

His response frightened everyone and they cast their eyes on him. Brendel's expression was cold. He finally knew what happened in Fortress Riedon and why it

fell so quickly.

[But history— or the future... cannot be changed now.]

Esebar felt the perspiration on his forehead. The words from the damnable fat bastard appeared like a deadly trap now. In order to capture Brendel, he had took out a third of the Fortress's guards and placed them under Burnley.

And these private troops, were most likely undead creatures by now.

When they still hesitated over this matter, ghastly blue flames could suddenly be seen from Riedon's west and northern areas. Everyone understood what happened by now.

Esebar felt the world was spinning.

“Re-retreat! To the south gate now!”

Chapter 56

Witness

Brendel coldly watched the gathered nobles who argued ceaselessly at one side. The din created by the nobles and the soldiers did not appear to end anytime soon.

The nobles wanted to leave the fortress by the north gate, without any regards for the citizens as they could not care less about them.

[These bastards did not even mention about the citizens even once.]

There was no one amongst the nobles who cared about political fights anymore. Some placed importance on their assets, even to the point where they would rather die than give their wealth up, others stressed that survival was the most important thing.

[Do these nobles think that Madara's undead would care about their status or wealth? These bloody morons are grating my nerves.]

Brendel lowered his head and wiped his sword. He had received 220 XP, one of the highest gain apart from the Golden Demonic Tree boss.

[Looks like that was a mid-ranked lich. It was fortunate that it did not react in time as these things are usually level 30 plus.]

Due to the low strength, the gargoyles were able to trap the lich in its claws, making it unable to move and ultimately allowed Brendel to kill it easily.

The lich was not limited to mere XP. Brendel chopped off its head earlier under everyone's stares and took out a bone material. He then sliced off its four fingers from the right hand, pried open its head and pulled out its teeth one by one.

Everyone watched Brendel's unthinkable actions in silenced horror as if he was a devil. His actions were like an experienced hunter who was processing its prey.

Brendel did not think it was unnatural since he really was processing his prey. The lich was different from regular mobs, as its soul fire had a chance to be molded into a gem,

the four fingers holding on to its staff could be used as a spell regent, while the teeth could be made into paralyzing poison. One could even describe that the lich's body was full of treasure.

Ciel knew a little as to what Brendel was doing, so he stood beside him faithfully. The nobles' soldiers whose loyalty was to money, had scattered due to the low morale, and Luc Beson's soldiers had fallen back to their leader. The young wizard recalled the moment where Brendel tested the sword at Dunn's corpse, and understood that his every action had deep meaning to it, and could not be more impressed in his mind.

As Ciel watched Brendel continue to dismantle the lich, he felt the revered archmagi in Karsuk could not compare against him.

On the other side, Luc Beson had regained his composure after the temporary shock. He was not like the nobles who were eager to escape, and looked at Brendel with interest as he grabbed his horse's reins. In his eyes, Brendel was steady, decisive and flexible, and he was formidable at his age.

[If he's ten years older, his accomplishments would have been remarkable.]

Although he was in the royal faction, the current Aouine made him shake his head. He raised his head and look at the dark sky, wondering what future the country had.

But only the heavens knew Brendel did not plan this ahead, but simply chose the best option for escape. He looked at Ciel who stood beside him, and asked: "Between the White Knight and the Black Warrior, which one do you find it easier to deal with?"

Ciel was momentarily stunned by the sudden question and did not know how to respond.

Brendel shook his head as he watched the squabbling nobles escape to the east. Their former comrades' bodies were simply left behind at the river without anyone caring about them. *(TL: I made a mistake in the previous chapter, Esebar intended to retreat to the East, not north.)*

"The poet Goebbels depicted Karsuk's nobles as brigands, but I think Grinoires is not too far off." Ciel spat out his words in derision.

"This country is at its final moments." Brendel did not care if Luc Beson could hear him as he spoke condescendingly. He did not desire to seek revenge against the people

who were going to face death.

[Retreating to the east side means they will face Tarkus's most infamous general, 'The Dragon Calamity', Lord Tamara.]

"Are you not fleeing?" Luc Beson appeared as if he did not hear Brendel's words as he asked.

Before Brendel had the chance to reply, there were sounds of wings beating in the air. Everyone in the vicinity looked up as they saw two huge bone dragons passing by over their heads, and fear spread throughout them. Hellish purple flames burned between their black bones, and their gigantic tattered wings emitted a dull beating sound as they flew through the air, and the wind that swept through the ground made their hair prick up.

The people on the ground felt like their souls were shrieking from an unending nightmare. In their minds, they saw nothing but bleak hopelessness, and phantom-like bones were suddenly climbing out from the ground with maggots crawling all over them. The ground seemed to turn into a dry, decaying landscape without end.

Brendel punched himself in the arm and recovered from his afflicted status.

[Damn it. The dragons' fear aura hit me pretty hard. Just flying over us affected us this much...]

He checked his surroundings and the war horses were running away because of the fright, or dropped to the ground because of their weakened knees.

Then he saw Luc Beson who also shrugged off the dragons' aura. The latter appeared surprised as he saw Brendel's quick recovery. "Come with me, lad. As you can see, an individual's power is small against such foes."

Brendel looked grimly at him, then shook his head.

[You died in history. I'm not going to be caught in your misfortune here. It has been hard to get to this point, but if I can escape from this dead city, I will have fulfilled half of my plans. And from then on, I can grind my level up and wait for Aouine's final moments.]

Brendel was not about to step into the trap at this point, and decided to tell him the

truth: “I’m breaking through the north as my friends are waiting for me there. If you don’t mind, you can join me.”

Luc Beson stared at him in hesitation, but shook his head at the end. There were huge burning blue flames in the west and northern areas, indicating that the undead army invaded through that direction. Even though he admired him, he did not wish to move to a risky area.

Brendel did not tell him that all the other areas were a dead end other than the north due to the distance. Time was of the essence, and explaining that to him was going to take too long.

He patted Ciel’s arm and said: “If that is the case, then we shall take our leave. If there is a chance in the future, let us meet again.”

Luc Beson did not have much of a difference compared to the nobles, but he was at least capable. He was also one of the rarer person in this era who still thought about this country, so Brendel did not mind if he had survived.

[There’s also the fact that I might be considered as a heretic and sent to be burned by firewood. Luc Beson is not Freya or Romaine, He might be able to see past my bullshit.]

Brendel did not take any unnecessary risk.

.....

The year of the bustling flowers and summer leaves, the second day of the sixth moon.

The peaceful land in Fortress Riedon turn into ashes under the burning flames. The undead rampaged everywhere, causing chaos and destroyed many lives.

The citizens found that prayers could not save them and the nobles they relied on abandoned them. A scar that could never be healed was carved into their hearts and gradually spread everywhere from this battlefield.

[The first step towards Aouine’s demise.]

The news of Fortress Riedon’s fall only reached Fortress Vermeire on the sixth day, while Tarkus’s secondary army was at Anchorite’s doorsteps. The defensive lines to Fortress Vermeire were gone and they held on with much difficulty.

The eleventh day, Vieiro discovered Madara's army and send the news to Corvado, and on the twelve day, Oberg the seven met Madara's messenger in secret.

On the thirteen day, the merchant alliance of Ampere Seale announced they were going to participate in the war.

On the fourteen day, Madara's messenger was formally received.

On the twentieth day, the battles at the frontlines stopped temporarily. Both countries established a team of envoys, and there was a long negotiation period.

But the talks was progressing slowly and Madara's army kept burning the lands everywhere, and Aouine's troops struggled painfully as though they were trapped in quicksand.

Aouine's slow reactions caused immense losses to the nobles but the royal family was happy to see that happen.

The talks continued to progress. On the seventh month and fifth day, the Madara army advanced into Randner, they encountered Ampere Seale's hired mercenary army for the first time.

The history's event of 'Battle at Fortress Frangerd' raised its curtains as Incirsta became famous in this battle. Under the undead gunners' cover, the black knights ripped apart Ampere Seale's flanks again and again, finally defeating them.

Madara managed to advanced greatly after this, reaching even the capital of Randner. Tarkus, Incirsta, Verand, Augusta and Tabhita became known throughout the lands.

On the seventh month sixteen day, Oberg the seven saw the messenger again. Three days later, the talks finally ended and the first 'War of the Black rose' ended.

TL: Names everywhere. Bleah. This is the last chapter of The Amber Sword "Volume 1". The second volume rewinds the events and there would be some sweet battles (at last).



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