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The Amber Sword

– 琥珀之剑 –

- Volume 3 -
Royal Authority and the Rose
(I)

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Fei Yan

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Sadon999

[WolfieTranslation]

SADON

SADON

Chapter 1
Letter (1)

========== Tirste's POV ==========

The afternoon's sunlight poured onto the ground's decaying leaves. The shadows shimmered continuously on them as the top of the trees trembled against the slight breeze.

"The silence here is slightly unusual, my lord." Gail said with a slight frown.

"There is a particular legend circulating amongst the Highland's citizens. The abnormal silence in the forest's certain areas happens because the Goddess of the Lake is watching. 'In these places, be wary and do not turn your head back.' — So they say." Tirste replied. His bony and pale fingers were on his sword's hilt, while his gaze was cast towards a thin path where a vigilant beast was crossing. *(TL: Tirste is a young man from the Unifying Guild who nearly killed Brendel during the auction quite a while back.)*

"You jest, my Lord," Gail felt the hair on the back of his neck rise a little. His eyes wandered all over the surroundings. The shadows seemed to have a pair of eyes hiding in them somewhere: "All manners of Divine Spirits are mere untruths."

"I think not, Gail," came Tirste's reply. "I believe the Divine Spirits are real existences."

Gail's gaze went back to the young Viscount's kind eyes, as though he was trying to find the source of the grisly tales. Tirste was recognized as a Holy Saint in the Unifying Guild. To get to his position, he was gifted with wisdom, talent and was completely loyal to the cause. He was one in ten thousand. Even though he was quite fickle with his personality, no one would believe he utter those words.

"If Divine Spirits exists," Gail asked with uncertainty, "are our actions not blasphemy towards them?"

Tirste glanced at Gail's unsteady footsteps; his expression seemed to mock the young knight's cowardice.

“If there are divine spirits,” he said, “do you think they are always in the right? I don’t.”

Gail fell into silence. He realized the difference between himself and the viscount.

Tirste turned around and observed the nearby lake at the edge of the forest. Knights were approaching the bank on boats. They disembarked before towing them back onto land clumsily.

“Let us continue on our journey.” Tirste snapped his fingers. “Pay attention to your surroundings. We might encounter dark spirits and the likes in this place. Even if they don’t threaten us, they are still troublesome foes.”

He pushed out with his hand to brush his cloak behind him, marching forward. Gail followed him closely. The knights who landed near the shore eventually caught up to both of them.

“My lord, the third, fourth, fifth and seventh squadrons are ahead of us and will join us in the north. However, the other squadrons seemed to have failed to push through the fog shrouding the forest.” The knights’ captain reported to Tirste.

Tirste studied the beautiful forest’s surroundings as he continued to march forward. The ever-changing light that reached his narrow eyes seemed to become soft with a glow.

“That would mean a total of thirty-seven knights have arrived?” He said.

The captain nodded.

“Thirty-seven silver-ranked knights and I included. That should be enough to take care of the ‘Knight of the Lake,’ if the information provided isn’t wrong—”

Gail’s nervous hand was on his blade upon hearing Tirste’s words. Their footsteps shuffled across the soil until he could no longer help but ask a question to relieve his anxiety.

“How big is that particular island, my lord?” He asked.

“Feeling afraid, Gail? The native fishermen have said the Knight of the Lake will not appear outside of the sacred mountains.”

“I apologize, my lord.” Gail relaxed his hand stiffly, taking in a deep breath.

Tirste smiled kindly in response.

When they were finally out of the forest, they discovered the northern squadrons of knights waiting for them. After a short moment of greeting Tirste, they doubled their speed to reach their destination.

A valley of pure white boulders led to tall, rising cliffs. Tirste walked up to the nearby walls and stroked it with his long fingers, savoring the uneven and rough surfaces.

It was the feedback of a certain weight from a venerable history. Many centuries ago, a king had brought along his personal sword and quietly slumbered within the forest ahead.

“A king made his eternal rest here. Do you know who it is?” Tirste said.

“King Erik?” Gail asked.

“No,” Tirste shook his head. “Not him.”

But he did not speak further and merely withdrew his hand, letting it hang limply beside him. After a moment, he continued his footsteps and went deeper into the valley.

The knights traversed the uneven ground behind him, and he led them into a cave and out of it. A verdant forest appeared before their very eyes.

‘The Sleeping Forest,’ the natives had named this place so.

“Is this it?” Tirste asked as he looked at the knights’ captain.

“Yes, my lord. According to the report, the Knight of the Lake is patrolling the area within the forest.”

“Is everyone armed and ready?”

The knights’ hands went to their swords as their replies. Tirste nodded with satisfaction.

“Then follow me into battle.”

“For the Chaos above!” The knights responded.

========== Brendel’s POV ==========

Brendel was sitting in front of a table made from a walnut tree, when he felt the Sage Slate in the bag hanging on his belt vibrating.

[Again?]

He paused momentarily in hesitation, before laying down the goose-feathered pen in his hand, took it out and placed it on the table beside his letter.

The Sage Slate continued to vibrate as though it was alive, but it turned silent after a moment.

“Is there something wrong, my lord?” Amandina asked, blinking in confusion.

She had been standing against an arched window. Her posture was upright and graceful, her long neck accentuated by the sun. Brendel’s eyes went to her and were momentarily distracted by her beauty.

“…Nothing.” He said, his eyes going back to the slab of rock. He prodded it, but there was no response. He pondered for a moment. “It seems to be another low-level resonance, something that’s quite common recently.”

He pulled open the table’s drawer and placed the Sage Slate in it. He dipped the pen into the bottle of ink, and it went back to the letter he was writing earlier. However, the interruption he had gave him trouble to continue writing it. He rubbed his forehead as he felt a headache coming on.

“Are you writing a letter to Miss Freya?” Amandina glanced at the letter on the table.

“Yes. It’s quite a headache. The troubles with Graudin are over, but the real problem starts now.” He raised his head back up at her. “How should we handle Count Randner?”

Amandina’s eyes went back to him, irritated.

“I thought my lord has a solution prepared. Why didn’t you seek my opinion when you marched straight into Graudin’s manor?”

“Are you going to rest easy if I give up on finding a solution?” Brendel gave a short laugh.

She turned her head back sullenly to gaze at the scenery and did not speak anymore.

[There she goes again with the hot and cold attitude.] He dabbed the pen on the paper.

“What exactly did you mean when you spoke with that female mercenary commander?” He asked.

“The words are exactly what they mean.”

“I don’t think so. I understand the complaints in your heart, but you and I both know how straightforward you are. There’s no need to tell an outsider that much.” Brendel shook his head. He took the letter up, crumpled it with both hands and threw into a wastebasket. “That was quite a smart move, Amandina. I’m really fortunate to have a subordinate like you—”

Amandina’s eyes went back to him with a hint of admiration.

“I merely acted on my own when I realized my lord wanted to recruit these mercenaries.” She said.

“So you are not blaming me any longer? I should thank Mother Marsha.” Brendel sighed with relief.

“I never did blame you, but I was a little angry at being left behind.” A faint smile went up before she frowned. “The truth is, I’m afraid that I’m unable to follow your thoughts. If any misunderstanding arises because of my actions, it will become a rift between us and grow increasingly larger.”

[As long as you are willing to work for me, you won’t go wrong very far.] Brendel smiled. He took out another parchment.

“Well, let’s put that aside. Now then, do you have any ideas to handle the Count Randner, Lady Advisor?”

“Somewhat of a plan. My lord has made a dangerous move, and any ordinary means would not be able to resolve the dangers we are going to face. A noble weak in power against someone stronger traditionally deflects the attacks, or borrows influence from another family.

In that aspect, we should try and find someone who’s willing to back us. However, families who have strong traditional values are unfortunately unlikely to lend us their troops.

While we can consider seeking aid from his enemies, our actions have gone against the rules of the nobles’ game. Our name is also weak and unknown to them, and there is probably no one who will accept the risk of going up against Count Randner. We should not expect anything.”

She looked troubled as she pondered on the options. “What remains are illogical choices, but I think they are better than the above. Joining hands with the southern armies, or even Madara—”

“Madara is out of the question. Let’s hear your thoughts on the southern armies.” Brendel waved his hand.

“The reasons why Madara and Count Randner went into an alliance are probably due to one of these few reasons. Count Randner wants to borrow Madara’s hands to eliminate the southern armies, while suppressing the citizens of Randner’s highland territory. My lord, have you noticed that Madara’s undead has not set foot in the Lightning Lake of the Goddess? Their activities have only progressed in busy cities or within the autonomous regions of the Highland’s citizens.

The Southern Armies are cut off from reinforcements, and possibly resent Count Randner greatly for not doing anything. Since they are entrenched in areas of great poverty, their most immediate troubles are the lack of supplies. If we can secure an alliance with them with that reason, putting the war with the Randners aside, we can at least secure our defenses in our backlines.”

“You are referring to Madara as the secondary threat?”

She nodded.

“The plan is a good one.” Brendel was doodling on the parchment subconsciously while his eyes and thoughts were outside the window. “However, the Southern Armies

are deeply cut off with the world after Madara's battles with them. Figuring out if they are still battle-worthy is a problem, and contacting them is another problem."

The pen stopped moving. He sighed deeply.

"We cannot rely on mere luck. Therefore this plan can only be used as a backup. I will send scouts along to investigate the various regions, but before we receive any concrete information, this will remain as a mere plan." He said.

"Are the Silver Elves available to aid us? When it comes to military prowess, they are the strongest troops available—" Amandina said.

"The Silver Elves?" Brendel shifted his body slightly as he allowed one hand to support his chin. "Indeed, the friendship I have with the Silver Citizens is of one of my trump cards that I can use. However, unless we have reached a critical point, I will avoid throwing this card out. Do you have any more ideas?"

Chapter 2
Letter (2)

Amandina was pondering in silence for more solutions before her eyes landed on the pale parchment beneath her lord's pen. It was gradually turning yellow.

The parchment came from a particular tree from the southern Grinoires. Natives called these trees Duval's Gold, prized for the creation of thin parchment and equivalent to the value of gold. The completed papers were mostly sent to Seale Ampere, Seifer, Corvado, as well as other rich regions.

However, the transactional relationship between Aouine and other kingdoms were affected because of the brewing civil war.

"My lord," She suddenly realized something and frowned: "You wish to… But even if the *princess*'s faction is weak, they might not be interested in what we have to offer. In addition to that, the Royal Faction is uninterested in offending Count Randner."

"You get to the crux quickly, Amandina," Brendel folded the paper into the shape of an airplane and sent it flying into the bin, "But what if it's not borrowing strength, but dividing it?"

"Dividing?"

"This letter is indeed written to Gryphine Corvado Ordelis. As you have guessed, I am doing this to gain a brief respite from the unending pressure on us," Brendel said as he got up and passed his pen to Amandina, "Here, write for me."

"A letter to the princess?" Amandina inhaled lightly when she received the pen. She sat down and pressed it against the paper: "What are the contents?"

"I'll leave the format to you, and the contents are these," Brendel snapped his fingers as he went to the arched windows.

"On the seventeen day of the month of Autumn Twilight, this letter is written in the city Firburh of Trentheim, and addressed to Princess Gryphine Corvado Ordelis.

There was a battle on the previous night, and it hailed from the Madara's undead forces, Incirsta the Black Lord.

They had passed through four southern districts unchecked and launched a secret attack on Firburh, resulting in massive loss of lives and the death of Trentheim's Feudal Baron, Graudin Randner.

I am a Pioneer Knight of the kingdom with the rank of baron, who set forth in taking new land for the kingdom, and successfully became the lord of the Valhalla region. With my dual status as a new Baron and a region's lord, your humble servant had the duty to undertake the defense of neighboring Trentheim, especially when I had received Lord Randner's generosity during my journey.

I successfully repelled the undead after fighting through the entire night. However, in order to prevent the undead from invading again, I had temporarily taken up the position as Trentheim's lord to handle the local administration and defenses—"

He paused for a moment.

"Until Your Highness appoints a new lord." He watched Amandina write carefully, her seemingly quick scribbles forming into perfect letters.

"I'm continuing again," he said, "In addition, I have to question Lord Randner's motives. He had reported no news of Incirsta's army in the southern region, and allowed Madara's undead to pass through four regions unchecked. To validate the proof of my words, I have attached a Mana Stone which recorded the battles along with this letter."

Amandina's pen stopped, and she looked up. "A Mana Stone? Where did you get—"

Before she was able to finish her last word, there were a few knocks on the door.

(TL: I had to search through chapters to see the reaction on this letter for some additional information. It turns out Brendel didn't sign his full name. Now, this kind of leaves things in an interesting fashion because I keep wondering about Brendel's surname and whether his Pioneer Knight has some fake name registered on it. I'm going to assume that Brendel did a crazy perfect job about hiding his identity starting from Fortress Riedon, since the nobles didn't seem to get any real information about him.)

"Come in." Brendel said.

The door opened, and the older Wild Elf sister Felaern who came in. She glanced at Amandina before going to Brendel's side.

"My lord." She spoke in her usual flat voice, and placed a white sphere-like rock full of intricate sigils onto a nearby table, "This is the item you requested."

Brendel turned around to look at her. She wore a simple leather armor and dress, with her golden hair braided perfectly behind her head, and appeared tidy and capable like a high-functioning secretary.

"Have you inspected it?" He asked after imagining a pair of glasses on her.

Falearn nodded in response.

[The Mana Stones are not rare but to use them in advance the previous night, means that my lord did not attack Graudin because he was reckless. He had planned everything in advance…]

Amandina snapped out of her thoughts as she saw him take the Mana Stone away.

Mana Stones were artifacts created by wizards a few centuries ago. They discovered records during the Era of the Silver Bloodlines, where it was mentioned a certain type of quartz was capable of recording approximately for a day or two. When the citizens of the Silver Bloodlines placed them into a Magic Formation, they were able to increase the preservation of the recordings to several decades.

"We need to wait and see what Princess Gryphine's response is after she read the letter. Although, I'm sure she will make good use of this opportunity since she's a smart person." He said.

"My lord, you seem to know her very well?" She quickly found the relevant point with her sharpness.

"She left the Corvado's palace admist all that turbulence, possibly with only her knight and a few maids to her territory, then borrowed the Royal Faction's strength to oppose her older brother's power. Is that level of wisdom still insufficient?" Brendel replied smoothly without batting an eyelid, "Don't forget this, Amandina, she's only sixteen this year… And even if she doesn't take to my letter's value, the people around her aren't blind. They have spent their entire lives in politics inside the royal court, and will understand the intentions behind this letter."

He walked over to Amandina and took the letter from the table, smacking it a few times.

“Count Randner is a snake who wavers between the nobles, the Royal Faction and the Prince’s Faction. Everyone would be glad to see someone like us, an unpredictable variable that puts pressure on him. That is why the importance of this letter isn’t whether the contents are real or not, but how realistic it appears to be. With this letter, it’s a chance for the Royal Faction to force Randner into compromising—”

“While it is a good choice to be used as a pawn during moments of weakness,” Amandina frowned upon hearing Brendel’s words and refuted, “Once Count Randner chooses the Royal Faction’s hand, we will be discarded.”

“Things are not so simple,” Brendel shook his head, “Count Randner is a cunning old fox who is careful by nature. He will never allow any sides to control him easily. He’s quite indecisive and easily angered, but when he’s being pressured, he becomes cautious. In any case, the pressure on us will be reduced, and from a long term point of view, as long as we have time to breathe, the situation will change for us. Ultimately, it’s our strength that dictates our fate.”

She glanced at him before looking away. He had described himself as a mere Pioneer Knight, but how would one know these many secrets? He knew not only the nobles’ traditions; he even grasped their personalities well. Even prominent children of high ranking aristocrats might not know as much as he did. Even though puzzles about him kept getting unraveled, she was certain that he must have an incredible story behind him.

Surely everyone following him would think the same.

“Is Count Randner truly going to forget about the fact that we murdered his son?” Falearn asked, a little puzzled.

“A traditional noble like Count Randner woule be more interested in power and position, compared to his offspring.” Amandina answered quietly, “Also, Graudin isn’t Count Randner’s only child. However, since it concerns his family’s honor, he wouldn’t let this go unanswered. Sooner or later, we will face Randner’s armies.”

Brendel nodded to agree with her assessment.

“A pawn needs to establish his worth,” he continued: “we have to let her Highness see

our pressure on Count Randner. If we are unable to fortify our position, no one will be willing to provide the Venture Capital we need."

"Venture Capital?"

"Think of it like a gambler's bet." Brendel explained as he took out another parchment from the drawer, "A great gambler doesn't rely only on luck."

The two women nodded to show they understood.

"One more thing, Amandina, copy the contents of this draft to a new parchment," he said to the confused girl. "This letter is for Leto and the others. I suspect we will fight against Graudin's remaining retainers and Randner's armies quite soon. They are the only force outside of Trentheim, and it's a question whether I can rely on them. As you well know, I hate things that are uncertain, so I want them to give up on their original mission and meet up with me here."

Amandina opened the folded parchment. A hint of surprise flashed in her eyes as she studied the contents. She thought for a moment before she suddenly asked: "The people from the Viridien village, what do you plan to do with them?"

Brendel had thought about them for quite some time. He was certain that they were willing to pledge their loyalty to him, but their lowly status was preventing them from speaking. He did not mind this point, however.

[There are about three hundred of these Lycanthropes, and their natural strength coupled with the terrible environment of the Dark Forest… Without any other considerations, half of them should be at Iron-ranked fighters, and is quite a force to have.]

"Aouine's citizens might not be able to accept the Senia's citizens," he replied after a slow afterthought, "the best solution is for them to return to the Viridien village temporarily. Once I reach that place, it will need a large population—"

"That place?"

"A fantastical place called Valhalla, as mentioned in the letter. You will know it very soon. Ah, yes, about the druids, how did they join up with this battle?"

"The druids are a coincidence. When I spurred the Lycanthropes into action, I didn't

know of their existence. But I'm certain… they were there to find Sifrid."

"Sifrid?" Brendel's eyebrow was raised slightly.

Chapter 3
Letter (3)

The doors to the room were suddenly pushed opened with force.

[Who the hell—]

Brendel was slightly angered by the people who barged in without seeking permission. When he turned around, he found three faces staring back at him.

The person with had unique features. His skin was dark and his angular face was chiseled like a rock. His deep sunken eye sockets with long ashen-white eyebrows which followed the bone structure. His grey hair was braided and tied behind his head and long enough to reach his bear-skin overcoat.

“Please stop, you can’t go in right now—” The mercenary who had tried to stop them from going in was pushed back by one of the strange men. When he finally realized that it was meaningless to stop them because he was already in the room, he turned around and looked at Brendel with an apologetic expression, “My lord, I couldn’t stop—”

Brendel waved his hand once, indicating that it was fine. He then looked at the strangely dressed men again, and immediately recognized them as Druids. They were mostly a unique force that held an agreement with Goddess Nia, staying within forests corrupted by Mana to observe and track the animals during the Month of Goetia.

[Hmm? Isn’t this Andellu, one of the Elder druids of the Waning Groves? The two young followers behind… Nope, no idea. Some branches of Druids are even nice enough to become cordial with the natives and warn them when the monsters were invading during the ‘Waves of Calamity’. But the Waning Groves won’t do something like that. So why would they bother to find me?]

He suddenly spotted Sifrid behind them, just as the mercenary retreated out of the room and closed the door. Silence filled the room momentarily before it was broken by Amandina who made sure the mercenary was out of earshot.

“How dare you barge into this room without permission!” Amandina stood up in anger. She was completely dwarfed by the three gigantic intruders, but she was not in the least bit intimidated.

Andellu’s observed the room with a pair of hawk-like eyes. The room had not received the chance to be redecorated as the battle had just ended in the morning. It still retained the slightly dark red fancy furnishings that Graudin was fond of. However, the thick carpet emitted some form of foul, piercing odor that he was able to detect and caused him to frown.

Brendel scratched his brow in response to Amandina’s outburst and also waved his hand to calm her down.

[Well, these fellows consort with wild beasts day and night. I’m not surprised they ignore customs.]

Sifrid peeked out from one of the druid’s back and smiled shyly at him, and he felt his mood lift up slightly. Her green hair was almost like a waterfall that seemed to burst with life.

“Well then, would you introduce yourselves?” He said with a pleasant voice.

“I am Andellu. The two behind me are Reid and Raim.” The Elder Druid spoke with a stiff accent, and pointed at the younger men behind him respectively as he called out their names.

“This is Amandina and Falaern. So, would you explain yourselves?”

“Lord Viscount, we’re here to bring Sifrid away.”

“What exactly do you mean?” Brendel was not surprised as he suspected they did not aid the Lycanthropes out of kindness, but because of the mysterious little girl. When he cast his gaze at Sifrid, she avoided his eyes and nodded slightly. Brendel’s eyes returned to the Druids. “I’m sure you wouldn’t bother getting my permission to take her away. What exactly are you here for?”

“Lord Viscount,” Reid suddenly cut into the conversation, “we had already sought permission from her father and the Viridien’s Village Elder, but Lady Sifrid insisted on getting yours to let her leave.”

“Is that so?” Brendel pointed his question to Sifrid.

“It’s true, brother Brendel.” Sifrid replied softly, but there was something in her voice that said there was more to it.

“What exactly do you want from me?” He frowned and decided to get right to the point.

“Lady Sifrid has requested us to enter an alliance with you, Lord Viscount.” Andellu’s eyes were just as sharp as when he stared at Brendel. He appeared as if he was studying an oddity of the rotting nobility within Aouine. “That’s because you seemed to be caught up in some form of trouble after rescuing her. We have thought about it and we agreed to do so if you—”

“Hold on,” Brendel’s eyes narrowed and stopped him from continuing. “I have no interest to engage in trafficking people. You lot better start from the beginning and explain everything.”

The room fell into silence, and Amandina and Falaern looked at Brendel in surprise. The three druids looked at each other before Andellu spoke again:

“Very well, Lord Viscount. This has to start from the reason why we left the forest. There has been a prophecy in our forest—”

Brendel raised his eyebrow slightly, but he did not interrupt and listened patiently.

“In the prophecy, it was said that a female baby had succeeded Goddess Nia’s will and would be born in this land… And we believe Sifrid to be the chosen one.”

“Prophecy,” Brendel repeated that word.

The Gods turned themselves into Laws, but they continued to impact the world. When a God’s Will interfered with mortals, they would send a revelation down and be called as prophecy.

[The Druids won’t lie if they bring up Goddess Nia. This is surprising. If Sifrid came up in their prophecy, that means she’s a Chosen. Considering that idiot Graudin’s actions to want her in front of my face— No, that’s not it. It’s the Madara’s undead who wants Sifrid. Iamas wasn’t trying to stop Graudin from negotiating with me; he was trying to hide the information about Sifrid’s identity! That would mean the undead has received their own prophecy, and it explains the relationship between the Randner family and

Madara much better. It's not as simple as making use of each other. And yet… to have both Druids and Madara to have their own prophecies, this isn't something as simple as inheriting Goddess Nia's will.]

"The Dragon of Darkness." He whispered to himself. The divine being that blessed the undead could only be the Dragon of Darkness, and Goddess Nia opposed them. His expression turned serious as he felt the situation had turned into something complicated. He asked the Druids: "How certain are you that Sifrid's the one mentioned in the prophecy?"

"My lord, we have the means to ascertain it," Raim said.

Andellu nodded as well and immediately lowered himself to Sifrid's height and said: "Lady Sifrid, would you please turn around?"

The Druid was almost like a clumsy bear bending at the waist, appearing to be nearly comical, but Sifrid nodded obediently and turned. Her hand pulled back her lush green hair and allowed Brendel to see something like a tattoo on her pale neck.

A leaf-like tattoo the size of a thumb with threads sprouting from the center.

"Nia's Holy Sigil!" He shouted in a low voice. "The Lady of the Forest!"

Reid nodded to Sifrid, and she lowered her hair back and turned around with a blushing face. Andellu's expression turned solemn and looked at Brendel cautiously: "Lord Viscount, you know of Nia's symbol?"

"…I need to correct something. I am not Viscount Gaston, that identity is used to deceive Graudin. My name is Brendel, and I'm a Highland Knight. I believe you have met Ciel, my wizard squire." Brendel paused for a moment, "And from him, I learned quite some things about this land, including the legend about The Lady of the Forest…"

Brendel finished spouting his usual lies with truth intermixed into it. The three druids did not object to his words and even appeared to come to a certain realization. It was a great excuse for him since it was well known for wizards to be learned, but their expressions changed completely when they heard his next line.

"The Lady of the Forest is the key to Valhalla—" He said.

"Did you say Valhalla?" Andellu took a step forward, and his hands nearly grabbed

Brendel's collar, before he suddenly felt an oppressing feeling from the latter. His instinct told him that this normal looking man was a Gold-ranked warrior. "Ser Brendel, did you say Valhalla has something to do with the Lady of the Forest? The Kingdom of Fantasy that only belongs in the legends?"

"You don't know that?" Brendel was at a loss for words.

[The Lady of the Forest is someone chosen by the Goddess Nia and the only person who inherits Valhalla's lineage. The legend itself is closely linked to the Waning Grove, how could they not know of it?]

"Valhalla truly exists, and in fact, it has always existed within this forest. I am quite puzzled as to why you have no idea that legend existed there when you have been living in it for so long." Brendel rubbed his forehead with one finger while he observed Andellu.

The Druids faced each other and began discussing in whispers for a short while before it ended.

"Valhalla has always been a legend in this area, and it's rumored that the Sealed Kingdom is one of Mother Marsha's given land in the earliest days. But there's no one who's capable of verifying such a story, as it existed before the records of history. Rumor has it that Valhalla has a unique 'Fire Seed', and if it's lit up the entire Dark Forest will become a land governed by Laws." Andellu said and swallowed once, "If that happens, the Waning Grove and other branches of the Druids can finally finish their task to guard this land and fulfill our promise to Goddess Nia."

"Then isn't it clear? That's the meaning of your prophecy." Brendel said.

Chapter 4
Letter (4)

“Please wait. Even though the rumors indicate as such,” Reid interrupted, “we have not seen any signs of Valhalla in the forest.”

Andellu suddenly became alarmed. He realized it was a possibility that Brendel might be misleading them and even coaxing information out from them.

“Ser Brendel, let’s go back to our original topic!” He tried to stop the discussion.

But Brendel shook his head.

“You are mistaken about your position. Sifrid told you to seek permission from me to let her leave, and if you’re unable to convince me to do so, don’t even think for a moment that I will allow her to even take one single step out of this land. And you can stop raising your eyebrows, old man. Spare me your nonsense about using your abilities like Merging With Nature or Hide In Nature’s Shadows. You can go ahead and try either technique, but I have my ways to catch you.”

When Andellu heard the Druids’ techniques being called out, he abandoned the idea of taking away Sifrid by force. The masses had a poor understanding of the Druids, but the overbearing youth in front of him was an exception. He did not believe it was an empty threat, so he spoke again after some hesitation.

“Ser Brendel, what exactly do you want? We are of no threat to Lady Sifrid, and I’m sure that you believe in what we have told you. We can swear upon Goddess Nia that we are only here to bring her to our land and have her become a Druid.”

“Have you been listening to anything I have been saying so far? Are you not interested in lighting up Valhalla’s Fire Seed?” Brendel said in exasperation.

The three Druids froze.

“Of course we do. This is one of our goals in the Dark Forest. The Druids believe in Mother Marsha as well, but I have to be blunt, my lord, Valhalla—” Raim was incredibly

polite.

“Valhalla is in the Dark Forest! The rumors are true!” Brendel’s voice was almost in a yell, before he suddenly stopped and glanced at Sifrid, his voice back to normal, “To be more precise, the Lady of the Forest isn’t the key to lighting up the Fire Seed, but the key to using part of Valhalla’s power.”

He walked over to an armchair filled with cushions and sank fully. He showed an amused face and interlocked his fingers: “Let’s make a transaction.”

“What kind of transaction?” Andellu said.

“Help me find Valhalla, and I’ll help you light up the Fire Seed.”

“And you intend to become Valhalla’s lord as a Pioneer Knight?” Andellu finally realized his real intentions. “This suggestion is feasible since we have no desire for power, but I have to repeat myself. Valhalla doesn’t exist in the forest, and it is a mere legend.”

“Fine, believe what you will. If that’s the case, I want you to enter deeper into the forest and help me locate the ruins of a city.”

Reid suddenly whispered to Andellu’s ears: “Elder, didn’t we discover the ruins in the outskirts of the Annulus of Wind?”

The words seemed to jolt Andellu’s memories.

“Are you certain the ruins are the fabled Valhalla? I have witnessed that place for myself in the Annulus of Wind, and it is in complete shambles. Humans have entered the Dark Forest repeatedly in the past, and it’s possible for them to leave something behind like a small city. We have investigated that area carefully, and did not discover anything related to the Fire Seed.”

“That place you mentioned, is it the pathway that faces the seasonal winds and loop around the Karanjar mountains?”

“Yes.”

“You got the right place,” Brendel nodded with certainty, trying hard to resist the excitement within him. The Valhalla he knew was constructed there, and received

sufficient rainfall from the Diesluna Inland Sea during summer and ensuring that the harvest was bountiful. “How long ago did you discover the ruins?”

Andellu was slightly affected by his eagerness, and answered carefully: “That was about three years ago.”

“Can you still remember the direction that place?”

“It’s difficult to say,” Andellu shook his head, “In truth, we discovered that place by accident. We had gone deep into the Karanjar mountains to investigate the biology of the corrupted beasts. If we want to locate that place again, I’m afraid we need to send out a new investigative team again. But we do have the general direction and shouldn’t take too long. Are you interested in going to ascertain that it is Valhalla, Ser Brendel?”

“No, I don’t have the time right now. That’s it for the transaction. Send your men to find the place, and once do, immediately notify me.” Brendel said.

The transaction was solely advantageous to him as he obtained Valhalla, but he knew the Druids ignored power and fame. The only way to have deals with them was to know what they were interested in. Lighting the Valhalla’s Fire Seed was something that the Druids desired immensely.

The Druids agreed as well. In their eyes, Brendel’s transaction was something that was also advantageous for them. However, Amandina immediately spoke up when she saw the discussion ending between the two parties.

“Sifrid’s relatives are now in Firburh. If you take away Sifrid, what is going to happen to them when Counter Randner’s revenge reach this place? Have you thought about it?”

Andellu frowned and glanced at her: “Ser Brendel, our agreement to search for Valhalla still stands. Once I report to the other Elders, you will receive our aid. However, in the matter of lending our strength… We have at least one condition that you must agree on.”

Brendel glanced at Sifrid who nodded.

“Speak freely.” He said.

“Our obligations end at defending your forces in Firburh. We will not provide any aid

other than this." Andellu's eyes saw through the youth's ambitions, but the Druids were unwilling to be tied down to his wars.

He was almost certain that Brendel was going to try and make use of them, but Brendel nodded unexpectedly: "The Druids have always been neutral. I'm satisfied to hear something like this. But I would like to add one more point; the protection extends to Valhalla."

Andellu was momentarily surprised, but he nodded quickly: "Of course."

[Good~ While the Druids are good at perceiving human emotions, their common sense is lacking. The nobles' greed is something they didn't account for in their plans. War cannot be avoided with the Randner situation, but having something a mythical land like Valhalla appearing would definitely attract the nobles' attention. As long as the Druids are tied to Valhalla, they have to enter the war at some point.]

Brendel knew that he had to gain as much power as possible in order to rescue Aouine from a terminal fate. Securing the Druids meant that history had changed in some ways, regardless of how small or big it was going to be.

This was his first major step.

But Brendel suddenly turned to Sifrid.

"…Sifrid, becoming a Druid isn't an easy task. Even though you're chosen by Goddess Nia, your fate is still controlled by your own hands. If you stay here, it's still possible to learn many things." His voice became a little softer at this point: "If you say you don't want to go with them, the deal with them is off."

The two girls looked at him in surprise. The Druids were shocked. They had thought Brendel to be no different from the other nobles, but now they looked at him with a slightly changed outlook.

Sifrid stared at Brendel who was smiling slightly, almost as if he was persuading her not to accept the Druids, but she nodded in the end. "I'm going with them, Brother Brendel."

"Why is that?" Falaern did not know the Druids as well as Brendel, was furious over the fact that a little child was being used as a bargaining tool. "Isn't it fine if you stay here? Why do you need to enter a dangerous place like the Dark Forest?"

“That’s because of sister Amandina.” Sifrid looked at her and replied earnestly.

“Me?” Amandina looked back in confusion.

“Sister Amandina told my father that people had to rely on themselves. Brother Brendel treats me very well, but I can’t accept his help without feeling right. Uncle Andellu said that I would have their powers if I become a Druid.” She took a pause to breathe: “Then I’ll have the ability to protect everyone in the village.”

“Wonderfully said.” Brendel’s smile was like the sun.

Chapter 5
Letter (5)

Brendel got up and walked over to Sifrid. He patted her head.

“Sifrid’s is an understanding kid,” he said to the Elder Druid. “I treat her like she’s my younger sister, so I’m going to entrust her to you as per her wishes. I don’t care whether she becomes a citizen of the forest or not, but I want you to ensure her safety. The Druids are capable of doing at least that?”

“That goes without saying, Ser Brendel.” Andellu nodded.

“Thank you, brother Brendel.” Sifrid’s hands grabbed on to his sleeves as she sniffed a little.

Brendel stroked her head. The little girl was earnest and mature for her age. Brendel did not care much for the Druids’ alliance, but since they were coming on board, he was going to make full use of Valhalla’s connection to enforce the relationship.

“Amandina, please bring Sifrid out to pack the necessary things for the journey.”

“What?” Amandina was called back to reality when she was studying the Druids. She looked at Brendel in confusion, “Me?”

“Yes, even though she’s just a child, she’s still a girl. There are probably things that only girls would know, or perhaps I should let Romaine do it,” he suddenly grinned, “but would your mind be in peace if I allow her to take over?”

Amandina had an image of the merchant girl stuffing marbles into Sifrid’s tiny backpack, with the latter boasting how much they cost when she bought them in Bucce. She sighed:

“But… Isn’t Scarlett a choice as well?”

“She’s not as careful as you?” Brendel tilted his head.

Amandina felt a strange little delight in her heart when she heard that, but his expression seemed to say more. “Is there anything else, my lord?”

“Tell Cornelius and the others to find me.” He said.

Amandina nodded and took Sifrid’s hand. The little girl looked back every few steps until the doors were closed.

“Is there anything else you wish to request, Ser Brendel?” Andellu looked at the youth in front of him. He was certain the latter in front of him was incredibly ambitious, and letting Sifrid leave was a prelude to something more. “We Druids are a straightforward bunch, so there’s no need to beat around the bush.”

“It’s going to take a while, unfortunately. First of all, I’m really busy, so I won’t be able to send you off on your journey… I do know that you’re not interested in having an alliance with me—” He said.

“Lord Brendel.” Reid interrupted, but Brendel put his hand up.

“Let me finish. I understand what your traditions; the Druids towards the Dark Forest and what kind of promise you have with Nia, I know of it. However, I have to warn you, the power that the Chaos hold is incredibly strong.”

The Druids suddenly flinched and readied themselves into a stance.

“You’re a member of the Unifying Guild?” Andellu’s eyes turned cold: “The Platinum Sky Serpent, the Tree Shepherds, or a Baphomet’s disciple?”

“I thought you would put the Tree Shepherds first.”

The Druid Elder scoffed coldly.

“None of the above, and every name you mentioned happens to be my enemies,” Brendel said.

“An enemy of enemies might not necessarily be a friend,” Andellu said with a snarl.

“True. You and I both know this era is about to reach its ending. The Demonic Moon is about to reach its peak— The previous ‘Waves of Calamity’ ended the Era of Chaos, but who would know what’s going to happen this time? But one thing is definite, it’s

impossible for the Druids to suppress the growth of the Dark Forest."

"What of it?"

"I know much more about the Dark Forest than you do—"

Andellu looked at Brendel with an incredulous expression. The Druids have spent generations living in the Dark Forest, and now there was a young man telling them he knew the Dark Forest better than they did. This feeling went beyond exaggeration; it was arrogance.

Brendel merely smiled in response: "It's fine if you don't believe me. Think about it, before the Era of Chaos, the continent was only a fourth of what it is now. Who was it who expanded the borders and turned multiple 'Dark Forests' that were practically everywhere?"

"It's the Druids." Andellu's voice had pride creeping in it.

"To be more precise, it's the Ancient Druids of the World Tree. When the Sky Tower collapsed, the Dragon of Darkness attacked the Druids next and forced them into the Wilderness fraught with monsters. The factions of the World Tree fractured, resulting in the Tree Shepherds and the traditional Druids. Do I need to say more?"

"You are certainly knowledgeable, Ser Brendel."

"No, this is quite similar to us," Brendel sighed on purpose, "When the Sky Tower collapsed, the wizards who studied Ancient Magic and Modern Magic fractured into factions as well. I am certain that the current Druids and Wizards are interested in seeking Ancient Relics. Coincidentally, I know of one Dragon personally, as well as having certain knowledge about the Ancient Druids' teachings."

"You know of Ancient Magic?" Andellu narrowed his eyes. He knew the Dragons were the remaining Golden Lineage in this world, and capable of the Ancient Chord Magic unique to them. While the Ancient Runic Magic from Druids were more mysterious, the fundamentals between the two were similar.

"Auiseaamrs. The Seed of Life, surely you understand what I mean by this word."

The three Druids' expressions immediately changed when they heard the words 'Seed of Life'. The seeds would grow into the Tree of Life, but the Tree Shepherds typically

corrupted and turned them into the Golden Demonic Tree.

The Druids had discovered the Tree of Life was able to purify the Dark Forest, but it was nearly impossible to get the seed without interference from mortals' hands to create them artificially with great odds, even if they found the tree. The only other option was to find one from Ancient Ruins.

[Auiseaamrs sounds like a conversion spell word. Eaam refers to the Great Earth. This sounds like it's part of the Ancient Druids' Magic, 'Words of Nature'. Our legends said the magic is able to purify Mana Corruption in the Dark Forest.]

The Elder Druid searched through his memories. Such Ancient Magic was more than a thousand years ago, and their oldest books only recorded certain tales about it. Finally, Andellu looked at Brendel with a complicated expression as he writhed a little:

"Words of Nature?" He asked.

"Indeed." Brendel nodded.

The word itself was written on the Sage Slates, and almost every gamer more or less knew about it. But knowing of the lore had no effect, because the only way to activate the Ancient Magic was through the Sage Slates' activation. It was also why the 'War of the Wizards' happened in the later part of the game. In other words, it was cool to know the Ancient Words as a trivia, but they were completely worthless without the artifacts.

It was just that the Druids fell for the hook, line, and sinker.

"If you know how to use that magic, then, are you a Druid?" Andellu pressed on.

"Of course not," Brendel answered while he reached for the letters and rolled them up.

"Then what is your purpose for saying that word?" Andellu frowned.

"To put it simply, I'm also interested in the Dark Forest. "In spite of how strong the Laws are, the Chaos' resistances to them are also just as great. Fighting against them alone isn't the perfect solution to them. The Druids are used to solving things with the Laws of Nature, but didn't the Goddess of the Forest give you a new path to quash the monsters?"

“What path is that?”

Brendel took a candle from the table, carefully snipped away the stalk and lit it.

“Borrowing the strength of others. After the Era of Chaos, civilization hardly expanded outwards of the land guarded by Laws, other than the handful of Pioneer Knights. As a result, with the beasts’ corruption from Mana, and the limited land available, the signs of civil wars are increasing every passing day,” he said, pausing for dramatic effect: “But I have a new solution to end this problem, even if it’s just an attempt. Still, I’m quite confident of making it work. Are you interested?”

Andellu took a moment to think before he spoke again: “Please continue, Ser Brendel.”

“In order to stabilize the kingdom and revitalize it, I’ll expand my land—” Brendel said as he dripped the hot wax over a rolled up parchment.

The Druids suddenly took a deep breath as they realized he was hinting at changing the entire politics of the kingdom, and that he was not going to stop there. His ambition was far beyond ruling Trentheim.

He was going to create an empire of his own.

Andellu was immediately uneasy and stared at him with guarded eyes. He spoke in a low voice in order to prevent drawing Brendel’s ire: “Such expansions will bring along blood and wars, and this goes against our beliefs. If you wish to entice into joining you by providing us soldiers from your victory spoils that you gained from other nobles’ lands, I’m afraid you’re gravely mistaken.”

“Wars are unavoidable,” Brendel did the same for the other parchment before he extinguished the candle and took off the Ring of the Wind Empress, “and it’s going to be a last resort to protect myself. You’re mistaken by what I mean by expansion—”

“Y-you mean?” Andellu looked at him in disbelief, realizing the other possibility.

“Yes, expansion towards the Wilderness,” The ring pressed into the hot wax before it was lifted up, “I’ll carve out new territory and gain resources from there.”

Chapter 6
Letter (6)

“But the Wilderness isn’t something easily conquered. No one will acknowledge sending out their men into the unknown, when there are hardly any resources and filled with monstrous beasts and demi-races because of the Mana Corruption.” Andellu said impatiently before he tried again in another approach: “Also, Ser Brendel, do you not have your troubles from the people out for revenge because of the former Lord’s murder? Would you risk all your men to do this?”

“Conquering the Wilderness not as hard as you believe, and profits will always spur people into action,” Brendel said after reflecting for a moment.

[This is the same reason as to why Portugal and Spain ventured out to the sea: For gold and silver. I’m just following what Prince Henry did. The only comparable organization who knows what kind of probable valuables are in the Wilderness, is the Church, and they are unlikely to match what I know.]

“There are examples of great valuables found in the Wilderness, besides the usual gold and silver. These are easy reasons for the citizens of the kingdom to act if someone succeeds in bringing them back. Mortals easily forget themselves when they see a profit, and only a few can see the risk in them. This is especially so when they find their lives improving from the riches, and will never want to go back to the past. You have seen the poverty in this town, haven’t you? You will gain the men you need to quell the monsters, and I get the resources I want.”

“How can you be sure of the profits when these events of getting valuables are clearly rare? Once you failed, the shock from your assumptions would be devastating.”

Brendel was giggling to himself. If Andellu was standing in his shoes to think for him, it would mean that he’s already persuaded.

“Which is why I need you,” Brendel said with a beaming smile: “with your knowledge of the land and my expertise, a thorough plan with a little luck, the chances would be far better. Do you know why the Pioneer Knights in the past failed in getting anything done? That’s because they lack the natives’ and the Lords’ support. Even the entire

kingdom did not spare anything for them."

[There are cases where powerful Lords tried expanding out to the Wilderness, but given the number of political enemies, nobody wants to invest too much into the unknown. Such gambles are usually a single time and never repeated. Since the majority failed in Aouine's history, people are hardly interested in expanding anymore, other than crazy gamblers.]

Brendel had a far better understanding of the Wilderness, and was confident that his investments would always end up in profit.

Andellu folded his arms and thought for a long time about the events leading up to Graudin's removal, and he finally nodded: "Very well, Lord Brendel, you have convinced me. If you're capable of expanding into the Wilderness, what do you want us to do after that?"

"I don't need you to do anything. Rather, you should think about how you can protect what you have earned. You will understand what I mean. I believe you have not truly seen the nobles' greed in this world yet."

"I see. I must say that you're the best speaker I have seen yet." Andellu nodded.

"There is one final thing before you go," Brendel said as he lifted two letters from the table.

"What else do you require?." Andellu said and took a deep breath. In truth, he was a little agitated when he heard the possibility of the conversion of the Dark Forest. If Brendel were able to accomplish that, then he would possibly be able to do the same for the Wilderness, which was even more impressive.

King Erik the Kind was known for the greatest expansion of the Wilderness after the Era of Chaos, creating the Kingdom Aouine, and this youth somehow appeared like he was going to be as famous as he was.

"Help me deliver these two letters to Port Gris to the east of the forest. I have some subordinates there. In particular, send them to the Red Bronze Dragon, Leto. His name is ridiculous enough, so I don't think you will get it wrong." Brendel said.

Andellu received and looked at the letters. Striking words were written on one of the parchment's back: 'To The Red Bronze Dragon, Leto'. The other letter was void of the

addressee's name.

"Is there anything else?"

"No, that's it. The only thing left is to leave it to time and prove things. I have other things to be concerned with, so I won't send you out. I wish you luck in your endeavors."

Andellu nodded: "Then I'll take my leave."

The three Druids bowed deeply and left the room.

Falaern merely sent them off with their eyes and only spoke when they were gone: "My lord, you passed both letters to them?"

Even though she knew Brendel's actions were beyond reproach, she was still worried because the three men were strangers. Not only did he entrust Sifrid to them, he even gave them the letters that could decide their lives.

Brendel was unable to explain that he had actually met Andellu in the game as an NPC over ten years later from the current time period. He had raised the reputation with the Waning Grove to participate in Valhalla's quests. Graudin had been slain as well, and it could be said that Aouine was at its peak after recovering from the civil wars.

"Well, Leto has kept in contact with Freya, so having him deliver the other letter to princess Gryphine would be convenient enough." He chuckled.

Falaern glared at him: "You know I'm not referring to that… My lord."

"I know what you mean, but you have to admit I understand the Druids better than you. Trust in my judgment. Everything they said is the truth. Their respect for the Goddess Nia is much more than you can imagine, and that prophecy is real. I'm certain that Andellu perceives this letter as a test," Brendel thought a moment and explained further: "If you don't look at things from their perspective, it's very hard to understand how much importance they put on this matter."

"But—"

"Look, that itself is just a single plan of mine, I have other moves." Brendel gave up convincing her and lied.

“You do?” Falaern looked at him with suspicion. There were no signs of any other plans. Having Amandina write the letters and then dismissing her without having anything else done, made it impossible to believe he had more plans. She had started to understand what the youth much better after a long time with him.

“Of course,” Brendel peeked at her unimpressed face. He suddenly had a flash of inspiration: “So has the goods been accounted for?”

There was a moment in Falaern’s eyes that showed she looked down at him for changing the topic. But she reached for a book in her bag and said flatly: “We checked the warehouses. There are fifty thousand bushels worth of grains, and we can support the entire city for approximately three to four months. The other goods like raw metal, lumber, stone, and others are much less than what’s recorded on paper, and there’s no way to track down where they went to.”

[Embezzlement is a common thing amongst the nobles. With Graudin’s greed, I should be thankful that he hasn’t turned Firburh into another Dark Forest. The Druids should be glad that he doesn’t know they existed.]

“We need to find a solution to the shortage to stone and lumber. The city isn’t in a safe state, and the damage caused yesterday needs to be fixed and repaired.” He was rubbing his forehead so hard he was causing the skin to go red.

[The game used 2 units of stone and lumber to repair a wall— Then how do you convert that into reality? Amandina probably knows nothing about repairing a wall-]

“Is there anyone amongst the prisoners who know about the city’s conditions or related to maintaining the city?” He said.

“Most of them are mercenaries hired by Graudin. A few of the commanders refused to answer our questions and would rather pay ransom for their freedom.” She replied.

“Fine, we have enough resources to repair the southern gate at the very least, yes?”

Falaern eyed him for a few seconds. He had shown off by cleaving the gate into two, but he was literally shooting himself in the foot. She grumbled internally while she said flatly: “My lord, the short answer is, an unequivocal no.”

“What!”

Chapter 7
Territory (1)

Brendel's mind was working furiously.

"Four sawmills and two rock quarries near Firburh and there are not even enough materials to repair a gate? No, that's not the full extent, there are seven sawmills in Trentheim! Let's see, getting four to work overtime and we should be able to fix and strengthen the walls…"

[A sawmill provides 1 unit of lumber every week, and working overtime increases the unit production by 1 as well. At least, in theory, there should be enough… Shit, but I can't guarantee that's going to be the same here.]

"My lord knows about the resources here?" Falaern asked as she looked up from the book, her voice even.

"Of course I do," Brendel pushed down his questions and replied: "so tell me exactly why the resources cannot be procured."

"Two reasons," the Elven girl pursed her lips, "the first reason: The workers in the sawmill are Graudin's private property, and they are not willing to work for us."

"Why?"

"Because they fear retribution. In their eyes, my lord is one who's destined to lose. After all, your enemy is Count Randner, and you, my lord, is a weak noble who has no support or power."

"That's reasonable," Brendel nodded, "then vacate them without causing any trouble. The natives won't follow us if they don't feel safe. They are as practical as they come, no one will believe promises without proof behind them. That's fine; we can stabilize our forces if we passed this first hurdle. Overturning this problem will be fast."

"I see, then who shall work in the sawmills?"

“Do we not have the Senia’s citizens?”

“I see. But we still can’t use the sawmills.”

“Why?!”

“Because my lord needs to conquer them.”

“What?” Brendel was almost laughing out of his nose when he heard the robot-like answers from the Elven girl, “Are the Sawmill not within our control?”

[I’m sure the nearest sawmill was just a few miles away, did the remnants of Graudin’s army gather outside the city and took over the resources? But I don’t recall these mercenaries to have such discipline.]

“That’s the second reason. I have checked with the citizens. Three out of the four sawmills are occupied by Subterrane Dwellers. The remaining sawmill was abandoned five years ago.”

“Subterrane Dwellers, the lowest demi-races living in the Jurgen Underworld? Aren’t they fighting amongst their own tribes and the Demon Lords at the same time, when did they have the time to come up to the surface?”

“It seems there’s a crack in the Dark Forest that leads the underworld to the surface,” Falaern paused for a moment, “our captain believes that it’s a tribe which escaped from their wars and came to this place.”

“And Graudin did nothing about it?” Brendel tapped the table with his fingers gloomily, “But his fondness for treasure…”

Falaern’s eyes were looking at him in an accusing way, almost as if to tell him that all nobles are incomprehensible, and caused him to flinch unhappily.

[…It’s not that Graudin did nothing, it’s because he couldn’t do anything about it. I led a squadron of mercenaries and killed off his private men with ease. Even though they easily bullied Firburh’s citizens, the Subterrane Dwellers are a force to be reckoned with. They could easily rival the riders or pikemen of the empire Kirrlutz, known for its military strength. They are even a match for Aouine’s core army in the capital. Graudin must have his hands full from defending their attacks, not to mention attacking them.]

Brendel silently cursed their incompetence.

[I'm looking at the world with level 130 eyes. Even though all these wars right now are basically children fighting with each other, a low tier army like the Subterrane Dwellers is causing me trouble… But I should be happy that the second chapter hasn't started yet. Otherwise single 'hero' anti-army units like Tamar and Incirsta are going to start appearing everywhere.]

Brendel pondered on events of the second chapter, 'Separation and War'. The battles in that chapter were many times more intense than how Incirsta fought against Bucce and the nearby cities.

[If I rate the strongest units right now in the various kingdoms, they would be Tier 5. The Dwellers are Tier 1. The mercenaries under me, well, Tier 0? Since Aouine isn't like the military empire Kirrlutz, even a Tier 0 unit is considered to be the main component of a battalion.]

Brendel started pacing throughout the room. Falaern watched him for a few minutes with an expressionless face, but she finally called out to him with a hint of curiosity.

"My lord?" She asked.

"Let's go," Brendel said.

"To where?"

"I want to find someone."

"Who exactly?" Falaern asked, her thoughts a little slow, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Although I feel like I'm being rushed for time." Brendel shook his head while he walked over to the table and retrieved the Sage Slate, placing it back to his bag around his belt.

He then moved to an ornate sword hanging from the wall and removed it entirely. It was one of Graudin's prized object. The bloodthirsty baron was not a brave swordsman, but his desire to boast was obvious.

When the youth drew the blade, he discovered it was an Iron-ranked longsword enhanced with simple magic. He sighed. There was not much of a difference with a

normal longsword because it similarly could not withstand his full strength.

[I miss the Thorn of Light. Ever since I lost that weapon, I can't find anything that suits me. There's no time to get any of the swords I want too.]

The two of them left the room and walked silently in the empty north hallway. Brendel noticed Falaern's creased brows after a while and asked:

"What's wrong?"

"It's just that Kabias's relics are still with me, my lord."

"Right, I forgot all about it. I remembered you wanted to ask me something the previous time?"

Falaern rummaged in her bag around her waist and took something out. Her outstretched palm revealed a four-sided triangular golden brooch, the shape almost like a compass needle. Brendel took the weighty artifact and stared at it.

"So it's this, Kabias really is lucky— I mean, I'm really lucky." He blurted.

Falaern was looking curiously at him and waited for an explanation.

"The Gemstone of Law. It's a wonderful artifact that expands the territory."

"I don't understand."

Brendel withdrew his gaze and looked out to the garden, his head shaking lightly. "I'm not quite sure how to explain it to you. It's a rare artifact, and I don't know how that bastard Kabias got it. This level of cheese— he probably stole from the southern nobles near the borders. Damn, these people must be rich."

[Maybe I should just rob the nobles?]

The Gemstones of Law provided a unique bonus in the game. If it were used in a forest, then it would be 'Quick Growth' (+1 to lumber production), or if was used in a workshop it would be 'Professional' (increase in output). He did not know how to explain it to her.

Falaern frowned when she heard him speak incomprehensible things again. She took

another ring. “My lord, this is also something that Kabias left behind.”

Brendel’s footsteps stopped, causing her to overtake him. He stared at the ring; it was a sword and shield on the ring’s settings.

“The Warrior Ring,” Brendel’s eyes were gleaming as he called out the artifact’s name with great effort, “this is also what Kabias had?”

Falaern nodded and asked curiously: “Is it something important?”

The name sounded like it was something that could be found anywhere in the streets.

“Beyond imagination.” Brendel took in a deep breath. If one were not familiar with the abilities it gave out, they would be misled by the name. It was truly a priceless artifact in the game.

[A Fantasy grade artifact… Open Stats— Indeed, it’s just like the game.]

The description was just as simple as the name sounded.

– The Warrior Ring (Fantasy grade artifact)

– Description: All Warrior Skills +1

Chapter 8
Territory (2)

Brendel rubbed the bronze ring as he carefully studied the ring's settings of the shield and sword. When he finally wore the cool ring to his left hand's forefinger, he closed his eyes and drank in the feeling of the power that rushed into him.

The Ring of the Wind Empress, the Flame Ring, and the Warrior Ring. These rings were respectively worn on his right hand's thumb, forefinger, and his left hand's forefinger and fully occupied the Magic Boundary which formed somewhat into a triangle.

[It's only until the Year of the Holy Griffin that I assembled a set of rings like these.]

Trinkets containing magic in them were incredibly rare, and Brendel spent three years from the start of the game to get them. Even Pay-to-win gamers needed to spend months trying to get them.

[I do have a Brass-ranked Shale Longbow and Tamar's Soul Arrows. Rock Mercenaries' Necklace, Star of Flames, three Ghoul Necklaces, three Defensive Totems, Element Bracelet and a Deer Statue. From the looks of it, I do have a great selection of artifacts gathered, and a moment where the first Madara War had ended recently… Although I still feel like pounding the ground when that unlucky dragon girl ruined my chance of getting a Fantasy-ranked defensive armor…]

He suddenly looked up at her when he realized it was all thanks to her luck.

"What is it, my lord?" She asked.

"Nothing," he said as he brought up the Stats Window and looked at his abilities.

– Power Break

– Level 11(10+1), Master Rank, 3 Stamina, + 15 OZ Strength, +10% OZ Strength

– White Raven Sword Arte

– Level 6 (5+1), Elite Rank

– Frontal Assault (5+1)

– Level 6 (5+1), Elite Rank

Brendel walked out to the center of the garden, drew out his sword and slashed at the sky. But instead of the usual crescent-like wave, a gigantic web of air currents violently formed into a spiral that seemed to drag the world to its center. Metallic petals seemed to appear from nowhere and refracted light as it followed the air currents, piercing through anything that crosses its path. When the burst of wind finally died down, the nearby trees were in shambles and bald.

Leaves fluttered through the slight breeze that still remained, while the two stared at the scene with agape mouths.

[Holy shit, this AOE is huge,] Brendel was cursing from the shock: “I have never heard of such an insane Sword Arte. Did the Aouine court ever have something like this in their teachings?”

“My lord,” Felaern’s eyes glinted once as she adjusted the account book in her arms: “was that the Royal Court’s Sword Arte?”

“It’s a coincidence that I got it,” Brendel said.

He sheathed his weapon and saw a red and white figure dashing over. Scarlett and Medissa were resting in their rooms, but the explosive sound from the wind pressure reached them. They were slightly taken aback at Brendel and Felaern’s figures, glanced at each other once, and spoke at the same time: “What happened my lord!”

“Nothing to be concerned about, I’m just training a little.” He replied.

Scarlett immediately frowned when she saw the trees that were stripped bare. She was fond of the certain tranquil silence found there and felt at peace whenever she walked past it. Her eyes went back to the young man with slight dissatisfaction.

Brendel completely missed her reproachful gaze and said: “Right, Scarlett. Follow me for a walk.”

“Where to?” Her spear relaxed slightly from the surprise.

“We’re going to Firburh’s inner area, before leaving the city.”

“Only us?”

“I probably want Cornelius and the others to come along.”

“What about me,” Medissa bowed slightly and put her hand over her chest as she asked: “should I go along, my lord?”

“I need you to stay in the city,” Brendel shook his head, his eyes going to her “the undead might have fled, but they did not move far away. I need to leave men behind in the city to prevent any sudden attacks. Even though Iamas won’t fight a battle with such odds, but a battlefield can change anytime, and I need to put safeguards. Ciel and you should be enough to hold him off.”

Medissa quietly nodded without any surprise shown, and merely head back. Scarlett walked and passed her by. She had thought of something, but after a moment of hesitation, she chose not to say anything. She lowered her spear and walked over to Brendel: “Where exactly are we going, my lord?”

“The prison,” he said.

The journey took approximately thirty minutes. When he set foot in the prison, it was just as he had imagined. It was a dark, dirty place filled with a foul stench that caused him to frown and wrinkle his nose. Rats larger than cats would sometimes run past the uneven ground tiles when they went past the cells.

[A horrible history in this place. The lore in the game stated that it was constructed about two hundred and forty years ago. The threats from the borders were greater in the past, and this prison was used to torture and jail the ‘barbarians’ from the Dark Forest.]

However, Graudin used this place to imprison the poor citizens who did not pay their taxes, thieves or lowly ranked nobles who offended him. Most of them were falsely accused of a crime, and the remainder of them were directly thrown in without reason. Many had suffered in this place without seeing daylight for years, and given the fact that the kingdom set their laws during a harsh era and hardly changed, the treatment that they received was terrible.

Many died in the prison from illnesses.

After the battle against Graudin, Brendel ordered Amandina to release the citizens who were jailed; most of them were impoverished farmers who could not afford to pay the taxes. Thus, the prison that was used filled to the brim appeared oddly quiet.

Brendel, Scarlett, and Felaern continued to follow the guards in front of them. Footsteps echoed throughout the narrow path, and they would sometimes knock against the chains that hung loosely from the ceiling. Brendel was considerably irritated when he realized that they were there to instill fear to the prisoners.

An old man who was in one of the deepest, isolated cells sat up in alarm and steadied his breathing.

[Someone's coming again— the footsteps sound constant and powerful, moving at an even pace. There was a lot of commotion during yesterday's night. The guards seemed to be replaced with a new batch, and military at that. The people currently approaching here seem even more formidable.]

The old man's name was Bosley. He had spent half his life amongst soldiers and developed an innate sense to detect bloodlust like a wild animal. Keys jangled as they repeatedly tried to open an iron gate leading to his cell's section. Given that he was the only one in it, he was certain they were there to find him.

His heart beat painfully.

The first ray of light came from the corner and poured into this cell. He had not seen any form of light for a long time, and it painfully caused him to tear up, but he did not look away. He could not even recall how long it had been since he was thrown into this godforsaken place, neither remember what the world outside nor the daylight look like.

[There's no reason for Graudin to send his man here… Given the commotion last night, does it mean that bastard was replaced? But every member of the Randner's family are as vile as they come.]

Bosley sneered in his heart.

A few seconds passed, before the warm voice of a young man wormed into his ears.

"Bosley Lipsius, Lord of the Golden City, Royal Faction. I do recall that you were supposed to be dead because of Everton's Rebellion?"

The voice shook Bosley enough for him to stand up. His muscles turned rigid, and his face paled. He gradually got used to the light and realized the person who spoke to him was a young man.

“Who… are you?” The old man’s heart was beating rapidly.

The Royal Faction lost completely in that fateful battle. The highest ranking leader within the Royal Faction, Duke Everton of Highfield, was implicated and imprisoned. Bosley received a secret report of the situation and cast the lies that he died in the battle and he was not an important figure in the Royal Faction.

He moved to the borders and changed his name, awaiting the day for the Royal Faction to rise again. However, he had offended Graudin over a small matter and was sentenced to life imprisonment. He thought he was going to die alone without anyone caring, but someone called out his true identity out from nowhere.

Even Graudin did not know his name.

On the other side, Scarlett and Felaern looked at him in surprise. It seemed like the young lord somehow knew at least one person from every single place they traveled. This time, it was someone who was supposedly dead and well before Brendel was born. Amandina had stated that he was probably a scion of an incredibly powerful family, although they did not put much belief into it.

“Who I am isn’t important to you. I am not from the Royal Faction, Duke Arreck or Randner.” Brendel smiled faintly.

“Then you are from…”

“Consider me as a separate faction, Grandmaster Bosley,” Brendel received a waterskin bag from one of the mercenaries prepared for the old man, and passed it to him, “but you should know that my goal is the same as yours.”

The old man was considerably grateful to Brendel for his actions. He received the waterskin bag and drank from it greedily. When he was done, he wiped his lips with his dirty sleeves before asking his next question: “What does that mean?”

“To restore Aouine.”

“Restoring the kingdom? If that’s the case, why not join the Royal faction and assist

the Corvado royal family?" Bosley lowered the waterskin bag as he studied the youth with considerable suspicion: "Or perhaps, you stand with the Seifers?"

Brendel shook his head, "No, I belong to no faction other than myself. I have my position to consider, and I handle things differently, but these things are not important. I am here to recruit you to my side."

"What can a miserable old man help you with?" The old man chortled.

"Grandmaster Bosley, you're one of the finest blacksmiths in Aouine proficient in crafting armor, are you not?"

"— You want to raise your own private soldiers?" Bosley's eyes darkened.

"Indeed."

Chapter 9
Territory (3)

“But I belong to the Royal Faction,” the old man shook his head and raised the waterskin bag in his hands, “does Lord Trentheim really believe that a small act of kindness will move me?”

“Why not listen to me for a while? Different actions during different situations have another meaning. Stubbornly refusing to change will lead to ruin, just like how Duke Everton did. Surely you have experienced it for yourself by staying in this prison.”

“Then go ahead and try to convince me, young man.” Bosley scoffed.

“Two weeks ago, under Queen Anna, the elder son was announced as heir to the throne. House Seifer, Marquis Kluge and the nobles under his faction support him. Even though you have been imprisoned for years, surely you are familiar with their names?”

“What! What are Lord Oberbeck and the others doing to allow that bastard Kluge to get a hold of one of the royal family’s scion? What of His Majesty?”

Brendel merely gazed back at him without answering.

Bosley pulled back a little, his grey hair shaking a few times, while his wrinkles sank deeper and he looked as defeated as he could possibly be.

“How… How… If this is so… Then our efforts are completely wasted,” he mumbled to himself for a few seconds, but he was someone who experienced all sorts of hardships and he recovered himself. “Lord Oberbeck isn’t a fool to suffer Kluge clowning antics. If that rat succeeded, surely it must be due to another reason?”

Brendel nodded, although he disagreed with Bosley’s assessment.

[Kluge is a core member of the Unifying Guild, he’s definitely not someone useless.]

He began to inform Bosley of the recent events. Because of his insight to Madara’s

actions, Bosley quickly realized the meaning to the war was something different in its nature. *(TL: It is hinted that Kluge persuaded the king to allow Madara's invasion to happen to clean up the nobles straying away from the crown, although no one is certain whether the king actually allowed it to happen on purpose or he's actually dead or influenced? Lots of question marks.)*

"Madara's invasion, you say…"

"Yes."

Bosley's face was drained of all colors.

"Then, it means the Mercury Staff has reappeared? Loptr's Mercury staff?" There was a sudden glint in the old man's cloudy eyes.

Brendel's mouth parted slightly. He did not expect Bosley to know of the staff. The legends of the Mercury Staff was hardly known, and the gamers actually had to do story quests not only in Aouine and other kingdoms to piece the story together.

"You know of the Mercury staff?" Brendel said.

"Of course," Bosley scratched his head, sending specks of dust flying about. He walked a few unsteady steps closer to Brendel: "Not only do I know, I know the origin of it."

"Oh?" Brendel's eyes opened wider with interest. He had not seen or heard anything related to the staff's origin. The legends only depicted Loptr having that staff before it appeared in Madara after countless years of silence. As to what history or whether a child of the Gods possessed it before Loptr, he had no clue at all.

[Interesting, I can't believe I'm gaining lore from such a rural area. I wonder how much this blacksmith knows.]

"The Mercury Staff is not the only divine artifact that appears in the prophecy." Bosley's words nailed Brendel to the ground.

"What?!"

"I had thought it as a mere myth," Bosley's tone was flat, "but the story that you have told me might mean that the myth is turning into truth, then the next divine artifact that appears…"

He paused as he stared at the young man in front of him, his cloudy eyes suddenly clearing up: “The Firestorm Staff.”

“The Firestorm Staff? What’s that?” Brendel’s questions continued to grow.

He was confident in the game knowledge he possessed, but nothing from Bosley’s words reminded him of anything. He had completely no idea what he was talking about, and if a Divine Weapon like that appeared in the game, it was going to be huge. Madara had sealed off the information tightly, but it only took one year for the gamers to discover it.

“Lord Trentheim has heard of the Four Sages’ legend?” Bosley said.

“Naturally,” Brendel nodded, “King of Fire, Gatel, Wind Empress Osorno, The High Priest Enzian, Saint Eireann.”

Bosley’s gaze suddenly seemed to travel back a thousand years, and he spoke as if he was trying to recall an old memory: “That year, the Four Sages, in order to emerge victorious against the Dragon of Darkness, received the permission of the Ancestral Kings—”

He suddenly looked back at Brendel: “This is Kirrlutz’s poem of world creation, under the Poem of Grey, has my lord heard of it?”

“The Four ‘Hidden’ defeated the ‘Emperor’ in the darkness—” Brendel said before his eyes bulged.

Everyone and everything disappeared as if they were swallowed by darkness. When he turned around, he saw a bright moon and a dark tower that extended towards the sky. He felt as though he was standing in an empty land that was endless, making him feel as though he was nothing more than a speck of dust. He shook his head hard, and he was back to reality.

“My lord?” Scarlett whispered to him when she saw a sheen of perspiration on Brendel’s forehead.

Brendel put up his hand to indicate everything was fine. His mind went through possibilities but there was no answer, so he moved on: “Yes, I heard of it, and so?”

The old man studied him for a while before speaking again: “The Four Sages took four

Divine Weapons from the Ancestral Valley, the Firestorm Staff, Dyrnwyn—"

"Wait," Brendel interrupted with a near yell: "Dyrnwyn, isn't that King Gatel's sword?"

He suddenly realized something and took a look at his Ring of the Wind Empress: "The Wind Empress's Hydra Ring, the Holy Staff Oarvolr, and the Divine Spear Gungnir, these are all…"

Bosley nodded.

"…How do you know all this?" Brendel said.

"Does Lord Trentheim think I can trust you with that information?" Bosley answered in a low voice.

Brendel looked a little surprised at his response, and he rubbed his forehead as he nodded: "I understand. But my earlier suggestion to join my cause, Grandmaster Bosley?"

"Before that, I have a question. If you know what the Mercury Staff means, you understand that Aouine is standing on the edge of a cliff. Why are you so confident that you can revive Aouine?"

"I have no confidence," Brendel said without any hesitation, "but is that important? As you well know, the next thing that comes after Madara's war will be the civil wars in Aouine. The fact that Duke Arreck had put his support so quickly into supporting the king's eldest son means that the princess is in grave danger. I have decided to lend my hand to her in times of need if it's necessary. You can even consider me to be in support of the Royal Faction."

"If that's the case, why not join us? Will it not be easier for you and us to gain strength?"

"Like I said before, I have my position to think of and my means of doing things."

"I still don't understand why you keep refusing… Can you tell me your motive for supporting her?"

"My motive…?" Brendel laughed harshly for a long time, before he spoke through clenched teeth, "My motive is this, why have I come to this place if I'm not doing anything?"

Bosley did not understand Brendel's words. Perhaps he would never understand the meaning of the latter's words for his entire life. In the end, he just observed him and spoke slowly: "Then, what can this old man who has half his foot in the grave do for Lord Trentheim? If I can help you to assist the Corvado's royal family, I'll do anything. But surely you're not lacking in armorsmiths if you wish to raise a private army. As far as I know, Firbugh alone has five different workshops to make standard armor. There should not be any problems for you."

Brendel felt a headache coming on when the stubborn old man tried to deflect him again. He did not understand why the corrupted kingdom had so many loyal retainers. He even had to state that he was on the princess's side to get his attention and interest.

"Grandmaster Bosley, standard armor is difficult to get, but I believe only a royal blacksmith like yourself knows how the recipe to create the White Lion's Plate Armor?"

"The White Lion's Plate Armor!" Bosley looked at Brendel with incredulous eyes: "You wish to create a regiment of the royal army?"

Brendel nodded, but suddenly frowned a little.

The Sage Slate in his bag was vibrating again.

Chapter 10
Territory (4)

Tirste looked up. The forest was filled with myriad shades of green. His thirty-seven knights under him were strewn all around him, lying quietly for all eternity amongst the decaying leaves. They were killed quite some time ago.

The sword injuries on the young Viscount were throbbing with pain, and every time he took a breath, he felt needles poking into his lungs, causing him to feel dizzy.

He turned his head to look at the ghastly knight staring back at him in the shadows. He realized that he had most likely fallen into a trap.

[The information came from the Unifying Guild's internal department, and there's the proof of the Oubourous sigil— Unless Megeska is a damned traitor.] *(TL: Megeska is from the Unifying guild and also the commander of the Silver-Winged Cavalry)*

Tirste expelled the air in his lungs with a bloody cough, and he subconsciously searched for the sword that was knocked away from him. But even if he was in peak condition, there was no way he could fight against the opponent before him.

That knight covered in emerald-green armor injured him with the very first strike. His strength was beyond common sense, and what surprised him the most was how it did not even use its Element power.

It defeated him with pure skill.

Tirst was unable to find his sword and he turned to the altar made out of white rocks in front of him. It was constructed on a ground that was void of foliage. The longsword was placed horizontally on the altar's flat surface. Its blade was simple and ordinary, but the hilt's grip handle was intricately made with golden-red sigils. A golden lion's head jutted out from the center from the cross-guard with its mane extended from bone sides.

Three unknown heroic spirits, their runic names written on the blue gem just above the lion's head, blessed the sword, bestowing the king's merciful, braveness, and

impartial nature onto it.

It was just a few steps away from the sword, but the Knight of the Lake stood in his way, making it seem as though there was an endless chasm between him.

Any normal man would run away, but Tirste gave a sneering laugh.

He was gravely injured and knew that he was about to die, so he hardened his heart and crawled to the sword. Blood flowed freely from his thighs and abdomen, revealing the deadly wounds that stopped him from even standing up. Yet he crawled forward with his left hand, while his right hand attempted to staunch the bleeding wound from his heart.

[Even if I die, I'll be closer to my goals than anyone else!]

As Duke Grinoires's illegitimate son, he quickly understood the cold-blooded nature of the world. If there was nothing to rely on, then he would rely on himself. Being weak meant losing everything. He had worked hard to gain the position he had currently. Certainly, he could be seen as having great ambition, and he would defy the world even if it meant giving up his life.

The earlier battle he and his knights had against the Knight of the Lake kept playing in his mind as he crawled towards the sword. He was unable to find that moment where the Knight of the Lake stabbed his heart.

But halfway through his destination to the Lionheart, the Knight of the Lake turned away; its sword was returned back to its sheath, and it walked away without saying anything. It adhered to the oaths of the knights of the old era, and would not attack anyone who had lost their ability to move.

[What's going on?]

Tirst looked at it in confusion, not understanding why it stopped attacking. But he did not let this opportunity slide and put in even more effort to reach the sword. The distance was gradually shortened, and he finally laid his hand on the hilt.

The moment he grabbed the sword, a sudden warmth entered his entire body. He felt energy coursing through him, as though every pore within him was able to sense the world around him. His injuries itched for a moment before they repaired themselves.

He lowered his head to look at the wound on his heart, and discovered it was already gone.

[What!?]

Tirste stared at the Lionheart, but to his surprise, the light on it that had enveloped him was rapidly fading away.

It was turning into stone.

He was startled and nearly threw the sword away, afraid that it was somehow going to turn him into stone as well. However, when he took another closer glimpse, he could not see any signs of magic on it. He carefully felt the blade with his finger tips; it had already turned into rock.

He looked at it in confusion. Based on the strange event earlier, it ought to be the Lionheart sword as it invoked a holy power, but it was now a rock in the shape of an odd-looking sword. There was a strange feeling in his heart; it was as though the sword was rejecting him. The sword was clearly in his hands, but it did not feel like it was here.

He finally glanced at his surroundings again. He and his knights had searched this place carefully, and there did not seem to be anything else in the vicinity. The item in his hands was probably not a fake, but there was no answer to why it had changed. He looked back at the shadows carefully. The Knight of the Lake should be there somewhere, staring at him.

But it still did not appear even after he took a few steps away from the altar.

He sighed with relief and decided to bring the rock back with him.

“This trip is truly a nightmare…” He shook his head hard and ignored the corpses around him, picking up another longsword as he started walking out of the forest.

========== Brendel’s POV ==========

The Sage Slate in Brendel’s hand finally stopped. It was the first time it had resonated this long. Everyone was staring at the artifact until it stopped vibrating before they cast their eyes back at Brendel.

The prison fell into an uneasy silence, with the occasional dripping sound of water from somewhere far away.

“A sealed Sage Slate, Lord Trentheim?” Bosley said.

Even though he was a prisoner, or perhaps Brendel’s temperorary retainer, his attitude did not diminish in the slightest. He was almost expressing himself that he was likely to go back to the Royal Faction anytime, but Brendel did not seem to react to his actions.

It surprised him and made him feel uneasy, almost believing that he would be better off being imprisoned. But the warm fire and promise of fresh air stopped him from thinking.

Brendel glanced at him and appeared as though he had understood his thoughts. He had took on the role of Guild Commander in the game, but he had never gotten his own territory and acted as a lord. Even if he was in the position now, he did not feel like he was one.

Moreover, his attitude seemed to be acknowledged by the people who followed him. Amandina had to agree that his usual easygoing attitude solidified his men as a group better, although the most convincing aspect was how he seemed to have endless confidence in himself. She believed it to be charisma from a unique person.

“You know what this is?” He asked with a curious glance at Bosley.

“Sage Slates— They are described in the Poem of Grey from the Miirna and the witches to be fragments of the Stars. They are able to establish relationship to Fate itself, and in truth many mortals know much about the Sage Slates. Seers use them to find prophecies by having the Sage Slate establishing a resonance with something else. With the hints from the reaction, they are able to foresee the related events in the Sage Slate. The Saint Statue is able to see the future in the same way. As long as you place them on the Saint Statue, you would be able to receive the answer your heart wants—
”

[Indeed, the gamers have validated these rumors themselves. This setting is in the game. But knowing that it’s sealed? Not everyone understands one of the oldest runic words. Perhaps as a blacksmith for the royal family, hearing rumors about it is natural. Understanding them is abnormal… Though I doubt he’s bluffing here.]

“Indeed, this Sage Slate is sealed. Since you understand these things well, can you tell me what the words on this Sage Slate mean?” Brendel asked.

His question was actually forcing the impossible to happen. Even he did not understand what the chicken scribbles meant; though he guessed it had to do something with the Lionheart.

“Let me see…” Bosley received the artifact almost smugly, but his face gradually turned solemn. Very soon, both of his hands were trembling. “The symbols of the kings, the saints…”

He rubbed his eyes and looked at it again, before he took a step back with disbelief and looked up at Brendel, almost like he was testing the waters: “The Lionheart?”

Brendel’s face was even in a state of shock when he heard the name.

Scarlett let out a small yelp. Even though she did not understand what all the fuss was about, as an Aouine’s citizen, she had heard the most famous story about the King Erik the kind, and the Lionheart sword he possessed. She wanted to ask Brendel for confirmation, but he already answered in a hoarse voice:

“How did you know?”

Chapter 11
Territory (5)

Felaern looked suspiciously at the old man, while everyone else was momentarily at a loss for words.

“It’s truly the Lionheart…” Bosley suddenly mumbled and took one step back subconsciously as he looked at Brendel. “…But how is that possible!? I know King Erik had once said that if his descendants forgot the oaths that the kingdom was founded upon, then the Lionheart would be lost as well, but the Royal Faction have gathered to restore the kingdom and find the glory that was lost for decades, so why is the sword tied to your destiny…”

Brendel took back the Sage Slate and gave a slightly surprised sidelong glance. He could hardly imagine the beggar-like appearance of the old man had anything to do with his job as the Royal Family’s head blacksmith. But despite his eccentric mumblings, the latter was able to read the runic words.

“Grandmaster Bosley, is there some secret to the Lionheart?” He said carefully.

Bosley’s hands stopped scratching his head and looked back at the young lord. He knew he was unable to deceive him, but he was still a little conflicted: “Lord Trentheim, my family’s bloodline has sworn to keep this a secret—”

Brendel waved his hand irritably.

“Is it? Or perhaps it’s because your House Tutius has worked for the royal kings ever since King’s Erik rule, and you’re unwilling to think otherwise? King Erik has also said that the Lionheart would return to Aouine, if the oaths are upheld and glory returned to the kingdom. Regardless of who possessed the sword or when it returns, the kingdom’s fate will be tied greatly with it because of King Erik’s oaths. That is why the person who inherits King Erik’s will is qualified to hold the sword—”

He stopped and stared at the old man before him. The meaning in his eyes was clear.

[Yes, you’re with the Royal Faction, but your efforts are not supposed just to allow the

authority of the royal family to stand above the nobles. If you want the glory of the kingdom to return, you must walk the road that King Erik took in the past. Only then will the flames of the Ancestral King ignite the kingdom and bring new life to it—]

He was walking on the same path as the Princess Regent did in the game. She tried to bring Aouine back to its former glory and failed, and this time he was going to do so with his own hands.

He had already walked through the road of darkness in the game; the burning royal palace and cities, the kingdom overturned with its citizens slaughtered and the living suffering under an age of darkness.

Now he was walking through the other road; an unknown, difficult path also dyed with blood and lives, but there was a sliver of hope that lit the path.

Bosley hesitated for a long time as he lowered his head in thought. In the end, he chose to accept the road Brendel offered.

"You're right… Regardless of who possesses the sword, this ancient legend will not be wrong. Is this why you refused to join the Royal Faction? Perhaps we have fallen too far, and the road to Aouine's glory once again require bloodshed and flames, just like how King Erik led his citizens out of Kirrlutz." He nodded.

"Very well, Lord Trentheim. The White Lion's Plate Armor is indeed invented by us. Our House's lineage is unknown to many, but we can be traced back all the way to King Erik's rule. My ancestor was a blacksmith in the army, and also an attendant of King Erik," His voice turned slightly proud, "and generation after generation, my House had also worked for the royal family. After King Erik's rule, his descendants eventually splintered, most notably to the Seifers and Corvados. Eventually, my House turned to Corvado's lineage and supported them till this day."

Brendel nodded. He knew about Aouine's history, and at the very least, Bosley was not lying.

"But there's one secret that our House had kept guarded at all costs. King Erik led suffering citizens from the Great Eagle Empire, Kirrlutz, and formed into Aouine that we know today. My ancestor was one of the five retainers under him." Bosley's voice suddenly turned deeper: "They brought out the Lionheart from Kirrlutz. Many rumors stated that the sword is one of Kirrlutz's four Holy treasures, but most of them, even

the Kirrlutz's citizens, probably don't know that the four treasures were actually derived from one body."

Brendel's eyes widened as he realized something.

"That is?" He pressed on.

"When the four treasures are combined as one, they would make up the Firestorm Staff. The more commonly known name would be Dyrnwyn, King Gatel's Sword of Flames. A Divine Weapon."

Brendel felt his knees go weak and stuttered: "G-grandmaster Bosley, a Sage Slate and the Lionheart's resonance, is it likely to cause a Divine Resonance?"

"Impossible." Bosley shook his head, "Even though the Lionheart is indeed a magic sword, it's not a Divine Weapon. The difference between the two cannot be compared."

"T-then, how about another possibility? The Lionheart has accumulated power from King Erik's oaths and turned into a Divine Sword after centuries?"

"My lord, what are you talking about? I know that you're young and hold a lot of fantasies in your mind, but you should refrain from overworking your imagination. If you see a Divine Weapon first-hand, you will realize that how silly your thoughts are; these weapons can only be made by the Gods." Bosley nodded with confidence before he suddenly realized he might have insulted the youth.

This made him remember the events on how he offended Graudin, and he quickly lowered his head to show his obeisance, with his heart was full of regret. But Brendel did not care about that, as he felt like his vision was blacking out.

[Holy f—… I was wondering why I had a Divine Resonance with the Lionheart, and what I did to get such a good karmic event… But to think my Divine Resonance was with Dyrnwyn!? A sword used against the boss of bosses, the Dragon of Darkness! Damn, no one in the game managed to get the Lionheart, and that's why there's no news on this Divine Weapon. Where and what exactly did I do to tie the weapon to me? Just because I said some oath from King Erik? Surely there are countless gamers who did that in the game!]

Brendel rubbed his forehead violently before he shook his head.

“Well, the topic ends here, Grandmaster Bosley. I don’t want any rumors leaking out,” he turned to the guards behind him before going back to Bosley, “and I think you wouldn’t want anyone else to know that the Lionheart has chosen me, right?”

Bosley looked at him in confusion. The Lionheart was a symbol of Aouine’s legitimacy. Because of King Erik’s oaths, Brendel could proclaim himself as the legitimate king. When the Corvado royal family took over the kingdom, they had also declared themselves as legitimate rulers by stating they had the sword, but no one knew that it was already missing. If the truth leaked out, it would definitely affect the standings of the royal family. The fact that the youth wanted to quash this point made it incomprehensible to him.

[Perhaps he truly wants to support the princess?]

Even though he still did not fully believe in him, he nodded in the end as he did not want the reputation of the Royal Family to be hurt. Regardless of whether the weapon ended in Brendel’s hands or how legitimate he was in proclaiming king, he would never swear loyalty to him. He had dedicated his life to the Corvado’s family and spent years in the Royal Faction battling against the opposition. Even if he failed in the political battle, he was without regrets. The only hope he had was Brendel not reneging on his words and helped out the princess.

If the crown prince had the support of the Seifers, then the princess would be the only legitimate representation of the Corvados. *(TL: The crown prince’s mother is from the Seifer’s family.)*

“My lord, I’m willing to create the White Lion’s Armor Plate for you, but I don’t think it’s enough. Even though it’s the core aspect to create the royal army’s infantry, the training for the infantry…”

Brendel’s face was turned slightly away from the torches, so part of his face was hidden under the darkness. He was smiling.

“The White Lion’s swordsmen, made famous by battling against Kirrlutz in Valhalla a few centuries back. They were famous for having amazing speed and defense. And the secret to the armor… It’s because it borrowed the designs from the Half-plate of the Wind Empress. Although the combat tactics for them are complicated, that doesn’t mean they cannot be replaced—” Brendel said.

“Y-you know how to employ the White Lion’s combat tactics?” Bosley was looking at him with his mouth half-opened from Brendel’s insinuations.

“What’s the fuss about knowing the tactics that are unpopular? Also, when King Erik fled from Kirrlutz, there was the support of the Elven Kingdom Osor. Did you truly believe that he was capable of fighting Kirrlutz to a draw? If King Erik wanted to splinter off the Holy Cathedral of Flames as well, it might even turn out to be an even bigger war, and bring the First Holy Crusade forward by a few centuries.” Brendel laughed: “The Elven Queen wasn’t too generous though, regardless on both of the White Lion’s Plate Armor or Combat Tactics, they are too weak in comparison to the original. If the original is a Tier 3, then the modified version would be Tier 1… two grades lower.”

Bosley had heard about these things when he learned the trade from his family as well, but listening to the youth brought about a new sensation: “My lord… Y-you mean?”

“The original version of the White Lion’s infantry came from the White-winged knights from the Wind Elves. It’s an inferior version.” Brendel giggled: “Even though the White Lion’s Combat Tactics are one the biggest secret’s in Aouine’s royal palace, it’s not even worth mentioning to me. I’ll give you a surprise if you’re able to make a batch of the White Lion’s Armor Plate, Grandmaster Bosley.” Brendel patted Bosley’s shoulders.

Even though he said that the White Lion’s plate armor was inferior, it was nearly impossible for him to find anyone else who could make them in the southern region. It was Aouine’s kingdom secret after all.

“Surprise?” Bosley did not understand how Brendel was trying to make motivate him, and only replied with suspicion.

“Of course.”

“I see,” he answered with a frown, “then, my lord, you know that the White Lion’s Plate armor is a type of Magic Armor?”

“You are referring to the special materials required to make one?”

“Yes.”

“Then what do you need?”

“As far as I know, Trentheim lacks a crystal mine that’s pure in mana content?”

Chapter 12
Territory (6)

Brendel and his men left the jail after Bosley briefly told him about the materials he needed. The old man was led away to wash himself before having a proper meal.

"At the final step to create the White Lion's Plate armor, the Sigil of Wind is enchanted on the joints and torso, raising agility and reducing the weight of the armor. We will either use the purple Moon Quartz, or orange Mana Calcite. These two crystals contain very pure Mana and are used by witches and seers. Grinoires, Arreck, Viero, and Randner's are the current suppliers for them. They are found in caverns eroded by water in hilly areas, but Trentheim doesn't have any locations that fit these conditions."

Brendel recalled Bosley's words as he rode through Firburh's streets. This was the first time he was thinking about the population of the cities. Felaern was also riding beside him and informed him about the information on Trentheim

"Graudin directly held these four areas— The city Firburh, mining town Schafflund, Port Gris and Gareth's Crossing. These are where most of the population is centered in, approximately eighty-thousand in total. Firburh and the nearby vicinity have about thirty-thousand. If we include the villages, we would have a hundred thousand.

Trentheim's entire population is approximately three hundred thousand, and the peerage holding the other lands is about a hundred and seventy.

There are two retainers who are loyal to Graudin, Lord Macsen and Lord Palas. The latter, nicknamed the Tolerant Knight, is someone who's knighted because of his skill in the sword, and is a Silver-ranked swordsman. He's also the only person who has Trentheim's best army, comparable to the capital's." Felaern said.

"Palas is given that name because he's being compared to a tyrant like Graudin. He's actually a strict and conservative knight, and the reason why he's trusted by Graudin is his loyalty towards the bastard," Brendel said, thinking about his first goal was to make the retainers under Graudin fear him, "That would mean we're going to face these two armies next. If we're able to defeat them convincingly, we will be to make

Count Randner who's hiding behind the scene even more cautious."

Brendel suddenly stopped his horse. They were at a clear area that was high enough to oversee the distant northern wilderness that led to high cliffs. The farms near the city were enjoying the rays of the sun, and he could see the golden sheen coming from the ripe wheat. It was nearly time for harvest, and the temperature was dropping quickly.

The nobles in the north were preparing for war and hoped to attack before winter set in. If they were delayed, the war would drag to next spring, and neither the queen nor Kluge want that result. This was because the Dragonlion Fleet in the Aniras region presented itself as a significant threat by accessing the sea, and could easily overturn the situation.

Seifer's Black Mercenaries had entered Ampere Seale to convince the various conglomerates to let them pass. The queen's best speaker was there, and if he succeeded, then tens of thousands of Seifer's heavy infantry would sail through the seas and reach Vaadra's borders directly.

Trentheim's situation was also just as tense because of Brendel's appearance. The scent of battles seemed to spread through the air, bringing along a sliver of bloodlust.

"Have your scouts set out to Fort Minst?" Brendel asked.

"Yes. They will send word if Lord Macsen sets off with his army." Felaern replied.

[Today's the 17th. Lord Macsen should be receiving Graudin's remnant mercenaries' words by now. Fort Minst is only a day's journey from Firburh. I'm sure he has sent out his first batch of knights to gather his soldiers, possibly going to get around two or three thousand men. Considering only twenty percent is Iron-ranked and higher… No, the odds are still against the approximate thousand mercenaries that I have. If possible, I want the battle to take place in the northern hills… The control I have on Firburh's information is something I should think about as well.]

But Brendel's real headache came from the possible steps that Count Randner was possibly going to take. Lord Macsen was nothing more than a distraction. Within a month, he had to repair his walls, tidy up the finances and build the trust he had with the mercenaries. They were currently in the same boat he was in, but if he was to think about the long-term future, it was impossible for them to stand closely together with

him unless he was worthy of their protection.

[None of the three mercenaries' leader is going to be interested in having a beautiful dream. The upcoming battle that I plan must convince them. Amandina has also said that it's necessary to convince people of my legitimacy as Firburh's lord, and overwhelming victories ahead will make Count Randner slow down his plans. With that, I have the chance to win the citizens over. They want not only a merciful lord, but they also want one who can protect them.]

Brendel turned towards the citizens' houses. Trentheim was near the Diesluna inland sea, so there was ample rain brought from the wind. Most of the citizens had great sloping roofs and pipes that led the rainwater down to the sewers. The red tiles contrasted with the painted green windows. But the citizens who spotted him cast suspicious and guarded looks at him, observing the new illegitimate lord carefully.

Even though Brendel had ordered Amandina to redo the tax plans, abolished most of them and even canceled all debts, many doubted how much weight it was going to carry. It was still a question whether he was able to hold on to his position.

"Let's go to the city gates," Brendel said.

When they reached their destination, they found Amandina and the three mercenaries' leaders waiting for them.

Cornelius bowed deeply upon seeing him. He had seen what the young lord was capable of when he fought next to him. He was worried about Brendel's resistance against Count Randner, or even use him as sacrifices, but the more worried he was, the more respectful he appeared to be.

Jana lightly pursed her lips. Brendel's current image made her feel a little surprised. The warm, friendly, and even a little shy smile he had was the complete opposite of his snarl that was full of bloodlust he showed yesterday.

Raban was the only one who looked on indifferently with a raised chest.

"Know the reason why I looked for you?" Brendel asked.

The three of them shook their heads.

"My lord," Cornelius said, "go ahead and give us your orders. We will be sure to fulfill

them.”

Chapter 13
Territory (7)

When Cornelius lowered his head, Jana shook her head once, leaving her fiery red hair to flutter in the wind and looked at him from the corners out of her eyes with dissatisfaction.

[You're free to bend your knees, but don't bring us into it.]

But even if they were unpleasant to listen to and she wanted to find fault with his words, she had to admit they were Brendel's subordinates and they ought to do what he wanted.

They understood today's conclusion from the actions they made yesterday. The young man in front of them was right, they had already offended the previous lord and the powers behind him, and they would not dare to offend another. The only people they could blame were themselves for acting rashly after Graudin's insults and gave Brendel a chance to spur them into action.

She clicked her tongue lightly in annoyance before her eyes went back to Brendel. She was puzzled when she heard his new tax policies for the city. Vaunte's nobles did not need to have the people's hearts because the power they wielded was ironclad. If Brendel were strong enough to resist Count Randner, the citizens would not dare to resist such a powerful lord, and if he did not, it was pointless for him to administer the policies. Therefore, there was no meaning to his actions.

[Doesn't he understand that he needs more money to set up a proper foothold in this city?]

If he was able to gather more funds, he could at least recruit more private soldiers to his army.

Brendel rubbed his forehead in thought as he looked at Cornelius and the other two commanders: "We're surveying the lands. Bring along around a hundred of your men each."

Felaern blinked her eyes puzzledly. She knew that he was about to fight Graudin's remnants and he needed to win at all costs, but it sounded like he was about to bring the mercenaries to subjugate the sawmills. The Subterrane dwellers lived in the harsh Underworld, and their average warrior was at least an Iron-ranked fighter. Even if he was confident in winning, how was he going to avoid the loss of his men?

Was it so important to regain the sawmills?

"Survey the lands?" Cornelius was confused at the answer.

"There are four sawmills and two quarries near Firburh. Today, our mission is to bring them under our rule." Brendel said.

"My lord," Jana immediately spoke up, "we know of the sawmills, but the Subterrane Dwellers are occupying them. Are you telling us we are supposed to seize them back?"

Brendel merely looked at them without answering.

Cornelius and Jana's expressions turned ugly. They had been here for quite some time and knew of the creatures in the woods. They were especially fond of night battles; their strength was high and their bodies robust. If they fought, they truly did not know how many of their men were going to be killed. Just the night battle yesterday alone, had caused them to pay a considerable price, and this battle seemed like it would be no less difficult.

Also, at this moment, it did not seem like it was a necessary battle when there was going to be the retaliation from the nobles in Trentheim.

They felt like the command was unreasonable.

"…My lord," Cornelius raised his head up after considerable difficulty, "The Subterrane Dwellars… They come from the Underworld, and any of their individuals can match any of my best men. If we are to fight them, we will definitely be at a disadvantage. This… isn't a problem, but my advisor believes that Lord Macsen, a nearby retainer of Graudin, would be gathering his forces and marching on us soon."

His voice softened as he felt that Brendel would know what he was insinuating.

Amandina shook her head: "Certainly, Lord Macsen is Graudin's retainer, but why does he want to attack us?"

The three mercenaries looked at her with questioning eyes, wondering if she somehow fell and hurt her head.

“Isn’t it clear enough, Lady Amandina,” Jana replied, “he’s Graudin’s retainer, and we killed Graudin—”

She paused for a moment and added: “Furthermore, there’s Count Randner behind him, if he doesn’t move, that old bastard would probably pressure him—”

“You’re right. So our true enemy is actually Count Randner, and Lord Macsen is nothing more than a pawn being used to test the waters,” she nodded and said without any expressions: “But do you think that we are capable of fighting against the Count currently?”

The three looked at each other. This matter was something that worried them the most. Amandina did not reveal the contents about the Druids and the princess’s letter, and they had no idea how Brendel was going to handle the situation. It seemed possible that he might hand them over as sacrificial lambs. They glanced at him nervously.

Brendel was quietly musing to himself as he nodded inwardly to Amandina’s answer. She was starting to catch up to his thoughts, and her growth was shockingly fast ever since the battle of Chablis.

If he was going to fight Count Randner, he had to expand big enough in a single month to cause significant damage to both sides if it came down to war. Trentheim was currently a poor and indefensible location, and it seemed like an impossible task.

Valhalla and the Druids were his trump cards, and the Exploding Crystals from Amandina were also a source of strength.

Besides the time needed to acquire them, he needed resources. The most important thing was to restore functionality around his city. Acquiring the sawmills and quarries were necessary to repair the walls, build a workshop to create Exploding Crystals, training grounds for the militia and many other buildings. Once he was done with all these, only then would Romaine be able to execute her financial plans.

He must finish the battles before the autumn harvest so that his territory would be on track to raise a proper army. He could also finally start on the myriad things he needed to do for the political battles ahead. It was a tight schedule.

“Amandina is my advisor, and her words can represent my own.” Brendel said, and Amandina’s expression was slightly moved: “My family can ensure my safety in this war, but you lot are different. I’m not one who abandons my followers, but I have my limits. If I lose in the war, you can imagine what your fates would be. We’re traveling the same ship, but that doesn’t mean it’s going to be choppy waves coming at us all the time; there are opportunities and treasure. Compared to Graudin, I believe I’m a generous lord. As long as you do not disappoint me, I will not disappoint you.” *(TL: In case you don’t get it, it’s a fake family.)*

But the three mercenaries continued to look blankly at him, so he spoke again.

“As for the Subterrane Dwellers… Do you know that the wizards from Karsuk’s Black Tower fought against the Underworld in order to vie for resources? It was a war that lasted for a decade.”

Raban was quick to catch the point: “My lord, you have a strategy?”

“I always do,” Brendel answered, although it was a lie that the wizards fought against the Underworld.

While the three mercenaries set off to gather their men, Brendel ordered Felaern to get someone to find a guide from the slums.

“My lord, what are your plans for gaining money?” Amandina asked after the mercenaries were gone. “If you are not taxing the citizens, I assume you have another source for money?”

Brendel pondered for a moment. He was quite aware as to how territories functioned in the game. Funds came from various places, but the majority came from these: Trading, taxing, and money from mines.

Population and resources were important aspects of development. Trentheim produced silver and processed lumber, but they had quite the lacking number of workshops, If it were not for the silver mine, Graudin would be considered as poor as a beggar amongst most of the nobles.

“How many blacksmiths do we have in the city? How many pieces of armor do they produce in a month?” Brendel turned to Felaern.

“There are less than twenty blacksmiths, and that includes the apprentices. The

production's limit is no more than ten suits of armor, be it chain or leather. Also, their skill in magic and techniques are below the normal standards."

[…This fucking piece of garbage. The entire Trentheim's production line seemed like it has been stagnant since fifty years ago. The whole Firburh, a population of thirty thousand and yet only this number of blacksmiths are employed?]

Brendel cursed Graudin in his mind. He knew that very little of the silver mine's profits actually went into Graudin's hands. Count Randner took the largest portion, while the royal family and the Holy Cathedral of Flames took two more portions.

[When the civil war starts, and my hands are fast enough, I might be able to control the entire mining process for two or three months. It's just that I'm not sure how much it's worth. I never did become a lord in the game, and only the biggest guilds monopolized them and ran them like a company. But at the very least I think I can get at least ten million Tor coins. I know the people around me are questioning my tax policies. But how many coins can I tax in a year? Three hundred thousand? That's small change. I'm already opposing the nobles, and the last thing I want is to have the citizens opposing me too. It's better to gain their hearts and think about the long term.]

"I'll talk about my thoughts in detail when we come back from the excursion, Amandina," he said.

Chapter 14
The battle for the sawmills (1)

The man before Brendel had ragged clothes that were repeatedly repaired with different scraps of cloth. He was found amongst the shacks at the southern Firburh and had previously worked in the sawmills.

The battles within the city had frightened many citizens, and he was uneasy about working for the unfamiliar lord. But the lure of money and his woman's persuasion finally made him agree to join as a guide.

The young lord had promised to give him an entire gold coin. Even if he worked hard for a year, he might not even be able to earn this much money. With this reward, he would be able to send his child to the inner city and allow him to study as an apprentice in one of the workshops, and might even change his family's fate for the better.

"The woods in the south of Firburh is called the Direbear Forest," He said carefully, as Brendel's eyes twitched a little when he thought of the level 65 monsters in the game. "and the name comes about because there are a lot of wild bears in the forest. The four sawmills sit within the forest; three are in the deeper parts and are currently occupied by the creatures, while the fourth was destroyed and abandoned by the workers. Lord Graudin had sent his private armies to try and gain them back, but after two humiliating defeats, the baron never mentioned this matter again."

Brendel nodded. Things were just as he expected.

They had left Firburh for about an hour.

The wilderness gradually showed more trees the further they walked into the south. The expansive forest seemed to veer off to the east like a giant shadow. The guide was at the forefront riding with another mercenary on horseback, continuing to fill Brendel with the history of Graudin's past. Very soon, they entered the forest filled with black and red pine trees, disappearing into the shadows of the forest.

"Hey," a girl's voice suddenly interrupted the guide's explanation: "are the creatures

that strong?"

Brendel's eyebrows raised upwards uncontrollably, while the corners of his lips twitched once. He did not know when Romaine appeared. After they had set off for the city for some time, she was suddenly frolicking about in front of his eyes.

[This girl is supposed to be checking the previous accounting books from the past lords and counting the resources. Who's the idiot who told her that I'm fighting against the Subterrane Dwellers?]

"Of course, my lady," the guide quickly answered in a loud voice: "I heard the city guards speaking about them. They described them as incredibly ugly and monstrous. Though they don't have eyes, they can smell and sense sounds to differentiate their direction. They are swift and powerful, and average humans have no chance against them. Even the former baron's soldiers have to form groups of three to fight a single creature."

Romaine prodded her chin with a white finger, imagining the image of the creature with her mind, before mumbling to herself: "Doesn't that mean, they have a great advantage during the night?"

"Indeed, I believe they do." Amandina looked at Romaine with troubled eyes.

She had trouble telling Brendel she was the one who actually leaked out the information. The sharp merchant girl had innocently asked a few questions before she spotted clues from her mistake and knew about their movements. Even now she did not know whether this [Lord's fiancee] did it on purpose or it was a coincidence. Either answer was a little unacceptable to her.

"Not only do they have the advantage in the night, in this dense forest where visibility is low, their advantages are also much better than us. Unless we send out Iron-ranked scouts, it's unlikely we're going to be able to discover them early," Cornelius said, before turning to Brendel, "my lord, since we have entered the forest, should we send the scouts out?"

Brendel shook his head.

[A normal Subterrane Dweller has 15 OZ of strength, and 10 OZ agility. That's pretty close to a veteran Iron-ranked fighter; any typical mercenary isn't their match.]

“I only brought approximately three hundred mercenaries and left the remainder behind to defend the city. I don’t want to split my forces anymore. Also, just think about it, who is more familiar with the forest, the mercenaries or the Subterrane Dwellers?” He stared into the forest.

Amandina asked in surprise: “Of course it’s the Subterrane Dwellers, but my lord… You mean you are not going to send off scouts…” She had never seen any tactics without scouting in the books, but there was a glint in her eyes as she asked: “Magic?”

“A close enough answer.” Brendel glanced at the ground as he summoned the card in his mind. The Wind Spirit Spiders were climbing out one by one in a line from the ground ahead of them. The mercenaries who saw them jumped up in fright, but a few of them had seen or heard of these things in action during the battle with Madara. Since the mercenaries eventually knew the spiders was controlled by Brendel, they quickly calmed down, but they looked at him with fear and respect.

They were quickly reminded of the Gold-ranked wizard under him. In this era, any nobles who employed these wizards are proof of high nobility. Even Duke Arreck or Duke Karsuk, or dukes with similar clout only had two or three Gold-ranked wizards as their advisors.

But Brendel was a mere scion, and he had not only a Gold-ranked wizard but two additional Gold-ranked fighters, Medissa and Scarlett. Even the lord himself was a Gold-ranked swordsman. The veteran mercenaries who saw Medissa even guessed that she was a Silver Elf, and they had not appeared in this land for centuries. The impact they had when they explained to their younger comrades was huge, especially when there were rumors that he had a strong relationship with the Silver Elves.

The three mercenaries’ commanders felt they were increasingly unable to see where the mysteries around him ended. But it was also the reason why they had the determination to stand together against Count Randner who quite possibly would only the same number of high ranking fighters as Brendel.

Otherwise, they would rather escape into the Dark Forest because that option would have a better chance of survival.

Brendel had heard the rumors as well, but he was certain that it was Amandina and Romaine who spread them. The combination of a careful planner and peculiar thinker made interesting ideas. They even worked well together during the Madara’s siege,

and so he allowed them to continue without checking them.

He quietly brought out the Holy Sword card. The next moment, Magic Circles appeared all over the area and attached themselves to the spiders. The three commanders who saw Brendel's actions immediately paled. The mana released into the area around them was impossible to gauge, and it seemed like it could even defeat a Gold-ranked existence if used appropriately.

They were certain he was a Gold-ranked swordsman, yet it seemed like he was also a Gold-ranked wizard. It was unthinkable.

Brendel waved his hand and set the commands to kill all non-human bipeds, with were several restrictions in play. The Subterrane Dwellers had their outposts nearby, and he needed to remove them. Although it was unnecessary to ensure they were undiscovered all the way, he needed more time to set things up.

The Wind Spirit Spiders began to fly across the area as streaks of light.

The Nightsong Tiger rode closer and asked: "My lord, what exactly is your plan for fighting this battle? If the information is right, there are thousands of these creatures. They outnumber us many times, and every individual has a fighting strength that surpasses our own army's, and to tell the truth, I'm unable to think of a way to fight them."

"Please don't get the jitters before we fight," Scarlett said from behind them, "Captain Nightsong."

"Captain?" The large man suddenly laughed as he turned his head at the girl and Brendel: "It seems like miss Scarlett has thought about it and is ready to join us?"

The young girl nodded without any care and glanced at Brendel as well: "I thought about it and since I have no place to return to—"

"I apologize." The Nightsong Tiger suddenly frowned when he heard her words.

"It's fine. Let us hear our lord's ideas. I'm also curious as to how we should fight this battle. When my former commander led the Grey Wolves Mercenaries, the highest number of enemies we fought against was twice our size, but it was a group of untrained bandits. It differs greatly from our situation now."

“Yup,” Romaine was moving animatedly on her horse, making people wonder if she were going to fall off, “Brendel, a night battle would be to our disadvantage since the creatures have good hearing and smell. I think we should finish the fight against them as soon as possible.”

The three mercenaries’ commanders drew a little closer and raised their attention when they heard the discussion. Brendel smiled when he saw their reactions. He did not choose to reassign their men because they were still unfamiliar and wary with him. If he tried to force or hastily bring up the topic, he might cause misunderstandings, and they would resist his orders. He ultimately chose to let them become impatient and come to him instead.

Cornelius was the first commander to react and shake his head, while he observed Brendel’s reaction: “Even though we have not fought against these creatures, but they are definitely not rabble judging how they disgraced Graudin’s armies twice. My men might be slightly stronger than Graudin’s men by a little, but I’m not ashamed to admit that we’re severely outmatched.”

“Then what should be done?” Romaine blinked her big round eyes and asked curiously.

“I believe my lord wants to remove their outposts,” Amandina watched the final spider disappear before returning her gaze to Brendel, thinking for a while, “to gain enough time for us before they react? My lord, are you thinking of assaulting one of the sawmills with as fast as possible, then lure the remaining creatures to attack us?”

Brendel’s eyes had a hint of praise. It was indeed his idea to change from offense to defense.

“It’s a good plan,” Raban also praised Amandina’s answer, “but is it going to work?”

“The Subterrane Dwellers know where their advantages lie. If they lose in the daytime, then they will attempt to gain it back in the night.” Brendel replied, “They might have the night advantage, but we can make it up with a defense from the sawmill. We are equal in this area. The rest would be on our commanders’ capabilities, morale, and fighting strength.”

He appeared confident, but he thought he was not exactly a genius in his mind. He had a number of strategies that were derived from the efforts of countless gamers, and this plan he was using was when Kirrlutz fought against the Jurgen Underworld.

“But what if they don’t attack us?” Scarlett asked.

“Isn’t that fine?” The Nightsong Tiger laughed: “We will just attack in the day. But our numbers and fighting capabilities are still a problem, my lord.”

Brendel nodded and ordered their guide to skip the abandoned sawmill and instead march directly to the nearest occupied by the Subterrane Dwellers. He looked up at the sun which was slowly setting to the west: “That is a problem, but I do have a solution if they stay behind their defenses.”

Chapter 15
The battle for the sawmills (2)

It had been one hour since Brendel and his men entered the forest.

The bows' strings could be heard through the wind, and very soon the mercenaries cheered loudly as they dragged a few corpses from the bushes.

They were pale yellow creatures with their bodies protruding with large tumors. Their head was like a large bald mass with smooth waxy skin. There was no nose or eyes and seemed to lack them, but under their skin folds hid thousands of sensory organs to smell and listen with, enabling them to fare a hundred times better in the darkness compared to a human. It was expected from a creature from the underworld.

When the mercenaries inspected them, they realized that their arrows had only caused skin-deep damage, while the fatal injury was on each of their chests. It was a large hole that penetrated through their body, with the edges on it burned black. A few mercenaries recognized the injury caused by the 'Dragon Knights'. When Brendel rode over, the mercenaries parted and turned around, looking at him with respect and fear.

Brendel studied the Subterrane Dwellers. Their mouths were open wide like sharks, and the interior was filled with tiny jagged teeth. The blood that leaked out was green in color.

They were different from warm-blooded creatures and were actually a subtype of lizards. He would have preferred coming back during winter to deal with them since their activities would be much smaller, but time was of the essence. Still, the weather was cool enough to affect them. He bade the mercenaries to turn them over, and observed their rigid claws holding onto their long spears.

"They are the lower caste amongst the Subterrane Dwellers." The Nightsong said as he studied the bodies as well: "It seems like they have put their elites in their inner defenses. The deeper we go in, the stronger the resistance will be."

Brendel nodded.

[But it is a good thing. Monsters that progressed from weak to strong like a traditional RPG means it's a natural caste system in the game. If it's segmented like an army where there's a captain leading the outposts, it's a full military organization. Since it's not, we're most likely dealing with a splintered tribe or remnants which are gathered under a strong individual. This is a normal mob zone and not some dungeon elites.]

He was apprehensive to find the situation as a planned invasion from a large tribe or even a full-on invasion from an entire faction. There would be times where the Underworld's citizens would hanker after the surface's resources. Even though the underworld had even richer resources, it was even harsher there.

"We might meet their warriors and elites called 'Camlu'. The latter means 'Warrior' in their language, and are something like a military officer. They are just one step below Silver-ranked fighters and are the strongest fighters amongst the Subterrane Dwellers. However, I'm certain we can take them on without any trouble." He remarked to the three commanders near him.

The mercenaries combed the entire area and brought out over twenty corpses. Brendel calculated his XP he received, and it was a match to the number of creatures killed. They were quickly killed under the attacks from the Dragon Knights. Because the spiders utilized the flow of the wind, they were perfect counters to the Subterrane Dwellers who had to rely on their sense of smell and hearing.

With the surrounding eyes eliminated one by one, Brendel and his men progressed smoothly into the forest. Three hundred mercenaries did their best to move in silently, but a few carelessly trod onto dry sticks and caused a loud snapping sound from time to time. They nervously snapped their heads to their surroundings, but there were only unknown birds that beat their wings as hard as possible.

The wizards who were placed in the center found the situation to be intriguing. They were used to being the first target of ambushes. Anyone would recognize their importance in a battlefield. Their defense capabilities were low, and their high value made them the favorite targets of scouts. They were used to injury and frequently stood between the lines of life and death, all while witnessing their comrades killed in front of them because they defended them.

The only target that exceeded their importance was the commanding officer, but they were less susceptible to ambushes because of their skill.

As the mercenaries continued to walk through the forest without incident and continued to make the Subterrane Dwellers' scouts disappear, they started feeling it was more like an exhibition trip. This could only be the miracle of their lord.

Ever since the denizens of the Silver Bloodline imparted their mysterious techniques to the mortals, the latter had formed a deep impression of respecting the powerful. They started remembering that Brendel and Ciel frequently discuss matters together in the city and whispers started passing around.

Meetings between wizards were an exchange of information and power, and this was gradually called as 'The meeting of the Golden Duo'.

But Brendel was quite different from the elegant image they had in their minds. He was repeatedly grumbling in his mind, as he calculated the amount of EP he had to spend in maintaining the Holy Sword card.

Even though the results from the spiders were impressive, the price to pay was 13 Earth EP for each round of attacks he made. He checked his reserves and discovered his 32 EP had dwindled down to 7 EP.

He frowned and immediately called for the guide to come over to him.

The guide came before him and realized Brendel was a little upset. He thought he had done something wrong to incur his wrath and asked uneasily: "My lord, is there something you need?"

"How long more to our destination?" Brendel asked with a little impatience in his voice.

The spell could only last for another five minutes before he needed to pay the maintenance again. He was going to give up on it and allow the Holy Sword card to return to his deck, planning to use it only when it was necessary, preferably at night or early morning against the retaliation that would happen after the upcoming battle.

The guide was visibly relieved upon hearing the reply: "Very soon, my lord. Once we cross this part of the forest, we would be able to see it. This particular sawmill is constructed in the river to utilize a water powered saw, and—"

His words were suddenly interrupted by a strange bird call. Brendel turned his head in front of him and saw the mercenaries had stopped and laid on the ground. It was a

warning from the furthest mercenaries in front, and they continued to gesture with their hands.

They found the enemies.

He was slightly surprised. He had allowed the spiders to move autonomously, and if there was no reaction or XP coming in, it meant that the Dragon Knights had encountered an obstacle that did not allow them to kill in a single strike, and thus they obeyed his second order to hide.

He dismounted and walked over to the edge of the forest. The three mercenaries' commanders, the Nightsong Tiger, Amandina, Scarlett, and Romaine all dismounted and followed him. There was no cautiousness in the merchant girl's eyes, and were filled with curiosity instead.

The density of the trees was becoming thinner, and Brendel quickly reached the forest's edge.

"My lord!" The mercenary stood at attention and said. He turned his head and saw his commander, Cornelis, nodding to him.

Brendel studied the environment. It was a steep slope leading downwards to the river bank. The sawmill was across the river with a few wooden houses nearby; it considerably large for its size, but it had changed significantly from its original appearance.

The Subterrane Dwellers had turned it into a fortress.

They stacked boulders against the river's direction and erected a tall wooden wall, along with a watchtower. Within the fortress were countless large holes and soil packed into a corner. He counted the holes and estimated approximately two hundred Subterrane Dwellers were living there.

"They have quite the numbers. It's a difficult battle." Jana frowned, glancing at Brendel and worried that he would make the order to force them to attack.

But Brendel did not answer. He studied the patrolling squadrons near the river. Each squadron was led by a Subterrane Dweller with dark-red colored skin. They were Camlu, and launching an attack might cause them to retreat to their fortress and waste their advantage of a sneak attack. He turned to Amandina and the Nightsong Tiger:

“What do you two think?”

“You can use our old method of dealing with them.” The Nightsong Tiger answered.

[Hold it, Nightsong Tiger, relay your method to me through our thoughts. This is also a test for the three commanders I have.]

Brendel gave the slightest nod after the Nightsong Tiger explained in detail. He then cast his eyes on Raban and Scarlett briefly.

Chapter 16
The battle for the sawmills (3)

The Subterrane Dwellers in the sawmill quickly discovered a team of adventurers. They were comprised of a few warriors, two crossbowmen, and one wizard. Regardless of whether it was in Aouine or Kirrlutz, it was a common combination.

When the human team appeared, it was undoubtedly a provocation to the territorial Subterrane Dwellers. A shrill whistle quickly rang out within the fortress. The massive wooden gate was raised noisily with groans, and two groups of the Underworld creatures rushed out, following the river's coastline as their feet stomped through the water before they started wading across.

They divided into two and attempted the surround the adventurers. The crossbowmen fired two shots. One missed, while the other struck one of the Subterrane Dweller's chest, but it did not penetrate through. The impact from the hit caused it take a step back, stirring the water lightly, but that was it. The creature shook its head, raised its spear and continued following its group.

"Their hides are certainly thick," Cornelius who was hiding in the bushes frowned as he saw the results, "the rumors are true. Even a hundred of these creatures is trouble for us, let alone a thousand."

"Their speed is shockingly fast. It's nearly three hundred feet from the river, and yet they only took a few seconds! Surely they are swifter than best riders!" Jana said in alarm.

"Swifter than the fastest riders? That is because you have not seen excellent cavalry, miss Jana." Raban gave a short laugh.

The female commander immediately shut her lips sourly and glared at him.

Brendel nodded to agree with Raban's assessment. The creatures could be compared to a Tier 2 mounted unit and were slightly slower than the best horses. But Vaunte's mounted troops did not exclusively use warhorses. Aouine's strongest flying troops were called 'Cruising Knights', describing how quickly and effortlessly they entered

into the battlefield. They rode flying dragons and were considered elites amongst the flying mounted troops.

“That’s enough.” Cornelius stopped their quarrel, “My lord, there are at least two hundred of these creatures in the sawmill. Which a large number, there is no way our men can handle them.” He shook his head, and his silver hair shimmered against the sunlight that peeked through the dense foliage: “Do you have any solutions?”

His gaze seemed to hold an intentional meaning.

Amandina scoffed lightly at the other side. She had seen through his thoughts. Indeed, if Brendel and Scarlett were relied upon, a frontal assault would not be difficult. Two Gold-ranked versus a hundred Iron-ranked was not much trouble at all. If the mercenaries helped in the process, they would be able to forcefully conquer the sawmill, and it would take at most two hours.

But if he was to follow these sellswords at every step, what authority would he still have? Yet when she looked at Brendel, he was calm and assured, and she knew that he must have a plan in mind.

Thus Amandina spoke in a cold voice: “Books about these creatures state that they have difficulty fighting against a defensive structure. Their effectiveness is also limited in this area because they have difficulty digging the land up as it’s near a river. No matter how fast or how thick their hides are, as long as we can take down the sawmill and turn it into our defense, they would have no chance.”

Raban looked at Brendel in surprise: “They have this weakness? My lord, you knew about this place and chose to attack because of this point?”

Brendel did not give away his thoughts, but he was suppressing the spasms that were on the corners of his lips. That was because he really did not think about it.

It was quite common for sawmills to be near rivers. It was easier to transport by following the currents, and it was quite common to use the water currents to generate power and use it to saw lumber. If it was somewhere in the capital and there were no water-powered saws, they would use Magicite to power the saws.

Even though he heard about the guide’s descriptions about the sawmills, he really had no idea what sort of state the sawmills were in, just like how they did not expect to see them make a fortress out of the sawmill.

“The solution is already taking place,” Brendel nodded, “but we have to see how many of these creatures our baits are capable of drawing out.” The youth looked at his subordinates-in-name, “But everyone can relax. This battle is not as difficult as you think; just treat it as a warm-up battle for your men.”

The mercenaries who overheard his words were taken aback. The numbers required to defeat the two hundred odd dwellers required more than the three hundred mercenaries they had today. No matter how they look at it, it was not a warm-up but a harsh battle.

“Just wait for it, you will see what I have prepared soon.” Brendel’s mind concentrated to prepare for battle. His eyes went back to the river and watched the adventurers retreat at full speed back to the forest. They were quick, but they were soon caught up at the slope to the forest.

The wizard in the team slammed onto the ground and roared a chant. Three large Magic Circles appeared beneath their feet, causing sand and rocks to form together as a small fortress of five meters tall and three meters wide at each side. It was complete with battlements and allowed the crossbowmen to station between them.

A spell to create a building out of nothing.

The mercenaries were surprised. It was close enough to be a Silver-ranked magic spell, although it could not compare to the original legendary spell which created an entire city. Jana and Cornelius had glanced at each other before they noticed Raban was smiling nonchalantly.

“Raban, he’s your man?” Cornelius lowered his voice and asked. Allowing such a wizard of the Third Circle to go to the frontlines to become bait was unthinkable.

The commander of the Firebrand Mercenaries nodded without a care. “Matthew, he’s the best wizard in my mercenaries,” he replied.

“You’re quite the risk taker,” Cornelius confirmed the truth, but he did not feel relaxed but rather, a sense of danger. The middle-aged man who had a full head of silver hair took a long look at Raban, then at the silent Brendel, and felt that his position was shaking.

The night where he fought alongside with the young lord should have left a good impression, but the quiet veteran soldier beside him had forged an understanding

with the youth before he even realized it.

[Damn it. When did they make some kind of arrangement?]

He cast his gaze back at the forest's edge. The middle-aged wizard, Matthew, retreated to the center and stayed behind the crossbowmen and warriors. He put his entire body weight on to the staff and breathed heavily. The spell he cast apparently drained a large amount of stamina and energy.

The effectiveness of the small fortress was evident. The Subterrane Dwellers' front limbs were short and weak, and when they attacked, they relied greatly on their legs. They would leap forward with great force, lunging towards their enemies while they held on to their spears.

They were unable to climb the walls because they were not meant to do so.

The walls were also high enough to cause them to have difficulty in judging the distance to jump over. If they did manage to go over, the warriors quickly rushed forward and overwhelmed them one by one.

Within a single minute, four Subterrane Dwellers were cut down and kicked off from the fortress, causing them to roll a few times off the coastline. The creatures started to retreat as they looked on with confusion.

The two Camlu which were commanding at the back emitted shrill cries to surround the fortress and coordinate the attacks.

"Defending from that position is too difficult…" Jana's eyebrows were knitted together in frustration. The group of mercenaries were skilled and chosen by Brendel to be bait. Each of them was highly skilled Iron-ranked fighters, but against thirty-odd Subterrane Dwellers, they would only last so long. When they get overwhelmed… there would be blood and carnage.

Two rounds of attacks quickly came and went without the creatures having success, but she did not expect the events that followed. The Camlu which forced their subordinates to attack suddenly shrilled loudly and had them retreat a distance while surrounding it.

The mercenaries at the fortress stood at attention. Matthew had caught his breath and was ready to participate in the battle.

“The Subterrane Dwellers are unwilling to pay the price to capture the fortress by force. They will eventually overwhelm them, but they would have a considerable number of casualties. The Underworld is a harsh place. The population and military might are precious commodities and not to be wasted. It’s also why their individual strength is higher than the average human.” Brendel explained to the confused mercenaries.

“I see. But their ability to attack fortified areas is weak. Could it be that these creatures don’t have the experience of destroying fortified buildings, or build their own?” Cornelius asked while he shot a glance at Brendel. As a mercenary who lived their lives in the battlefield, they would often look down on the nobles and scholars who knew nothing of it, yet when they were able to apply unknown knowledge to the battlefield, they could not but feel impressed.

Brendel nearly swallowed wrongly when he heard the question. Underworld races were incredible at building fortified cities. The earliest Underworld fortress was created to prevent the invasion of evil demons. The walls’ thickness and toughness would make most human fortresses like Bruglas appear weak in comparison, which was a given since their craft came from the underground Dwarves.

And in contrast, the walls of a rural city like Firburh were woefully lacking.

“It’s not exactly like that,” he said, “these creatures are usually combined with Earth Spirit Bears to form an army.”

Chapter 17
The battle for the sawmills (4)

"You probably have not seen it before. They look a little like a bear that stands on both its feet at over two meters covered in fur, and hold some form of blood relationship with the surface's Earth Spirits. They are far stronger than their numerous distant relatives. It's almost a subspecies which has powerful physical strength. Their whelps can match a fully grown man." Brendel explained slowly. "These bears wield a flail and large shield on their hands, while the Subterrane Dwellers dig tunnels beneath them to bypass fortified areas, they are quite the troublesome combination— Since they coexist together, there might be Earth Spirit Bears."

The people around Brendel were astonished and cast their gazes back at the Sawmill. The gate was once again raised noisily as another group of Subterrane Dwellers walked out. There were heavy lumbering footsteps that could be heard behind them. Three hulking creatures walked out, carrying huge shields and flails that dragged behind them.

Even though Brendel described them as bears, they could hardly see the resemblance. Their bodies were covered in long shaggy brown fur; their heads seemed like they sat flatly on their shoulders and had no neck. However, everyone cast impressed eyes at Brendel's near perfect depiction of the new creatures.

Jana stared at Brendel in silence, as though she wanted to find something any signs that revealed a truth about him.

"I have seen these things before," Raban suddenly stood up and said as he glared at the monsters that made their way across the river, "I encountered them in Karsuk once. These things are so powerful that they easily swiped away a dozen soldiers." His expression changed deeply for the first time, "My lord, are you certain that these creatures are also considered as a Tier 1 army like you said earlier?"

Brendel nodded, "The representation of the might of an army isn't done by me. It was originally created by the four different Holy Cathedrals. Their classifications not only look at the individual strength of a single unit but also how effective they are in an army. These Earth Spirit Bears are not intelligent creatures and are incompatible with

any other Underworld creatures. These Subterrane Dwellers had coexisted with them for a long time, and because of that, they are able to form a specific type of strategy with them. Otherwise, these foolish creatures will probably be taken off the list."

Raban nodded and did not speak any further. Brendel had told him earlier that his men would not be in any danger even if the enemies sent out their entire forces at them. But the other mercenaries had no idea what was happening, and could only watch nervously.

As the new reinforcements crossed over halfway, the two squadrons of Subterrane Dwellers that surrounded the small fortress gave a small opening to allow the new reinforcements to join in the fight. There was an odd silence amongst the mercenaries in the forest, as they thought the team of mercenaries on the small fortress were doomed and somehow used as sacrifices.

The shrill calls happened again as soon as their new reinforcements were in place to join the battle. They rushed towards the fortress with blood-curdling roars, when they suddenly felt a sudden change in the air.

The two crossbowmen suddenly laid down their crossbows and unsheathed their weapons from their backs. Strange sigils were carved onto their blades, gleaming brightly under the sun.

"Magic swords!" Someone amongst the mercenaries in the forest shouted in surprise.

And they were not the more common low-grade Magic Swords made by alchemists, but a fully enchanted blade that made the difference against an opponent of similar capabilities.

Whispers started spreading amongst them as they wondered who the two crossbowmen were from. A few cast their gazes at the three commanders as they were the only ones who would possess such precious weapons.

But the three commanders had the same question, although they all believed that none of them possessed such weapons.

The surprise turned into gasps. Two lines of light swung across the walls. The Subterrane Dwellers that managed to jump onto the walls were severed cleanly into two. Only the three mercenaries' commanders had that level of skill.

“Who are those two?” Jana turned her head back and asked: “Cornelius, are they your men?”

But Cornelius did not have the mood to answer her words. He finally recognized the pair of swords. The two men were actually the two angels who followed Brendel that night. He could finally understand why Raban agreed to allow his best wizard to become bait. If there were two flying angels who could escape anytime with his men, was there anything to be worried about?

The Earth Spirit Bears closed in with large strides and swung their flails at the fortress’ walls. A resounding crash split the walls open, causing fissures along the top. The angels then grabbed the mercenaries and flew up into the air before landing onto the ground a certain distance away.

To the blind Subterrane Dwellers, it was as if they had jumped from the wall. They screamed excitedly and rushed towards them.

But right at that moment, a loud horn rang out in the distance, and a group of fifty-odd riders came rushing out led by the Nightsong Tiger, surprising the three commanders. Brendel had secretly prepared a fourth group of mercenaries led by the Mercenaries of Lopes, with the exception of the Nightsong Tiger, a certain distance away from the main group of mercenaries in order to cover their rear when they traveled to the sawmill.

“My lord, this is—” Raban suddenly realized what Brendel was doing. The youth was gradually increasing the number of soldiers to lure the Subterrane Dwellers to come out of the fortress. If there were too many attackers at a given time, they might be guarded and refuse to come out. But with each iteration of reinforcements to threaten the Underworld creatures that were already on the field, they might actually be provoked enough to send out their entire force!

“This is the Nightsong Tiger’s idea,” Brendel’s eyes glinted as he studied the river’s coastline, “the Subterrane Dwellers have sent out their allies because they didn’t want to give up on taking down the bait. Now that they are in danger they would send out their entire forces to minimize casualties. After all, the population in the Underworld is too precious. Well, it’s not just the NPCs, sometimes the gamers will make that kind of mistake as well…”

He started giggling with a perverted smile when he saw the mercenaries of ‘Team Bait’

cheering when they realized the reinforcements had arrived.

[Oops. That was sort of mean; I shouldn't laugh at the baits' reactions.]

When the Nightsong Tiger mentioned this idea, he immediately understood that it would work. It was no different to how the gamers exploited the psychology of the Underworld's denizens.

"NPCs, gamers?" Raban interrupted his thoughts with a question.

Brendel coughed and replied: "Don't get distracted, it's nearly time for us to take action. Look at the sawmill."

The three commanders twisted their heads at the same time. The sawmill's gates were raised up. Indeed, this time it was not a single gate, but three gates that were raised up from the fortress. Long streams of Subterrane Dwellers seemed to appear from thin air as they swarmed out of the sawmill. Cornelius immediately paled while he quickly counted and estimated there were over two hundred creatures. He inhaled deeply and released a cold breath.

[Marsha above, surely these creatures wouldn't leave the sawmill completely undefended, doesn't that mean there are over three hundred of these creatures? Luring the majority out is one thing, but even if we make them lose the advantage of the fortified position, that doesn't mean we can take them down, we're outnumbered!]

Brendel quietly watched the Subterrane Dwellers wade across the river. Their goal was definitely to rescue their own, and judging from their speed; they did have the capability to do so. Brendel finally stood up, ignoring the three mercenaries' commanders unpleasant expressions.

He snapped his fingers and caught the attention of the mercenaries around him. He gestured with his hand, 'Men, ready your crossbows, now!'

Everyone was momentarily taken aback. Witnessing the monsters in action had caused them to lack the courage to do battle. In addition to that, they were confused about readying their weapons when half the enemy was still on the coastline. Still, no one dared to disobey his orders, even if they did not acknowledge him as the commander. Their comrades were still on the coastline, and their commanders had pledged their loyalty to him.

They quickly took their crossbows off from their backs and drew back their strings to load them. They had been warned to do it as silently as possible, and they took their time to do it. Each crossbow was readied with a soft twang.

'Aim.' He relayed his next order.

His timing was perfect. The new batches of Subterrane Dwellers and Earth Spirit Bears had just reached their destination, just when the mercenaries finished loading their projectiles. The three commanders looked at him in incredulity. This was the first time they had seen Brendel commanding, and it was no coincidence that he timed it accurately.

Brendel merely smiled inwardly at their reaction. Most of Aouine's mercenaries roughly had the same capabilities, and the scenario he had now proved that his timing was not off when he compared it to the gaming.

Even if it was a group of Wind Spirit Riders on the other side, he could still have the mercenaries to get the first strike.

At that moment, three hundred mercenaries readied their projectiles, be it wizards or gunners. Each one of them tracked down their targets, but the enemies' robust hides made them wonder if they were going to be effective. They wondered if it was truly a warm-up like their commanders had told them.

Brendel waited for two more seconds and snapped his fingers.

'Fire!'

Chapter 18
The battle for the sawmills (5)

The bowstrings were released in a cacophony. Countless projectiles were fired and covered the ground like a cloud casting shadows over it. The Subterrane Dwellers at the forefront felt like they crashed into a wall. Projectiles littered across the smooth pebbles, and they stepped onto the bolts in confusion, stumbling and falling over. Very quickly, they were turned into corpses as arrows continued to fill their bodies.

The raining arrows completely ambushed the Subterrane Dwellers, and those at the frontlines retreated in a panic. However, the creatures at the back continued to advance, and thus they collided and fell into complete disarray.

[[That's a great chance!]]

Jana and Raban immediately had this thought. They unsheathed their rapier and greatsword respectively, ready to lead their men to charge into battle and finish them.

But Brendel's sword swung downwards and cut across a line in front of their feet. The wind pressure cut through the ground deeply, before it ended up in a tree and climbed upwards, causing branches and leaves to be severed. Both of them held their breaths and gaped. They turned around involuntarily to look at Brendel.

"My lord?" Raban asked.

"Prepare an attack formation at the river." The Nightsong Tiger and his men were engaging the Subterrane Dwellers on the river's coast, charging straight into their tail.

"My lord, but…" Jana gritted her white teeth and looked hatefully at the panicking monsters in the river. "This is an opportunity."

"Your opponents are not humans." Brendel glanced at her and answered simply. He pointed his finger to his ears. These creatures fought in the darkness their whole lives and relied on their hearing senses to discern the creatures around them. They were much more responsive in handling unknown situations better than humans.

This ambush might have caused them to be in complete chaos, but they were going to recover very quickly. Their way of communication was emitting pitched frequencies, and it was far more effective compared to humans who relied on flags and uniforms to discern direction and allies.

[The Subterrane Dwellers recover much more quickly compared to other army types. The worst of them all is Earth Spirits, once they lose their formation they can't regroup. The group immune to panic or confusion from ambushes is the undead. Only incredibly well-trained armies can take advantage of the Subterrane Dwellers. You mercenaries are not.]

The only way to take advantage was to attack the moment they fell into chaos, but only an exceptionally trained army would be able to do so.

The two commanders were still unconvinced, but Cornelius pulled out his longsword and walked in between them. "We should listen to our lord," he had instinctively realized something was different about the Underworld creatures, "we lack the experience to fight these monsters."

Brendel raised his eyebrow as he noted the ambition in Cornelius's eyes. He did not care about the reasons why they followed him, but as long as they did, they had to submit to him.

"It's good enough if you understand that point, I don't have enough time to explain it to you," He lowered his sword and said, "now execute my orders." Once he was done, he merely turned his body towards the river.

"Is my lord going to the frontlines?" Jana was still a little uneasy. She did not understand why he insisted on having them fight the Subterrane Dwellers in a direct battle. Even a battalion of Aouine's army numbering five hundred, might not gain any advantage in fighting them, not to mention their smaller numbers of mercenaries.

"I have selected my targets," Brendel answered.

[Over there—]

The two angels were fighting against the three Earth Spirit Bears to a stalemate, while the Nightsong Tiger held the first advantage by targeting their weakest link. Brendel did not waste any more time and activated his Charge skill. He leaped into the air and flew across the ground like an arrow, and the second step he took changed his

direction and descended into the enemies' midst like a meteor.

In the mercenaries' eyes, the young lord seemed to turn into a black trail of light as his cloak fluttered behind him, reaching the Nightsong Tiger's army in the blink of an eye.

A few Subterrane Dwellers realized a disturbance in the air and raised their weapons, but Brendel was already past them and went straight for one of the Earth Spirit Bears. The gigantic brute shook its furry ears and turned around, swinging its flail straight at him. Under the influence of Charge, he witnessed the attack in slow motion, dodging the attack by jumping up on its arm and ran straight to its shoulder.

The movements were done in a smooth stroke, and when the mercenaries finally caught a glimpse of his body, he was already half kneeling on its shoulders and was sending his longsword straight into its throat with both hands. With a quick pull after the blade found its mark, a geyser of blood shot out and sprayed across the ground.

The Earth Spirit Bear bellowed painfully as its body shook a few times before it collapsed heavily onto the ground. Silence momentarily filled his surroundings as the Subterrane Dwellers realized what happened.

The mercenaries who watched the entire exchange stopped what they were doing and felt their blood boil. They gasped heavily as they thought they were witnessing a legendary tale happening before their eyes. They would never forget that moment—

Raban swung his greatsword into the ground and caused a loud crash, forcing the mercenaries to break their eyes off. He lifted his weapon back up and ordered them with a yell: "Form up, advance with speed, and don't let the enemies get to the shore."

But when he turned around, the Subterrane Dwellers had calmed down.

The ten-odd Camlu were repeatedly screaming, sending out commands to their subordinates. The chaos that the creatures had earlier was gone, and they were back into formations, seemingly ready to advance again.

It was less than half a minute.

Raban then realized Brendel's decision to stop them was completely right. If they had charged down to the river, they would probably face an organized army before they even reach their destination, while their own mercenaries would not be in formation. Against these opponents that were stronger than them, Raban did not even need to

think and know what the result would be.

His eyes sought for the other two commanders and saw that they were having the same uneasy thoughts while they maintained their own mercenaries' formations as they started marching to the river's bank.

[Who exactly is this youth? It seems like the wizard under him is a Highland Wizard, so he must be a noble's scion from Karsuk. Even if you compare him to the most promising nobles of Aouine, he won't lose out even a little.]

His stray thought only lasted for a moment, before he turned his attention towards the enemies. He judged the battle ahead of him to be terrible odds. Even though the youth's judgment had been right again and again, he was beginning to feel that the Subterrane Dwellers were impossible to defeat.

The mercenaries had no chance at all if he looked at the enemies' morale and organized formations, as well as each individual's strength. In fact, he had no confidence that they would be able to handle the first clash.

He raised his hand and signaled. The first group of the mercenary warriors raised their shields up and marched forward. The row behind them were mercenaries that used lances and other weapons with long reach. The ones that stayed behind at the top of the forest were marksmen who continued to reload and fire.

The first bout of projectiles did not produce great results, and it was more of a question of how effective it could be. It was almost nothing more than a psychological comfort.

As the mercenaries marched closer, they found the Subterrane Dwellers and Earth Spirit Bears maintaining a constant and organized movement, as though it was a requiem of death. Raban's men could now feel what their commander was thinking about, and their expressions were infused with doubt and the intention to retreat.

Their morale was plummeting.

They were no more than a hundred feet apart from each other when the archers and crossbowmen fired their third volley of arrows. Raban could clearly see the weak arrows bouncing off the Earth Spirit Bear's hides, and how ineffective they were.

Fifty feet left, and Jana stood in front of her men. Even though she thought herself as

one who did not possess enough strength, she could at least deflect the initial damage to those who saw her as the head of their family.

She felt considerable regret for the first time, wondering if she chose wrongly. When she peered at the young lord, he had just killed off the second Earth Spirit Bear, but he did not turn back to take even a single glance at the mercenaries facing the reinforcements. She could not help but think that he was just like the other nobles who did not care whether they lived or died.

Twenty feet, and Cornelius could almost see the disgusting skin folds on the Subterrane Dwellers. His head was full of cold perspiration, and he gripped his sword tightly.

Just moments before they clashed, the mercenaries could hardly be called as an army anymore; but so did the creatures in front of them. They had clashed together in confusion, with the results completely out of everyone's expectations.

That was because the battlefield had lost all sound.

Everyone realized that fact.

Chapter 19
The battle for the sawmills (6)

When the warriors felt the Subterrane Dwellers crashed onto the raised shields with their weapons, not even a single sound happened. It was almost a comical sight to have the warriors fly up into the air due to the massive impact, then thrashing their arms wildly as they fell down towards the back rows. It was complete silence.

Everyone stopped in confusion.

Jana was the first to turn around, her eyes darting around to find the cause, and she saw Brendel holding up a radiating light in his hand towards their direction:

A massive Silence spell that covered sixty feet wide at their location, covering the entire battlefield they were in.

The Subterrane Dwellers fell into complete chaos as they lost their senses to 'see' and losing their ability to judge. Their first instinct was to retreat, or swing their spears threateningly around them, trying hard to protect themselves. This chaos spread everywhere. They started treating each other like enemies, or run around in random directions. Quite a few mercenaries were dragged into their frantic attempts to fight, but the majority managed to escape the chaos and realized something after a short moment of confusion:

Victory was right in front of them.

'I understand now', everyone thought of these words.

Brendel threw away the expended Soul Gem in his hand as his eyes went back to the third Earth Spirit Bear. It was as though he had seen the conclusions of the battle a long time ago.

[I see, so these foolish bastards have this kind of weakness.] Cornelius and Raban thought of the same thing as they looked at each other.

Cornelius quickly bade the Flagbearer next to him to change the flag's color. A red flag

with two swords was raised into the air. There was no need for words since the meaning was clear: Attack.

The warriors dropped down their shields and took out their weapons. They were the defenders a moment ago, but now they were leading the counterattack. It was as if an invisible wave swept through the battlefield as they cleaved down their enemies with both hands.

The Subterrane Dwellers were completely unable to defend themselves from the organized attacks, and in this 'darkness' they felt an instinctive fear and started retreating from the direction of the attacks.

The Camlu were unable to stop the formation from breaking down. The entire surroundings around them were being robbed away by the Silence spell like a black hole and preventing all aural feedback.

Even when the Subterrane Dwellers escaped from the spell's effective area, they discovered that everyone was escaping, and they had no desire to stay behind. Very soon, the Camlu and the Earth Spirit Bears started retreating as well, causing a massive defeat.

In truth, the casualties were significantly less than one would think. At the mercenaries' first charge, they killed only twenty Subterrane Dwellers. They were felled near the river, and the water reached their bodies.

The remainder of the Underworld creatures did not have any thoughts to check their losses and simply obeyed their fear to run away. Once they reached areas where they could hear again, they began fleeing as fast as they possibly could without any formation or organization. Many of them were trampled to death by their own, leaving behind a road of corpses.

The mercenaries who followed them out of the effective area of the Silence spell, changed their formation and chased after the stragglers that strayed away from the group. They truly did not think the entire battle changed that easily.

It was just like what Brendel had said; this was nothing more than a warm-up battle.

At the other end of the forest, there were only thirty Subterrane Dwellers left. Brendel had slain all three Earth Spirit Bears, and the remainder of the enemies had to deal the angels and twice their numbers. The conclusion of the battle was foregone.

Brendel turned his eyes to the escaping Subterrane Dwellers at the other river's bank and chanced upon the mercenaries keeping a constant speed to chase after the scattering monsters. He snarled in annoyance at their cautious attitudes. At this rate, they were going to allow the remaining Subterrane Dwellers to retreat to the fortified sawmill.

Even though they appeared to be in dire straits, they did not use up their stamina to fight. Their injuries were practically non-existent, and eight out of ten were still ready for battle. None of the Earth Spirit Bears died either.

Allowing them to escape was a waste.

[There's no choice, I'll need to use that.]

Someone familiar was appearing from the direction of the Sawmill. A red ponytail fluttered strongly and created a trail of red in the wind, as the rider charged at the retreating creatures on the summoned card, Silver Colt.

It was Scarlett.

She was tasked by Brendel to cut off the retreating enemies, and her spear was raised up threateningly with an electrical arc trailing from it. She stopped before the hundred odd Subterrane Dwellers.

"Move away!" Jana was completely shocked, not knowing why the girl stopped in front of them. Their numbers included the Earth Spirit Bears, and their instinct to survive would surely bring out their aggression. Even a Gold-ranked fighter would have trouble facing them. In fact, if they gathered together to put up a last-ditch effort to fight back, it would mean their victory would be wasted.

But Scarlett did not move from the spot as though she did not hear.

The next instant, countless green lights appeared in the forest near her, and Jana swallowed her curses that were at the tip of her mouth. She knew how powerful they were.

The spiders were directly commanded by Brendel, and they began their assault, shooting beams of Light Energy unerringly at each Subterrane Dweller. Each laser that fired at them was the full strength of a Silver-ranked fighter's attack, and the enemies were unable to defend themselves.

Brendel used the attacks sparingly to conserve his EP by using a lower number of spiders. He ushered the retreating groups of Subterrane Dwellers to the right and did not attack them. This prevented them from retreating into the sawmill, and they scampered off into the forest in fear.

Scarlett did not move from her spot and merely sent off waves of thick bloodlust. The remaining creatures that somehow escaped the spiders' attacks did not dare to run past her and fled to the forest.

Scarlett did not attack. She merely waited till the last Underworld creature disappeared into the forest and waited for the mercenaries to join up with her. She then pulled the reins and turned the Silver Colt around.

The Subterrane Dwellers within the sawmill realized that none of the of their allies were coming back and hurriedly closed the wooden gates. Scarlett smiled with a hint of challenge in her eyes, and she swung her weapon against it.

An explosive sound echoed in the vicinity, with the gate hurling high up into the air before they shattered into pieces and rained onto the ground.

"That's really troublesome," Amandina frowned to herself and grumbled, "If she destroyed the door, we still need to get people to repair it. Why can't she think more about it."

Amandina walked out of the forest when the battle was over. She was almost not bothered by the corpses around her, most likely because she was used to it.

"Let her do it." Brendel laughed, his eyes capturing the trails of golden light flying towards him. He had gained approximately ten thousand XP and was able to advance his Mercenary profession by a tenth.

Amandina did not continue her complaints after hearing his words and watched Scarlett lead the mercenaries into the sawmill. Their enemies were not their match, and the conclusion was drawn.

"It's hard to imagine that these creatures would be so weak against specialized magic. They should logically understand what their weaknesses are." Amandina said quietly.

"That's not true, miss Amandina." The Nightsong Tiger rode over and dismounted as he spoke.

Amandina turned over and asked for the reason with her eyes.

“The Subterrane Dwellers are grouped with other units.” Brendel explained: “The Jurgen Underworld is akin to a huge kingdom. Many different races gathered with each to form it. Not only do the Subterrane Dwellers work together with Earth Bear Spirits, but there are also witches with eagle bodies, and dog-headed bipeds as well. The Subterrane Dwellers do have their witch doctors, but the enemies we are facing here is from a small tribe, and there might not even be one. It’s not strange for them not to be capable of handling magic.”

“Their witch doctors are few?”

“One wizard out of every thousand humans. That ratio is actually pretty high on our side. The Subterrane Dwellers have far less in their ratio.”

Amandina nodded and pondered for a while: “I didn’t expect the Underworld to be comprised of so many races. It’s completely different from the books. The Subterrane Dwellers are mentioned prominently; I thought the place below is a place where civilization doesn’t reach, and it’s a barbaric place. The world is certainly interesting.”

[It’s normal to make this mistake since Kirrlutz is the one who writes all these books and promotes humans as the superior race. From the gamer’s point of view, this world is incredibly vast.]

“If I compare these Subterrane Dwellers to the Madara’s skeletons, they are much more powerful. There must be even more fearsome creatures below. To think there’s such a threat from the Underworld.” Amandina said.

“One characteristic of the Underworld’s creatures is the individual’s might. This has something to do with their environment,” Brendel said, before shaking his head and looked towards the sawmill with a sigh, “yet if you think that these creatures are powerful, that’s actually because Aouine is much too weak. If it were Kirrlutz’s army, they would never say these words.”

Chapter 20
Expansion

========== Tagiv's POV ==========

The Direbear Forest was somewhat considered as part of the Dark Forest, despite being close to civilization with its small geographical area as the bears were highly aggressive. The four lumber mills in this mountainous forest were approximately a day's journey from each other.

The human leader of the mercenaries had taken the lumber mill located in the most western forest called the Hooved Grass Lumbermill. The defeated Subterrane Dwellers brought back the news of the fortress being conquered by humans, and eventually reached the ears of their Elders.

Tagiv, one of the thirteen High Nobles who became a Witch Doctor without training, had skin color that was even darker than the elite warriors. The creature wore a coat woven from Terror Vulture's long feathers, won from the Underworld's Dark Elves in a battle.

It sat on a throne covered with a large bear hide without any mood to groom the beautiful feathers. Instead, its long fingers were restlessly stroking a Longstaff. The weapon in his hands was adorned with a skull at the tip with Terror Vulture's feathers.

Five years ago, Tagiv became the leader of this sub-tribe which splintered off from the main clan. Due to a territorial fight, Tagiv had no choice but to bring its tribe away from the area. It was a habit of the Subterrane Dwellers to move away from trouble. Tagiv and its men eventually discovered a path towards the surface, as it was not a rare thing for the underworld to be connected to the surface.

Rumors had described the surface to be far from the description of paradise, but the Witch Doctor decided to take a risk and led its tribe members to the surface world. It discovered that the human race here was not as terrifying as it had imagined, and thus led its tribe to conquer the four lumber mills within the forest.

This act naturally caused the territory Lord, Graudin, to be in utter fury. He eventually

sent out his men to fight the creatures in the forest twice, but the unsightly human army comprised of undisciplined local men and nobles' private soldiers were not the match of the Subterrane Dwellers. In the end, the humans did not win anything and were driven out.

Graudin ultimately cast down his pride and met Tagiv for negotiations. The Subterrane Dwellers did not need the lumber from the forest, but he needed them. Trentheim provided the merchant city Ampere Seale's demand for lumber, and if there were any problems with the delivery, the first person who would demand answers would be from his father, Count Randner.

Even if there was a deficit in the yearly supply of lumber, Graudin had no choice but to find ways to ensure Trentheim provided the minimum amount. The four lumber mills near Firburh supplied a considerable figure, and he did not dare to abandon it lightly. Since he was unable to take them back by force, he had no choice but to establish a transaction.

It was highly unthinkable that a lord had to buy his own commodity that was made from his land, but Graudin at least had a silver mine in Trentheim to pay for it.

Silver was also a currency used in the underworld, and Tagiv required money to bolster his tribe. This outcome was a secret agreement that would supposedly continue, except that Graudin met his death.

Tagiv was highly satisfied with the transaction. Despite the numerous victories against the humans and taking down Graudin's pride, the fact that its tribe was vastly outnumbered remained. Several thousands of Iron-ranked fighters might sound like a terrifying force, but they were the entirety of the sub-tribe's population.

Tagiv was highly intelligent, and with the constant interactions with the humans, it had realized the situation it was in in this surface world. Even though there was no army that could easily drive them away in Trentheim, there was no easy advantage that it could get by staying within this land.

A population of seventy thousand lived around Firburh, and the region Trentheim had several times of that. A strange race like themselves attacking the human cities was likely to gather a retaliation many times stronger than what Graudin had done.

Tagiv understood that the kingdoms of the surface world were similar to the kingdoms

in the underworld. This land was merely part of something much bigger, and it was a little fearful and wary of that fact.

Despite knowing that Graudin had a silver mine, it did not attempt to conquer it. As long as they maintained a hold on the lumber mills, they would receive a constant flow of silver. It could expand its tribe until it was ready to return to the underworld with hoarded silver to use for trade.

Within its heart, it still desired to go back. Even though Trentheim appeared like a bountiful place, it was not the Subterrane Dwellers native territory.

After adjusting to a stable peace for months, the Subterrane Dwellers did not favor holding a hostile behavior towards the humans and would rather remain an unknown existence.

But good things did not seem to last, and the creature felt that it had encountered a difficult trouble. The news of the conquered lumber mill arrived in the afternoon, when the defeated Subterrane Dwellers reported the humans had once again invaded the forest—

This time not only did the humans take back one of their lumber mills, they even slaughtered more than a hundred of their tribe members.

Tagiv was in a complete fury when it heard the news. It quickly gave an order to gather the tribe members who could fight, but it calmed down soon after and started to gather more information about its opponents. The Witch Doctor eventually summoned its trusted subordinates in order to hear more opinions about their enemies.

An Elder Subterrane Dweller who had deep wrinkles in its hide, complete with white tattoos, stepped forward with its weak and thin limbs.

This Elder was called ‘Horned Claw’, a rarity amongst Subterrane as the majority of them had no names, and was bestowed by Tagiv; this name originated from a type of lizard bipeds; hunters known for their efficient movements and cunning ways.

Tagiv gave this name to him for his wisdom and experience. Horned Claw had betrayed its rival tribe and escaped from them, before surrendering to Tagiv.

It was a common thing for the Subterrane Dwellers to surrender to another tribe and

they did not have the notion of loyalty. Rather, they submitted to the strong. The Subterrane Dwellers did not look down on Horned Claw and even regarded its words with considerable weight.

“According to the descriptions from our defeated tribe members, the humans most likely have a wizard,” the elderly Subterrane Dweller said, “A Silence Spell. In the Underworld, the Dark Elves frequently used it against us. It is unfortunate that we don’t have more Witch Doctors in our army, or we wouldn’t lose so many of our tribe members.”

“How many men do they have?” Tagiv asked.

“Two to three hundred.”

“A mere army with only three hundred at most,” Tagiv said darkly, “the human named Graudin must be tired of living. Does he think that I wouldn’t fight back if he sent out the mercenaries after us?”

It slammed its Longstaff onto the ground and said hatefully: “We will kill these damned mercenaries and then take this useless lord’s head. Then I’ll also lead our army and occupy that silver mine in the south too.”

“But if we do that we will most likely draw the humans’ ire.” Horned Claw said.

“That is fine. They require time to move their armies. When we take over the mine, we will grab as much silver as possible and retreat to the Underworld. I want to see if they dare to pursue us.” Tagiv responded with disdain.

The other Elders also chimed in with their screeches, both agreements and dissents.

“But how should we fight the mercenaries?” One of them asked.

“I’ll lead the army myself. It’s merely magic that’s causing a disadvantage for us,” Tagiv stood up, “Tonight, I want the humans responsible to be killed in order to pay for our tribe’s blood that was spilled today!”

The chieftain’s screech echoed within the room, and the Elders lowered their heads without any disagreement. The humans were indeed fools in their eyes.

Tagiv had intentionally led an army of a thousand Subterrane Dwellers at any given

time. With the full force of three thousand Subterrane Dwellers, it was enough to overturn Trentheim's entire army even if they gathered together. If Graudin knew about this truth, he might have made countermeasures by seeking more forces, but since he did not, there was no possible way for him to gather a bigger army quickly.

The Subterrane Dwellers scouts near Firburh had reported that there was no new influx of any new armies, and there were only mercenaries that gathered there.

There were some strange movements of the undead attacking the city and nearby citizens going to the city to defend it, but that was it. After a day from the undead's attack, it seemed like Graudin had persuaded the mercenaries to attack the Subterrane Dwellers.

[If this short human believes this insolent act would not be met with retaliation, he must be a complete fool.]

Tagiv would never be able to guess that Graudin had paid the price for his arrogance. The human who was currently standing before them was Brendel, and he knew them as well as they did themselves.

The battles ahead for these creatures were always in a different direction from the very start.

========== Brendel's POV ==========

The battle within the Hooved Grass Lumbermill ended quickly. The remnants of the Subterrane Dwellers within the makeshift fortress were the sick and elderly. They were completely unable to resist the enemy that invaded them.

Still, the mercenaries paid the biggest price ever since the start of the battle. There were over thirty men who were wounded and ten who were dead from this encounter.

But Jana, Raban, and Cornelius were relaxed when the battle was over. They were leaders who had seen enough death, and the small casualties were something beyond their expectations. No, perhaps it was even a miracle. If Brendel did not make use of the Subterrane Dwellers weakness, even gaining victory was wishful thinking, let alone paying this little price.

But this battle with the Subterrane Dwellers made them uneasy and was out of their expectations. They had nothing to do with Graudin's antics, but for they were

ultimately bound together for strange reasons and had to fight for their new young lord. They could not help but glance at each other, and they saw nothing but their sardonic thoughts in each other's eyes.

Chapter 21
Expansion (2)

========== Three Mercenary Commanders' POV ==========

"This is absurd." Jana wiped her fringe to the back of her head as she spoke emotionally, gazing upon the mercenaries who were clearing the battlefield: "What exactly are we fighting for in this battle…"

She paused before sighing, "But the conclusion to this battle is acceptable, barely."

Raban glanced at her once and nodded.

"That young man is quite the excellent noble. Ever since I left Karsuk's armies, I have completely given up on the nobles' leadership, but he's starting to make me change my mind. A mercenary becoming a noble's retainer isn't a bad choice, but having him forcibly control us through our weaknesses is causing us to feel reluctant to do so."

"Hah!" Cornelius scoffed coldly. The middle-aged man with silver hair looked back at both of them and said: "Ask yourself this, are you certain that both of you would not act the same way if Graudin said he's interested in having you as his retainers? If Graudin hadn't acted like a crazed madman and started killing innocent people, I believe you would be interested in joining him. Regardless, this young lord of ours has no real footing in this territory, and any one of us can clearly see that he's borrowing our strength in order to fulfill his goals…"

He rubbed his gloves a few times, pondering deeply, "It's suspicious on how he's acting. He didn't tell us his plans on casting magic before we clashed with the damned creatures… I won't let him have his way if he tries to sacrifice my men."

Raban nodded and said, "This young man seems to be taking an independent stance amongst the nobles. I see no indication of any other nobles allying with him. Graudin is still a lord appointed directly by the king, and his death will spark a strong retaliation. No matter how highly I think of him, I too must be responsible for my men."

Jana made a light scornful noise after listening to the both of them and turned her

head away. Her motives were very different from the two in front of her. She established her own mercenary group in order to resist the nobles. Despite doing so, she was disappointed because she had no choice but to work with the filthy nobles.

During her leadership, she guarded her only sister fiercely until she lost her. She was still feeling a little lost and did not know what goals she still had left, but if there was one thing that was clear, it was that she disagreed with Cornelius's words.

The three of them stopped their discussion when the Nightsong Tiger and his riders entered the lumber mill— The young lord was finally coming here. The other mercenaries paused what they were doing and looked over to them.

It was simple for the mercenaries to judge their leader's abilities; was he able to lead them to victory?

Brendel had brought them to a miraculous victory against seemingly impossible odds twice. The mysterious rumors around him had only deepened their convictions, and every one of them felt like this was someone they could follow in their future.

The three mercenary leaders did not stop their subordinates from acknowledging him. Even though they did not know what direction they were heading into after the battle in Firburh, but leaving Brendel's side would mean that they would have to seek refuge in the Dark Forest.

Even though Count Randner was like a dark cloud gathering over their heads, they at least had a small hope shining in their hearts by following Brendel.

If Brendel was capable of bringing victories under impossible odds, who could be certain of what the future holds?

A seed of blind faith was growing in everyone's heart.

Delighted yells started ringing out just like Cornelius predicted in his mind. The mercenaries generously greeted their hero with the highest respect, and their lifestyle under constant battles had nurtured their hot-blooded personalities.

But when the last rider rode into the makeshift fortress, the mercenaries became confused.

There was no sight of Brendel.

The people at the forefront were Amandina, the Nightsong Tiger, and the lively merchant girl Romaine who behaved smugly after hearing the cheers.

“What is this?”, demanded Jana, who was the first to move over to them.

Amandina glanced at her. Despite the various exchanges between them, the veteran female mercenary was still unable to intimidate the young noble lady.

Amandina replied disinterestedly: “Our lord has orders. All of us are to set up a defense. The Subterrane Dwellers are likely to attack us during midnight after they have finished gathering their forces. The Silence spell cannot be casted repeatedly, so he wants every wizard to use their magic generously to fortify the surrounding walls. It must be done before the moon rises up to the Witch-king’s position.”

Jana had to take a moment to understand the answer. She furrowed her eyebrows deeply when she came to a conclusion and wanted to ask for more answers. Before she did so, Raban came up and patted her shoulders, hinting to her that she needed to calm down.

He raised his head to Amandina sitting straight up on the horse’s back: “Lady Advisor, when is our lord going to return? The only person amongst us who knows the most about the Subterrane Dwellers’ habits and strategies is him, and without his leadership, we are unlikely to defend this place past midnight.”

“It should suffice if I’m here. Our lord has said that he will bring us a complete victory if we survive the night.”

“Survive the night?” Cornelius was next to voice his disagreement: “Easier said than done, Lady Advisor. This lumber mill is the outermost area of the enemy’s territory, yet the number of creatures we faced was over three hundred. I don’t believe they would just split up a third of their forces to guard this place, especially for a race that’s in constant battles. Their numbers are far more than just a mere thousand.”

“Commander Cornelius, everything comes with a price, and regardless of the odds we need to hold this place down,” Amandina said with an impassive expression.

Romaine chimed in with a smile: ” For a businessman, opportunities and dangers always come together. My aunt had told me that the difference between one person and another, is that the clever people are capable of balancing boldness and cautiousness at the same time, and this little me is capable of being a smart person.”

Cornelius did not speak again after listening to her words. Since he did not dispute it, he acknowledged her words.

“What do you think?” Jana turned her head slightly and asked Raban.

“What else can we do? We can see that the young man doesn’t trust us — this is a test for our loyalty, and he has left us with this choice. We have to make our decision to accept it or not,” Raban smiled a little, “He’s quite the confident fellow, and is completely different from the other useless nobles.”

“What do you mean?” Jana looked blankly at him.

“He’s telling us that our beliefs are wrong. We have always thought he needed us for our men, but the fact that he’s not here means that it doesn’t matter whether he has us or not… And has given us a chance to decide if we still wish to serve under him.”

Jana stared at Amandina with remarkable intensity: “Arrogance. If we’re capable of defending through the night, we will be able to gain victory over the damned creatures? Does he really think he’s going to reproduce King Erik’s miracle?”

She was referring to how King Erik subdued the Highland citizens in the past. Raban shook his head slightly as he had his own thoughts about that fact, but he did not say anything more.

========== Brendel’s POV ==========

The sun was about to set to dusk. No one in the lumber mill knew where Brendel was. While the three mercenary commanders were busy fortifying the lumber mill, Tagiv had split up his army into two forces and advanced through the forest. Countless Subterrane Dwellers and Earth Spirit Bears meandered slowly beside the mountain streams, looking like a gigantic grey snake that was moving slowly in the night.

There were a few Earth Spirit Riders — They were not from the Underworld but the surface, and had allied with the creatures.

[Most of Vaunte’s main scouting forces are flying types. It’s a huge disadvantage for many Underworld races as they are used to living in the small spaces, especially during the daytime when the sun easily blinds them… but they have allied with the creatures on the surface.]

In Brendel's eyes, they were merely weak creatures that could be ignored in a direct confrontation, but they were an obstacle if he wanted to fly over the enemies. He supported himself against a tree as he spied on them from a mountain slope.

"They have so many soldiers?" Scarlett could not suppress her voice and gasped a little when she saw this sight before her: "That's more than a thousand. I knew the reports from Graudin's men are untrue. That fool didn't even realize how many creatures he was facing."

Brendel nodded. He and Scarlett had flown on the Silver Colt and followed the fleeing Subterrane Dwellers. As the creatures relied on their hearing and smelling senses, they were unable to detect the two. After waiting for a few hours, the enemy finally started to move. Brendel and Scarlett then moved ahead to higher grounds to observe them better.

Brendel glanced at the sky. It was still early, and the creatures would probably reach the lumber mill around midnight.

"With such a large force, even Commander Makarov would find it impossible to win," Scarlett looked at the valley and frowned. She looked up at Brendel, "what can we do?"

"Hmm. It seems like there's an outpost ahead of us." Brendel said.

"What?" She looked back puzzledly at him.

"It's about time for us to set out, but we won't be able to fly into the air now. I didn't expect the Subterrane Dwellers to ally with the nearby Earth Spirits."

"My lord, you mean to—" Scarlett's eyes were tinged with a sliver of shock: "Isn't this action too bold?"

"Don't worry; this isn't the first time I'm doing this." Brendel grinned back: "But I do need your assistance—"

Scarlett sighed. "Your orders, my lord."

"Very well, as you wish…" Brendel nodded after studying her expressions, "Scarlett."

"What are your orders?" She bowed her head.

"…There's an old phrase back in my hometown. In order to capture the bandits, you must first capture their leader. I order you to aid me in doing so."

Chapter 22
Expansion (3)

The sky's cotton-like clouds seemed like they were set aflame by the setting sun's penetrating rays. The near crimson sky extended to a great distance before it gradually turned to colors of violet and dark blue, with patches of unlit clouds at the end.

The clouds were considerably free of any indication that they were going to rain and instead hinted of good weather for the days ahead. While the trills and warbles of the birds could still be heard, they were diminishing and became quieter than it was a few minutes ago.

Scarlett's eyes were slightly tinted by the sunset as she stood at Brendel's side. She looked over to Mountain Graham's northern direction; it extended towards Karanjar's mountainous regions which wrapped around Firburh and continued eastward to the Dark Forest.

It was rumored that the mountains were the source of the land's wealth with countless treasures buried beneath the ground. The silver mine in Trentheim was rumored to be just a small portion of what the mountains held, and even that alone was enough to supply Graudin with money to spend.

While the natives treated the tallest peak of the mountains as something holy and regal, it appeared like an enormous predator in her eyes. The jagged rocks that jutted out at the top caught the sun's rays and glinted brightly, but the dense foliage from the trees that grew out at sharp angles seemed to prevent light from entering, and appeared like there were something mysterious lurking behind the shade.

The lumber mills in the forest were visible spots that stood out, and it seemed like there were few Subterrane Dwellers in them. But the truth could not be further away. These creatures dug the ground beneath it and created tunnels leading to exits all over the mountains. The small gaps in between boulders might lead into a network of tunnels.

It was impossible for an army to reach the mountain valleys without being detected by the Subterrane Dwellers' strict guard.

She glanced back at Brendel. They had traveled a few hundred meters along the mountain after he told her about the plan, but once they reached near the enemies' outpost, he stopped her from advancing. She initially thought that he was going to observe the situation, but he closed his eyes, sat down on the ground and started munching on some dry rations.

She waited till he finished eating before she hurriedly urged her young lord to move off, but he scratched his head unwillingly and told her to wait with a small smile. When she asked for the reason, he mumbled about some unclear excuses that she did not understand.

[This damned noble.]

The girl did not make any visible reactions, but the root of a nearby tree near her was cracked open as she stood on top of it.

[If you already decided on your plan to capture the ringleader or assassinate it, why aren't you acting on it…]

She hated the feeling of wasting time and frowned deeply because of that. A stream of Subterrane Dwellers suddenly appeared from one of the tunnels, and her eyes went to them. They were the second batch of Subterrane Dwellers that appeared.

"The first army of Subterrane Dwellers we saw a while ago moved deeper into the forest without stopping at the outpost. Are they going to wait for this second army or march straight to the Hooved Grass Lumber Mill? That first army has over a thousand of the damned creatures. If they are not waiting for the second batch, will our mercenaries be able to hold on until midnight?" She asked with suspicion.

"I have no idea, as for the mercenaries holding on…" Brendel's answer was simple.

[How should I know? I'm not a genius. Knowing the Subterrane Dwellers' habits doesn't give me foresight into how they are going to act.]

"…My lord, didn't you say we are going to move before the sun sets?"

Brendel's mouth dropped down with surprise and said: "Did I say something like that?"

"You— just did less than an hour ago…"

“Uhh,” Brendel interrupted her, “that’s because I saw that you looked really annoyed, so I wanted you to relax.”

She whipped her head in his direction and bared her pearly white teeth at him.

“I’m sorry,” Brendel said with an apologetic smile.

She did not respond to his words, but she let it slide as he was still her lord. As a subordinate, she could not question her lord’s intentions, and even if she had questions, she could only put them in her heart.

Brendel would usually explain his thoughts and actions most of the time, but it seemed like he was a little strange today.

[…It’s not that I don’t want to explain, but it’s something that I can’t tell you.]

He sighed inwardly and tapped the Loxar’s Market card in his mind and paid 2 Reputation. 6 Wealth immediately entered into his pool of resources. He had repeated this for three days and had his entire Wealth increased to 98 points. However, this terrible exchange of resources made him tremble a little painfully.

“Even if we were to act now and search the tunnels, we wouldn’t be able to find their chieftain.” He considered for a while and said, “The Subterrane Dwellers have most likely dug through the entire mountain, and we wouldn’t be able to find him even if we search the whole year.”

“But we can’t afford to wait, right?” She grumbled.

“Don’t worry, since the enemies responded this quickly, it means they are confident of beating our Silence spell. Judging from their numbers, the chieftain that rules over them is a Witch Doctor. It will come out to fight against ‘our wizard’. ”

“When will that happen?”

“It depends on how cautious the enemies are. At the latest, it would be sometime after the moon is at its peak.”

“…Can our men hold the enemy’s vanguard off for so long?”

“I trust Amandina, and I told her my plans earlier. The only thing that matters is

whether the mercenaries are willing to stand with me. If they are unable to hold the place, they still have ways to preserve themselves and escape. In truth, there's no real importance whether we hold the Hooved Grass Lumber Mill or not. When we won today's afternoon battle, our victory has already been decided."

"What do you mean?"

"Hmm, look forward to it. My goal isn't something as simple as winning a victory against the enemies."

========== Mercenaries' POVs ==========

The moon was up in the sky and unhindered by clouds.

The night scenery around the Hooved Grass Lumber Mill had an air of serenity, but Jana detected an unusual scent in the air when she patrolled the fortified walls.

[It seems like the Subterrane Dwellers' scouts are here.]

She subconsciously combed back her fringe and tidied her hair, which had been blown into slight disarray from the wind that was turning colder. She beckoned a few mercenaries below with her left hand and instructed them to investigate the forest.

Her actions naturally caught the attention of the other mercenaries. Cornelius quietly glanced at her before he turned his attention back to his men. They were digging a trench around the walls to prevent any sneak attacks from the ground below. Raban was also silent as he sent a hand signal to his men and had them to climb up the walls.

Amandina was secretly relieved at the mercenaries' orderly and experienced responses. She took another brief look at the defenses in the lumber mill and climbed up the wall with the Elven twin sisters' aid. She soon reached Jana's position.

"Did you discover something?" Amandina asked.

Jana turned her head and was not surprised when she saw the noble young lady, but she looked away rudely before speaking: "There's something in the forest, perhaps the Subterrane Dwellers, perhaps it's just a beast. I have sent my men to check it out."

"The creatures are already here? This quickly?" Amandina's mind was shaken slightly, but it did not reach her expressions.

“I said ‘perhaps’,” Jana emphasized on the last word.

“But if it’s true?” Amandina inhaled lightly and calmed herself: “Does this mean the Subterrane Dwellers’ response is fast? Are we able to judge how well-organized their army is?”

Even though she was knowledgeable from reading books, she realized that her experience was still lacking after she followed Brendel. She believed that she would learn much from the veteran mercenaries and thus lowered her attitude and asked humbly. Jana turned back and looked at her again, finding that the young lady was not as annoying for the first time.

[This little girl has a pretty good mental fortitude for her age—]

Jana had seen enough talented nobles, so she quickly accepted the new Amandina.

“There is little information on the battlefield that’s reliable. Things change all the time,” Jana shook her head, her crimson hair shimmering in the torches’ flames, “it could be possible that it’s a Subterrane Dweller that was left behind in order to check us, or perhaps they are the enemy’s scouts that have reached us. The former would mean that their battle discipline is very high, and if it’s possible I wouldn’t want to face this army; the latter would mean the enemy’s response and organization are exceptional, and the battles ahead would be challenging… And the reason for that is their scouts. The lumber mills are supposed to be an entire day’s journey from each other. For the scouts to reach this place so quickly, it would mean their physical attributes are astonishing, as well as their speed to gather their army.”

“Which possibility do you think it is?”

“Based on experience, I would think it’s the latter.”

“Experience, you say?”

“Miss Amandina, relying on experience is very important, especially when you are unable to confirm something. Instinct honed from experience is more reliable than your knowledge—” Jana answered, before loud clashes of weapons colliding each other suddenly filled the air. The mercenaries had encountered Subterrane Dwellers and were fighting them off. “But our lord is even more impressive–”

“What?” Amandina looked blankly at her.

“The enemy is fighting back instead of fleeing, so it means they are enemy scouts. If that’s the case, it would mean that the enemy’s main forces are nearby. Judging from the amount of time that the enemies’ main forces are going to take to reach here, the height of our battles will be at midnight, to even predict the time taken for the enemies to reach us, that boy… Ah, excuse me, I mean our lord truly knows the enemies well.”

“That’s not all he predicted.” Amandina looked up at the moon as she said in a flat tone.

“Oh?”

Chapter 23
Expansion (4)

Amandina listened to the faint sounds of the birds flapping away within the distant forest and felt a little shiver creeping up over her.

Jana stood beside her. Both stared silently ahead on top of the wooden walls, with the faint moonlight barely lighting up the trees' silhouette.

Who knew what dangers lurked in the darkness? They could imagine the Subterrane Dwellers emerging from the forest, with their heavy footsteps crushing the dry branches with threatening snaps, burly figures appearing before them and sieging the lumber mill —

When the Subterrane Dwellers indeed emerged, there were thirty of them pursuing the mercenaries who had been sent out to investigate the forest. Jana had considered that point and sent out experienced riders so they could at least escape from the enemies, or so she thought.

The creatures were swiftly moving across the ground, and the mercenaries were not able to shake them off. If the humans somehow panicked and made a mistake by opening the fortress's gate without dealing with the pursuers properly, they would rush in and hold the gates until their main army arrived.

Jana immediately reacted and ordered her men to open the gate to allow the riders to enter the lumber mill. She then yelled at the mercenaries on the wall.

"We're hitting the Subterrane Dwellers, ready your crossbows now! Nock! Mark! Loose!" She roared.

The concentrated bolts struck the Subterrane Dwellers' formation like an invisible whip, causing them to stumble and lose their footing. But as expected, the damage done to them was suspect. Amandina saw the fallen Subterrane Dwellers getting up once again, with only five or six casualties on their side.

She took in a cold breath. Even though she saw them in the afternoon, they were much

further back and were not as close as they were now. She realized how ineffective the crossbows were.

When the creatures found that the riders were already in the lumber mill, they retreated without taking back their comrades' corpses.

"They are definitely scouts," Jana confirmed this point when she watched them retreat.

"They are probably the Subterrane Dwellers who guarded here this afternoon," Amandina responded in a quiet voice.

"How do you know?"

"Their reactions to recover after they struck by the arrows was much faster compared to this afternoon."

"It's possible that the scouts know our tactics because those creatures told them what weapons were used." Jana raised her eyebrow. Amandina had asked a basic question earlier, yet her insight was good for something that was harder to determine.

"Maybe so, but they also seemed like they know this area. The terrain is uneven in this area, and our riders appeared to be slightly hindered when retreating, yet the Subterrane Dwellers had no such problems."

The two did not have time to discuss their arguments, as they spotted approximately a hundred-odd Subterrane Dwellers walking out from one side of the forest. The creatures marched along the shore and kept their distance from the lumber mill.

"What are they doing?" An inquisitive voice rang out behind the two women.

A face appeared between the two of them. Romaine's round eyes were like a pair of glossy black gems, and they blinked curiously at the long string of enemies before them.

"Surrounding this place," Amandina's brows were furrowed: "It seems like they are going to wait for more to group up with them."

"Are they slighting us? Hmph!" Jana was a little agitated as they moved into a snaking formation: "Perhaps we should get let the Nightsong Tiger lead our mercenaries out and attack them?"

She thought that the enemies' inferior numbers would make for a great advantage if they attacked them now.

Amandina silently observed them with a little trepidation in her heart. They were sealing off possible exits and surrounding the lumber mill slowly. She calmed her nerves and shook her head: "It's useless."

"Hmm?"

"Doesn't this mean they won't attack us anytime soon if they are surrounding us. Isn't this what we're hoping for?"

"If we cut their strength down, we will have an easier time defending later," Jana glanced at Amandina, noting her calm exterior and impressing her, but she nodded: "But you're right. We're going to face perhaps a thousand of these creatures, having a hundred more or hundred less has no difference. Honestly, I don't have the confidence to take the enemies down in front of us completely despite outnumbering them…"

Amandina shook her head inwardly as she thought about Brendel's words in the afternoon. There were three thousand Subterrane Dwellers, perhaps even more.

As she watched the creatures gather in greater numbers slowly, she reflected on Brendel's prediction.

[Brendel said that it was possible for more than half of them to attack the lumber mill, but we should be able to hold our position as they are unused to sieging in open ground. I hope he's right.]

She felt more and more anxious about his given plan, but she was unable to recall Brendel ever making any mistakes in his strategies.

========== Brendel's POV ==========

When the moon was nearly at its highest, Brendel finally discovered his target. He narrowed his eyes and saw several Earth Spirit Bears surrounding a skinny Subterrane Dweller, which quickly disappeared amongst the army. He committed the estimated position in his mind.

It was just after midnight.

The Loxar's Market card had reset. He tapped it again, entering 6 Wealth into his resources to reach 104. Once he was done with that, he studied the dark mountain valley. The amount of Subterrane Dwellers was staggering and split equally into three armies. Brendel guessed that more than half of them were residing within the the lumber mill's underground tunnels and only emerged after his attack. He frowned when he looked at the number of long spears appearing like a wall of dense needles.

[The bad news is we have to search for our target in such a big army. Even if Scarlett and I hold Gold-ranked capabilities, it's highly unrealistic we can move about freely when there are over a thousand Iron-ranked fighters in our way. The good news is that we're not fighting in their underground tunnels.]

Brendel had fought against the Subterrane Dwellers with his allies back in the game. They went directly for their chieftain by searching the tunnels, and the result was getting lost for a whole week. Scarlett nearly repeated his old mistake by wanting to do the same thing.

He finally stood up and beckoned to her. She looked terribly bored as she tormented the grass in front of her.

"Let's go," Brendel said.

"We're finally moving?" She looked up in a daze and asked, with Brendel nodding back.

The two slid down the slope quietly. The lush foliage seemed to cover their tracks, but the Subterrane Dwellers quickly detected their light footsteps a hundred meters away as they did not rely on sight but scents and sounds.

This sneak attack would have failed for any normal humans, but the duo could hardly be considered as such.

While the creatures took a few seconds to understand there was something out there, Brendel and Scarlett had closed the distance and appeared before several Earth Bear Spirits that were at the edge of the valley. The lumbering creatures stared blankly at the two humans for a few seconds before they bellowed, sending echoes throughout the valley—

A metallic grinding sound rang out as Brendel sliced the enemy's morningstar whistling towards him into two with his sword; he then shifted his head slightly as the weapon hurled harmlessly behind him.

The Earth Bear Spirit who attacked him discerned that its attack failed and understood its opponents' strength and howled guttural noises. The information spread quickly amongst the surrounding creatures, but they took time to comprehend the human's power.

Brendel did not waste any time and drew a long horizontal line with his sword, unleashing his Arte. The wind pressure escaped from his blade, and sliced across the battlefield like a long scythe, mowing the Earth Bear Spirits first before it reached Subterrane Dwellers at the back. Blood spilled across the ground like rain as the gigantic monsters were minced into half at their abdomens from the repeating slashes, and the Subterrane Dwellers were blown away into the air before they crashed lifelessly onto the ground.

This single strike terrified the Underworld creatures. Even though the grading of power was different for them, but a Gold-ranked fighter was enough to awe them. The Subterrane Dwellers immediately wailed with fright and shock as they retreated backward like an ocean's low-tide, although Brendel only heard meaningless noises from them.

[This is even more exaggerated than the game…]

Brendel perceived this to be similar to the game's Morale bar. He did not expect that his single attack to have such a strong effect and it surprised him. But it was a good thing, and he immediately charged straight into the area where the creatures retreated, with Scarlett following closely behind him.

At this moment, the Witch Doctor Tagiv finally recognized the source of trouble to be two humans. It shook its race's characteristically large head. It was angry and displeased at its subordinates in the beginning before it realized something was off.

[Two mere humans causing such chaos in my army that I gathered painstakingly— W-wait, what kind of speed is that! Those two are charging over to my direction!]

The echolocation from the various noises around Tagiv made it possible for the Witch Doctor to discern their location, and they had closed in dozens of meters to its position within mere seconds.

[This is a bad omen!]

Tagiv started to panic.

Chapter 24
Expansion (5)

========== Tagiv's POV ==========

Although the battlefield was mired in chaos, the Subterrane Terrane Elite Warriors' angry screeches brought order to those who were frightened by Brendel's attack.

Tagiv's startled heart calmed down after much effort. The Underworld had circulated rumors about the people on the Surface. Some had mentioned about their greed, but there were also legends and stories about the Surface Empires' might.

The Witch Doctor used to believe in these rumors, and regarded the Surface to be a dangerous and destitute world. It then quickly changed its mind, because Trentheim's humans gave him an impression they were feeble. In its eyes, their army was weak and lacked discipline. The Subterrane Dwellers were considered as a weak race in the Underworld, yet they easily defeated the 'big army' of the local baron named Graudin.

At first, Tagiv thought that the humans were laying a trap and they pretended to be weak. Even after Graudin came to meet it personally, it still wondered if the human noble was lying.

In the end, Tagiv was able to prove that this belief was unnecessary. The rumors about of a large empire with an undefeatable army wielding flags with griffins woven onto them were nothing more than a story that was meant to frighten children.

But it was true that the humans were greedy.

After the surprise, Tagiv's careful attitude was replaced with arrogance. It began to expand brazenly in the forest and even thought to occupy Graudin's territory with the forest as a foothold. It eventually remembered the humans had a large population and canceled his plan. Naturally, it did not change the idea that they were weak.

Tagiv believed that the mercenaries were able to take a lumber mill was due to the human wizard taking advantage of the Subterrane Dwellers' weak point. Once it set out to lead the army, it would give the humans a lesson they would not forget.

[These weak and greedy humans needed to see fists and fresh blood, or else they wouldn't remember their earlier lessons.]

Tagiv hatefully regarded the Surface's people as lowly beasts subconsciously.

When its army gave information about the two invaders, it was greatly shocked.

"The two humans are incredibly powerful, perhaps they have the strength of a Slavelord—" A nearby Elite Warrior shrilled and told its chieftain.

On the surface, the types equivalent to a Slavelords was Minotaurs living in mazes or Golden Dwarves. All of them were Gold-ranked fighters ranked somewhere in the middle.

Tagiv's pores opened up, an innate characteristic for Subterrane Terrane dwellers when they are on guard. The Slavelords were creatures that sat firmly in the position of the Fourth Tier of the underworld. They were existences where the entire Subterrane Dwellers had to look up to.

[These two aren't the rumored minotaurs wielding dual-bladed axes or the Golden Dwarves who resides in the Golden Hall but two supposedly weak humans? I see… To think that there are strong existences within the humans as well. But there are only two of you, and you dare to challenge an entire army?]

Tagiv's mind quickly spun and regarded them as foolish creatures of the Surface who did not know tactics. In the Underworld, tactics were seen as an art, and even though the chieftain had only learned a little, it was enough to look down on the humans and regard them as barbarians.

Tagiv raised its flag quickly, getting its subordinates to surround them. Even if they were Slavelords, they would not be able to resist its whole army.

========== Brendel's POV ==========

Brendel's progress was considered smooth when the Subterrane Dwellers were in a panic. The Witch Doctor's position was too distinct because it wore a gigantic goat-like skull with feathers stuck onto it. It was approximately a hundred meters away, but the Subterrane Dwellers were quickly filling up the space between them.

The Subterrane Dwellers' Elite Warriors were commanding the scattered creatures.

They were much larger, with purplish-red tumors growing on their skin, and mercilessly whipped them with their long spears, forcing them to wake up from their panic and get back to their position.

The opening was closing as the Subterrane Dwellers were forced back to fight him.

He quickly found himself against the enemies' grunts. They stood together in a line, shakily thrust their weapons at him as if to test the waters, and it was naturally ineffective. He quickly swept away the spears of poor quality and used a single strike to divide the wall of creatures into two again.

The first row of Subterrane Dwellers that was nearest to him were blown away with a layer of frost, and the defense line parted like melting snow.

Brendel moved forward again, but the Subterrane Dwellers were chased back by the elite warriors to become cannon fodder to delay him. Due to the time gained by them, more of the creatures moved in with a tactical formation, distancing him away from their leader.

"My lord," Scarlett said, wanting to inform him the enemies were surrounding their rear.

Brendel did not need to look back to know that they were closing in like a tidal wave. The two of them continued to advance by ten meters, but the resistance they encountered was starting to slow them. Three Subterrane Dwellers charged in with high-pitched screams, their strong legs resembling powerful warhorses, while concentrating their strength on the spears' tips.

This attack was completely different from the previous attempts.

Brendel felt troubled after defending the new attacks twice. The chaotic screams and charges were causing him to lose where Tagiv was moving to.

[He's moving to the north or the northeast?… Was it a mistake that I didn't stick to my first plan and use the Silver Colt and attack from above? No, I already shot that down because it's much riskier facing an enemy who can cast anti-air magic. I should think of another way…]

Brendel's hands did not stop moving while he was reflecting on his plan. Scarlett was right behind him, and both of them struck the enemies with lightning and ice,

extending their attack range to three meters in front of them. The third group of Subterrane Dwellers who attempted to surround them were crushed by their attacks.

But both of them soon stopped to take a rest instead of advancing.

Brendel noted that he had killed at least forty Subterrane Dwellers, and with the addition of Scarlett's shared kills, he received an impressive amount of XP, except that his stamina was rapidly dropping.

Scarlett's face was slightly red, and her forehead was perspiringly lightly. Her overall Power Rating was even higher than Brendel's by a tenth, but the latter had constantly fought against larger numbers in the game, and lived a life where he charged in and out of the enemy lines; a gamer's infinite lives allowed them to test out all kinds of combat tactics, and Brendel conserved his stamina by using the most efficient way of attacking.

[As expected of my lord.]

His face was void of any signs of exhaustion, even taking on a nonchalant expression, and it caused her to feel considerable admiration in her heart when she looked at him.

Brendel was carefully listening to the shrills around him. He swung his sword and prevented the Subterrane Dwellers from filling in the empty space in front of him, while he pricked his ears for a certain high-frequency wavelength.

A particularly antiquated language, similar to a variation of the dragon's language that should not be within a normal human's listening range.

However, in this world, the higher perception one had, the more frequencies and noises one could hear. Brendel's perception was 20 OZ, and he quickly caught that unique sound. The highest-ranking Elite Warriors within the Subterrane Dwellers were issuing orders to the lower ranking commanders with their unique methods.

Even though he did not understand their language, he was certain that the enemies would fall into chaos if he disrupted these hidden 'command posts'. It was one of the most common tactics within the gamers to aim for them.

He quickly locked down the sources and found at least three different voices. They were most likely ordering the fourth attempt to surround them.

“Scarlett,” he immediately shouted, “create an opening over to where I’m pointing.”

Scarlett looked over to where he was pointing at; there was a huge group consisting over one hundred Subterrane Dwellers that was forming a strong layered defense with no gaps.

It was evident that they realized Brendel’s intention.

However, their actions also made her realize that there was something important behind them. She tossed her ponytail hair to one side, and there was no need for more words; her spear swung onto the ground with a lightning trail!

The blinding light immediately pierced through the front defenders, then spread out like a fan to hit the person next to them. An explosive noise echoed into their ears.

The few front rows of defenders were burned into cinders from the intense heat while the rear was paralyzed.

Brendel’s narrowed eyes managed to spot the burly Elite Warriors once the opening was created in the wall of creatures. However, the two flanks were closing in and filling up the gaps of the wall, and there was only a short moment before the chance disappeared.

He immediately activated his Charge ability. His body blurred into a black line in an instant and separated away from Scarlett for the first time.

The black line leaped above the Subterrane Dwellers’ shoulders and bypassed them. When they finally reacted, they turned their heads and discovered that he had reached the highest-ranking Elite Warriors.

There were a total of six Camlu of the highest rank, and these purplish-red skinned creatures were smart enough to scatter in different directions when they discovered Brendel had broken through the defenses.

But the latter used his utmost efforts to strike them down, combining both the Power Break and the White Raven Sword Arte. A translucent distortion of eight meters swept through the air and cut through their bodies. The Camlu staggered as if they were drunk before they collapsed to the ground in a heap with their heads lopped off.

When Brendel turned around with his sword in hand, the Subterrane Dwellers

retreated away from him in utter fear.

Chapter 25
Expansion (6)

========== Tagiv's POV ==========

The ball of lightning exploded in the darkness like fireworks, and the combination of electricity and fire immediately penetrated past the first three Subterrane Dwellers and expanded out like a fan.

A group of Subterrane Dwellers collapsed.

Tagiv jumped up in fright. It was not because Scarlett's terrifying attack pressured him. He already knew that power at a Slavelord's level could increase many times with a concentrated blow. But what shook him was the fact that the Subterrane Dwellers' formations started to crumble.

[What's happening?!]

The Underworld creature's eyes darted around the battlefield and suddenly realized the sounds that commanded the battlefield had stopped.

[I lost six Camlu. These two humans seemed to know our ways of commanding the battlefield—]

Tagiv's heart suddenly pulsed faster, but he did not even have the time to mourn because the two humans had started to intersect each other and were killing a path towards him.

Their speed was exceedingly fast, and the disorganized Subterrane Dwellers could not stop them, and they closed in more than half the distance between them.

Tagiv naturally did not wait there for them to kill him and attempted to organize a defense by screaming at the nearest Camlu. The elite warriors tried to follow his orders, but the two humans accurately removed them. After several tries, the Witch Doctor gave up this meaningless attempt and furthermore it did not have that many Camlu to spend.

Tagiv was finally starting to become anxious after losing half his elite warriors. Time did not allow it to overthink. It glanced around; the Earth Spirit Bears were guarding him.

[It's time for these giants to be useful here. Even though they are the most powerful forces in our tribe, I don't want to die meaninglessly to the two humans nearing me with every step.]

It made a gesture. It was a magic blessing that enhanced creatures to gain even more combat prowess, with the price of temporarily stealing their sight. This spell raised the Earth Bear Spirits, which had the peak strength of an Iron-ranked fighter, to gain the abilities of a Silver-ranked fighter.

In truth, it was a subtype of Black Magic which did significant damage to the receiver. But Tagiv had no idea what it was exactly, as the shamanic abilities it had were derived from bloodlines. It was the blessing of the Cave Witch, and every Witch Doctor learned this as their first magic spell, without any regards to its fairness.

Tagiv raised its three bony fingers, poured out ashes onto the ground, and cast the Blind Blessing spell. This made the Earth Spirit Bears blind, but it did not affect their abilities because they had been trained to fight without any sight, and they were mostly unaffected.

Every Underworld citizen understood that eyesight was unnecessary.

Finally, Tagiv pointed out to the humans and uttered a guttural scream. Its orders were simple; they were to intercept the humans or at least block them, while it personally organized the Subterrane Dwellers.

The chieftain knew that the humans had limited stamina and had heard the woman's breaths becoming gradually heavier. It knew that they were fighting to see who could outlast each other. However, it believed that victory would belong to the Subterrane Dwellers.

The experience that was gained from hundreds and perhaps reaching a thousand-odd battles, made the Witch Doctor certain.

Tagiv listened to the Earth Spirit Bears' lumbering footsteps as they set off, and ordered its other guards to protect it while retreating. The level of its guards defending was almost laughable.

“These two accursed humans.” Tagiv spat out its words vehemently.

========== Brendel & Scarlett’s POV ==========

Scarlett felt she was exhausted and could no longer continue. She had never tried attacking an army all by herself, and while the idea of a Gold-ranked fighter unleashing havoc in a group of Iron-ranked fighters sounded good, she realized that her stamina was dipping at an incredible rate.

She recalled that she had killed nearly a hundred or even more. At first, she broke through the creatures like they were made out of paper, but as her stamina was slowly drained, she found that she was experiencing a sliver of dull pain in her body.

The lightning arc that reached meters wide from her halberd was already reduced to the extent where it merely reached her weapon length. She did not know how long she was going to last, and could only observe the enemies that were coming from everywhere. She took in large gulps of air, glanced at Brendel, and was impressed.

He was still taking on a nonchalant expression; his Element Power caused the ground to freeze with a layer of ice dust because of the low temperature. It still maintained its range ever since he used it, and the Subterrane Dwellers that approached him were forced back after a moment in its field.

Scarlett gritted her teeth, unwilling to lose, and followed after him.

But she did not know that Brendel was just as exhausted. No matter how much stats one was able to accumulate in the game, as long as that person did not attain a Perfect body, then he would never be able to avoid fatigue. It was still true even if one had mastered the usage of Element powers completely.

(TL: Gold-ranked, lvl 41-60. The rank above it is called “Realm of Extremes” 极之境界 lvl 80 or “Realm of Elements” 要素之境 lvl 61-80. Perfect Body is level 81 and above.)

His expressions that he took on like he was unaffected and able to use his Element freely, was because of a particular ability. With the increase of his level, the Unyielding talent had also increased in giving out additional traits. When he inspected his Stats Windows to find out the cause, he discovered with surprising delight—

‘As long as your stamina has not reached the Critical Exhaustion level, you would be

able to use your abilities as though you are at peak conditions.'

[This ability isn't included in the Overall Power Rating, but the practical usage is beyond imagination. If I don't have this, then I will have to pace my stamina like the battles in my past… But even though it sounds good, once I complete the Perfect Body stage, it will become quite useless.]

He felt a little helpless when he thought about it.

Still, the fact that he was able to maintain his strength was truly advantageous. The only exception to the rule of losing stamina was the races who possessed the Golden Lineage. Anyone else who battled continuously would have their Overall Power Rating diminished slowly.

He casually cleaved through the air once again along with his Element Power, and it sent him one step closer to the Critical Exhaustion line. When the dust finally settled, he had reached Tagiv's large group of Earth Spirit Bears.

[They're clad in a dark red aura? Hmmm, that's a blessing spell most commonly used by their Witch Doctors. It looks like Tagiv's pretty desperate, given that their Mana Pool isn't a lot.]

His victory was practically sealed.

He could not help but sigh with relief, and he turned back his head slightly towards Scarlett.

"Can you still go on?" He asked.

Scarlett smacked away a random Subterrane Dweller which had charged in blindly. She gasped for air and could not even muster the thought to answer the question.

"We… I… How much longer must we advance, my lord?"

Her answer showed that she had reached her limits. When she looked up, she was shocked to find a whole row Earth Spirit Bears marching towards them. They were like giant walls that blocked their path. Her face paled, and she took a moment before she clenched her teeth. She took a deep breath: "My lord, I believe you have an ability to accelerate?"

“Charge?” Brendel blinked blankly.

“Yes…”

“Why do you ask?”

“I, I’m just too tired. I’m afraid I have no more strength to continue moving forward…” Scarlett’s head bobbed up and down as she breathed heavily, but when she looked up at Brendel, her eyes said that she did not wish to lose. She clenched her teeth and said: “I’ll use the Seventh Chord to create an opening, and my lord, you can accelerate past the Earth Spirit Bears… They are called Earth Spirit Bears right?”

“What are you talking about, I wanted to ask you if you can give me a bit of time.” He shook his head.

“What?”

“I need thirty seconds.”

Her eyes were perplexed, but she ultimately nodded with resolution: “Of course I can.”

“Then I’ll leave it to you!” Brendel glanced at the ‘Wall of Earth Spirit Bears’, while Tagiv’s goat skull flag was moving further away. But success was right before his eyes…

========== Tagiv’s POV ==========

Tagiv was able to sense that Brendel and Scarlett had completely stopped, and thought that victory was almost in his hands. Even if there were two ‘Slavelords’, they had to be careful in handling twenty Earth Spirit Bears that had been enhanced with Blind Blessing.

Once the humans stopped moving, it would have enough time to command the frightened Subterrane Dwellers to surround them. In that way, their efforts would be wasted.

The Witch Doctor felt a little proud of his brilliance, but before he could order his Camlu to create a new defense line, there was something that surprised him through his hearing senses.

Instinct honed from the countless wars it had was warning him. His mind worked

quickly, and it raised its head as it sensed sound waves coming from above. There were unwelcomed beings in the air.

[The sound of… wings? But they are much bigger than the birds in the Surface. Wait, I suddenly remember… There's a legend about Giant Eagles which served the Elves?]

It now knew something was causing the unique distortion by flying. The sound was soft and a hint of chaotic beating, as though it was drumming the air and creating a whirlpool of wind.

Right at that moment, only Brendel and Scarlett and a few other creatures in Tagiv's army could see that two glowing angels with two radiant wings on their backs.

The Pristine Angels were descending from the sky and targeted Tagiv!

Chapter 26
Expansion (7)

========== Amandina's POV ==========

Amandina's hands were clasped tightly together in front of her chest as she silently watched the increase of the shadowy figures in the forest. Since the new month, the temperature in the night had greatly decreased, even though it was still quite a long way from Aouine's first snow.

Everyone's misty breath could be visibly seen, and there was a thin white mist that gathered around the lumber mill. The mercenaries rubbed their hands together as they shivered a little anxiously in the silent night.

Nearly every defender was up on the wooden walls. Despite Jana and Cornelius' forceful objections to leave some defenders at the gate, Amandina had rejected them because of Brendel's plans.

"What is going to happen if they attack the gate instead? This is a dangerous move to make if we don't secure our backlines!" Jana shouted.

Amandina had the strangest idea while she listened to the female commander's words.

[If Brendel deceives me and gets me killed I'll haunt him his whole life.]

When she realized what she was doing, her body jolted in surprise, and she blushed slightly. She felt a little warm and even gave a quiet laugh before she shook her head vigorously to get rid of that thought.

Jana glared at the noble young lady as she acted oddly, but she quickly received the latter's reply.

"These are the direct orders from our lord," Amandina said, and immediately destroyed Jana's good feelings that were built just minutes ago.

Jana trembled greatly from anger from the irresponsible reply and stormed away,

yelling at her subordinates. She muttered curses at the nobles under her breath, but if it were yesterday, she would have done it right in Amandina's face. In truth, she had subconsciously recognized Brendel's leadership and did not object to placing all their mercenaries on the wall.

[That youth must have his reasons for ordering us to defend the walls.]

Cornelius also stopped his objections when he heard Amandina's answer. When he went off to command his mercenaries, he spotted a faint smile on Raban's dark face and was slightly surprised.

"You already know?" He asked and was instinctively on his guard.

Raban seemed to see through that old fox's mind. He rubbed his nose without reacting to Cornelius's rude tone with a smile.

"That girl is calmer than both of us. Do you really think she's randomly ordering us around? The only one who could overwrite her orders… is probably that young lord of ours." He said.

"You have quite the discerning eyes." Cornelius scoffed.

Raban thought Cornelius was the same as him but did not mention it, as a veteran mercenary who noted the number of Subterrane Dwellers at timed intervals had come up to him to give his report, and the imposing commander quietly listened to his assessment.

There were nearly a thousand Subterrane Dwellers shifting about in the forest.

Everyone around Raban was on their guard when they listened in.

The stars were shimmering in the sky, while the moon which hung right beside them meant that it had just past midnight. Before Amandina faced the commanders' rebuttals, she had dealt with Romaine's endless bizarre questions, and now that it was quiet she stifled a yawn and was about to rub her tired eyes.

That was when she heard a series of odd piercing sounds; the mercenaries who were already armed with their crossbows suddenly launched their projectiles.

Amandina was startled, and her eyes darted around. She caught rows of Subterrane

Dwellers marching with appropriately placed Earth Spirit Bears raising their immense wooden shields, shielding them from the raining bolts.

“Anyone spotted if they have siege weapons?”

“No!”

“I don’t see them!”

The question asked by the mercenaries was mostly directed at their scouts who had keener eyesight. Everyone was relieved, but Amandina was immediately alert.

[My lord has once again predicted correctly!]

“Be on your guard; they will definitely attack the wall! Be prepared to knock them off if they jump up!” Amandina yelled to the surprised mercenaries who nodded after a moment.

The Subterrane Dwellers began to accelerate at around the mark of hundred and fifty meters. They first appeared as if they were jogging, but the mercenaries discovered the distance the Underworld creatures covered was alarmingly quick.

The three commanders ordered the mercenaries to cease firing and reload, then wait for their orders.

Hundred meters.

Fifty meters.

It was at that moment they gave the order to unleash the projectiles at their enemies. The hundred-odd projectiles which fired at the same time caused a loud ringing in everyone’s ears, and the concentrated firepower swept through the air like a sharp blade, striking against the Underworld creatures’ formations.

Their front few rows slowed their advance at the same time, as a few Subterrane Dwellers and Earth Spirit Bears fell over; there was a clear crack to their army’s defense.

But everyone already knew how ineffective the crossbows were against the enemies. Before they were able to reload their crossbows, the gap they had created was quickly

filled in by the Subterrane Dwellers. Very soon, they reached the wooden walls.

The lumber mill's walls were constructed with four layers of thick wood logs, and between the two layers were mud packed tightly between them. The three commanders thought that the Subterrane Dwellers utterly wasted these building materials, but when the Earth Spirit Bears slammed their wooden shields onto the reinforced walls, they immediately regretted ever considering that thought.

The gigantic clumsy-looking creatures took large strides and swung with their body weight, sending their shields crashing into the wall. Cracking sounds could be heard immediately, and certain sections tilted backward. The fact that a third of the wood logs were entrenched into the soil only made the Earth Spirit Bears' assault appear even more impressive.

The mercenaries nearly lost their bearings when they heard the walls creaking repeatedly, but Amandina's repeated yells warned and woke them up— The Subterrane Dwellers were capable of jumping up to the wall.

It was fortunate that they recovered quickly enough to knock down the leaping Subterrane Dwellers. However, this was apparently not their only option, as one of the mercenaries suddenly bellowed:

"They're digging a tunnel!"

The Nightsong Tiger got Amandina to move further back in so that he could inspect the enemies' movements. Indeed, they were digging under the Earth Spirit Bears' raised shields. Their speed in burrowing through the ground was shocking, and they were quite rightly reputed as 'citizens of the soil'.

There was no oil in the lumber mill, and even rocks were scarce. The mercenaries tried throwing down the largest wood logs they could find at them, but they were completely useless because of the Earth Spirit Bears' immense strength.

It was fortunate that there was a mercenary group who specifically worked in digging out multiple deep holes some distance away from the walls. They were dug out according to Brendel's instructions and reached several meters deep. The battle continued into the thirty minutes mark, and the first batch of Subterrane Dwellers who broke through the area quickly stumbled into the holes.

Because the creatures rushed out hurriedly, they were unable to read the area well

and continued to fall into the traps. When they tried to identify the situation they were in, the mercenaries were prepared and were waiting for them. Dozens of spears stabbed into them, and no matter how outstanding their abilities were, they were unable to fend the attacks off and ended up as pincushions.

After losing several tens of their men, the Subterrane Dwellers finally recognized that the attacks by the underground tunnels were not working. They had no choice but to choose a more violent way to assault the walls.

They began to stack on top of each other, and the mercenaries were shocked to discover they were forming into ladders.

It was an effective strategy, and the only drawback was that the Earth Spirit Bears would not be able to follow. Still, their wooden shields formed into a stable platform and allowed the Subterrane Dwellers to scale the walls much easier.

“Nets!” Amandina’s eyebrows went up when she discovered their new form of attack.

Raban and Cornelius immediately echoed Amandina’s words, and the mercenaries carried ‘nets’ formed by oil ropes out to the area. When the Subterrane Dwellers finished climbing over the wall, they found that the nets were cast over them and inhibited their movements. It would be quite laughable to use them against humans, but the Subterrane Dwellers were blind and had trouble identifying what had covered them. As the mercenaries were able to prey on their hindered movements and hesitation, the Underworld creatures immediately faced losses.

The three mercenary commanders were amazed at the effectiveness at countering the enemies. These strategies were simple and efficient, and it did not appear what a noble or knight would consider using. It was instead more similar to what a veteran mercenary would come up as an emergency solution, but the person who came up with these plans was a youth who was just twenty.

They would never know that the crystallizations of such ‘tactics’ were invented by gamers who experienced countless battles.

The mercenaries were able to stop the Subterrane Dwellers from having a proper foothold with the simple tool, but as the battle continued, the nets ultimately frayed and snapped, and the Subterrane Dwellers finally broke through. It was at that point the mercenaries had their first casualty, and from that point, the injuries and deaths

of the humans quickly increased.

In a confrontation, the advantages of the Subterrane Dwellers' combat prowess slowly became apparent.

The mercenaries continued to be pushed back slowly, and with the increase of the Subterrane Dwellers numbers, they lost their advantage as defenders and were nearly forced off the wall. The Underworld Creatures seemed like they were going to overrun the lumber mill. The sheer numbers they had simply covered all weaknesses they had.

Cornelius and Raban's forehead was full of cold perspiration, and they cast their gazes to Amandina at the same time. The only way to overturn this critical juncture was most likely with her. If she did not have any plans, then they could only rely on their own methods to end this battle.

The two commanders made the same decision at the same time.

Chapter 27
Expansion (8)

========== Brendel's POV ==========

The battle suddenly stopped in the valley, and the no one uttered a sound.

The only irregularity that broke the silence was the wings cutting through the air. Tagiv's reactions were swift. The spellcasters of the Underworld had to deal with Harpy Witches or sub-dragon types, and anti-air spells were passed down from generation to generation; most of them were similar to the spell that Tagiv was casting.

The Witch Doctor raised two hands, combining a thumb, forefinger and middle finger to form a triangle.

"Tasdam! (Domain of Stagnation)" Tagiv's shriek accurately voiced out the two keywords. The Witch Doctor's anti-air spell was the usage of Rune Words. Legend depicted that these two Rune Words were uniquely controlled by the Northern Wind Witch, before she lost them on the continent, ended up spreading widely and allowing mortals to use them.

[The northern curse to wrestle the control of air away.]

Brendel recognized the Rune Words. Depending on the spellcaster's abilities, the level of control would be different. A low-level Witch Doctor like Tagiv would only be able to affect ten flying units, and he would not be able to cast it a second time.

He glanced at the angels and indeed saw them being locked by some invisible curse. Their wings stopped their movements, and they fell from the height of a few meters, crashing heavily onto the ground.

Dust flew all over the area.

"What!" Scarlett saw the same thing and shouted involuntarily. But she was directly struck by an Earth Spirit Bear's flail once her attention was divided.

“Don’t divide your attention. The angels are fine.” Brendel caught the staggering Scarlett. His expression was evident; he did not care about the summoned angels. He casually turned his gaze at her wounds and asked: “How are your injuries?”

Scarlett shook her head. Even after the Earth Spirit Bear’s increase of strength, it still would not be able to do much damage to a Gold-ranked fighter, especially when she was a God’s Acolyte. Her recovery and defensive abilities were one notch above the norm.

Brendel nodded and helped her up and frowned at the wall of Earth Spirit Bears. Tagiv was probably going to face a dire situation but they were no better off.

“We’re retreating.” He glanced at the enemies around him and said.

[Retreat? Do you really trust the angels so much?]

Scarlett blinked. They had spent a tremendous amount of effort to carve out a bloody path to the enemy leader who was less than a hundred meters away, would it not be a complete waste of time if they retreat from here? She could hardly believe that the angels would be able to subdue or kill Tagiv when they lost their ability to fly.

“My lord?”

“Obey my order,” Brendel answered in a low growl.

Scarlett hesitated for a moment before she nodded.

At the other end, Tagiv was truly indeed in trouble, just like Brendel predicted.

As a Witch Doctor and a reigning chieftain, it had experienced many things, and encountering aerial creatures in the Underworld was part of them. It felt slightly proud that it managed to bring down what he thought as Giant Eagles. It had read in books that these Giant Eagles were much bigger and violent compared to a Harpy Witch.

It knew that these aerial creatures had one common point, once they lost their abilities to fly, their movements on the ground were almost non-threatening.

Tagiv even took a step forward so that it could experience the echolocation better and ‘see’ the Giant Eagles for the very first time, with the notion of witnessing the two

invaders' troubled situation as well. It could almost imagine the clumsy eagles beating their wings helplessly.

It was evident that Tagiv had never heard of griffins or angels, or even the famous dragons.

This mistake was fatal and irrecoverable. If the Witch Doctor recalled the Earth Spirit Bears, there would be a chance for them to block the angels' path.

The first thing Tagiv heard was something different. The two 'Giant Eagles' that were knocked down dashed towards its direction at inconceivable speed beyond his imagination.

Tagiv then realized that it was in great trouble. There were only a few Camlu and Subterrane Dwellers guarding him, and they were no match for the angels.

Soon enough, Tagiv 'saw' that its guards were defeated with a few strokes of their sword swings, and two cold blades were placed on his necks. They were clearly not Giant Eagles but humanoid figures possessing intelligence. It quickly realized their intentions, and it raised its head proudly to silence their possible words.

"I… will… not surrender," Tagiv spoke in Kirrlutz.

It had studied the language after it met up with Graudin, but the two angels' lips never opened to answer it.

The Subterrane Dwellers in the battlefield momentarily paused when Tagiv spoke. Even though it spoke in a quiet voice, nearly all of them heard it. Brendel detected the change, and when he looked over at Tagiv's direction, he could no longer see the striking goat-skull that hovered in the air.

However, the Earth Spirit Bears did not stop moving as they were less intelligent to pick up the change. Brendel and Scarlett had to keep retreating as the hulking creatures continued to attack them.

Brendel pulled Scarlett who was drenched in her perspiration to avoid a swinging flail, and carefully swung a measured strike to prevent himself from reaching Critical Exhaustion, but also made sure it was strong enough to force the hulking giants back.

However, he felt a bout of dizziness after his swing.

“My lord?” Scarlett was startled when she saw his body sway.

“I’m fine. We reached our destination.”

She took a long look at her surroundings. They were at the edge of the battlefield.

“What are we going to do now?” She asked with a little confusion. Even though the enemies’ leader was downed, retreating here did not solve their problems. Even if Tagiv were killed here, the Subterrane Dwellers at the lumber mill would continue their task. His plan did not seem like it was working.

Brendel whistled loudly in response. Very quickly, a streak of silver came dashing out from the dark forest.

It was the Silver Colt.

========== Amandina’s POV ==========

Amandina nodded at Cornelius and Raban’s gazes.

“Send your orders to your magicians to prepare their spells.” She said calmly.

Even though the nearest Subterrane Dwellers were mere meters away, she still kept her eyes on the wall’s strongest area of contention between the mercenaries and the creatures.

“Wait!” Jana’s voice came from behind.

A few turned their heads back and saw her sword cutting down a Subterrane Dweller. She had been commanding on the southern wall and had came back with difficulty by leaving a mountain of corpses behind her.

Almost every spellcaster in the area came from her mercenaries, and she knew her men would be effectively useless if they cast the spell. Jana was afraid that Amandina and the other two commanders did not know that fact.

“Amongst the spellcasters, only a few of them are capable of using the Silence spell. If you’re going to pool everyone’s mana to increase the spell’s Area of Effect, you’re going to use every bit. My point is, we only have one chance to use it and our magicians are going to be useless, are you certain you want to use it here?” She took in a deep breath

and finished her words in one go.

“There are no other options. If we abandon the wall, this battle will be our immediate loss.” Cornelius said.

“Taking the chance and driving them off here will allow us to gain more time.” Raban followed up.

“And what next?” Jana asked Amandina in a serious tone.

“Next—” Amandina looked up at the moon. It was already after midnight. She looked back calmly at her and said: “There’s no next. The only thing left to do is to wait for our lord to bring back news of our victory.”

The answer made everyone stare at her wide eyes.

Chapter 28
Expansion (9)

========== Amandina's POV ==========

"They're retreating," Jana said.

Her face was painted heavily with blood, and she sat down tiredly opposite to Amandina. There were a few flecks of blood on the latter's pale face, and even though her black eyes still had vestiges of apprehension, she had forcefully calmed herself down.

The Silence spell was not as effective as they had imagined. They thought it would bring about a miracle, but they soon discovered that it was not the case. When the Subterrane Dwellers realized the spell had affected them, most of them charged forward and nearly broke through their defensive line by overwhelming them with numbers.

The mercenaries had lost their chance to drive the invaders off. It was at that critical juncture where Raban led his men into a do-or-die charge, swept the enemies off the walls and stayed there as a final stand.

The Subterrane Dwellers suffered significant casualties and understood that they could not continue and started to retreat. Everyone's heart was rapidly beating when they did so, and the mercenaries panted heavily.

No one on their side went on to count the injured and the dead. It was meaningless. If there were no miracle on the enemies' next assault, it would be impossible to fend them off.

"They will come again." Raban also sat down because his whole body was completely sore. After he glanced up at the moon, he spoke again: "Their next attack would probably come before dawn at the latest. There is definitely a second round of reinforcements."

"Anyone have any ideas?" Cornelius asked.

No reply came.

Even Amandina who firmly believed in Brendel's plans realized that the battle was much more dangerous than she thought, and she did not have the confidence to encourage the mercenaries to believe in him. After clearing her thoughts, she realized that the one that stuck out the most was whether she was going to die in this place.

After a moment of reflection, she calmed down again. If it were not for Brendel, she would have most likely died alone in her old home that was dark and cold.

"We mercenaries are here to do the very best we can and then leave it up to fate," Raban grinned, "we have been through many life-and-death situations. The next time they attack again, we will open the gate and lead our men to break out from this siege. Whether we're going to die here or live to see another day, will be on Mother Marsha's decision to bless us or not."

Cornelius gave a wry smile that served to mock himself. He shook his head and turned towards Amandina:

"With this, lady Amandina, we have answered Lord Brendel's orders, right?"

Amandina took a moment to think before she nodded: "I thank everyone here."

"That's not necessary." Jana interrupted: "We're just willing to believe in that bastard this once. Don't worry, even if he doesn't appear, I won't leave you two behind."

Romaine was sitting nearby, and her hands were wrapped around her knees to fend off the cold. She blinked her large, brown round eyes and nodded earnestly: "Thank you, you're a nice person." But she smiled and continued: "But Brendel will definitely come. He has never exaggerated, ever. If he says he can do it, then he will be able to do it."

"You trust a lot in him, girl." Jana paid attention to her for the first time.

"In truth," Amandina said a moment of hesitation: "I also believe in his words—"

"It seems like our young lord has overflowing charisma; to be able to charm you two beautiful girls to this extent," Raban's grin turned lopsided and teased them: "if I have the same capabilities like him I will be able to die satisfied."

Cornelius scoffed at his words. He was quite the playboy amongst the mercenaries, and if this brute managed to charm the beautiful girls out there, then every other guy should just knock their heads against a pillar and commit suicide.

Amandina lowered her head in silence and maintained a noble lady's conduct against Raban's crude manners. But Romaine raised her pair of little eyebrows and waved her hands vigorously while blushing: "Wrong, wrong, that's not the reason I believe in Brendel!"

"Then what reason is it?" Jana asked curiously.

Amandina also pricked up her ears. She had joined in later than Romaine did, and there seemed to be many stories between the young lord and the latter. She had made past inquiries regarding his past, but only heard stories right up to the time where he joined up with the Bronze Dragon, Leto.

She wanted to know how Brendel came to be, from the start of Madara's invasion. Romaine was also from the same village, and there was also an air of mystery about her. The only story that she heard from Brendel was another girl named Freya, and the latter had left the group a while ago. She had no idea what happened to her since he never explained.

"You don't understand," the merchant girl displayed a smug and mysterious smile subconsciously, her eyes bright, "when Brendel led me out to escape from Bucce, his eyes had changed, and he became a manly person. My aunt frequently told me that a manly person would always be responsible for their promises, and I had to find a person like that who's willing to protect me."

"That's… your reason?" Jana looked exasperated.

Raban pondered thoughtfully on the actions that Brendel did and compared them to the things he promised in the past. But Cornelius merely made a booing sound and spoke with a disgusted huff:

"From the time I have been traveling I have not seen a noble that I consider as a manly person. If any of their sons actually have a real pair of balls, I'll give them my thumbs up—"

Many mercenaries around him also agreed with his assessment. Amandina did not rebuke him for his rudeness but quietly thought about Bucce. When she wanted to

inquire further, a mercenary from the other end of the wall stopped their conversation and brought out new information:

“Commanders, there seems to be movement within the forest. The scouts say that the Subterrane Dwellers look like they are going to attack again.”

Everyone was unsettled at the enemies’ speed. The earlier warm atmosphere was gone and replaced with a dark cold dread that enveloped everyone. The mercenaries were looking at each other with great uncertainty. Even Amandina felt she was short of breath despite her earlier claim in believing Brendel.

The clouds in the sky happened to cover the moon as if to signify the hope that was extinguished in their hearts.

========== Brendel’s POV ==========

Their captured leader had completely surprised all the Subterrane Dwellers.

The Silver Colt easily leaped over the enemies, and once its hooves touched the ground, Scarlett lightly landed beside Tagiv.

The Subterrane Dwellers at the edge of the battlefield were rushing over to their chieftain’s aid. One of the angels stood in their paths and struck down the nearest Subterrane Dweller.

Scarlett frowned and felt the urgency to finish things quickly. She pointed her halberd in front of the Witch Doctor—

“Get them to stop.”

“I… die, you will, not live too,” Tagiv spoke in broken Kirrlutz.

She paused for a moment before she scoffed coldly and pretended to answer calmly: “Stop your foolishness! Do not forget we have a flying horse,” she brought her weapon closer to its neck, “I’ll give you one more chance, order them to stand down!”

Tagiv hesitated in its mind. It was afraid of death, but it felt that things were not as simple as they looked, so it decided to gamble: “In that case, please send me off to meet with Lord Siaa—”

Siaa was a deity in the Subterrane Dwellers' legends. It was depicted as a gargantuan lizard that lived in the Realm of Earth Elements.

[What deity. That's just a mythical subdragon, confirmed by gamers.]

"Don't think that I don't dare to kill you!" Scarlett's ire was raised, and she kicked it forcefully, making it bend over to the ground with both hands extended.

But this kick confirmed its suspicions. It became less afraid and patted its hands to remove the dust on them: "I believe… you can run away, but, your companions in the forest… might not be safe?"

"You—" Scarlett's words were silenced. She did not expect the Witch Doctor to confirm what she was thinking. She could not admit to it, but she had no idea what she could do.

"Which faction do you belong to?" Brendel took over the conversation and looked down at Tagiv from above: "Toland or Dragontongue city?"

His words immediately incited a reaction from Tagiv who quickly shut its lips. Even though it had no eyes, it involuntarily raised its head up towards him. If there was a description of its expression, then that would be as if it had encountered a poisonous snake.

Tagiv belonged to a faction which was the sworn enemy of Toland city. It was clear that the youth knew the Underworld well, and it suddenly felt like its advantages were extracted out of it. It had no choice but to take a second look the two humans again that it thought as unintelligent.

This was the first time a human had the right to negotiate with it.

[Where did this male human come from? If he knows about Toland and Dragontongue city, does he have any relationship with our accursed rivals? But he should be aware that we don't have strong ties to our tribes once we are separated from the main group. It's a common thing in the Underworld so why would he pursue this line?]

Chapter 29
Expansion (10)

The Subterrane Dwellers were not unintelligent creatures and stopped their aggressive actions because they detected a change in their leader's attitude. Even though Tagiv had not ordered them to cease talking, they understood their rash actions might cause them to lose their chieftain. The two angels were also a factor, of course.

The more time Tagiv took to think, the more satisfied Brendel was.

He wanted to shock the Witch Doctor to make sure it was not conceited. The cities Toland and Dragontongue were common areas that led to the surface near Trentheim. Thus he guessed the Subterrane Dwellers came from this two places. While this knowledge came naturally to him, the people in this world would probably view it as a secret.

After breaking down Tagiv's pride, he continued to threaten it with a harsh tone: "The humans do not welcome you Underworld creatures!"

"I did not wish… to intervene, in your world." Tagiv had to temper his tone.

It was not exactly a lie. Even though it once had the ambitious plan to take advantage of the weak humans, it canceled it because of their numbers. Aouine had a population of millions, and this information was beyond its imagination.

The fact that the weak leader named Graudin actually governed hundred of thousands of citizens and still considered as a small lord made Tagiv greatly surprised. In its homeworld, only a mighty leader like a Slavelord which had a powerful military might would be able to hold that many citizens. The Toland and Dragontongue cities were also examples.

"Is that true?" Brendel refused to acknowledge his words: "But it seems like you, great chieftain, are acting differently from your words. The woods that you occupy are lands that the humans have occupied since the Age of Divinity—"

He said it as though it was fact but quickly realized there were issues with his statements. He corrected himself:

"No, I'll change my wording. These four lumber mills are part of my wealth, and I don't intend to even lend it to you for one minute, let alone accepting your occupying of them."

"Your wealth?" Tagiv repeated the words blankly. It had met Graudin a few times, and it did not believe that the youth was the actual owner of Trentheim, Count Randner.

"Yes, they are mine… for now," Brendel nodded.

"Then, what exactly, is it you want?" Tagiv's head moved towards the angel's sword and Scarlett's halberd, seeing them through echolocation.

"I'll give you two choices. One, go back where you come from."

Tagiv shook its head, the feathers all over his body shaking. A branch tribe which lost a battle would mean certain death for the chieftain… Unless it was willing to surrender to its sworn rival. It rejected this possibility a long time ago.

"The second choice?" It asked.

"It seems like you and your tribe members have lost a battle in the Underworld if you're unwilling to go back… Even if you go back and become successful in the future, you would be working for others. If that is the case, why not switch over to a new point of view? How about this; why not become my citizens? I know your rules, and you pledge loyalty to me, I can promise to let your tribe continue to go about without my interference."

Tagiv had guessed what the youth was thinking but refused to believe that it would happen. He actually wanted it to become subordinates and sell out its entire tribe to him. Even though the youth truly understood how the Underworld function, getting the Subterrane Dwellers to surrender was remarkably hilarious.

What exactly did he have in him to demand its whole tribe to swear loyalty to him?

Both options were just as bad as each other. Tagiv looked down on humans, but surrendering to a rival tribe was beyond frustrating.

[But it's possible that this human doesn't really intend to let us go back. If I say no, these blades might end up cutting me to pieces.]

The Witch Doctor hesitated for a long time, and Brendel continued to wait. Scarlett was silent and her expression was even gloomier compared to the two people in front of her. She was worried. If this damned creature said no, then what would her lord do?

He had no other way to stop the battle at the lumber mill, and the Subterrane Dwellers would continue attacking Amandina and the others. Even if they killed every single one of them, it would be too late to save the others. She exhaled lightly and had sweat on her palms when she realized this fact.

Brendel's hand had never left his sword's hilt. Tagiv's guess was not wrong. If it said no, then it would go through an unthinkable fate.

He was not as worried as Scarlett, because he intended to force or trick Tagiv into accepting a new proposal if it refused. The hundred Wealth in his mind was already set and ready to be used. Tagiv would become a card if it rejected him.

Even though it was a different way of solving things, the tribe would still submit under him. He needed this force as a secretive backup. Regardless of Lord Macsen or Lord Palas, they would not be of any threat to him if he had the Subterrane Dwellers.

(TL: Both are Count Randner's men in Trentheim possessing an army each.)

The strength of three thousand Iron-ranked fighters would leave Trentheim with a voice in the political arena, and Count Randner would never be able to predict this outcome.

His heart started beating faster. The thorny road extended in front of him had become crystal clear for the first time. It was the first time he felt such a strong ability to change the future ever since he arrived in this world.

After a few more minutes, the chieftain finally lifted its head up shakily. The feathers around its body trembled as though they had made a huge decision and it opened its mouth.

A chilly wind blew across the entire forest, causing the pine trees to rustle loudly, overpowering the words that would change Trentheim and Aouine's history.

The youth's expression became softer, and he nodded.

"It's good that you decided—"

And his second sentence was: "Because you would find that you have gained much more than what you have lost."

The mercenaries who participated in the lumber mill's battles did not understand how they won the night.

Days soon passed, and Firburh gradually went back to a certain hushed and stable state like before. A week-long battle was finished in a dramatic single day.

The Subterrane Dwellers had the complete advantage in terms of numbers and geography, yet not only did they retreat, they even gave up their occupied lumber mills and surrendered their territory.

At such a near-miraculous result, the mercenaries had completely changed their view on Brendel. In their hearts, he had become a mysterious figure who could achieve anything. Even though the mercenaries' commanders had their questions, they ultimately chose to submit to him without any conditions.

Brendel did not immediately rearrange their armies. The first thing he did was to have the Viridien village stay in the lumber mills, and produce timber for Firburh, and hasten the date to repair the walls.

The next thing he did was to enforce the tax exemption and create new ways to revitalize Firburh's destitute farms. The citizens could not believe what they were seeing. Instead of acquiring taxes, the lord was actually spending money on the lands.

He smirked when he thought that the citizens were probably betting on how long he would stay as the city's lord. The table he was sitting in was filled with papers containing reports on Graudin's wealth. Perhaps only the gods would know how much time the former lord spent on Trentheim's affairs.

He continued to work on the paperwork before him with a smile.

Chapter 30
Expansion (11)

The morning's daylight broke through the clouds, but there were still remnants of the cold air from yesterday's night, and white mist could be seen from the men and horses' mouths. Winter was coming to Trentheim.

A group consisting of humans and horses passed through the mountain valley. Their surroundings were filled with greenery, but the scenery from afar was almost ink-black, almost as if it was painted with dark palettes. Somewhere past the fog were mountains filled with verdant green foliage, creating a strong contrast between the mountain peaks and valleys.

There were a total of thirty-odd men, each fully covered with armor and weapons. However, they were not from Aouine's formal armies but mercenaries.

In Trentheim, the only places where Aouine's formal armies were at: The Palas Region, or Graham's northern mountains where Graudin's most elite knights were stationed.

After the men passed through the valley, they entered a small clearing within the forest. Another group of men was guarding a bunch of crestfallen youths. When the latter noticed the incoming group, they raised their heads and saw the group's leader, a middle-aged noble.

All but one looked at him restlessly; the youth who was the exception amongst the group looked slightly frustrated.

The middle-aged noble, Lord Macsen, was riding on his favorite horse. It was a stout black horse with a smooth mane and a purebred from the north and had accompanied him through thick and thin. Even though it was already aged and no longer as quick as before, he was still affectionate to it.

(TL: I just want to point out one thing, Lord Macsen's real name is Samuel, but since he's in charge of the Macsen region, he's called Lord Macsen.)

He bade his horse up to move up to the youths and glared at them without speaking.

A few days ago, he received the report of a rebellion in Firburh. This cautious noble did not march straight to his lord as it was forbidden for retainers to bring their private soldiers without orders. Only when he was certain that the news was accurate had he ordered his knights to march.

The Macsen region was close to Firburh, and an army could reach there by nightfall if they started in the day. He gathered his army overnight and left the next morning, and entered Port Gris. The scouts who went ahead had reported that it was not occupied, and the towns nearby had not heard any news from Firburh. Even after traveling for another ten miles, there were still no signs of any rebellion.

Lord Macsen was not surprised. The news he received stated that there were only a few groups of mercenaries that participated in the uprising in Firburh. He believed these mercenaries to be no different from lawless bandits who did whatever they wanted and probably left the city after looting it.

He even thought that he was too paranoid for checking the port. Only people who wanted to occupy the city would control the port; they were just a bunch of mercenaries who loved wealth and would not wait in the city to be exterminated.

He was originally worried that Madara might be involved as the Undead's army was still lurking somewhere at the southern border, but once he saw enough reports, he was confident of the situation.

It was nothing more than a simple rebellion.

Lord Macsen was relieved at that moment. But his good mood did not last a long time after his confidant gave frustrating news to him, and it was the cause of why he had to bring thirty of his men in this forest.

His youngest son, Carglise, was wearing a light brown cloak that hid most of his clothes, but it was clear that he was bearing a longsword. Lord Macsen favored him the most out of his three sons because the youth displayed quick wits and excellent swordsmanship. He had placed in much effort on him, but the latter refused to accept his efforts and was constantly lazy and playful.

In the end, Lord Macsen sent him to the neighboring county, but not only did it not cure his attitude, he even came back with a streak of ridiculous ideas after he received an education.

When he learned that Carglise had brought along his subordinates and servants, he went into a fury and ordered his men to capture him.

“Speak,” Lord Macsen asked as he glared from above: “Why did you sneak out?”

“I’m too bored, father.” Carglise raised his head and was unaffected by his father’s dominating pressure.

“Hmph, didn’t you want to experience what war feels like? I’ll bring you along this once. But I want the truth from you.”

“War? They’re just a bunch of civilians. How can this be considered a war?” The youth gave a faint smile and said disdainfully, but his tone turned serious: “Very well, father, did you know that there are rumors that princess Gryphine had gone back to her lands and are gathering her knights—”

Lord Macsen took a pause. Even though he was also considered a noble, he was of a lowly rank and would not even be factored in as a pawn in the political chessboard. He did, however, hear of the rumors in the north.

“And why does it concern you?” He asked.

“Of course it does,” the youth said excitedly: “this would be a battle that decides the kingdom’s fate. I decided to cast my lot in this moment of history, and serve the princess—”

Lord Macsen did not expect his son to have this ambition. He took a short while before he spoke again: “Ridiculous. You have never left Trentheim. Do you know where the princess is? Or what’s happening in the current political affairs?”

“I have my ways.” Carglise was full of confidence.

Lord Macsen had no answer. His son was smart, and he might really find a way. He shook his head and ignored that thought: “I don’t care if you have your ways, you should be thinking of ways to convince me—”

“Father, there will be times where you won’t be able to keep me from leaving, so why don’t you give me your blessings to become someone of importance in Aouine? The titles that your generation have in Trentheim are your accomplishments. To me, a true knight should gain their achievements through wars—”

“Wars? Have you ever seen one?” Lord Macsen could not help but mock his son. He had followed Graudin as a knight when he was young, and the wars he had made him a cynical and careful man. In front of his son’s seemingly romantic notions of wars, he had nothing but scorn.

[Hold on— My son was taught by Lord Palas when I sent him over to the neighboring county. Even though he doesn’t have a famous reputation, he’s a first-rate veteran in Trentheim.]

On Graham’s mountains, Lord Palas led his army and defended against other nobles’ attacks, and faced constant battles against bandits and the occasional undead in the south. The occasional civil trouble in Trentheim would be akin to docile lambs to him. Anyone in this region would recognize him as a strict military man.

After thinking for a while, he recalled that his son had also fought over land disputes. In terms of leading a battle, his son might be as good as him.

“Very well, I’ll give you a chance to show me that you can do it.”

“What exactly?” The youth was thrilled.

“Become my assistant and show me your performance. If you’re capable of undertaking this position and excel in it, I’ll let you leave.” Lord Macsen’s mind obviously thought otherwise, but he did not wish to waste time arguing and wanted to deal with him after the upcoming battle is over.

[Maybe I should throw him to Lord Palas since he likes wars so much.]

While there were rumors that he was on bad speaking terms with Lord Palas, it was actually untrue.

But the youth realized what his father was thinking, and he rolled his light blue eyes before he smiled again: ” Father, these people are just a group of unruly civilians. Are you not making a mountain out a molehill?”

“Oh? Does your confidence come from studying combat tactics under Lord Palas?” Lord Macsen suddenly realized that it was a good idea to waste his son’s energy. He had heard of an unfounded rumor and decided to goad him: “I’ve heard the leader of the rebels is a young man too. He’s around the same age as you, but he’s actually leading the mercenaries despite the veterans amongst them. You, on the other hand,

are just boasting all the time. Now that I'm giving you a chance to prove yourself and you're not taking it?"

Lord Macsen was not truly concerned as to who led the rebels, but he wanted to tie his son down.

"A trick like this wouldn't work on a knight, father," Carglise said, but his interested expressions betrayed him, "but fine, I'll agree to your terms and see who this person is."

Lord Macsen's face was stoic, but he was laughing inside. However, his smugness was gradually turned into another sigh.

[The young people are just too impulsive.]

Chapter 31
Expansion (12)

========== Carglise's POV ==========

Lord Macsen went back to his camp to command his subordinates after he solved the sudden situation that had cropped up.

He was thankful that he was fighting against an unruly mob. If the enemy's leader led his army out to fight an open battle, he would not be able to take time out to capture his reckless son and change his mind.

Once Lord Macsen turned his back, Carglise's servants and subordinates surrounded him. They gave a relieved sigh. They were around the same age as the youth and inquired inquisitively like children: "Young master, are we going to war?"

Carglise nodded and smirked: "Of course we are. Our enemies are just a bunch of villagers in this uprising. How can they be stronger than Aouine's formal army? Remember this; the future enemies might be the kingdom's true elites. As for this rebelling mob, we will have them become the first stepping stone for our future—"

"But based on our Lord's description, the enemy leader seems to be an incredible person!"

"Calm down, no matter how brilliant a commoner might be, they would be limited in their insight," Carglise scoffed, "also, it's not as if I don't understand what my father is trying to do here. Does he truly believe I can't tell he's delaying me? His words are possibly false, and the enemy leader isn't accomplished at all. But that's fine; once I refute everything my father said, I'll be able to see what other excuses he can come up with!"

He curled his lips into a cunning smile as he watched Lord Macsen's body gradually disappear from the forest.

========== Brendel's POV ==========

Brendel continued to work in his room, but there was a commotion outside that became louder over time. He frowned and finally stood up, went over to an arched window and looked down to the courtyard.

He quickly discovered the master craftsman Bosley, Amandina and the mercenary commanders arguing. Medissa was trying to stop them from doing so, while Scarlett was lying against a tree with her halberd, biting on a blade of grass and appeared to be uninterested in the quarrel.

"What's going on?"

He did not understand what they were arguing about, but after a moment of hesitation, he decided to check it out for himself. It was not a good thing for his core subordinates to fight.

After he opened the door, a dark shadow charged into the room with two hands extended out with the intention to push open the door. If his reactions were any slower, they would have collided. He jumped backward while Felaern stopped herself and took several steps back. She calmed down before handing out a piece of paper, and spoke in a crisp voice: "My lord! An urgent message!"

"What is it?" Brendel knitted his brows as he stared at the paper. He wondered what kind of unfortunate day he was going to have as events seemed to start piling up. He took the piece of paper and closed the door, while he studied the message's content, before speaking in surprise: "Samuel's troops have gone past Port Gris?"

The name Samuel was Lord Macsen's real name.

Before the battle with the Subterrane Dwellers, he had sent scouts near Port Gris. When Lord Macsen's army finished their journey over the river, the news had already reached Brendel's hands.

"Yes, my lord." Felaern nodded.

"Based on the previous reports, he must have gathered his soldiers yesterday. This is much faster than what Ciel had predicted. This fellow isn't simple—" Brendel could not help but praise him.

Ciel had great insight to Aouine's politics and understood the nobles' deployment speed the best amongst his advisors. Based on his judgment, Lord Macsen would not ignore the rules, and even delay his approach as the majority of the nobles were cowards or reluctant to send out their army. But it seemed like Lord Macsen's commanding abilities were much better than many low-ranking nobles.

The only 'noble' who would ignore the rules was Brendel who came from another world, naturally.

"How many men do they have?" Brendel asked.

"A few hundred, but the numbers don't exceed a thousand," Felaern answered with her usual stoic expression, "but Cornelius's scouts did not venture too far past Port Gris, so they don't know if there are going to be reinforcements."

"No, that's all the men he has," Brendel shook his head and smiled wryly, "Samuel is just a retainer, how many men would he have? But to gather only a few hundred men instead of borrowing more, it seems like he's looking down on us…"

"I would rather have everyone look down on us, instead of the odd idea of wanting to fight more enemies, my lord." She looked at him and refuted him.

Brendel smiled in response and was about to drop the topic before he suddenly thought of something.

"Come to think of it; I remember there are several areas in the river towards Mountain Graham that are shallow. Surely the scouts would be able to avoid the enemies' eyes from there and check whether there are reinforcements, right?"

"Yes, but they would be risking their lives."

"This is why the mercenaries are no match for a formal army. Ahh, but I'm not referring to you."

"The Mercenaries of Lopes are not that different either." She replied.

"Well, leaving that aside, what's going on down there in the courtyard?"

"I don't know—" Felaern shook her head. She had seen the quarrel as well when she walked into the building, but she had a disinterested disposition and did not care

about things unrelated to her.

Brendel nodded and did not ask further. He left the room and walked down the spiral staircase as she followed behind him, reflecting on the state of his army.

Even though the mercenaries worked for money, they did not act as involved compared to actual soldiers. They saw wars as transactions and only accomplished as much as the money paid to them.

The majority of the mercenaries tend to only follow their orders and were mostly used to pad the army's numbers. Graudin was an exception who abused his position to use them and bully the citizens into submission. Very few nobles would treat them as their main force, even if their quality and experience were excellent.

In a real war, discipline was the most important aspect. This was also the reason as to why Brendel did not regroup his mercenaries. The veteran mercenaries' undisciplined characteristics were very difficult to change, so he decided to integrate them all into The Amber Sword Mercenaries, and allowed them to what they do best on their own in a war. *(TL: In case you can't remember, Brendel rescued mercenaries from way back, Leto and the others, are The Amber Sword Mercenaries.)*

As for the make-up of his formal army, he would recruit the natives and take a few men with extraordinary potential from the mercenaries, and did not plan to place the mercenaries in important positions. Currently, the ideas on his armies were very rough, and he had just started building a corner of the blueprints he had in his mind.

In his eyes, he was in a complicated position.

[The pressure that I'm facing isn't small. Samuel has already set out with his soldiers, and I'm still nothing more than a pilgrim on his journey. Putting aside Randner's forces that would dwarf my own multiple times, even Palas and the cavalry under him would be enough to cause me trouble—]

At this moment, he was unable to put eyes in the north, but he was certain that 'Merciful Knight Palas' had received news of Graudin's defeat and was preparing to gather his forces. Knowing that man's loyalty to Graudin, he was certain that his army would move at the quickest possible time to reach him.

[I'm not completely worried about Palas commanding Graudin's most elite riders, but it's a pity to defeat them. They are Trentheim's true soldiers who trained for battle

since they were young. If only I could use them…]

He obviously knew that it was wishful thinking, and after a moment he crushed the paper into a ball and put it into the bag on his belt. He understood that building up his army had to be done step by step, and there was no point thinking about it.

[Well, I'm not surprised at Samuel sending out his army, but my battle with the Subterrane Dwellers wasn't pointless. The river extends to the Firburh's forest, but Tagiv and his men have already controlled that area.]

Brendel did not need to overthink about Lord Macsen's fate. A few hundred private soldiers and a handful of knights going up against thousands of Subterrane Dwellers and his own mercenaries as reinforcements. It was easy to know what the results were going to be.

Brendel and Felaern walked out of the entrance hall and into the courtyard. The area had been cleaned up the previous time where he made a mess by unleashing a Sword Arte, and even the benches and tables were changed.

The quarreling noises were becoming clearer, and words could be picked out.

Brendel first saw Romaine sitting down at one end of the long table with her body hunched over it; she was wearing a strange pair of glasses, with both elbows pressed against a big pile of parchments, while she seemed to be copying something—

The arguments did not get her attention, but when she heard the footsteps behind her, she abruptly turned around. When she saw the young man, she immediately got up and yelled: "Brendel!"

Brendel gave an exasperated sigh and picked off the glasses from the girl's narrow nasal bridge: "What are you doing exactly with this look?"

"Accounting." She lifted her chin up and answered as if it was the most natural thing.

Brendel's eyes went wide in a moment of comprehension before nodding. Graudin's private wealth and trophies were naturally taken over by 'Lord Brendel' when the latter took over Firburh, and there was still money left over after paying the mercenaries and investing in the city.

Chapter 32
Expansion (13)

The wealth Graudin left behind was handled quite messily. Brendel had left the management of it entirely to Amandina, which she then allowed Romaine to use the wealth to invest in Trentheim's businesses as well as restoration to the city.

Soon after, Ciel, the three commanders, and the grandmaster craftsman Bosley were given a certain level of rights to use the wealth as well.

Brendel arranged it in this manner purely to enjoy the convenience of not having to deal with it after attempting to do so initially. Even though he accepted the responsibilities as a guild leader for a certain time in the game, it was under the system's assistance to log in the members' contributions and basic calculations for budgets.

Now that he lacked this function, he realized the amount of administrative work was overwhelming him, and quickly discovered that it was becoming a chaotic mess. After several attempts to put together a budget, he found many issues that made it unable to work.

He soon threw it to Amandina who also had trouble handling it on her own.

In the end, it was Romaine who went up to Amandina and suggested that she would take control of the entire budget by herself by logging in the data and stabilizing the entire system.

It was the first time Brendel realized Romaine's prototype system worked.

When he glanced at her accounting methods, he realized that he did not understand the majority of it. When he inquired about it, she replied that it was taught by her aunt. The symbols looked familiar, so he asked Ciel if the latter knew anything about Romaine's method, and he received the reply that it was probably the secret language between witches.

Brendel nodded and did not mind the secretive nature. The people he could rely the

most on, leaving his summons aside, were Freya and Romaine.

After studying it for a little longer, he finally looked at the people quarreling a short distance away. It had been persisting for quite some time; Jana's voice was the loudest, Cornelius seemed to be arguing for his cause while Bosley was trying to drown out Jana, and Amandina interjected from time to time. But the person who spoke the most was Medissa who attempted to dissuade them from fighting. It seemed like no one was going to convince each other.

"What are they arguing about?" He asked.

Romaine immediately shook her head happily, imitating Amandina's disapproving voice: "Only the ones involved know how valuable resources are, my lord—"

Brendel's brow raised up and felt like he had guessed what the core issues were.

Amandina had a disapproving frown on her forehead while she looked at the people in front of her. Even though she maintained her basic manners, she was truly annoyed inside.

She definitely supported her lord in his decision to get his own army. She also knew that Jana, Cornelius, Raban and the Nightsong Tiger had their missions from Brendel, and that Jana was recruiting citizens within Firburh to create the initial structure for a private army.

But the problem was not in that area.

There were a total of fifteen thousand citizens within the city. The autumn harvest was just over, and the total amount of grains were just enough to keep the population going for the next year. In other words, there was no guarantee that there would be surplus food for the mercenaries and they had to rely on trade.

Yet Trentheim was most likely about to face many battles. The food needed to sustain these soldiers was nearly twice the amount.

Considering that the city was also undergoing development, the workers would similarly require more food. Finally, the Subterrane Dwellers also wanted access to food. Graudin had provided them partially by starving the citizens within the city, but they could not do the same thing.

With all these things into considerations, the amount of food required was quite substantial.

If he wanted to go one step further and control the entire Firburh, the deficits would become even more apparent. For this year alone, Amandina knew that the grains in the south were in a shortage.

It was partially due to this year's unstable weather, but the real reason was Madara's invasion.

Even if she wanted to purchase grains, she was going to have another problem. The invasion in the south by Madara was over, but a great war in the north was about to happen soon. Dark clouds were gathering all over Aouine. *(TL: Civil war in the north.)*

The outcomes from consecutive wars meant that the prices of food were going to be more stable than gold. Their prices would go high up, and it would not just be a little.

The devious merchants in Ampere Seale, the largest trading harbor in Aouine, knew what was going to happen. They would not lower their prices out of pity but drive the prices up as much as they possibly could.

Purchasing grains at this point of time was difficult.

Amandina had rubbed her forehead many times in frustration over this matter, but she was unable to think of a solution. She had factored in the silver mine in the Schafflund region, which was also part of Trentheim's territory, but this was a military matter and could only suggest Brendel to capture it. If he denied this suggestion, she could only think about the resources she had at her fingers to solve this issue.

Furthermore, Lord Macsen and Lord Palas's armies were reaching Firburh, and her lord was unlikely to leave this place. Because of that, even the self-centered Romaine obediently delayed her plans to implement her business strategies.

Jana had come to Amandina in order to arrange the recruitment of a private army, but doing so at this point would mean that the latter needed to provide nearly double the funds because of the issue of obtaining enough food for them.

Amandina did not want to imagine the consequences of doing so.

She convinced the female commander to put this issue aside with great difficulty, or

at the very least, wait till the citizens felt safe in the city.

Then Bosley came along and sought money as well.

The reason he had was that Brendel wanted him to establish a workshop. Before he could think about making Magic Armor, he would first require a large workforce and assets. Forget about whether Trentheim mined metal ores; even training craftsmen apprentices needed a large sum of money.

Because Bosley was originally a royal craftsman, he never had to consider the issue of money, and naturally demanded it when he realized that he lacked the funds.

Cornelius was the next to join in, also with the issue of money. He was not there for the recruitment of soldiers, but the remuneration for the mercenaries' expended equipment. The mercenaries in Firburh right now could be seen in-name only, as they were more like Brendel's private soldiers.

Since these mercenaries were without a normal income, the equipment they expended had to be replenished and their lord Brendel naturally had to take responsibility. He had silently agreed that he had a hiring relationship with them.

But Cornelius also understood they were in the same boat and Brendel was currently lacking in funds, so he did not even mention their wages.

The mercenaries were going to be embroiled in constant battles, and it was an urgent situation to replenish armors, weapons, and ammunitions. He had to come and demand money from her.

Amandina was quickly overwhelmed. The little money she had right now was simply insufficient, but before she could think of a solution, the three people in front of her started arguing because they could not find a common point to agree on.

The arguments generally went along the lines of 'your matters can be delayed, my stuff is more important so you can get lost', and Amandina initially tried to dissuade them, but after a while, she angrily joined in the battle.

Medissa who passed by them hastily went over to stop them from fighting. Scarlett who accompanied the little Elven princess felt that it had nothing to do with her and merely sat from afar and watched them quarrel, feeling nothing but boredom.

The arguments were reaching boiling temperatures.

Bosley had been in the Royal Faction for some time, and his oratory skills were quite formidable, having barbed sarcasm in every sentence, and caused Jana to nearly drown in his litany of sneering words. Her face was visibly flushed with furious anger and was about to shout him down when she suddenly stared behind him with a grimace and instead said:

“My lord.”

The others paused, then turned around and greeted Brendel: “My lord!”

Brendel put on a poker face and scoffed through his nose: “It seems like there’s an ongoing party?”

Everyone lowered their heads, but Bosley merely tilted his head and thought for a while. After a moment, he also did the same and said:

“My lord, based on your words, we should have a common goal and enemy, so I won’t cause trouble for you. However, as everyone knows, a war is a contest between wealth. It seems like your situation isn’t an optimistic one—”

Brendel did not answer him. He understood this point well. An average person would feel that Graudin’s wealth was massive, but it was clearly lacking if he wanted to use it to build the city. As an example, the amount of money spent on fixing the wall was huge…

Amandina had to spend twice the money to get the craftsmen to work for him. It was quite unthinkable because a normal lord would have forced their citizens to work for free.

[It’s the same old story of instilling citizens’ trust in me. Cornelius and Raban had recommended using force to make the citizens work for free, but Jana and Amandina objected to it. Romaine also objected, but her views were on the future economic reasons. I chose not to do so because I don’t want to stoop to Graudin’s level. But this problem has to be solved somehow…]

Chapter 33
Expansion (14)

"…Lord Macsen's army has reached Port Gris." Brendel said.

Everyone was taken aback and were unable to react. Brendel did not request Bosley to leave when he informed his subordinates, but the latter bowed slightly and said:

"Since this topic is unrelated to me, this old man shall take his leave," he said and acted accordingly to the nobles' etiquette by placing his left hand over his chest, "although, my lord, I'll be waiting to hear good news from you."

Bosley then left the courtyard with leisurely footsteps.

"What's going on?" Jana glared at Bosley's back and saw him disappear behind a wall while she asked. She then turned around to face Brendel: "We hadn't received news that of any army departing."

"The scouts sent news directly to the Nightsong Tiger," Brendel explained, and he introduced the young Wild Elf girl next to him: "This is Felaern, I believe you have seen her before. I'll let her speak."

Everyone's gaze fell onto her, but she continued to wear a stoic expression, raising her chin a little as she repeated the information that she told Brendel.

Their faces took on odd expressions when they heard Lord Macsen only brought seven hundred-odd soldiers over the river. The enemy's army was comprised of mostly private soldiers recruited from farmers, a portion of it mercenaries, and a small handful of knights.

"Wait, this idiot lord, surely he's not eager to send himself to his death right?" Jana flipped a few strands of her long red hair back behind her neck, shaking her head without comprehension: "We can take him down easily in a single swoop if he brought so little men."

"Is it possible that it's some form of trap?" Cornelius asked cautiously.

“No, I think it’s because Lord Macsen believes that the mercenaries wouldn’t be so bold, to the point that they would stay here,” Brendel explained his thoughts to them, “Graudin’s most loyal knights were killed by us long ago, and the remaining private soldiers he had were shady adventurers and questionable mercenaries. When they were driven away by us, do you think they would escape to Lord Macsen or Lord Palas to report Firburh’s situation?”

The mercenaries were silent. It was not exactly an honorable thing to abandon their lords, especially in this era. It was possible for the deserters to be sent to the gallows so no one would do something so disadvantageous.

“Which is why the news Lord Macsen and Lord Palas received came from other sources. For example, the news came from the Firburh’s refugees.” He continued to explain.

“We locked down the surrounding areas around Firburh to prevent Graudin’s soldiers from running away that particular night,” Amandina added after Brendel’s words, “and your men were sent to the various chokepoints within ten miles of the city. You know it best whether Lord Macsen’s scouts managed to infiltrate the city.”

Jana and Cornelius exchanged glances. Their mercenaries were highly experienced, and while they were not great soldiers, they were excellent hunters. They did not believe a small noble like Lord Macsen had scouts capable of entering the city or gather accurate information about their forces.

It was evident that he was arrogant enough to set off with their troops with such limited information, and it seemed like he did not view these ‘rebelling commoners’ as a threat.

Brendel scratched his forehead. Jana and Cornelius were standing at attention ever since he appeared before them. His mind was a little surprised but realized that ever since he recruited Tagiv and its men, the mercenary commanders seemed to understand their positions under him were weak.

He had displayed enough strength to make them cut off any useless thoughts like how they had to submit to Brendel to avoid Count Randner’s revenge, and were now contemplating what positions they could get under him. Even Jana who did not like fighting for influence had to think about her men.

[I see, this is what they are thinking about… When these two commanders heard that Lord Macsen only had seven hundred men, they were ready to join in because there are thousands of Subterrane Dwellers as our allies. That means it's easy to attain victory and they are willing to vie for achievements.]

In truth, Raban had come before him to hand over his men for direct control even before the battle for the lumber mills. But Brendel did not do so as he thought this would cause Jana and Cornelius to become uneasy in their positions.

He thought for a while before he replied: "Cornelius, prepare your men and meet up with Raban; tell him about Lord Macsen's arrival. Then you're to find a way to go around Lord Macsen and get to his rear to cut off his retreat path. If it's possible, capture every one alive, especially Lord Macsen. I have use for him—"

Brendel rubbed his chin as he pondered momentarily: "…… Of course, I'll defer things to your judgment if a situation crops up."

Cornelius's eyes lit up slightly as though a burden had been lifted off his back. He glanced at Jana and answered gravely: "As you wish, my lord."

When he finished his words, he acted like a real knight by tidying up the position of his sword and saluted to Brendel. He then turned away and left the courtyard, with his satisfied footsteps hitting the stone pavement.

Jana could not help but glower at him, but she did not say anything in the end. Medissa and Amandina were relieved to find the arguments were over, although the latter knew that her troubles were not over. The problem with the budget allocation was still unsolved, and delaying it was not a solution.

"My lord, are you not going to the frontlines?" Amandina asked while she gathered the documents she had brought along.

"There's nothing to look at," Brendel shook his head. He did not think there would be any unforeseen situations and allowing the Nightsong Tiger and the other two mercenary commanders lead their own men would be more effective than him doing so.

He was a warrior who led charges straight into the battlefield and certainly not a commander. Being a city's lord was already hard enough to cause him a headache, and he wanted to be lazy whenever he could. If he had time, he would rather solve the

more pressing issues.

“How much money do we still have left?” He said.

“Approximately 3,500,000 Tor coins, including the valuable objects that Graudin has. But considering the issue of time, the current amount of coins we can use is less than a third,” Amandina’s expression became solemn and replied, “also, the question of food is right up our noses. Trentheim’s current food production is equivalent to its expenditure. We don’t have surplus food for our men and don’t forget, Ser Leto is bringing along a few thousand refugees.”

Brendel did not forget about that point and nodded as an acknowledgment.

“When it comes to trading, it’s not as simple as it looks. First of all, we don’t have any ships—” Amandina continued.

“But there should be ships in Port Gris, right?” Medissa whispered to her. Although she was not familiar with Aouine’s territory, she had studied Trentheim’s geography to handle any future battles.

“Leaving aside the issue of us not controlling Port Gris, this particular harbor is mostly used for fishing. While there are a few merchant ships using it, the biggest problem we have is whether they are willing to work for us. If they do, we’re going to fork out another large sum of money. But we can’t afford to spend our current funds on this because we are likely to spend half of what we have in the upcoming battles. To be honest, I’m not sure how long our situation is going to last because Count Randner will never let us have it easy.”

Amandina sighed at this point before she continued:

“Finally, we control Firburh, but that’s only in name. The majority of the city isn’t willing to work with us, and our situation is truly in a terrible state. Right now, I’m more inclined to hide with the Dark Forest. No matter how brilliant you are, we can’t do anything without money, my lord.”

She then cast a resentful glare at Brendel: “As for the promised building for my Magicite Research, it’s fine, I can continue to wait for it, but it seems like Bosley isn’t interested in waiting…”

Brendel smiled wryly at her words, as they were the exact opposite of ‘fine’. She was

right, to solve Trentheim's lack of food, he needed to find a way to trade, and the lack of money was the core for most of his problems.

[The first thing I need to solve is the issue of money. Romaine made a profit in Bruglas and left it to Leto's daughter. If she didn't encounter any issues, I could probably get around a few hundred thousand Tor coins. But Count Randner is in the way because he's blocking Grinoires and Trentheim. Then my first idea would be… the silver mine in Schafflund.]

Chapter 34
Expansion (15)

Schafflund's source of silver came from the base of Graham's mountains which contained an enormous amount of silver ore. The mine vein extended towards Karanjar's mountains and the Dark Forest.

Schafflund's silver mine was just a small portion of what the Dark Forest had to offer, but it still allowed Aouine to benefit greatly.

"Amandina, tell me what you know about Schafflund," Brendel said.

The young noble girl's eyes brightened up slightly, and she immediately answered: "Schafflund is the most important source of income in Trentheim since its beginning. During the Year of Dwelling Beasts, the previous Lord Trentheim built a fortress to harvest and transport silver, but it slowly formed into the town that we know of today."

"Year of the Dwelling Beasts," Brendel recalled in his mind, "that's thirty years ago?"

Amandina nodded and said:

"The highest ranking officers there are comprised of an adjutant and secretary officer. Neither of them answers to Graudin but directly to Count Randner, and this is why Graudin is unable to take much of it, despite the silver mine producing nearly fifteen tons of silver every year. Also, the creatures in the Dark Forest make it impossible to extend the harvesting area of silver ore, and Trentheim continues to remain poor."

"Graudin is utterly useless as a city's lord," Brendel was pitying that pitiful worm a little, and he smiled a little, "but this means I'm going to take away Count Randner's cheese."

Amandina smiled at his remarks: "Have you not moved it already, my lord?"

Brendel laughed. He turned around and saw Jana's gaze on him, keenly noticing a streak of anxiety in her eyes despite her restrained expressions.

When Jana saw the other two commanders who joined Brendel at the same time as her receiving his orders, she did not want her men to sit and do nothing. If they had nothing to show Brendel, then they might be sold out for being useless.

Even though the young lord appeared to be friendly, she had encountered many nobles and had to maintain the necessary amount to despise and suspect these bastards, simply because she knew how despicable they could be if they turned against her.

“My lord, please allow me to conquer Schafflund! I know the situation there, the mine only has a mere hundred-odd soldiers defending it,” She used a slightly raspy voice to plead her case, and placed her hand over her chest, “it is more than enough for my men and I to capture it.”

“But Palas is too close to Schafflund. I’m afraid that other Lord is watching the situation closely, even if we do occupy it, we wouldn’t be able to control it.”

Jana was silent.

“Are we not able to follow up with that thought? Can’t we use the Subterrane dwellers, or are we unable to trust them?” Amandina asked.

“We want Schafflund to work properly; the workers will be affected if Lord Palas harasses the place,” Brendel explained after thinking for a moment.

[Hmm, well, Tagiv had sworn upon his deity, and the Subterrane Dwellers wouldn’t dare to break their oaths, so it’s okay to trust them, but it’s not a good choice…]

“How much food are we lacking?” He asked.

“Seventeen thousand bushels,” Amandina said.

Brendel felt difficulty to adjust to this world’s system as the game used metric measurements.

[One bushel of wheat is roughly 27 kg, and rounding it up would be approximately 500000 kg. That’s a pretty big number.]

“If we count our men and the partial allocation of food to the Subterrane Dwellers, how long we can last based on the current wheat in the city?”

Amandina frowned slightly: “Based on the data, that would be two months. But there are a few other sources of food that have not been entered yet, though we would still not last for more than three months.”

“This means we have a window of two months,” Brendel said.

Amandina nodded.

Brendel thought for a while: “Then it’s fine, continue to recruit soldiers from the citizens. If Bosley wants a plot of land, human resources, or money, just give it to him. Do the same for the other three mercenary commanders, but I’ll have to set the Magicite Workshop aside for now.”

Amandina nodded again. She deliberately chose to mention it, but she understood that Trentheim did not produce Amber Gemstones so it was more of a grumble.

“Romaine’s business plans have to be set aside as well,” he continued.

He could hear Romaine’s voice behind him, “Of course, right now there’s no point in implementing these plans.”

It seemed like she was not feeling sad.

“Finally, make sure that we are capable of fighting for the upcoming battles, you can use your judgments to cut out any other expenditures. Of course, you do know that the only true request that I have, is not to let everyone here be chased off into the Dark Forest.”

His last sentence made all the girls grin.

But Amandina still felt it would be nice to move off to the Dark Forest when she thought of all the things she had to do now.

“My lord, does this mean you have a solution for our finances?” She asked.

“Well, it’s still the silver mine.” Brendel gave a hearty laugh, “there’s no reason not to move such a large piece of cheese when it’s right beside us, right?”

“But…?”

Medissa suddenly understood why, and her silver eyes widened with comprehension, “My lord, you mean to say we should take a different approach to Schafflund?”

Brendel praised her with his eyes: “Yes, I want you and Scarlett to come along with me to visit Count Randner’s subordinates. Miss Jana, you can come along too—”

Jana immediately replied: “Do I need to bring my men?”

“Of course, but there’s no need to be too many,” Brendel deliberated for a moment, “twenty to thirty men would suffice.”

Jana nodded silently, but she was feeling quite conflicted inside. He was younger than her, but every time she spoke with him she felt that she became a head shorter and had to look up to him. Clearly, it was not his noble status, but a unique air about him that allowed him to remain utterly unfazed by anyone.

She could not help but think that even if this young man met up with the king, the latter would feel the same way. Even though this thought was a little ridiculous, Jana’s instincts told her she was right.

In any case, receiving this order made her relieved. She politely took her leave and immediately went to gather her men.

“Do I need to go as well?” Amandina asked after the female commander left. It was apparent to see she was unwilling to go. She was starting to feel tired of seeing battle after battle, as well as running everywhere.

“It’s best if you stay behind and help me come up with a plan,” Brendel could see how unwilling she was and said.

“What of it?”

“Rebuild the entire Firburh city somewhere else into a fortress.”

“What?” Amandina’s eyes were completely round.

Brendel knew that she would be shocked, but it was a necessary plan for him. If princess Gryphine refused to enter an arranged marriage with Lord Arreck, then this rewritten history meant that the Royal Faction’s armies would lose in battle once the northern lords and crown prince’s coalition army fought them.

When that happened, he hoped the newly rebuilt Firburh would become the final bastion of defense against their terrible might. It would preserve Aouine's southern territory, especially Valhalla, which was his trump card to tilt the chessboard.

Firburh's position was also an excellent spot. It faced the sea in the west, and had a silver mine in the east, and was a natural commercial hub between the rest of Trentheim and Valhalla.

[Aouine's future capital for me has to be Valhalla. Firburh needs to become an impregnable fortress to defend it, but this spot isn't going to work. I already instructed Tagiv and his men to find a suitable place somewhere in the north and make sure there's enough space and geographical suitability for defense and offense. The north of River Gris is hills that have gentle angled slopes, so it shouldn't be too hard to find somewhere suitable.]

These creatures were not used to attacking cities, but they were brilliant city builders in the Jurgen Underworld.

He stopped his thoughts when he saw Amandina's confused expressions: "There's no need to be shocked. This matter cannot be done within a day or two. We have one or two more years so we can make this a long-term project."

It was a little challenging to build a complete fortress with all the facilities of a town in a year or two, but the basic necessities could be set up. Naturally, this building speed was only possible with magic, unlike Earth.

"What do I need to do?" Amandina inhaled deeply when she saw that Brendel was serious. It was not a small project to build a city, and the amount of knowledge to build one was just too much. It was the first time that she felt she was not going to be able to do a good job.

"It's not a hard problem. You can just take a look around this city and think back on what you saw in Bruglas. Ponder on how the past architects build the cities and think about what we need."

Brendel once again emphasized that the New Firburh had to be a fortress.

"Ciel will also aid you in this matter. Even though he's a wizard by profession, I'm sure that he has studied widely in many areas and shouldn't be a problem for him when it comes to simple planning."

“Ciel will help me?”

Brendel nodded. “…Of course, if there are any noteworthy craftsmen good in building structures, you can recruit them.”

He did not have much confidence in his words. The famous city builders did not really exist in this era, and even if they did, they would not gather in this impoverished city. This was not some fictional novel, and Bosley was already an exception.

[The more I talk about this, the more ridiculous it sounds. This world isn’t a game where I can just spend unlimited resources, and let the system go ‘ka-ching’ and build an entire ready-made fortress in the middle of a forest. We’re building a real-life fortress after all…]

Chapter 35
Expansion (16)

[How does building something work in this era? Lime as mortar? The rocks aren't going to cut and stack themselves to form a wall, which means bricks have to be made from a kiln and then transferred to the workplace. Human workers aren't a simple set of data too. The money and food involved are going to be black holes. It's also a professional skill to allocate human resources effectively. It will be challenging to ensure a hundred men outputting a hundred men's worth. Heck, it's easy to make it less than half if I did it poorly.]

Even though Brendel had managed a small number of men in the past, he thought that the number of workers would go up to thousands and even over ten thousand.

It was not like fighting a war where he could just send in his armies. He had to know what the workers were supposed to do for their tasks.

[Maybe the Rolan Dwarven Craftsmen or underworld Great Earth Spirits, or the Wizard Craftsmen… These dwarves live in the northern regions even further away than Osor. But that place is always snowing in the mountains, and they don't live in Aouine. Hmm, come to think of it the Kirin Dwarves are distant relatives— No, I can't use them, they are professionals in making wine, and not building cities. The Great Earth Spirits are considered high-class citizens. On top of that and their building skills, they have exceptional combat prowess and are regarded highly. Why would they come up to this poor place and suffer?]

Lastly, Brendel thought of the Wizard Craftsmen. They were arrogant old men who were in the Silver Alliance, but they were unlikely to be interested in him. Also, these men had incredibly keen senses who might guess that he usurped the original Brendel's body after talking to him.

In the end, he chose to take it one step at a time. He currently had no solution, but once his strength rose in the future, he might be able to find a method to substitute things.

"Go ahead and do your best, I trust in your abilities." He could only say these lines.

But these words made Amandina glow and she nodded earnestly.

“I think I heard you calling for me, my lord?” A youthful voice came from the outside.

Scarlett who was not too far away from a black pine tree subconsciously followed the voice and saw Ciel wearing a dark cloak covering his entire body who walked into the courtyard.

The young wizard had hardly appeared before anyone ever after the day Graudin was killed. He stayed in a small cottage provided by the city’s guards and acted as though the worldly affairs had nothing to do with him.

Ciel had explained to Brendel that he was testing out new magic spells. An apprentice wizard becoming a master overnight needed to some time to get adjusted.

Brendel watched him stroll in with a face full of carefree ease and even appeared to be a little excited.

[This guy seems to be doing well these days. It’s certainly more interesting compared to the time he was in the graveyard.]

“Why are you here?” Brendel asked, but he quickly saw that he was not alone and there was another young man beside him.

Brendel recognized the young man to be the only person who survived amongst the unfortunate group of adventurers, Alistair, who was a fledging wizard who used Chord Magic. Although, he did not understand why Alistair would bother staying on under him. He eventually came to know that his companions were all from noble families, and while they were not exactly influential, they were still well off.

[He’s still around, huh… There’s actually no need to continue mingling with my mercenaries since his origin is good. Amandina called us as righteous rebels, but we’re more like bandits, to put it mildly. And the only difference between real bandits and us is that Amandina, Ciel and I understand the rules of the nobles’ game.]

Ciel came up with a small smile and respectfully bowed all the way to his waist before Brendel. Any outsiders would have been shocked to see a wizard so respectful to a noble, but Ciel did not miss a beat and greeted Brendel.

This meant that Alistair was now staring at them with odd, astonished expressions.

He shifted his eyes at Ciel, then at Brendel. Even though Brendel was a Gold-ranked swordsman, Ciel also had the same rank, and the position for the latter was regarded with higher importance.

Amandina did not seem to be surprised anymore and merely fiddled with the documents she had. Medissa did not understand the etiquette in this era, while Scarlett had no idea what a Gold-ranked wizard really meant.

“I’m here for the money.” Ciel answered with a smile before he acted like an elderly gold-ranked wizard and scratched his head, causing Scarlett’s eyebrows to twitch a little: “But I’m also here to give out money.”

“Give out money?” Brendel parroted his words with a peculiar look.

“I think I’ll talk about the reasons why I need money, since I know my lord likes to take in the bad news first,” Ciel quickly stole the chance to speak his agenda, “the things that you asked me the previous time, I thought for a while and there should be no problem.”

Brendel quickly understood what Ciel was talking about.

Ciel had now become a leading figure amongst all the casters in the city. If he were to shape up the other wizards in the mercenaries, it might be possible for him to establish a Wizard’s Association like the Tower of Stars and Moons.

Although his situation looked quite pitiful now, the future that he envisioned was quite optimistic; it would not be good enough to go up against the Silver Alliance, but they would not be weaker than the Black Tower’s wizards.

Brendel had asked this question a little earlier because Ciel studied under the Black Tower’s wizards and there might be some taboos. There was a certain degree of discretion when it came to their knowledge, and a war nearly happened when they splintered off from the Silver Alliance. He finally received an affirmative reply from Ciel now, but he was quite surprised by Ciel wanting to give out money.

[What’s this guy playing at now?]

“I think we should talk about the good news first,” Brendel said.

“My lord, have you forgotten what the item you had given me?” Ciel reminded him with

a smile.

“What is it?” Brendel was still uncertain, and he saw Ciel taking out a painting from the Magic Item Bag on his waist.

“Marsha above, the portrait of the Coruscating Darkness Princess!”

Amandina dropped all her documents and shouted with wide eyes, then turned suspicious: “Is this a fake?”

Judging from her lord and Ciel’s true nature, that might be a possible answer. But Brendel shook his head.

“This is the real thing.” He said, recognizing it from Fortress Riedon. It was something he stole and was quite a devious act back then, but right now it seemed that the decision to do so was brilliant.

The painting of Lamona, the Elven princess of Coruscating Darkness, was highly sought after and not impossible to sell it for several million. Even though this money was not much to Brendel, it was enough to solve their immediate problems.

Brendel immediately thought of Ampere Seale because there was no appropriate market in Firburh.

[I need someone to head to Ampere Seale, the opportunities there are favorable due to investors betting their whole fortune on the complicated political structure. There’s also a need to establish some form of relationship with them as this city’s lord. A civil war is about to break out, and Ampere Seale would certainly be in a raucous state right about now.]

Brendel smiled confidently as plans started formulating.

Chapter 36
Princess Nun

========== Princess POV ==========

“Ampere Seale?” Magadal said.

She was sitting on a tall chair and looked at her close friend, Gryphine, with shock. The latter was also sitting down on an identical chair, with her long silver strands of hair collapsing gently onto her dress, her lithe body sculpted like a doll.

The half-elven princess with silver eyes seemed to be filled with patience and mercy, appearing to be meek, but she was well known for her unyielding personality amongst the nobles.

She carried a short silver sword outlined with emeralds carved into runic patterns on her belt; it seemed like it was only decorative, but Magadal was absolutely certain that Gryphine was capable of easily subduing a male adult, and perhaps that was still an understatement.

Gryphine was famed for possessing exceptional swordsmanship, and even a formal knight was not her match.

Both of Magadal’s hands were placed on both her knees while she sat elegantly. She was also a princess from the Manticore Duchy and had known Gryphine when they were young.

Magadal was a little envious of the latter who naturally showed off her assertive side, and every action seemed to show how she acted for herself.

In comparison, Magadal had grown up under strict upbringing for nobles. Even though she was widely learned, outsiders treated her like a gentle and quiet noble lady that was the very model of an aristocrat’s daughter.

But she hated this praise. She wanted to pursue a life of freedom, although she did not know exactly how it felt like, and her responsible nature meant that she had to accept

her fate. The Manticore Duchy was only a small kingdom from the north of Aouine, and a girl of her status had her fate already decided from the beginning.

“Why do you want me to go to Ampere Seale, is it because of the war?”

The half-elven princess nodded.

Sudden roars and cheers came outside the balcony; the knights were having a competition in the courtyard. But the voices quickly died down and did not affect their conversation for long.

“Has the situation became this tense?” Magadal lowered her voice.

“What do you make of the situation? My older brother has moved faster than what I imagined. Many dukes have joined him and they have formed a coalition army. Even though that old fox Arreck is still hesitating, I think he would make his decision very soon.” Gryphine spoke unhurriedly, as though it had nothing to do with her.

“Perhaps the situation is still able to change?”

“It’s not as simple as you think. Arreck is an ambitious person and either he chooses to stand with my beloved brother, or he stands with us,” Gryphine paused for a moment before she said wistfully, “I don’t mind a marriage with him, but I’m afraid it would hurt Haruze.” *(TL: Haruze is Gryphine’s younger brother.)*

Magadal did not speak further and looked silently at Gryphine. She knew Gryphine well and understood that the latter would not topple because of this problem.

Otherwise, Gryphine would not be recognized as Aouine’s brilliant star.

“In truth, I’m more worried about Count Randner,” the half-elven girl said, “Arreck might be the dark clouds gathering over the northern skies, bringing about violent storms and lightning, but if the wind is right, he might not be our enemies and instead become our allies. The count, however, might bring out a dagger behind our backs.”

A flash of amusement streaked across Magadal’s brown eyes, and she abruptly spoke: “I have heard of something recently; you might be interested in it.”

“Go ahead.”

The Manticore Duchy's princess brought her body a little closer: "I have a letter written in sealed magic from a friend in Randner's territory. The Count seems to be in some sort kind of trouble because there's a rebellion in his territory. I think he doesn't have the time to care about things outside his territory."

"Your friend is from the Cathedral?" Gryphine asked solemnly.

Magadal nodded lightly.

Gryphine took a serious look at her close friend. Even though the latter did not have Elven blood, she was regarded to be just as beautiful. She had a different air about her, with her soft golden locks reflecting the light around her to give her a saintly sheen, accentuating her gentle and tranquil appearance.

Magadal was called the 'Frowning Angel', and she was so beautiful that Gryphine could not help but recall an ancient fable about a human queen who captivated everyone. But the queen's ending was an unhappy one, and Gryphine knitted her eyebrows for an instant before she discarded her stray thoughts.

Magadal was extremely pious and had excellent terms with the Cathedral of Holy Flames. She even had personal friendships with the Cathedral's local bishops in various territories, yet this was also the reason why she was ridiculed by some nobles and called as the 'Princess Nun'.

Even the Cathedral's High Priest had praised her devout faith, which in turn assisted her to go relatively untroubled despite her beauty. Between nobility and faith, people would be inclined to pursue the former, but the latter made them feel awe and distance themselves away from her.

"Do you remember the joke when we studied etiquette back then? In Aouine, a lord wouldn't be a true lord until they settle one or two uprisings." Gryphine asked.

Magadal gave a faint smile in response, Gryphine was most likely thinking about the peaceful days.

"It's roughly the same anywhere," Magadal replied.

"Yes, while I hope Count Randner gets his hands tied down by this rebellion, we can't put our hopes as to what happens to him because there are things that we can do right now."

“What would you like me to do?”

“I’m afraid that the merchants would be swayed by the profits offered by the nobles in the north. I hope that you can use your relationship with the Holy Cathedral and convince the merchants in Ampere Seale to deny lending their harbors to the coalition army to travel south. The Cathedral of Flames have the ability to protect the harbor, so the merchants don’t need to worry on that. ”

“I do know of a local bishop in Ampere Seale; I can try persuading him,” Magadal recalled for a moment before speaking, “but when do you want me to go?”

“There’s no need to hurry. Once you leave my territory, I believe the dukes will immediately receive the news of your departure. My request is dangerous, so I want you to think about this carefully. You are my close friend and I don’t wish to trouble you—”

“Precisely because we’re close friends, that I want to help you.”

“Thank you.”

Another round of shouting and hurrah rang out again from the courtyard, and Gryphine looked towards the balcony. Someone had won again, and a glint appeared in her eyes.

“Let me pick a few of my people to guard you. They can ensure your safety and accomplish this task alongside.”

“Then, I want Ser Maynild,” Magadal showed off a rare cunning side of her, which she would only do so in front of Gryphine, “if she’s there with me, I’ll have some to chat with and relieve my boredom.”

Gryphine smiled in response: “You’re certainly taking advantage of me for going after my best knight so quickly. Very well, if that’s the case I can only let her go with much pain in my heart— but you do need to care of Maynild’s whims; her temper is much worse than mine.”

“Naturally.” Magadal blinked several times.

In truth, the three of them were close friends who knew each other well. Even though Maynild had an indifferent personality, she was not one to vent her temper.

Another round of delightful roars came again and lasted for a long time. The two girls understood that the final match amongst the knights was about to take place.

Gryphine stood up, her attention taken away by the cheers: “Let’s take a look and see which talented youths have the fortune to travel with you—”

Magadal stood up as well and nodded.

========== Freya’s POV ==========

Freya’s hands were full of perspiration, and her heart was pounding intensely. If the crowd got closer to her, they would be able to see clearly that her face was like a ripe apple and was gasping deeply for air. Her sweat was dripping off her sharp chin, and her uniform was already soaked long ago. The consecutive matches that she had were making her feel that her stamina was about to run out.

The number of opponents she had defeated had gotten the audience’s attention. As the newest member amongst the competitors this year, her performance could be seen as outstanding.

And in the other arenas, Bennett and three other newcomers formed the brightest existences this term.

(TL: Bennett used to be Bretton, and I changed it because the name is too close to Brendel. He was a rival of the old Brendel and quite near the start of the series, in case you can’t remember.)

She wiped away her perspiration from her chin. She would certainly be considered the least prominent out of the five.

Bennett had defeated a reserved knight with just three strikes. When Freya saw his match, she realized that the once immature and rash youth was becoming more level-headed, and his skill in the sword was improving by leaps and bounds.

Freya could almost imagine his talent shining brilliantly through his sword, and he had found where he was supposed to belong to. This was the best stage for him.

And in comparison, she felt a little lost.

Chapter 37
Freya's swordsmanship

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

Freya knew that she did not have superior talent in the sword. After the events in Bucce, she had tried closing the gap between her and the other squires in the academy with her obstinate personality, by putting in more effort than the others to inch her way closer.

But it was not as simple as she hoped for.

As the days passed by, she gradually realized that effort alone was not able to bridge the gap between the talented and untalented. There were many people who were more capable than she was, and she was part of the crowd who were insignificant. Her little pride as the best swordsman in Bucce disappeared completely when she realized she was dwarfed by the brilliance by the top knights in the academy.

In front of her was a senior apprentice knight; a Silver-ranked swordsman like Bennett. The rules of the competition limited the usage of strength, and the combatants were to duel each other with the knowledge of their swordsmanship; if this were not the case, she would have been defeated long ago—

However, this was precisely why she felt her sword which was held with both hands tremble a little, at the thought that she was fighting against someone superior.

Her frowning opponent was carefully circling her. The stubborn defense from her had caused him to suffer a little disadvantage.

Ever since the creation of this yearly tournament in the Royal Knights Academy, there was a rule which stated matches were conducted again as soon as they were over, which practically gave participants no time to rest. Everyone had to pay the price for spending too much stamina in a single battle.

The person who made this rule did it so these knights would understand that the enemies in a battlefield would give a 'fair' rule. They needed to conserve their stamina

so they could survive longer.

The reason for building the Royal Knights Academy was to sire the best military personnel. In this current era of peace, the knights who graduated were then sent off to be groomed by high ranking officers. Those who showed excellent skills might even be accepted to become the royal family's knights.

This was how a commoner could become a noble overnight.

The tournament's format utilized a points system and a single elimination system. The aspiring squires would duel each other and gain corresponding points to their years in the academy by being victorious; the victors would continue to proceed to duel with each other until the final victor emerged, and would then attain the highest honor in the academy, the 'Champion Knight'.

And after the Champion Knight was crowned, the squires of respective years in this academy would be picked out based on the points to be named as the best knight amongst their own.

These winners would literally be perceived as nobles.

Even though the rules were unfair, it accurately captured the reality on a battlefield. The first person who created this academy once claimed that luck was part of one's strength and the most reliable attribute to save them from dire situations.

Perhaps this was the most appropriate description for Freya. She managed to arrive at where she was despite surrounded by thousands of undead and even reached the pinnacle of an Iron-ranked fighter at her age.

She felt she was outmatched by her opponent both in skill and stamina. She could barely keep up with the opponent's attempt to find a weakness by circling her.

It would be a miracle if she somehow won.

Her opponent also realized her current status. After making sure she was at the end of her rope, he decisively attacked with a lunge where her right guard was the weakest.

[…Won't make it in time!]

She could hardly think to react, partly because of her fatigue, but her body reacted

even before she was able to piece her thoughts together, mirroring a familiar figure's stance and defense against the undead Knight Ebdon.

The next moment she felt the enemy's blade running through her left forearm, causing it to burn painfully, but her opponent looked back in confusion as he was pushed slightly off-balance; she stepped to the side and struck down at his thrust by the narrowest of margin near the base of her sword.

This had allowed her to knock his blade to the ground, where she followed up by stepping on it and drove her sword's pommel to his face. It dazed and made him lose his hold over the sword, and he staggered back several steps. Freya then kicked him in the chest without missing a beat and knocked him down onto his back. When he got up shakily, Freya's sword was on his neck.

"What is the name of this swordsmanship?" He asked as he glanced at the dripping blood from the girl's hand; it was a little glaring.

"…" Freya did not answer.

In truth, she was still a little confused as to what happened. Her opponent's thrust somehow resembled a single moment between Brendel and Ebdon's duel, and she copied Brendel's diverse techniques to deal with it.

Ebdon's terrifying swordsmanship seemed to corner Brendel's simple defensive stance and parries every given moment when she watched the fight, but now that she had used it for herself, she realized how practical his defensive techniques were.

[…If Brendel were the one defending, he would never get himself injured. Now that I recall the duel between that undead knight and him, I finally understand just how incredible it was.]

"I lost." The senior apprentice knight sitting on the floor raised his hands after a dazed moment.

Freya watched a female knight with black hair on her shoulders walk over to the tournament area. She was the acting judge and looked at both of them with her usual cold expressions.

"I've heard that you fought in battles?" Maynild asked, and her tone was cold as well.

Freya noticed a sliver of deep suspicion in her black eyes; Maynild seemed to wear a mask on her face, but at this moment it was lifted just a little. She was a bit puzzled at Maynild's reaction but nodded at her question. No one opposed her in this school, yet.

"You fought against Madara's undead?" Maynild asked.

"Yes," Freya said.

"Are you still able to use that technique again?"

Freya hesitated as fatigue was quickly catching up to her, and the bleeding on her arm hurt. Maynild also noticed her situation, so she spoke again:

"That technique you used earlier has Aouine's Miliary Swordsmanship's shadow in it, but it's different from what the instructors teach here. You were trained in Bucce as a militia?"

Freya nodded again.

"I can't think of any region in Aouine which would teach differently to their militia or even their formal guards. These straightforward techniques for the sake of killing feels like someone had modified Aouine's Military Swordsmanship to be even more practical in wars." Maynild frowned and stared at Freya deeply: "You came from Bucce? Do you know someone in the White Mane Army?"

Freya was confused as to why Maynild who somewhat looked out for her, was demanding answers to strange questions in this place right now.

She naturally shook her head.

But she was no longer that girl who came from the rural area Bucce. The few months of training had increased her insight, and when she recalled Brendel's usage of his varied techniques, she realized that was a common point amongst them. They were all concise.

Every single action he made did not seem to contain any wasteful movements at all, and it was as if his techniques were all used for the sake of victory. Freya thought on the effects that it would bring onto the battlefield, and was able to understand why Maynild said they were made for killing.

Brendel's movements were clean and swift every time he charged into battles. It was indeed a mystery why he was so good with the sword. The training he had as a militia would not explain his skills.

[…Does talent really explain Brendel's abilities?]

She suddenly realized Maynild was still staring at her. She jolted and wanted to shrink away, but the latter finally spoke:

"But the core seems to have deviated from Aouine's Miltary Swordsmanship."

Freya was even more confused.

"Are you hiding anything?" Maynild asked.

Freya shook her head, her ponytail swinging hard.

"I have seen these techniques before…" Maynild's expression was a little strange as she muttered to herself.

Freya watched Maynild leave for the other tournament area after throwing that sentence, but she gradually paled as she thought of a possibility—

[She knows Brendel?]

========== Princess Gryphine's POV ==========

"Who is that?" Magadal asked.

"What?" The half-elven princess turned back.

"That squire who won earlier," Magadal watched the crowd from above as she spoke, "I saw Maynild speaking to her down there."

Gryphine followed her gaze and recognized her quickly.

"That's Everton's daughter," she sighed, "but it seems like she has not inherited his father's talent. Even though she's quite good, she's not the best amongst this year's batch, and if you compare her to her father, the difference would be even more apparent."

“That’s because the quality of this year’s batch is outstanding.” Even though Magadal did not know much about swordsmanship, she was observant and had seen enough to judge: “Bennett and two other talented youths. I have heard you speak about them more than once.”

“Yes, it seems that Mother Marsha still blesses Aouine,” Gryphine answered with a small smile, “I intend to pick the squires with the highest points from the respective years. Oberbeck and I agree that we need to groom this year’s intake, and it’s my idea to allow them to leave here and train.”

“Then that youth Bennett has caught your eye?” Magadal looked up and turned to her: “He does seem to be very reliable; youths like him in the nobles’ circle are rare—”

“Indeed,” Gryphine’s eyes glinted, ” but I know of one more. He is the one who showed me the noble lineage from our ancestors has not dried out yet, and that this ancient kingdom still has hope.”

“I rarely hear such high praise of another person from you.”

Gryphine did not answer. The person she was thinking of was the very same person Oberbeck spoke of. She had confirmed that he had not accompanied Freya to attend the academy.

[This person is mysterious. I’m not sure where he is right now and what he’s doing, but I have a feeling that he would appear before us very soon. As to how he would reappear…]

Gryphine smiled inwardly and dispelled her strange thoughts.

Chapter 38
The lord, the youth, and the hunter

========== Raban / The Nightsong Tiger's POV ==========

The edge of River Gris was slowly becoming brighter as the sun rose.

The Nightsong Tiger and Raban were hiding amongst the dense foliage of the forest, silently staring at the noble's boisterous army from afar as they continued their march into a used path. It was not a strange thing; even soldiers from Aouine's formal armies were not disciplined enough to curb chattering.

The Nightsong Tiger and Raban's mercenaries were obviously different, mainly because they were attempting to ambush them and had to be silent. Hundreds of mercenaries were lined near River Gris's edge and waited for Lord Macsen's last soldier to enter the ideal spot for their ambush.

Their crossbows and longbows were already aimed at their chosen targets.

"Even though their scouts don't seem like much," the Nightsong Tiger said as he watched their enemies, "they reacted quite well, and merely lacked a little experience in a real battle."

Raban glanced at the man next to him. No one knew what The Nightsong Tiger's real name was, and Raban had never heard of a tiger species with Nightsong in it.

[Lacked a little experience? You're the only person who would say that!]

He had seen much as a former Karsuk's cavalry commander, and Lord Macsen's scouts were good enough to be placed in any of Aouine's regular armies, but the Nightsong Tiger and his men simply overwhelmed them with sheer skill.

The Mercenaries of Lopes charged towards the enemies' scouts swiftly, leaping onto the horses and killed them in a single stroke from behind. They even discarded the bodies without startling the horses. Even now, these murdered men were still warm to the touch as they slumbered forever on the forest ground.

The level of coordination they had made Raban feel they were not mercenaries. The fact that the Nightsong Tiger was considered as a low-ranking subordinate and not treated as a retainer made him wonder what Brendel's real identity was.

His crude appearance belied his intelligence, as he saw more subtleties and recognized Brendel's capabilities earlier than Cornelius and Jana did. At the same time, he was curious as to why the latter had to come to this impoverished and rural area.

He accurately discerned Brendel's great ambition, which was why he surrendered to Brendel early.

He had gone through many difficulties to create a group of mercenary of his own because he did not want to be a common man. He hoped to look for someone who he could serve, but the people he judged worthy did not cast a glance at him, and those who did were bastards like Graudin.

It was until Brendel came along to give him this chance and they struck a chord with each other.

Raban continued to ponder over Brendel's identity while Lord Macsen's army advanced in the forest—

========== Lord Macsen's POV ==========

Lord Macsen had slowed his speed down ever since he passed through River Gris. It seemed like the rebelling citizens were not present, but his careful personality made him cautious.

He continued to let his men proceed slowly and be alert of any strange movements, but the slow march had caused them to chat even louder due to boredom. Even if he restrained his private soldiers and mercenaries by telling them to cease their noises, it would only work for a while, and it caused him to be in a slightly foul mood.

However, he was satisfied when he saw his knights who were clad in full armor beside him. They were his old subordinates, seasoned warriors who accompanied him since he was a young man, and maintained vigilance by surveying their surroundings with their hands holding their swords lightly at all times.

The squires who rode on top of the gigantic Dragon Beast at the back of the army

carrying the various flags even appeared to be more disciplined than the hired soldiers and mercenaries.

As Lord Macsen thought about the upcoming battle with a grimace, he was soon distracted by the sounds of a galloping horse.

Somewhere in the back were fifty soldiers who had been distributed to his son. He thought his son would suffer from undisciplined men. However, when he looked behind, he discovered they were far more subdued than he expected.

[What new tricks did this brat think of this time?]

Lord Macsen's eyes sought out for his son, and the corner of his eyes twitched when he saw Carglise urging his horse towards him, accompanied by several soldiers.

Carglise reined in his horse's speed once he got close to his father. He rode on the horse with an outstanding knight's upright back, as if he was a sharp blade that pointed upwards. He combed his slightly disheveled hair and expelled the air in his lungs with a huff.

"Father."

"What do you want now?"

The youth gave a meek smile and asked: "How long has it been since the last time our scouts returned?"

Lord Macsen paused for a moment, and suddenly realized that it was a problem. However, he was not keen to admit it and responded with a somewhat displeased tone: "Does it concern you? They are just a little late. Perhaps they have traveled a little too far ahead because they are a little too spirited—"

Carglise's eyes narrowed and glanced at the forest ahead.

"Well, I somehow doubt that," he said.

"What are trying to say, you damned brat?" Lord Macsen said.

Carglise let out a laughing snort and stared at his father with a teasing expression.

“Everyone claims that Lord Macsen is a cautious person, but it seems like that’s not the—” He realized that his father’s face was becoming darker and darker, and the youth inwardly exclaimed in alarm before he changed his tune quickly: “But you’re a little too bold, father. There’s a clear problem with the scouts’ delayed return, and yet you still allowed the army to advance into the forest.”

Even though Carglise spoke up, he was not exactly worried. His opponents were comprised of citizens and perhaps a few mercenaries after all. He did not believe they would be superior to his father’s private soldiers.

“A veteran like myself getting taught by an upstart like you?” Lord Macsen’s retort came with a snap: “When I had my first battle, you weren’t even born yet!”

“Yes, yes, father. Please stop the army for now.”

Lord Macsen glanced at his surroundings and also became a little worried. It was a stage that he could come down from without embarrassment, so he raised his hands and ordered his adjutant to relay his orders.

After a brief moment of chaotic disorder, the army stopped.

But the moment the chatter died down, Carglise immediately discovered a problem. He quickly raised his head up and surveyed the trees, frowning deeply.

He was not only the person who discovered the oddity, as the knights similarly realized the same thing.

The forest was completely silent.

“Retreat.” His expression was grave as he stared into the forest ahead.

========== Raban / The Nightsong Tiger’s POV ==========

Raban similarly frowned. The noble’s army was just a short distance away from the ambush area. If they continued to march in a little more, he would be able to lead his mercenaries to gain a preemptive strike, but their current position would only allow for a stalemate instead of an advantage.

He stared at them and noted down every single detail he could spot. In the end, he chose to wait a little longer. During his stint amongst the Karsuk’s cavalry, the most

important trait he learned was being calm, and it had allowed him to see the situation clearly and lead to a victory.

But this time he was wrong.

The Nightsong Tiger had sensed the unusual atmosphere in the air. After that young rider entered the main army, the entire army stopped their march, and he suspected that the enemies had discovered their mercenaries.

Regardless of what the enemy realized, he knew that he had to make an immediate judgment.

The Subterrane Dwellers were in place approximately a hundred meters away, armed with heavy crossbows. Tagiv had wanted to get these weapons ever since they fought with Graudin, but the latter was not foolish enough to give away military provisions to his enemies.

Naturally, it was different when they entered Brendel's army.

A hundred meters was a little far for humans to charge in, and even Iron-ranked fighters needed a few seconds to traverse on open ground, not to mention in a forest. The Subterrane Dwellers were a different story, though.

"Send out the signal—" The Nightsong Tiger made his decision and gave the order.

"Wait," Raban did not understand, "they are still too far away for the crossbows to reach them."

"We have absolute numbers and strength. The ambush is nothing more than a strategy to conserve our men, but if the enemies realized we are here, then things might take a different turn. Remember the crucial point for this battle; our lord wants to capture Lord Macsen."

Raban took a moment to realize it was indeed so.

Chapter 39
Town Schafflund

========== Carglise's POV ==========

"Prepare to retreat!" Carglise's voice was raised.

"What?" Lord Macsen could hardly believe what his ears were hearing. The brat actually ordered his men to retreat in front of him: "You damn brat, this old man isn't dead yet, so don't think you can order my men!"

Even if his son was cautious, retreating out of the forest was a little too much. Furthermore, how was he going to deal with the loss of his pride?

"My lord, I'm afraid the young master is right." But one of the knights also chose to speak up with a solemn expression: "It's best that we retreat, at least a little—"

"What's happening? What are y—" Lord Macsen's mind was going blank. His subordinates would not joke with him, and this time he was starting to panic a little.

Before he could finish his words, there was a visible signal made from a magic spell that rose up to the sky, followed by frightening bestial screams!

Carglise's eyes widened in shock as he saw countless enemies swarming towards them.

[T-this rebellion can't possibly consist of just disgruntled civilians and mercenaries!]

========== Brendel's POV ==========

Brendel and his men passed through the dark green peaks and ridges of Mountain Graham and stood at the highest point to observe the extending scenery. A scenic view of red and green spread across the coiling valleys. They had reached close to their destination before it was afternoon.

He took in the beautiful season for several minutes with astonishment.

“That place is Town Schafflund,” Jana said, referring to the houses with bright red roofs sitting near the forest, with the highest population density in its center.

A town that slumbered deeply within the mountains.

Ciel had given Brendel an entirely new line of thinking after he discussed the potential revenue that could be gained from the trading hub, Ampere Seale. The painting from Fortress Riedon was just a part of what could be obtained. Brendel also had Tamar, a future grandmaster alchemist, and combined with Brendel’s knowledge of the future, it was not difficult for him to profit from Ampere Seale.

However, Schafflund was also something that could significantly benefit him in the long run, so he decided not to change his plans.

“It’s beautiful,” Scarlett said to herself when she looked at the scenery.

The shrubs behind her rustled as the other mercenaries walked out. There were twenty-seven of them, each with steady hands and long endurance, and their eyes surveyed their surroundings with vigilance. These elite mercenaries were picked from Jana’s mercenaries and the smaller groups of sellswords, and even the weakest amongst them was a peak Iron-ranked fighter.

Brendel was initially quite surprised to see such a group. If they were trained a little more, they could become skilled warriors no weaker than Aouine’s knights.

But all the mercenaries knew that they were unable to match Brendel’s close subordinates. The two girls beside him were Gold-ranked fighters, and the two angels that followed behind him were genuine Silver-ranked warriors.

Brendel made the angels keep their wings folded to keep a low profile. Summoning and unsummoning them wasted too many Light EP. He did not have an effective means of replenishing his light EP, so he paid 1 Light EP every day to keep them outside. If he needed to retrieve a card in the graveyard, he could unsummon them and cast them again anytime; or if only five Light EP were left, he would unsummon them to ensure he could at least cast the angels.

He had spent his 100 Wealth after the battle at the lumber mill to unseal the Fire Element Earth Card ‘Ashen Volcano’, and the Wind Element Earth Card ‘The Nest of Storms’.

Right now in his created dimensional world within his mind, sat an inactive volcano and a hurricane that spun continuously. The final land card in the album was the Fire Element Land Card, Karudu's Wilderness.

With the Wind Element Land Card, it would not be a problem to summon the Wind Spirit Spiders, while the Fire Element Land Card allowed him to target the next card in the album:

– Fire Djinn

– (The Blazing Inferno X)

– 15 Fire Elemental Points

– Living Element: Djinn, Level 36 Creature

– Tapping the card will cause Fire Djinn to deal an enormous amount of damage to target enemy. Shuffle this card back into the deck after tapping.

– Pay 2 Fire Elemental Points every day when the Fire Dijinn is on the battlefield.

– 'The Fire Djinn always terrifies its enemies on the scorching lands.'

– Unlocking this card requires 50 Fire Elemental Points.

This card appealed to Brendel because it did not require Wealth to unseal it; his foremost priority was to unlock cards that gave out resources. It was still a little too much for Brendel now as he only had a total of 37 Fire EP available in his Mana Pool, but if he trained by casting more Fire Spells, then his mana pool for the Fire Element would increase gradually.

The spells he picked when he increased his Elementalist levels were all fire-based spells too, like Fire arrows or Control Fire.

He was targeting another card as well:

– Silver Swallow-tailed Flag

– (Alliance of Light VII)

– 12 Earth or Water Elemental Points

– Artifact / Fantasy-ranked rarity

– When Silver Swallow-tailed Flag is on the battlefield, all creatures' maintenance cost is decreased by 1. If any Cards have multiple maintenance costs, choose the Element you wish to decrease.

– Tap a target card that produces Wealth and doubles it.

– 'Glittering flow of silver.'

– Unlocking this card requires 100 Wealth

This card has caused Brendel to crave for it for a long time and even made him hesitate whether to unlock the land cards later, but Ciel's suggestion made him change his mind. The source of a Planeswalker's powers still come from Land Cards.

"What should we do next, my lord?" Scarlett carried her heavy halberd over her small shoulder.

Jana spoke before Brendel could: "Town Schafflund is built because of the silver mine and most of the residents work there. It's quite affluent because of that, and many merchant shops and a few inns have been set up."

"There are inns in this remote place?"

"It's not strange at all. Schafflund is the deepest town in the eastern Graham mountain, and there are quite a lot of adventurers who visit this town. Rumors also state there are silver veins in boulders found in the forest. Many come here in hopes of striking it rich."

"Silver veins?" Romaine came from behind and asked: "Is there something like that?"

Everyone turned around and saw the merchant girl crawl out from a bush. She even held the corners of her dress to prevent it from getting caught by the branches.

But she did not secretly follow Brendel this time; it was him who wanted her to come along. There were going to be accounting notes about the silver mine, and Romaine was probably the only person who understood them besides Amandina.

“Some were rumored to become rich because they found the silver veins, but it’s rare. The majority of the people go back empty-handed.” Jana said.

“Why do so many bother to come here when the success rate is so low?” Scarlett did not understand.

“Because the only thing people see is the success that people had,” Brendel said as he observed the town.

“My lord is right. Some of them spent their money by gambling them away after they discovered the silver veins.” Jana nodded.

“Things that are attained easily are discarded just as easily,” Medissa said as she spoke of a Silver Elf adage.

Many agreed with her words, but Romaine had a different opinion on the silver veins: “I find it hard to believe. My aunt regularly says that things that are too conspicuous invite trouble. How is it possible that the other nobles wouldn’t take notice of this? I think even Count Randner’s men would be interested in it!”

“Strangely enough the people who did not find any silver mining veins did not enter the forest again. It’s also one of the mysteries of this forest.” Jana shook her head.

“Huh?” Romaine’s eyes widened, apparently curious as to why they did not continue searching.

Scarlett shook her head and scoffed: “Mysteries? This rumor is more likely to be false! The people who got rich probably discovered something else and pretended otherwise!”

“That’s possible,” Brendel’s mind did think of a possibility, but he brought the topic back to their real goals, “but we should start talking about our plans. Jana, you’re most familiar with this area amongst us, go ahead and speak your thoughts.”

“My lord, the mining area is approximately two miles to Schafflund’s eastern-north. Every morning, the workers would pass through a dedicated path to enter the silver mines and work. The path is guarded by several watchtowers, and there is light cavalry patrolling as well. We won’t be able to enter the area without concealing ourselves.”

“Is there only a single path? What are the chances of sneaking in from the sides with

our men's skills?"

"It's not impossible," Jana thought for a while, "but I heard the commander of the guards is a Gold-ranked swordsman."

Brendel nodded. It would be strange without that this place did not have one. He knew the strongest defender of a silver mine in the game was a Sword Saint who had completely mastered his Element Power.

"Very well. Entering the town shouldn't be a difficult problem. Since we have quite the number of men, we need to divide ourselves into small groups to avoid suspicion. Everyone needs to make sure to bring your funds with you at all times and stay in different inns," He glanced at the sky as he spoke, "we will gather in the evening. Have all of you memorized your signs?"

Everyone nodded.

"Then move out."

Chapter 40
Silver mines (1)

There was an inn located in central Schafflund and the owner a normal middle-aged man. However, the ale sold there had exceptional taste and thus attracted many recurring customers.

Most of them were locals who worked in the silver mines six days every week and returned every Sunday to rest, with a terrible body odor worked up from perspiration. They had loud, boorish voices, ignored what others thought of them, and leered at the waitresses.

If any barkeep girl flirted with them, they would definitely be booed at.

A few young men sat in one corner and stole glances at the noisy drinkers while discussing their affairs. Their parents were workers at the mine, and so were they. But these youths' restless and brash personalities made them unwilling to resign themselves to spend their whole lives in this manner, and were currently discussing with each other to leave this town and see the outside world.

They had spent their entire lives within the town, and the furthest they went to was the forest, and the ideas they had of other regions came from the adventurers that came into the inns.

When they were finally prepared to leave Schafflund, they arranged the time to meet up and depart. However, they heard a cold scoff emitted through the nose near them. The young men's startled heads whipped quickly to the opposite table in guilt and saw an aging dwarf.

He had a large nose and long braided beard that reached to his waist. Metal clasps were wrapped around his stocky arms, his legs short but thick and powerful. His skin color did not belong to a mountain dwarf's ruddy complexion but a pale grey color.

The youths' expressions immediately contorted. The old dwarf's name was Odum; they did not know where he came from, but he was rumored to be skilled in mining and was hired to be a foreman.

His temper was atrocious, personality stubborn, and was inflexible; he never humored anyone. He seemed to have troubles of his own, and many had seen him drinking by his lonesome self— Dwarves love to drink, but they rarely do so on their own, and certainly unlikely to put a snarling grimace while ignoring everyone.

That was not the end of his unfavorable impression. He was also arrogant and looked down on everyone, even speaking badly about his superiors. He was bad-tempered enough to even insult the king, so they saw him as an eccentric person and ignored his actions.

The youths who saw him instantly cried bitterly in their hearts. One of them who had better social sense immediately spoke in a friendly tone: “Foreman Odum, we didn’t see you—”

The old dwarf glared at them: “Why, did I disturb you?”

“No, no, not at all. Would you allow us to treat you to a few rounds…”

“I don’t give a shit about your treat, but I’ll remind you young’uns that the world outside is harder than you think. Be careful not to get knocked in the head on your way out.” Odum snorted from his nose.

The youths were relieved and stuttered a few parting words in response. They nudged each other and quickly left the front door.

When they were finally out of the inn, they could not help but curse their luck for encountering the old dwarf. It was fortunate that he was in bad terms with the majority of the people in the town. Many of them would be rebuked if their parents found out.

Odum shook his head when he saw the youths leave. The world was a harsh place, but he did not bother himself with a bunch of hot-blooded youths. He was about to lift his flagon of ale, but the appearances of a group comprising of three men and women caught his eyes.

In fact, most of the people in the hall had their eyes lit up when Brendel pushed the doors open.

A bunch of beautiful lasses—

Medissa was a pure blooded Silver Elf from the royal family and was remarkably beautiful. Even though her body had not fully matured, her somewhat delicate appearance was more appealing.

Romaine and Scarlett were just as eye-catching. The merchant girl had a unique air about her that made people look at her twice, especially with her inquisitive dark eyes darting everywhere, while her hands were placed squarely on her leather bag in front of her belt.

Scarlet's wary crimson eyes combined with her large halberd had the same effect. When she walked into the inn's hall, her eyebrows were slightly knitted and lifted up a little, warning everyone not to approach.

But the reason why the bar was rowdy was due to Jana. Some men whistled loudly as they leered at the female mercenary commander's ample chest and sexy body.

The latter did not mind the noise but sneered coldly in response.

Brendel had seen typical scenarios in games and stories about the inns; adventures would discuss their plans, while the loutish customers would raise their voices as they had drinking games, with the waitresses flirting laughs.

[It will be perfect if there's a bard.]

He was quite fascinated by this sight and smiled.

The inn's owner closed in on them. He looked like an ordinary middle-aged man, but it seemed like he was able to recognize the relationship between Brendel and the others.

While the inn's men looked at the group with their lower bodies, the middle-aged man studied the two handsome men a few steps behind Brendel but shifted his gaze away after a few seconds to the youth.

As the owner of this inn, he learned how to read people after seeing so many people come and go. He was able to recognize him amongst the others because Brendel's confidence as a modern-age person was similar to descendants of high-ranking nobles who had received good upbringing.

[This must be a scion of an important noble!]

He thought as he squeezed out a smile and used a polite tone subconsciously: “What does everyone need?”

Brendel looked at the menu and pointed at the most expensive wine. He was uninterested in the choices but merely chose to keep up an appearance.

The other ladies, with the exception of Medissa, chose a fruit wine that tasted mildly sweet and sour. Heroic Spirits did not need to eat, and Medissa merely sat quietly at their sides. Scarlett noticed this and whispered: “You can’t eat?”

Medissa paused for a moment and shook her head: “It’s not necessary for me.”

“Then it’s best to try something. It will be a little conspicuous if you don’t order.” Scarlett said as she combed through her ponytail.

“Not so,” Romaine’s voice cut in as she spoke earnestly, “a real lady wouldn’t eat or drink in this chaotic and noisy place!”

Scarlett watched the merchant girl drink her flagon of fruit wine with satisfaction. She rolled her eyes as she said with a huff: “Aren’t you drinking?”

“But I’m not a lady!” Romaine’s said with widened eyes.

Medissa giggled as she listened to their conversation.

The middle-aged owner confirmed his thoughts when he saw the two men standing silently behind Brendel without ordering anything. The girls were the youth’s companions, and the men were his subordinates.

He glanced at everyone and asked with a sensitivity belonging to a businessman: “I assume everyone isn’t a local?”

Scarlett stopped speaking and raised her eyebrow cautiously. Brendel knew there was nothing to hide. The innkeeper might not hold power in this town, but he probably knew enough locals to see through any lies they could come up with, so he nodded:

“We’re here to test our luck.”

But he did not give the truth either.

The owner thought Brendel was a young noble seeking fun and adventures. It was not uncommon.

“Do you mean to go out to the forest? Do you need a guide?” He asked.

Since Brendel had ordered the most expensive wine, he was quite happy to aid him.

Brendel glanced at the wine in his hand. The service was quite considerate, probably because of how expensive it was. This place was an information hub, and the owner typically sold it as a side business, but as the information was taken from third parties, it was not checked for falsehoods.

He had to remove the useless bits by himself. The only thing good about it was the price of the information was included with the drinks.

“I don’t need a guide, but I want to know more about the forest.” He shook his head and said.

“The town’s surroundings are safe, but if you go deep into the forest, you might encounter beasts and possibly monsters. Also, the mines are in the north, if you travel there, you might encounter the patrolling guards. It won’t be good for you to meet them because they might capture you for being suspicious—”

The owner paused in the middle of his explanation, then quickly added as though he was afraid the youth might abuse his status:

“While this place is within Trentheim, the owner of the silver mines is Count Randner.”

“I see.”

Brendel sipped the wine that was brought to him, and a burning sensation went down his throat before it burst up to his nose, almost causing him to cough. He frowned because he nearly made a fool out of himself, especially when he was not a good drinker. After dispelling the taste in his mouth, he decided not to touch it anymore.

“What other areas must I avoid?” He asked.

“Not heading north would be fine.” The owner said.

“But how is it possible for us to find the silver veins if we’re not close to the mines?”

Brendel pretended to look troubled.

The owner thought he was right in predicting what Brendel came for.

Chapter 41
Silver mine (2)

“I don’t have firm information about the silver veins in the forest,” the owner lowered his body and whispered, “but if you do not lack money you can approach the well-known local adventurers here, they have entered the forest many times and even drew maps of the nearby areas.”

“How useful are these maps?”

“Priceless.”

Brendel nodded and asked information regarding the town’s workers and the patrolling time of the soldiers near the mines. He thought he made his group look like they were out for adventuring, but the innkeeper saw them as naive scions of nobles who were out for fun.

Neither cared about their misunderstandings, and the conversation continued until a dwarf nearly crashed onto Brendel as he stumbled close towards him.

“Excuse me,” Odum looked at the youth and barely recognized him as the person who came in earlier. His eyes were almost accusatory, as though Brendel was at fault, and shook his head in disapproval.

Brendel’s mouth nearly dropped. The path was wide enough for the old dwarf to walk by, but the latter made him sound like his chair was blocking his way. He did not want to have a scene, so he pulled his chair in after a moment of hesitation, but suddenly whirled his head back to the dwarf again.

Odum’s face was red from the alcohol and Brendel thought he was a common Mountain Dwarf, but the color of his arms was light grey.

The youth’s heart skipped a beat.

[A Rune Dwarf?]

He felt like he was somehow asleep and wanted to pinch the dwarf's face to confirm whether he was sleeping, or if the latter was real.

The Rune Dwarves in Vaunte's history was not as prominent as the Silver Elves, and they come from the Jurgen Underworld just like the Subterrane Dwellers, but their status was unique because they were from the Silver Lineage that disappeared from history a long time ago.

It was believed that the Rune Dwarves had died out during the Era of Chaos, but rumors indicated that the race survived because there was another city in the Underworld cut off by the Mercury Sea.

Either way, Brendel did not think he had the chance to see a living Rune Dwarf, mostly recognizable by their skin color as no other dwarves had the same color.

These Rune Dwarves were the builders of the Steel Plains, and their architectural skills were considered on par with the Wizard Craftsmen, though the Rune Dwarves were dissatisfied with the evaluation. Unfortunately, they would never be able to truly compete because the dwarves' buildings were located in the Underworld and the Wizard Craftsmen' buildings on the surface.

Brendel calmed himself after a short pause.

[It might be possible he's from a bloodline that drifted outside the Underworld. Every race has their own adventurers no matter what kind of traits they have. Though these drifters might not have their cultural heritage, and some of them don't even know what race they belong to.]

Perhaps no one in the town recognized this old dwarf for who he truly was.

Brendel continued to ponder as Odum staggered shakily past him, and his eyes followed the latter's back out of the inn's door.

[There's no point to talk with a drunken dwarf right now; he seems like he's a worker here as well, so I don't think he will be disappearing anytime soon.]

Brendel did not follow him in the end. His goal was to take control of the silver mines, and there would be a chance to interact with him later. He turned towards the innkeeper and said:

“Who’s that?”

“That old man? His name is Odum. He has stayed here for a quite some time,” the innkeeper did not know why the youth was interested in the dull-looking dwarf, “he’s currently working in the mines.”

“As a miner?”

“He works as one of the foremen.”

“Does he have any special traits like being knowledgeable in construction?” Brendel pressed on.

“…Hmm, I don’t think I’ve heard anyone say that before,” the innkeeper shook his head.

“I see, I thought the dwarves are all specialists in building something,” Brendel laughed and lied intentionally.

“That would be the dwarves in the north.”

Brendel nodded and thanked him for the information and the innkeeper left to tend to his other customers.

“Is there something special about that dwarf?” Jana asked.

“No, nothing of importance. Let’s discuss the information we have from the innkeeper.”

“What do you make of his information?” Jana’s eyes had a streak of anxiety in them. She was the next person to Brendel to be concerned about this matter’s success.

“We had originally thought that the workers return every day from the mines, but as you heard from the innkeeper, they work six full days there and only return to the town on Sunday. That’s not good at all.”

“The people in charge of the mines seem to be quite strict.”

“Yes, and our chances to sneak in becomes smaller.”

“Why do we need to sneak in?” Scarlett asked as she did not understand.

“Controlling the silver mines isn’t hard as long as we can capture that Gold-ranked swordsman commander. It shouldn’t be hard since Scarlett, Medissa and I are Gold-ranked ourselves. The hundred-odd guards won’t be a match for us, but doing it silently without attracting the attention of Lord Palas would be difficult. You should know how much of a commotion a fight between Gold-ranked fighters is, and if any guard realizes the silver mine is under attack, they will make sure to seek help from Lord Palas, and it won’t take more than a few days to know that Schafflund is taken.”

“Perhaps we can cut off their paths ahead of time by putting the mercenaries in their paths,” Romaine suggested.

“Lord Palas is indirectly in-charge of the silver mines’ safety, and if there’s no news from Schafflund for a long time, he would be suspicious.” Brendel shook his head: “We need to control this place and make it look like it’s running as usual, then transport the silver to Firburh.”

The silver would then be moved to a mint to manufacture coins. This was not much of a secret in Firburh as Graudin had his private mint hidden in a manor within the city.

This was naturally an act of treason liable to hanging, but Brendel’s favorite phrase easily stated his thoughts— A person on a death row would not mind if the noose on his neck were one or two ropes.

“Is it possible to lure him out and take him down? Surely that commander can’t stay in the mines all the time.” Medissa suggested with her soft voice.

“It’s certainly possible, but what if he doesn’t come out for a whole month, does it mean we have to wait just as long?” Brendel shook his head again and said: “This is why we should take the initiative, and at the very least, we should enter the mines and observe their movements. We might even pick up on how they communicate with the Palas region.”

“Then what should we do now, my lord?” Jana asked.

“Stop, don’t address me with that title,” Brendel glanced at his surroundings cautiously, “there are two pieces of good news from the innkeeper. First is the possibility of the adventurers mapping the silver mines. I feel this is highly possible since good adventurers probably make maps all the time.”

“You’re not wrong, my… young master,” Jana changed her words in time when

Brendel's eyes darted to her who had trouble using this title, "sometimes, the adventurers would even work with the local bandits. The nobles tend to ignore them since they won't be able to cause any problems."

"What's the second good news?" Romaine asked.

"This information is subtle to pick up on, but the adventurers occasionally go to the mining area and work there. Not all the adventurers manage to earn money here."

Jana was surprised and asked: "Count Randner is willing to allow these troublesome people into the mines?"

"Why wouldn't they? The mines need workers. I'm certain that the adventurers are not allowed to bring in weapons when they enter the mines, and they are not allowed to bring even one piece of rock out when they leave. They exchange the silver ores in the mines for food and money, so what kind of trouble would they be able to cause? And the final reason… It's Count Randner's territory. Who else would cause trouble other than us?" Brendel listed his reasons one by one.

"Then can't we go sneak in by this method?" Scarlett's eyes lit up.

"Well, yes and no, the women can't, while the men can. The silver mines can't allow women to work or else there will be chaos," Brendel said with a bemused expression.

The girls looked at each other and understood how easy it was to gain information on the guards' movements with this plan.

"Therefore," Brendel said as he observed them, "it's best I infiltrate the silver mines on my own."

Chapter 42
Silver Mine (3)

The gates of the silver mines were bustling with people. Regardless of whether they were workers or adventurers, they were watched by a squadron of cavalry and proceeded towards to the mines in an orderly manner. They were also formed into three lines to speed up their entry.

Brendel glanced at the map on his hand, and silently memorized the locations and symbols on it before he rolled the parchment up and put it away in his bag. He looked up at the group ahead. Twenty mercenaries had successfully sneaked in a while ago. The cavalry that was guarding the entrance were not vigilant.

It was probably because Schafflund had enjoyed peace for too long. Even though there were occasional groups of Trentheim's bandits that troubled the town, these desperados rarely approached the mining areas. One reason was the intimidating name of Count Randner, and another was because the loss outweighed the gains.

His eyes briefly darted to the lush green forest. His female subordinates had most likely entered the area already. Even Jana who was the weakest of the lot had the strength of a Silver-ranked fighter. Bypassing the watchtower's guards should not be difficult.

Romaine stayed behind in the town with two Pristine Angels protecting her, so he was not too worried.

"Next!" One of the cavalry guards yelled with a thick native accent.

Brendel realized it was his turn and quickly lowered his head and walked forward. He thought he would at least be checked by them, but the rider in front of him with a silver pointed helmet merely swept his eyes on the people in front of him, and let them pass when he saw they had no weapons.

[If this is the case I might as well have the girls disguise as men and let them sneak in. Judging from the way how this place is guarded, that Gold-ranked swordsman's vigilance probably isn't high—]

He shook his head in disapproval. Still, it was good news.

Once he was past the gates, the observations on them were even more relaxed. Brendel surveyed the surroundings and quickly saw the disguised mercenaries. In truth, their disguise was really nothing more than not taking their weapons. Naturally, Brendel was not rash enough to carelessly group up with them.

Twenty adventurers in a group were definitely suspicious no matter how one looked at it. Since they had their own methods of contacting each other, there was no hurry.

[I've done all sorts of missions in the game, but this is the first time I'm disguising myself and entering deeply into a territory full of enemies. I'm feeling a little anxious and excited at the same time… Hmm, then again a Gold-ranked fighter is enough to travel through Vaunte—]

His mind was more settled when he remembered this detail. It was still the first year of the game, and a Gold-ranked fighter was a considerable force to be reckoned with. In this year, one could count the number of Gold-ranked fighters below the age of twenty with their fingers.

He then continued to observe and memorize his surroundings as he progressed, while marveling at the beautiful scenery. The path between the town and the silver mines was a long snaking path that passed through the mountain's forest, and there were sporadic clearings that allowed him to see the valleys below him, as well as the distant Graham Mountain which was made up of a series of smaller mountains extending towards Trentheim.

It was like a watercolor painting where blue mountains lined vividly towards the horizon, and the trees were like black specks sprayed onto them, forming into a canvas that pleased the eyes greatly.

He finally tore his eyes off the landscape to look at his hands after a long while and reflected on his journey in a daze.

[I've been using the sword so much that my hands have calluses. I feel like I've been traveling for so long, yet it has been only a few months. The unknown kid in Bucce has gained companions and subordinates and is relied on for his strength. I even have my own territory just like I envisioned, and I'm controlling the known future step by step… until this old kingdom's fate is changed]

He had successfully turned the ship that had sailed towards the darkness towards the path of light just a little, and thought that the female upperclassman who introduced him to the game would be delighted to hear it.

A unique building structure broke off his thoughts. When Brendel looked at it, he saw a watchtower in front of him surrounded by foliage. When he checked ahead, there were more watchtowers similarly guarded by soldiers with shiny armor.

[Unlike the cavalry's relaxed attitude, the defense here is strict. Based on the map and the positions of these watchtowers, it seems like the adventurers didn't lie to me.]

The map cost him three thousand Tor coins, but it seemed like it was worth the price.

Suddenly, someone bumped into Brendel's back while he was concentrating on the watchtowers. When he looked back, he saw a young man. The latter was surprised to find Brendel to be of similar age to him; when the young man knocked into him, he felt he had smashed against a mountain, and the feedback nearly caused him to fall over.

The young man staggered a few steps before he steadied himself. He patted his chest and breathed in deeply, and it was easy to see his startled expression. He looked back at Brendel, and that emotion soon changed to an apologetic one.

"I'm sorry," the youth seemed to realize his mistake and apologized.

Brendel observed the youth's attire; he was wearing a common adventurer's outfit. The type of leather armor he was wearing did not offer any real defense, and the only good point about it was that it looked pretty decent.

"Well, since you apologized then you should return my things," Brendel replied after a pause.

It was common to see pickpockets in the game, but it was the first time he encountered it in this world. The difference between then and now was his skill level. He could not catch them in the past because he lacked the skill to do so, but now he was a true Gold-ranked fighter.

The young man's face turned into shock before he smiled upon hearing Brendel's words.

"You found out? That's amazing!" The young man's smile showed pearly white teeth,

and he did not argue when his actions were revealed, and generously took a bag of coins out from his clothes.

It was Brendel's bag of money.

"That's fine," Brendel received the bag and said, "your hands need to be gentler when you steal, also," he gravely added another line, "you should pick a better target!"

"Are you an adventurer? You don't look like it! You're an outsider, right? But it looks like you know our rules very well?" The young man nodded hard before he asked curiously. "But I agree that I need to pick better targets. It's just that I didn't expect you to be so amazing at your age. Your reaction is even faster than Maher! That guy always like to brag, oh, right, where are you from, brother?"

Brendel was not interested in knowing who Maher was, and also a little unused to someone using such a familiar tone with him.

"I've been to many places, but the rules of the Thieves Guilds are roughly the same. Since you returned my money, I won't make a scene out of this. I'm going to give my respect to these guilds… since their type is obnoxiously troublesome."

Brendel's words came from experience, and only experienced adventurers who traveled throughout the continent would know what he was talking about.

The young man did not mind and was even delighted as though Brendel had praised him, but he showed a curious look: "You said you traveled to many places? But you don't look any older than me; it can't be true, right?"

Brendel merely smirked and shook his head as he continued to walk.

But this action made the young man even more interested in him and he followed him at his side.

"My name is Jocah, what's yours?"

This question did not gain a response from Brendel, but Jocah did not mind, placed both his hands behind his head and continued to ask with interest: "Are things you said true? Do we really resemble a Thieves Guild? What does a real Thieves Guild look like?"

Brendel glanced at him and replied: “The things you do are pretty much what they would do.”

Jocah raised his eyebrow at Brendel’s evasive answer: “I heard there’s going to be a war in Firburh, is that true?”

Brendel felt slightly gloomy as the boy next to him kept asking questions.

[Do you really think I’m an information vault?]

He decided to ask questions of his own: “Aren’t you a native? Why are you interested in the outside world?”

But this time the boy beside him gave a mysterious chuckle and said: “Ah, well, nothing really, I’m just curious. I shouldn’t bother you anymore. I’ll chat with you if there’s time in the future—”

After he threw down this sentence, he disappeared in the crowd behind them.

Brendel’s perception was high enough to discern shrewdly where Jocah went to; the latter met up with a group of people of his age, and Brendel focused in on their conversation.

“It’s a failure, that guy is quite amazing!” Jocah said.

“Hah, how amazing can that person be when he’s not older than any of us. I can even steal from the veteran adventurers’ pockets in the town, are you sure it’s not because you are shit at it, Jocah?” A new voice said in mocking laughter.

“Why, Maher, please go ahead and show it to me.” Jocah retorted.

“Tsk, he’s already alert, that’s quite the devious plan you have there for goading me—”

“But that person is really quite interesting; he seemed to have traveled to many places. Even though he’s an outsider, he seems to understand our rules quite well, I’m surprised.”

“Hmph,” a new voice that sounded slightly refined interrupted Jocah, “you mean the rules that Maher stole from a drunk and made them our own? It’s not strange that

someone else would know about these rules."

Maher's face turned red: "Cut your bullshit, doesn't it mean that man is knowledgeable? Why not go up to him and sell the things you're talking about all day? Perhaps he might take a fancy to them!"

Maher emphasized on the word 'sell', making it sound like he was mocking the third voice.

"I can't be bothered with an oafish brute like you; you can't recognize the good stuff at all!"

"That's enough. I already told you not to cause trouble." This time it was a fourth voice— which belonged to a female voice.

[What, a girl really managed to sneak in? She doesn't sound like an adult too.]

Brendel was taken slightly aback and sneered at the gate's cavalry guards before he continued listening.

"I saw that person yesterday at the Forest Trout Inn along with a few other women. They don't look like adventurers no matter how much I look at them. I saw that man order the most expensive wine from John, and he doesn't look like he lacks money at all. He's definitely up to no good for coming here."

Brendel's brows knitted slightly and cursed his luck. It was a spontaneous decision to fish for information before he sneaked into the mines, and he did not think it would end up as a mistake. Who would know that there was someone to overhear their conversation and spot him again in the mines so quickly?

"Should we report him?" The girl continued.

Brendel's heart tightened.

Chapter 43
Silver mines (4)

The youth with a refined voice disagreed with the girl.

“Shhh, stop talking about it. What that young man wants to do isn’t any of our business. Just pretend that you know nothing about what you saw. This isn’t a simple matter and he might have other companions. None of us wants to get our throats cut, right?”

The group fell into silence after his persuasion.

“…Very well,” Maher finally said, “then it’s decided. Since we’re going to leave after this, we won’t want to get into unnecessary trouble.”

The others nodded.

Brendel turned his head to look at them. He did not expect there was someone with good common sense amongst them, so he wanted to see who the person was, but the group had turned around and walked away.

[That’s a little interesting.]

Brendel mused to himself. He continued to walk a mile to the silver mines without taking very long. When he entered the area, he clearly felt the increase of security to the point where it could be considered strict.

The silver mines sat in the middle of the looping mountains, and the thinner veins of silver deposits had been completely mined, causing the mountain walls to form into a depression and made into an artificial valley

[I wonder what kind of minerals these dark red boulders have in them. Hmm, these buildings on the surrounding mountain peaks are clearly watchtowers. They make this terrain very troublesome to capture. Also, there’s no hidden space to lure the Gold-ranked swordsman out here. It’s literally impossible to catch him here… I need to change my plans a little.]

He continued to study the environment. The ground was considerably flat and extended towards the horizon, but he was unable to find the entrance to the silver mines. What he saw next was a heavily guarded building which looked somewhat like a fortress.

[Randner's Gold-ranked commander and his administrative officer must be in this building.]

Workers were moving about in the mines amidst the piled rocks, soil, and carts. Most of them were walking orderly in a queue, and there were only a few adventurers who looked perplexed as they were here for the first time, just like Brendel.

But he did not feel tense and calmly followed the workers in silence. The soldiers would not leave this group of adventurers alone, and he was certain they would be ordered.

He was right.

A group of patrolling riders soon appeared from the valley's side and rode towards the adventurers who were milling about. These riders wore bright army uniforms that represented they worked for nobles and roared at the top of their voices, apparently uninterested in wasting time: "Queue up over there, take your number tags and tools!"

Once they threw down their instructions, they immediately went towards the incoming adventurers at the valley's entrance.

Brendel glanced at the direction where the riders had pointed to. The administrative workers were handing out tools and wooden tags with numbers written on them, which were forbidden to damage or lose them. If anyone lost them, they would be heavily punished. In this medieval-like era, Vaunte did not promote humanitarianism. One could have a reasonable or unreasonable cause to kill someone, and it would not be a big deal.

Even the officer even in the mining area had the authority to hang someone to death, as long as he suspected that person was stealing Count Randner's precious ores.

Brendel did not care about that. His concern was the camps he was going to be allocated to. The workers naturally stayed within the valley, and no matter how stingy the officers were, they would build at least build camps for the workers, no matter how terribly built they were.

[I can't help but sigh at the thoughts of staying in awful smelling huts. Thankfully the body of a Gold-ranked fighter tolerates things better despite the increase in perception.]

In the game, these camps were usually thatched huts that had awful odors that a person from modern Earth would find intolerable. Brendel was worried that he would keel over if he entered it.

[Bloody fucking hell.]

His worries became a reality.

Brendel's nose wrinkled as the smell of shit and piss mixed with thick body sweat wafted into his nasal glans, and he covered his mouth in order to suppress the urge to retch. He frowned deeply as he stood in front of a shaky hut that looked more like a hastily constructed shed, and glanced back and forth at it and his number tag several times, but he eventually realized that he was going to sleep there. He suddenly realized the girls had made a wise decision for not sneaking into the camp, and he was the foolish one for choosing to do so.

He hesitated for a while and turned back to look at the camping area. There were many sheds in the valley. His mercenaries were scattered all over the place, but he was certain that they would not be affected in communicating with each other.

The other good news was that three mercenaries were also allocated to the same area. He had found their signs outside the hut in front of him.

But whether he received good or bad news, he had to face the most important question in front of him. He agonized internally for a while before he walked into the dimly lit area, with an expression that was no less pained than a falsely accused prisoner walking to the gallows.

Before he entered the area, he shook his hand slightly, and an undetectable flow of air placed a few pebbles on the ground into the shape of a triangle. At his current level, the White Raven Sword Arte allowed him to control the wind to a certain degree.

[This is a pretty useful technique. Maybe if I have time, I can try going to the palace and get the advancement scroll for it. It's a bit of a shot in the dark though. Hmm, but princess Gryphine is most likely proficient in it, maybe I can fulfill some conditions to get her to teach me? How should I tackle this problem…]

Despite his attempt to distract his mind, he could not help but cover his nose a little as he entered the shed, which had turned silent upon his entry.

"Tsk, a noble's spoilt brat." The voice was nearly undetectable to an ordinary human, but Brendel heard it clearly.

He glanced at the direction of the voice and was instantly surprised. Jocah was sitting down on a straw mat and was looking at him with a smile, while the other youths in the group were beside him.

The oldest amongst them was taller and more built, nearly reaching Brendel's height.

[This must be Maher.]

Brendel was certain the voice came from him. His eyes shifted to the slight movement from the latter's hands on his shirt. He could guess that the object behind the thin fabric was either a dagger or short sword.

[These useless guards at the checkpoint… As for this Maher person, you have some guts, but apparently, you're asking to be killed.]

His eyes shifted to the side after he evaluated him. There was a lanky boy who looked malnourished, his face appearing almost gaunt. However, his eyes were unlike Maher's wary looks or Jocah's sheepish surprise, but of intent observation.

Brendel wanted to rub his forehead. He had been in battles constantly for the past few months, killed and slaughtered undead and humans alike, led thousands of soldiers and mercenaries, and even became a Gold-ranked fighter.

Even if he tried to hide his identity, there were traits that he was unable to hide. In the end, he decided to observe that youth as well, but there was nothing interesting about the latter, other than a grey bag which was filled to the brim at his feet.

After a few more seconds, he turned to the disguised girl. Despite the dimly lit place, Brendel could see freckles on her as though she was under sunlight. She was thin and not exactly pretty, but her features were prominent.

There were three other young men near them beside the people he had some slight impression with, and they seemed like they belonged to the same group as well. But his thought quickly shifted to a furious complaint—

[Eight people squeezed together like packed tuna in a can. This damned hut is even smaller than my university's dorm room… You bunch of miserly pieces of shit-eating nobles!]

Chapter 44
Silver mines (5)

The room was quiet after Brendel entered, but he did not mind the situation and walked between the small gaps available before sitting down on the only empty bed. Everyone's eyes followed him, especially Maher who continued to frown as he stared at Brendel.

[Why are they on their guards? Do I look terrifying? Or is it because there's another reason?]

Brendel shook his head inwardly. For some reason, their muscles were stiff, and their hearts pounded loudly. However, he did not want to remove their anxiety. While they had agreed not to report his strange behavior, but who knew if their minds changed? It would be better to observe their movements.

The strange tension continued to the evening because of his presence.

Due to the number of workers pouring into the silver mines when they returned, the work usually started on the second morning, which gave Brendel much time to familiarize himself with the mines.

He had passed on the frightening meal offered for dinner. There was no possibility of identifying what was cooked in the pot, and the green-like paste looked like it was some kind of witch's potion as it carried a rotten stench to it. Brendel nearly emptied the contents of his stomach, not to mention eating it.

He was secretly thankful for Jana's reminder to bring sufficient dry rations. At the same time, he wondered if she had done similar related work to foresee the necessity of carrying his own food.

He stealthily confirmed several locations in the other camping areas after touring the valley once before returning to the place he was assigned to. He immediately saw the slightly malnourished youth when he entered the place.

The other young men in the group had gone out for their meals, with the exception of

the girl who was also sitting beside the malnourished youth.

“Are you not going to go for your meal?” Brendel asked, wondering if their relationships with the group were bad. It was common in some groups after all, but the youth shook his head.

“I don’t eat dinner.” The young man replied. He did not seem like he was afraid of Brendel like the other youths were.

[Don’t eating dinner? Perhaps he’s a follower of the Temple of Silver Lily?]

In his memories, only the suffering believers who lived in poverty had this strange habit. The reason the believers did not take the evening meal was to pay tribute to the King of Fire, Gatel, at his worst period in his life. The humans led by him in that era desperately tried to escape the assault from the Miirna by going into the wilderness, and countless people starved to their deaths as a result.

The youth nodded to Brendel’s question.

[The Temple of Silver Lily branches off from the Holy Cathedral of Fire. It’s quite common in Arreck, but the typical believers don’t fast, and the ones who do are apprentices taught in the religion’s ways.]

“Did you learn their ways as an apprentice?” Brendel asked.

“Yes, and no. I had studied the doctrine alongside with an apprentice, but I have not entered the Temple as one.”

“Does that mean you can read if you studied with the apprentice?”

The youth nodded. Brendel thought he was quite impressive. Freya recognized a few words because she was fortunate enough to encounter Captain Marden.

Many old veterans could not write and read, but his own grandfather was another exception, and his family was sufficiently well-off for him to be educated, while Romaine was taught by her aunt. It would be a joke if she did not learn how to read as a witch’s descendant.

But in this world, there were not many literate commoners.

“If that’s the case, why have you come here? Even though the Temple of Silver Lily doesn’t receive many donations, it’s a legitimate religion recognized by the Holy Cathedral of Flames.” Brendel sat down and asked curiously.

“I don’t know if I belong to the Temple. The priest who taught me has passed away.”

Brendel’s curiosity only lasted for a moment.

[I see. Without a formal introduction from a ranked personnel, he can only be considered as an ordinary believer.]

His thoughts quickly went back to his operation. He had roughly understood the terrain within the silver mines, but he felt the situation was becoming more and more troublesome.

The Gold-ranked swordsman rarely appeared within the mines and mostly stayed within the army building. Sneaking into there was still doable, but capturing him there without being found out was nearly impossible.

He was currently unable to come up with a plan, but since he already planned to stay for a week, he could only wait and see if an opportunity came up. While he was thinking, the malnourished youth suddenly started coughing severely.

The latter felt Brendel’s gaze on him and said with a slightly apologetic smile: “I’m a little ill. If you feel uncomfortable, you can sit a little further away.”

Brendel was not worried. He had nearly 100 OZ worth of Physique and was literally invulnerable to sickness. He shook his head and retrieved a waterskin bag from his bag as he knew that the water within the mines was not for human consumption. The barrels that contained water was starting to smell foul.

“I have clean water here. Go ahead and drink it,” he said.

“Thank you.” The girl with a few freckles on her face accepted the waterskin bag under with the approval of her companion and looked at Brendel like he was an exotic animal.

[Why is she looking at me like that now? It’s just water…]

Brendel naturally did not mind something so trivial when he came from a world where

the necessities of life were freely available. But the backward world of Vaunte went with a different principle; the lowest social class mostly believed that the weak were prey to the strong. Not many would extend their hands to the weak.

But this act won a favorable impression from the two. It was clear that the ill-looking youth felt much better after drinking several mouthfuls of water. The silence continued for a while before the girl broke the silence between them.

“Mister, I heard that you’re quite amazing?”

Brendel blinked. The question sounded really strange. Still, he had not considered this question properly. Was he amazing or not? He compared himself earnestly with his former self at level 130, before shaking his head: “Hardly so…”

“‘Hardly so’ still means you’re impressive. I heard that the adventurer’s ranks are something about a metal rank, I assume mister is someone like that?” She asked.

“It’s Iron-ranked.” The youth beside her corrected.

Brendel glanced at them, unsure why they were interested. But the distribution of ranks was not a secret, and many commoners knew about it.

“I still lack by a hair’s breadth to reach that level,” Brendel said. He felt that someone of his age having an Iron-ranked status was too conspicuous. The Iron-ranked mercenaries under him were nearly thirty to forty years old.

The lower his profile was, the better it was for him in this camp, so he randomly replied.

“Mister, are all the mercenaries like you? At that… Iron-ranked level?” The girl asked again.

“Of course not. I think your friend knows that adventurers possessing an Iron-rank are considered to be skilled. But why do you ask?”

Brendel was not lying. Hardly anyone would want to become an adventurer if their skills were higher than an Iron-rank. The rare exception was those who liked to travel everywhere like a nomad.

“We want to take a look at the outside world.” This time it was the youth who

answered.

“To go on adventures?”

“Yes.”

Brendel did not think it was a good decision, but he did not persuade them. From a certain point of view, this mining job truthfully looked like it was an awful one. Furthermore, he was also young enough to understand why they would feel this way.

[Hmm. That Maher fellow isn’t here now, and it seems like the two in front of me are less wary. Isn’t this a good time to get information from them? They have been in here longer than I have.]

“I heard rumors about the silver mines’ tunnels. Do they lead to the Jurgen Underworld?”

“I don’t know what that Jurgen Underworld is, mister,” the youth shook his head, “but there are tunnels which lead further down. The rumors say that no one has ever walked till the end of it, and people had gotten lost because of that.”

Brendel nodded inwardly. It seemed like Tagiv’s provided information was not wrong. He suddenly had a hazy idea to kill two birds with one stone, so he continued to ask: “That sounds very interesting, are there any related legends about them?”

The two people in front exchanged furtive glances, but it did not escape Brendel’s eyes. Since the two people in front of him knew he had other intentions in his mind, he started to lead them into a direction where it seemed like he came for the strange rumors like an adventurer.

“Of course there is,” the youth said and slowly nodded.

“Would you like to listen, mister?” The girl asked.

“Of course,” Brendel answered with a smile, “I can give you money for any interesting information you heard about the mines in detail…”

Chapter 45
Silver mines (6)

The morning at Graham's mountain was a sky painted with desaturated purple and scant blue, and thin rays of light shot out from the horizon to pour onto the dense mountain forest— It was a picturesque view of vivid shapes.

But the time when workers went to work was even earlier than the break of dawn. Whistles sounded out when it was still dark.

The shimmering light from oil lamps lit up the shadows. Brendel and the others were called out of their camps to gather at the valley. He eyed the cross-like mining pick in his hand drowsily while he walked in the slightly chilled air due to the sun's absence.

The coarsely made mining pick was about four feet long. It had undoubtedly served many users, as the wooden surface had been completely worn down till it was smooth, and the edges of the metallic blades were dull.

[I can't believe I'm mining again.]

He had mined metal veins throughout the game in ancient ruins for quite a long time. He carefully inspected the rocks to extract ores and crystals from them and sold them at the market. Although he thought that it was an irksome and dull task now, he had endless motivation and fun back then to equip his character step-by-step, and it satisfied his mind immensely.

But he quickly came to the thought that it was done in a fake world and started to mock himself. When he was done thinking about the past, he looked up and carefully observed the crowd in front of him. He quickly discovered Jana, Scarlett and Medissa's presence. They had evidently noticed the marks and clothes he left behind in the forest and were now disguised amongst the workers.

They wore bandanas for easy recognition, though the headdress was uncommon amongst the Highland folks, and their dirty clothes were bought from the group of youths in the hut. It was quite convenient to have them, but the greatest benefit he got was the information from the malnourished youth called Cohen. The fact that the

tunnels linked to the Jurgen Underworld gave him a particular thought about the game's information, and he decided to check it out and execute his plan at the same time.

[Whether or not this plan works will depend on tonight's situation.]

He did not think that the chance to lure out the enemy's Gold-ranked Swordsman would come so quickly. While he was deep into his thoughts, someone elbowed him from behind. He turned around vigilantly, but he discovered it was Jocah.

"Hey, you need to be careful. If you're late you're going to get whipped," Jocah whispered.

Brendel's first thought was to check his money bag. When he found it was intact, he glanced back and saw Cohen nodding towards him from afar. The latter had sent Jocah to remind him.

It seemed like the group of youths had lessened their wariness towards him, despite having only a day's interaction. Brendel felt that Cohen was helping him because the latter did not want to owe him gratitude, but was surprised that the sickly young man had such influence amongst them.

"Where should I go to mine?" Brendel whispered back to Jocah.

Jocah now knew Brendel's reason for coming here was something else, so he did not find the question strange.

"You should follow us if you don't know where to go, I know the better mining areas."

"Thanks."

"This isn't a free service," Jocah raised his hand and rubbed his fingers together, "you have the money right?"

"Of course." Brendel gave a faint smile.

Once they entered the mines, Brendel discovered different tunnels distributed in the slightly flat ground. Oil lamps were lined appropriately to ensure the minimum amount of light to walk through safely. The workers who entered started scattering and went into different tunnels. He chanced upon the girls again as they silently

integrated themselves into the crowd and disappeared.

Jocah continued to walk quickly, with Brendel following closely behind.

“The tunnel which Cohen mentioned is in the deepest pit of the mines. We’re going to a different section to mine for ores, although it’s still quite far away,” Jocah said.

“I see.” Brendel nodded.

[…The chance to reach a huge ‘Nest’ that’s in between the Jurgen Underworld and the surface. It’s something worth using despite the risks.]

The snaking tunnels seemed to venture out to even more tunnels, and anyone who was lost would find it hard to exit the place. It was also one of the barriers between the Jurgen Underworld and the surface. The Nest was also another reason why there’s a barrier between them. With so many monsters living in there, it would be a death trap.

But Brendel wanted to make use of the monsters to lure the enemy’s commander into the tunnels. The workers would get out of the mines to safety, while he and his men would stay behind. It was a good plan.

Jocah finally led Brendel out to an open area, and they got onto a lift that descended deeply. They then continued walking for ten-odd minutes in a tunnel with a low ceiling after the lift stopped.

[H-how’s he keeping up with me? He’s definitely not a newcomer!]

The surprised youth thought Brendel would be unused to the sudden changes in the tunnel and was even prepared to slow down. If one were careless, they would knock against the ceiling easily and get injured. But Brendel seemed like he had done it for several decades. The way he moved through smoothly and unhindered through the cracks was something that Jocah had never seen before, even amongst the veteran workers.

In the end, it was Brendel who led the progress, and he shortened the time to less than half what Jocah usually took to reach his destination.

The latter did not know how he managed to keep up with Brendel’s speed, but he was panting with his whole body drenched with perspiration, partly because of the stuffy

heat within the tunnels. He had not felt this way since he started out as an apprentice a long time ago.

The air in the underground was quite thin, so flames were not used. Instead, Brendel took out a light crystal that was given to him. In order to save costs, the quality of the crystal that was handed out was one of the worst in the market, costing no more than a few Tor coins. Although the light given out was just slightly brighter than a firefly, it still managed to light up the uneven outlines on the surrounding walls.

He nodded inwardly. Jocah's group had indeed picked a good spot. There was a faint purple sheen on some of the nearby boulders. It was not the silver ore that the workers were looking for, but Brendel was certain that there were Mana crystals within the rocks.

It was not uncommon. A typical mine usually had different types of Magic Energy accompanying it. Based on his long experience in mining, he was certain there was a rich vein of highly prized raw materials behind the boulders.

Footsteps could be heard. Brendel turned back and discovered it was Maher's group who arrived, and they were surprised to find Jocah and Brendel.

"Jocah, the two of you arrived this quickly?" Maher asked.

Jocah was still catching his breath, so he glanced at Brendel before nodding to Maher.

"The place you picked isn't bad," Brendel said. His gaze stopped at the youths for a moment before it went back to the walls.

"Hmph," Maher scoffed lightly, "you can tell?"

"A faint purple sheen on the boulders means that it's likely to have Cold Iron nearby. It's a rare component." Brendel narrowed his eyes when he saw weaving patterns on some of the walls and asked: "Have you ever mined out slightly blue quartz with diagonal patterns?"

"Quartz with patterns? What the hell is that?" Maher looked back blankly.

"It's also called Azure Quartz."

"That sounds like a fake crystal. Why would a silver mine have it?" Maher shook his

head with distaste and said: “If you are looking for that, I can tell you that you came to the wrong place.”

“It’s not an ornamental crystal. It’s a type of Moonstone, one that reacts to moonlight and gives out a Mana signature. Low-grade Azure Quartz crystals are worthless, but the highest grade is called Mystic Eye Gems.”

Brendel closed his eyes for a moment, and decided to leave out the part that the Mystic Eye Gems were used as the source of Mana for Magic Rings, then pointed with his finger.

“In any case, you’re digging the wrong place. If you mine in this direction, you might be able to find veins of Cold Iron.”

“How do you know all these things? And why tell us?” Maher said as he exchanged looks with the other youths. He would not have trusted Brendel a few days ago, but it was different now, and it seemed like the latter did not have any reasons to lie.

Brendel merely told them spontaneously as an experienced miner and did not deceive them.

“What’s Cold Iron used for?” The girl behind Cohen asked.

“…It’s a valuable ore that’s mixed into a weapon as an alloy,” Brendel said slowly, “and raises the effectiveness in injuring monsters. A sword made out of pure Cold Iron has twice the effectiveness of an ordinary one, as an example.”

[It’s fine to give them more information. It’s free of charge to me, and I can win them over, especially when I still need their aid.]

“Kingdoms in Vaunte face monsters at any given time, so the demand for it is very high. These Cold Iron ores only exist alongside with silver or copper mines, as well as a few crystal mines, and their demand is high enough to cost as much as gold.”

Brendel’s explanation drew the youths’ attention. If they were able to mine out Cold Iron, secretly take a portion of it and sell to a suitable buyer, they would be able to attain unimaginable wealth.

It was not their first stint to smuggle out precious ores. In truth, the mines’ supervisors knew such deeds were ongoing, but since they reached their quota and the stealing

attempts are few, they were too lazy to investigate.

Chapter 46
Silver Mines (7)

“I can’t guarantee that there would be Cold Iron ore if you continue mining in that direction, but there’s definitely a rich vein of metal ores,” Brendel said.

Cohen nodded to Maher’s group. They moved over to Brendel’s indicated location and raised their mining picks to the rocks. But Brendel did not have the intention to dig, and instead looked at a forked tunnel a few meters away.

“Where does that place lead to?” He asked.

“That tunnel leads to the lowest level, but it’s abandoned because of the monsters that appeared after the workers broke through to an undiscovered cavern. The soldiers drove them back with much difficulty and the mining area was abandoned after that.” Cohen explained.

The members of his group gathered part of their ore and put them to his side. Due to his health, he was unable to work, but it seemed like they did not mind.

Brendel rubbed his forehead thoughtfully for a moment. He then started walking towards the other end.

“Hold on,” Cohen called after him, “it’s best that you wait for a while before going there.”

“Why’s that?” Brendel stopped and asked.

“The foreman in charge of our level will inspect our location. It’s best that you wait for him to leave before going elsewhere.”

“When is he coming?”

“Between five to thirty minutes.”

Brendel frowned: “Will he come again to inspect?”

“Yes, he comes over every few hours, but there’s no exact timing.”

“I see, thank you.”

[A few hours should be enough for me to execute my plan. Looks like getting on their good side paid off.]

Brendel toyed with his mining pick by throwing it in the air a few times before he randomly knocked twice on the wall. Under his Gold-ranked strength, the mining pick cut through the rocks as though they were made of paper.

The group of youths who were watching him with curiosity was surprised with his strength, but as they continued watching, they became stunned at his techniques; his mining pick seemed to cut off edges of the silver veins, and the thin sheet of ore slid off the rocks like running water.

The pile of poor-quality silver ore quickly piled at his feet. He was initially a little interested at the prospect of mining again, but he soon sat down in boredom and randomly poked at the silver ore. He quickly gave up and simply watched Maher’s group work.

The youths dug quickly, and the walls were quickly taken down to reveal a change in color. Grey rocks could be seen, and Brendel told them to stop and throw a piece over to him. Jocah did so, and Brendel picked it up and inspected for a bit before he spoke again:

“There are Azure Quartz crystals in the rock, continue digging!”

“You mean they found it?” Cohen asked.

Brendel nodded, and the youths showed subtle excitement. They needed a large sum of money in order to travel to the outside world, and it seemed like it was a chance for them to get rich. Their mining picks increased in speed, and the constant metallic clinks filled everyone’s ears. The rocks were thrown away in order to prevent themselves from tripping, and a few rolled over to Brendel’s feet. He curiously looked at them before his eyes widened.

[The quality of the Azure Quartz is getting better. This level is only seen in crystal mines that have high purity. Metal mines don’t typically have this grade!]

The sounds suddenly sto

pped, and Brendel's gaze went up. The rocks parted to reveal a richly saturated blue material— Cold Iron Ore. But what stopped the youths from moving were the glinting crystals in the faint light.

[Mystic Eye Gems! And seventeen of them with the size of a thumb!]

Brendel looked stupidly at it for a moment as he stood up in a hurry. He had never heard or seen anyone lucky enough in the game to find seventeen Mystic Eye Gems, let alone lower-grade Mana Crystals.

"Do you know how much Cold Iron is in here?"

The youths shook their heads in silence.

"At least a ton. The rocks in this section are unusual. Cold Iron is something that's affected by Mana, and I don't know why there's so much Mana gathering at this spot. But it's a fact since there are so many Mystic Eye Gems here…"

Maher was the first to reply: "Let's share equally."

It was not a fair deal for the youths since there were seven of them and Brendel was only one. However, Maher knew that Brendel was skilled in combat and was afraid that the latter might get greedy.

"No, I want them all. Just sell me your share," Brendel patted his bag at the waist as he spoke excitedly, "I can pay immediately."

The uses of the Mystic Eye Gems were more than just the creation of Magic rings. They could also be applied to the White Lion Plate Armor and even the legendary Wind Bow of the Golden Elves.

[Seventeen! That's more than enough to make a hundred sets of armor! What a find!]

The youths looked at each other in silence, and Cohen took over the conversation: "How much are you willing to pay?"

"I'm not going to lie to you. I can only offer a tenth of what the gems are worth because I don't have enough money, but I'm sure you will still be satisfied with the amount of

money offered. You may disagree with the money I'm offering because of what they are valued at, but these gems are poisonous because of how much they are worth; you're very likely to get killed trying to sell them."

"Then how much are you willing to pay us?" The girl beside Cohen asked.

"Ten square gold coins."

Loud gasps could be heard immediately. Ten square gold coins were approximately 25,000 Tor coins, and it was the biggest sum of money the youths had ever heard.

"You're willing to pay… so much?" Jocah asked with a stutter.

"Of course, oh, and your commission is also included in it."

Jocah gave an awkward laugh. He knew that Brendel was joking with him; he would at most charge him 15 Tor coins for leading the way.

Cohen thought carefully for a while before he nodded. His companions gently mined the crystals and passed them to Brendel, who paid them readily. The youths who received the money counted them repeatedly and even bit the coins with their teeth as though they did not believe they were made out of real gold.

Even if they worked collectively for ten years and stole the silver ore to sell, they would never earn the sum of money they had in their hands.

"Brendel, are you going to buy the Cold Iron as well?" Cohen asked.

Brendel glanced at the metal vein. He certainly needed the material, but there was no need for him to have it now. It was not as if the metal would be mined immediately, and if his plan went well the mine would soon be his.

He shook his head. The youths sighed with disappointment at his response. It would be difficult for them to sell the Cold Iron Ore.

Approximately thirty minutes later, the foreman that Cohen mentioned finally arrived. Brendel and the youths had returned closer to the entrance because they wanted to hide the discovery of the Cold Iron.

The foreman seemed to know the youths as he greeted them and mistakenly treated

Brendel as their newest member, but they did not correct his mistake. Once the foreman left, Brendel finally received the chance to investigate the forked tunnel.

He bid farewell to the youths and traveled the dark tunnel which seemed to have no end. The oppressive silence that was void of life would have frightened an ordinary man, but Brendel was delighted because of the thing he was about to do. Finally, he came out to a large area.

He stopped at a corridor that was blocked off by rocks. It was the spot where the soldiers had filled up in order to prevent monsters from coming back. He extended his palm out, and a shining card appeared the next moment:

The Wind Spirit Spiders.

Chapter 47
Silver mines (8)

========== Cohen's POV ==========

"Just who is that fellow?" Maher said.

The youths began discussing amongst themselves after Brendel left. Maher had been against that dubious person since yesterday, but the latter found a Cold Iron vein and used a large sum of money to make a trade between them. He had to admit there were good points by dealing with him.

However, Jocah was a little worried. 25,000 Tor coins was not a small sum of money, and he felt the entire situation was a little off. They had gotten money too easily. He could not help but look at Cohen. The sickly youth was the most knowledgeable person amongst them, and he even knew magic.

Whenever they got injured in the mines or fought with someone, Cohen would treat them with a magic spell. Even though it was not like the magic spells in bard tales where injuries could be healed in the blink of an eye, it was more effective than using herbs.

Eventually, Cohen was quietly recognized as their leader, although Maher did not fully admit that fact. It was mostly because the latter's pride was a little beaten when he was taken off the leader's seat.

"It's none of our concern," Cohen shook his head, "continue mining. The things that happened here do not concern us."

Suddenly, one of the youths who was still working yelled out, and everyone's heart skipped a beat and looked over to his direction. There were many strange tales in the dark mining pits. Even though they had not heard of any workers speaking out on odd things recently, they were afraid to encounter something that might hurt them.

The youth who yelled earlier ran towards them anxiously.

“Come over and take a look!” He shouted.

“What’s wrong?” Cohen asked.

“I-I have no idea, come over, and you will know what I mean—”

The youths exchanged glances puzzledly. When they crowded around the young man’s area where he was working earlier, they were shocked to see a silver blade sticking out from the rocks.

“Take a look at this,” that youth who alerted them brought up his mining pick only to discover that a section of the edges had been sliced off smoothly like a polished mirror.

“It was caused by that?” Cohen frowned, not recognizing that the thing in the walls was a weapon.

That youth nodded.

“That’s a sword!” Maher was the first to identify it, “I’ve heard that other races are living underground, and this must be one of the weapons they are using. Just how sharp is this blade!”

“No, wait, why would the weapons be stuck in the walls?”

“It must have been left behind by them. The creatures that came out from the pits proved they were able to come up.”

“You idiot, that’s because the workers opened a tunnel to the caverns below! There wasn’t any tunnel before we made one, and lastly, this sword is buried in the rocks!”

“Then maybe it happened a really long time ago, and a cave-in had buried the sword!”

Cohen stopped the youths from bickering: “That’s enough, let’s just dig it out first.”

“Dig it out? Why? Cohen, that’s useless to us, right? I’m a little worried about this. It will be difficult to smuggle it out without detection. Let’s just leave it in there.” The girl said.

Cohen hesitated. He was a little intrigued by the appearance of the weapon, and Maher was probably right in guessing the sword’s origin. At the same time, she was right. It

would be difficult to bring the sword out. However, he made up his mind when he glanced at the mining pick's edges. The value of the sword must be immense when it easily cut through it.

"Let's get it out!" He said.

The young men gave a delighted agreement as their curiosity finally won over their fear of the unknown.

========== Brendel's POV ==========

"It looks like the soldiers have sealed up the place well. There are no holes in the barricade." Brendel said to himself.

He wanted to lure the monsters and instigate a fight between the Gold-ranked commander and them before he and his group joined in the battle at the very end, but it seemed like it was unlikely now. Still, it was not much of an issue since his original plan was to capture the commander with his own men.

He directed the Wind Spirit Spiders and sent them upwards into different groups. He knew that the workers would soon panic and bring the news to the valley. Since the mines suffered casualties from the previous attack, there was no way that the administration would ignore the monsters.

He did not go back to where he came from and instead chose another route to go back to the higher levels. Under his 20 OZ Perception, he was able to see through the tunnels as though he was walking under daylight. He entered a tunnel where the spiders had gone through without hurrying. The area was silent and empty as the workers had already fled in panic.

Very soon, he reached the lift and activated the controls, and the crude machinery began to bring him a level up. When it stopped, he got off and walked to the gathering site where the silver ore was transported to the surface. The place was almost like an artificial cavern, and part of its ground was covered with wooden tracks for the silver ore's transportation.

He raised the crystal in his hand up to get a clearer view of the ceilings. The walls were supported with large wooden beams and had placeholders for torches.

[It seems like the workers had taken the torches away when they fled the area.]

He continued to search the walls carefully and finally discovered a subtle mark on it pointing to a nearby tunnel. He entered it and came to a crosspoint.

Suddenly, a sword thrust behind him from a blind spot like a venomous snake. His hair fluttered from the gale of air and alerted him. He dodged to the right while his head turned back, and his eyes were filled with vigilance. Very soon, the sword's hilt came into his eyes, and he formed his fingers into a claw and gripped onto somewhere between the attacker's sword hand and wrist with incredible speed, twisting it fully.

A light gasp of pain revealed that it was a woman's voice, and the sword was twisted out of her grasp before it landed onto the ground with a soft clang.

"My lord…" Jana recognized it was Brendel and her green eyes grimaced at the vice-like grip, "I'm sorry, I didn't know it was you!"

She knew that Brendel was a Gold-ranked fighter, but she did not expect him to be this amazing!

In truth, Cornelius was the sole mercenary commander who had witnessed Brendel's abilities with his own eyes, and the other two only knew of his skill by reputation. Jana felt like her entire body was locked down when Brendel grabbed her wrist, and she felt like there were broken bones.

[I'm a Silver-ranked fighter, and I'm disabled with just a single move? Is there such a big difference between a Silver-ranked and a Gold-ranked fighter?]

"It's fine, but didn't I tell you not to use your weapon against the workers? And where's Scarlett and Medissa?" Brendel asked as he released her wrist.

"I apologize, my lord. The workers suddenly disappeared in a rush, and your footsteps were disciplined enough for me to think that you were a strong enemy guard. As for Medissa and Scarlett, they are in the other mining sectors. My lord, why have you called for us with the spiders?" Jana said as she rubbed the bruises on her wrist.

"It's difficult to lure out the commander to the outside. We need to change our plan." Brendel sent out an aimed shot of wind at the sword and caused the dropped sword to bounce up onto his hand: "I received information that the silver mines had encountered a serious incident approximately ten years ago. The workers had accidentally dug a path into the Jurgen Underworld, and the monsters there ended up invading the mines. I have a new plan based on that—"

Brendel left a mark pointing back to the open area he was in earlier.

“In any case, let us wait for them in the place where the workers gather the ore for transportation. I think we will be able to meet up with the two before the guards come.”

Medissa and Scarlett soon arrived at where Brendel was.

“You wish to lure the commander out with this plan, my lord?” Medissa said when she entered the gathering site. She had easily made a conclusion when Brendel told her to convene with him through his mind.

“Yes. Based on the information I have, the guard commander’s name is Kodan. He was the one who led the guards personally to drive the monsters back during the attack a decade ago. It’s very likely that he would do the same thing again.” Brendel said.

“This place looks like a good place to battle, but will it hold with four Gold-ranks fighting here?” Scarlett said.

“We can try and capture him as quickly as possible,” Medissa said.

“It’s going to be a little tough,” Brendel frowned as he considered the possibility. “Our opponent isn’t some random person who recently became a Gold-ranked fighter. He’s likely to be a Grandmaster Swordsman, but there isn’t a better way. In any case… Let us wait for him. Jana, make sure you’re waiting for us back there. You wouldn’t want to come near us.”

========== Perkins / Kodan’s POV ==========

Voices were circulating in the administrative building as soon as the morning sun rose. The rumors first started in the deeper mining sections. The workers found monsters appearing out from nowhere, and the news quickly spread to the foremen who immediately requested for a squadron of soldiers to investigate the situation.

But none of them returned—

When the foremen realized the soldiers were missing, they scrambled to put up a report. Perkins received it on his desk in less than thirty minutes. This thirty-odd years old energetic administrative officer, who was still considered young by Vaunte’s standards, finally realized the severity of this issue.

One of the reasons why he was able to come to the silver mines and work for Count Randner was because of the latter's recognition of him, and another was because he had connections. He was the nephew of Count Randner's wife and thus easily gained his position. Once he finished dedicating his time to this temporary post, he would be ushered into the council of advisors working for the Count.

The silver mines were of great importance to the Count, and he would be one of the trusted retainers if he succeeded in handling the silver mines without nay mistakes. This was why he governed this site with a great passion and was completely satisfied at getting the position of his dreams.

It was going well for him, and the incident where the workers broke through a cavern of monsters was a decade before his time, at least until this morning.

[Giant spiders sighted in the lower pits? A squadron of soldiers completely missing? Possibly because the workers dug through a tunnel leading to the Jurgen Underworld!? Fuck! Fuck! This is a serious incident beyond imagination!]

He felt cold perspiration coming out from his body. He could not imagine what would happen if there were invaders from the underworld. He was in a position where Count Rander kept an eye on, and he was unlucky enough to possibly encounter the worst situation.

Losing the silver mines.

Perkins sank into his seat like jelly. If he lost the mine, he might be executed by Count Randner—

When Kodan pushed the door open, he saw Perkins in a miserable state. This old man had entered the Gold-ranked status thirty years ago and was one of Count Randner's most trusted men.

The Grandmaster Swordsman was unable to suppress the waves of disdain in his heart when he saw Perkins's spineless expression, especially when he came to his position through nepotism.

[This boy is even more worthless than I thought.]

Kodan coughed once and woke Perkins from his stupor. When the latter saw Kodan, his grey eyes lit up in joy. The old man was different from him. Even though Perkins'

position was technically higher than Kodan because he was in charge of sending off the gold, Count Rander recognized the latter as his right hand with complete trust. The old man did not use connections like he did, which meant he had gotten to his position through sheer capabilities.

The young man took on an even more respectful tone and expression than usual because of the situation, completely hiding away his darker thoughts of cursing the old man because the latter constantly looked down on him.

“Ser Kodan, you’re here, we’re in big trouble!” Perkins spoke as though he was a drowning man clinging on to the last hope for safety.

“What sort of trouble?” Kodan shook his white hair in contempt.

But Perkins did not dare to get angry and explained the report in detail. Kodan had already gotten hold of some information along the way and understood things to a certain extent, but he was seething with fury when the young man described the situation.

[You damned bastard. You suppressed the rumors from reaching my ears and sent my men off to the pits without telling me. Now that the situation has gotten worse you’re looking for my help?]

However, the situation was grave enough for him to restrain his anger and he replied with cold indifference:

“I see. Then what are you going to do, my lord?”

Perkins felt a lump in his throat. He knew that Kodan was trying to show his displeasure through this opportunity. But he also knew that he was in the wrong, so he gave an apologetic smile and tried to think of something:

“Well… we don’t know what the real situation is in the pits, and I’m afraid that the workers might be panicking and disorderly, so I want to send in the guards to maintain… order…”

He gulped as he saw the old man’s expression getting darker and darker: “Perhaps, at least enough men to…”

Kodan scoffed coldly.

“Your idea is shit. It’s utterly worthless. If you send all the guards in, wouldn’t the workers know that there’s something wrong with the pits? They would go crazy and immediately panic. Furthermore, there are over a thousand workers in the mine, and you want to maintain order with less than a hundred guards? Administrative Officer Perkins, perhaps you’re not thinking hard enough with your brain?”

Perkins’s dignity was almost shredded to pieces, but his skin was thick enough for him to ask: “T-then what do we do?”

“I’ll bring in a few men and take a look,” Kodan rubbed his sword’s sheath and said, “the monsters in the pit below are troublesome, but they won’t be able to trap me. We will discuss our options once I find out how serious the problem is.”

“Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful!” Perkins exclaimed with a placating tone. Even though the situation was not over, he was relieved to know that Kodan was going to settle it himself.

Chapter 48
Silver Mines (9)

[It's strange. A large amount of Cold Iron. Mystic Eye Gems. It's somehow familiar to me, but I'm certain I have never seen them together in the game before.]

Brendel was currently sitting on a pile of silver ore at the gathering site.

He had ambushed a squadron of guards with the aid of his Wind Spirit Spiders earlier. By using the White Raven Sword Arte, he extinguished their torches, ambushed them and knocked everyone out with a blow to their heads.

He took their swords and attached them behind his back on his belt before he called the girls to move the guards elsewhere in the tunnel. They then waited for the enemy commander's next move. Medissa stood quietly with her eyes closed and looked like she was meditating, while Scarlett polished her halberd's blade.

But Brendel was thinking back on the discovery of the Azure Quartz.

[If it's not within the game, then perhaps… Yes, that's it, a forum post. I remember there's a post about someone getting a quest in Trentheim. He discovered a vein of Cold Iron and two different types of strange materials. Eventually, one was identified as the Mystic Eye Gem, but the other had no conclusion during that time. I think it was a silver ball, but I don't remember—]

His eyes suddenly widened at the notion of a silver ball.

[A Legacy of the Silver Lineage?]

The forum post that Brendel recalled was considerably early in the game, and more people eventually understood the purpose of the silver ball in the future.

In Kirrlutz's ancient poems, the era before Mother Marsha's creation of the world was known as the 'Era of Eternal Night'. Within its lore, she was living in a world that every Golden and Silver Lineage lived in.

It was unclear whether Mother Marsha was created by higher Divine Entities in the Era of Eternal Night, or she was the highest Divine Power, but one thing was clear; she shed her first tear and brought the earliest Golden and Silver Lineage out of darkness. The Sages were born and fought against the creatures of Chaos and Darkness, and Mother Marsha established the Laws of Vaunte.

Gamers who played the game ended up breaking the fourth wall to fill up the missing lore. Mother Marsha was a mouthpiece for the 'Divine Entities', or simply the people who made the game.

Vaunte's formation took a long time. The earliest Golden and Silver Lineage sought refuge in different supposed Sanctuaries to avoid the Twilight Dragon's assault against them, but they were discovered time after time by the Twilight Dragon. Finally, they made their strongest stand in the Tower of Babel but ultimately lost.

Many different races disappeared that day, and it signified the start of the Era of Chaos.

But these sanctuaries remained, and Brendel had been to one when he led the refugees of Fortress Riedon out of Madara's siege. He even got a Golden Apple from there, a type of Legacy item from the Golden Lineage.

[There are three different types of Sanctuaries. The first is half-physical, half-phantasmal, either hiding within time or space, like the Homeland of the Fairies that I've been to. The Second is fully phantasmal, like the tallest point of the world, Babel, the last Sanctuary that's supposedly impregnable. And the third is a physical Sanctuary.

The Silver Lineage mostly used them, which were the most damaged from the wars. The Steel Plains were completely done in, and the Rune Dwarves were nearly wiped out. One of the Sanctuaries that remained is Heaven's Gate within the Kingdom of Knights and had become a holy symbol. And one other is the Sealed Kingdom, Valhalla.]

But Brendel had doubts about his hypothesis.

[The possibility of this silver mine as a Sanctuary… I should go back and check the Cold Iron again.]

Time continued to pass, and they waited until they were a little restless. Brendel suddenly stood up.

“The Gold-ranked commander has arrived,” He said, and drew in a deep breath, “and there are ten guards with him. Let’s get into the position that we have discussed earlier.”

Scarlett nodded and went over to Brendel and hid behind the carts. Jana stood behind near one of the exit tunnels, while Medissa positioned herself in the center of the gathering site, with her back facing the entrance.

Soon enough, footsteps could be heard amidst over a few talking men.

Kodan had led his men into the tunnels. He was feeling puzzled as he did not discover any creatures on the first and second level. When he descended into the third level, he finally found a giant spider scurrying away towards the gathering site. It was quickly destroyed, and they proceeded towards the room after he warned his men to move cautiously.

But when they entered the area, they were astounded.

There was a woman there. She turned around slowly when they came into talking distance.

To be more accurate, it was a girl not even the age of twenty, with silver hair and silver eyes, along with a pair of sharp, pointy ears.

The guards could only recognize that she was an Elf, but Kodan was trained as a knight. Not only did he learned etiquette from the noble families, but he also studied geography and history to a great extent. That was why he was able to recognize she was a legendary Silver Elf.

His eyes widened in shock. He thought his eyes were failing him, or that he was looking at a spirit. The Silver Elves had disappeared several centuries ago, but one was right here before his very eyes.

But despite his surprise, he did not drop his guard. He left two of his men at the entrance with a signal, while he brought the others closer to her.

“Who are you? Why have you come to Count Randner’s silver—?” Kodan asked in a gruff voice.

But before he could finish his questions, he suddenly turned around to discover two

youths charging out from the carts, and they knocked out his two guards in a flash.

The grandmaster swordsman quickly understood. He threw away his thoughts about the Silver Elves; it was clear that the cause of the monster incidents was because of the culprits here!

“How much did Jara pay you?” Kodan’s eyebrows flared up, and his next question came.

Brendel blinked blankly at the sudden question.

“Who’s that?” Scarlett asked in confusion.

“Hmph,” Kodan pulled out his sword, and Brendel and the girls reacted by readying their own weapons, “since you’re not my old rival’s men, then you must be the Count’s enemy! Regardless of who sent you, prepare to die—”

His orders echoed loudly in the area, and the guards drew out their weapons. Kodan might appear to be an old man with a head full of white hair, but anyone would be awestruck by his killing intent!

[Kodan is amongst Count Randner’s thirteen most trusted knights, and while there were a few others who were stronger than him, he’s the only veteran soldier who participated in the November War. I should assume he’s within in the top five knights. Rumor has it that he entered the Gold-ranked status thirty years ago. I should treat him like he’s close to breaking through the rank!]

Brendel did not waste any more time and brought his Element Power out.

Kodan had looked at the youths in disdain when they readied out their weapons, but when he saw the youth’s release his aura, the air turned colder, and a layer of frost started to spread out from his feet. Kodan’s eyes widened instantly.

[An Element Power, he’s a Gold-ranked Swordsman at his age?]

But his surprise did not end there. Scarlett had reacted as well, and visible electricity gathered on her halberd and arms, causing hissing and spitting sounds to vibrate in the air. When he glanced back at Medissa, there was a white spectral energy concentrated on her body, causing her beauty to take on an ethereal breath, almost like she appeared from a dream.

He started to tense up.

[Three Gold-ranked opponents! Who would bother to send out three prodigies to pick a bone with me? And all of them look like they are just twenty years old. No matter where you put them, they would be treated with importance, and not used as assassins and thrown into this shit hole!]

Kodan took a step back subconsciously. He was not showing off his weak side, but he needed to think about how to protect himself when he was surrounded by three Gold-ranked fighters.

Brendel flinched when Kodan moved. Against a Grandmaster Swordsman, he did not dare to hold back, and his first move was a fully powered White Raven Swords Arte as an involuntary reaction.

The air split into countless razor winds, and they traveled across through the air towards Kodan and his men in a crescent arc. Shrill whistles followed closely as the thin blades struck the guards, instantly hacking them into gruesome pieces with blood splattering across the ground, while Kodan had jumped into the air and avoided the attack.

Several tremendous bangs followed next as the shockwave from Brendel's attack struck against the walls and wooden pillars, and the fragments of stone and wood rained down.

Jana stared at the attack in disbelief and thought Brendel was closer to a monster than a human.

Kodan's counterattack came as his jump brought him closer to Brendel, with his sword in a position to cleave the youth into two. Brendel immediately kicked the ground and swerved to his left, while Scarlett swung her halberd as well in a large, exaggerated arc. Kodan's rippling muscles tensed up as he unleashed his blade from above.

The two blades collided violently, causing the metallic screams to echo in everyone's ears. Scarlett wobbled backward a few steps and nearly toppled over to the ground Although she was a God Acolyte and her stats was higher than a normal Gold-ranked fighter, she still lost out in terms of strength and technique.

Kodan was sent hurtling back through the air from Scarlett's attack, and Medissa did not miss the opportunity and moved closer to thrust her spear at him. Despite his

unsteady landing, he managed to duck and dodge the Silver Elf's swift strikes. His body was nimble and flexible as though he was a young man, and his aged wrinkles and white hair looked like they were lies.

The old soldier who survived the November War naturally used Aouine's Swordsmanship, but he had incorporated his own style and elevated it to even greater heights.

His attack was a mere straightforward slash, but there was an oppressive, bloodthirsty feeling to it. Medissa guarded with her spear placed vertically to receive it, and her boots left a grinding mark across the ground as she was pushed back with her hands trembling.

Brendel suddenly felt he had misjudged the difficulty of capturing him. Be it Conrad, Tirste, or even any Gold-ranked swordsman that he had seen in the game; they were no match for this elderly man's skill. Even Iamas back then did not give as much pressure as Kodan did right now. The swordsmanship and seemingly undefeatable aura reminded him of one person.

The Pale Knight Ebdon.

[Analyze!]

He roared in his mind and threw his sword at Kodan who ran towards him. There was no way he would be able to match the old man's skill in with Aouine's Swordsmanship, and he decided to even up the odds by using the system.

Kodan was momentarily confused when Brendel abandoned his sword, but he struck it away, then jumped slightly when the sword snapped into two. The youth drew another sword from his back, and that was when Kodan suddenly realized six or seven swords were hanging behind from his belt. His sword was clearly unable to handle the technique he used earlier, which was why he had to prepare that many blades.

[This must be the biggest joke I have ever seen. A Gold-ranked swordsman without a proper sword he can use?]

The old man scoffed and flickered his weapon at Brendel, aiming at his wrists, and the latter bent his knees into a low guard and parried the incoming blade by sending it upwards with his own. The two men's swords went back and forth in a tight metallic chorus, each attacking and defending alternatively.

Brendel finally experienced Kodan's swordsmanship fully. The old man was even more formidable than Ebdon was, and every time their blades met, there was a striking fear in his heart despite the fact that he used to be a level 130 gamer.

Kodan was surprised at Brendel's aggressive strikes. The youth seemed like he had entirely given up his defenses to injure him. Kodan wanted to take advantage of his weaknesses, but that ordinary steel blade seemed to find its way to riposte at the very last second.

[This isn't Aouine's swordsmanship! Kirrlutz, no, this isn't exactly right as well—]

However, that limit was soon reached as he eventually overwhelmed the youth in a flurry of blows and managed to kick him to the sides. He began to run to the entrance. There was no point in staying on. Once he managed to escape, he could send for help.

Scarlett had recovered and tried to bar his way, but he swung his sword in a mighty arc—

"Get lost!" He bellowed, and the girl staggered back several steps after deflecting his sword.

Kodan was briefly shocked as he had used his full strength in that swing; he expected her to be at least driven back to the walls.

Brendel was burning inside with worry. He could not allow the old man to escape. He immediately activated the Charge skill and aimed at Kodan's legs, but the latter's Perception was high enough to recognize the danger and turned back to deflect his sword.

[So fast!]

Kodan's eyes widened at Brendel's speed but quickly realized that the attack was a feint, and it had become a thrust to his chest. He hastily drew back his sword to defend against it, but that was also a feint. Finally, Brendel drew out another sword and swung at him in a horizontal slash at his arms, and Kodan was forced to dodge to his right.

Brendel's relentless aggression caused the old man to be in a fury. The latter used his skill in Aouine's Swordsmanship to the utmost limits, and rage fueled his blade's trajectory.

This time, Brendel felt Kodan's attack was not from a single sword, but a wall that could not be avoided and gave a feeling that he was about to be doomed, despite the single white line from the system's aid. The youth gritted his teeth and parried the meteor-like attack with the two blades with the use of Power Break.

The sword smashed away the two swords and caused them to shatter into pieces, while a shockwave struck against the walls and created a huge gash that was the length of ten-odd meters. Brendel's legs quivered, and his hands felt numb, but he quickly took out another sword.

"My lord, please move away, I'm going to use my Element Power!" Scarlett yelled.

Electricity flowed freely all over her body and weapon, and Kodan gave up on retreating to the entrance, and instead ran to the carts that were full of silver ore. He grabbed one and easily flung one at Scarlett.

"Seventh Chord— Resounding Thunderclap!"

Bright light filled the area, temporarily blinding everyone. The cart that was hurled over to her seemed to continue in its destination before it hovered a few meters, and the violent tempest of compressed air sent it back to Kodan. Slag rained across the area as the lightning superheated the metals, and the old man hid behind the carts to protect himself.

Medissa leaped across the room and lunged her spear into the cart Kodan hid at.

"Vortex Strike!" She roared.

Kodan barely reacted in time and swung his sword to divert the spear's path, dragging the cart along with the spear. Brendel sprinted across and jumped up into the air.

"Power Break!" He forced every bit of his strength into the blade at Kodan's other arm and snarled into his face.

As expected, Kodan had lost his center of gravity after defending against Brendel's strike that was aided with momentum and left him open. Brendel sank his elbow into Kodan's abdomen, and the old man grunted in pain. He wanted to continue striking him, but countless lines appeared in his vision, and he hurriedly retreated to a distance.

Kodan's Element Power activated and caused the surrounding objects around him to forcefully scatter.

"Stop!" The Grandmaster Swordsman shouted.

Chapter 49
Silver mines (10)

========== Jocah's group POV ==========

The entire mine experienced repeated light tremors when Brendel and the girls fought Kodan.

Jocah felt sand falling onto his shoulders. He touched it with his hands and looked up.

"What's going on? Did somewhere in the mine collapse?" He said worriedly and looked at his group members, "Do you all feel that?"

Maher and the other men were busy with their mining picks. They were almost done in revealing the weapon. Because it was too sharp, they had no choice but to work around it, and the shiny metal gradually showed itself.

However, they were shocked to find that that the blade lost its shape when the rocks were broken off and had turned into some kind of silver sphere when more than half of it was finally exposed to the air.

"How's this possible?" One of them tapped the strange object with his mining pick, and it was immediately chipped. "It retains its sharpness when it's agitated, but if you gently trace it, it's not affected."

The girl suddenly shivered.

"I feel a little cold," she said, looking at her surroundings restlessly as though there was something hiding there, "I feel like the temperature has gone down."

Cohen's attention was on the silver ball. He inspected it and discovered that there was a sheen of light golden color on the surface. He had seen it before in one of the books from his former teacher— Mithril.

His pupils dilated. The price of the Cold Iron was like a piece of rock compared to the sphere in his hands, but he quickly regained his composure. Mithril could be infused

with magic, and it was probably the reason why the mining pick was cut, although it remained to be seen if the ball was made entirely out of it.

“This isn’t the first time we felt tremors in the mine. Compared to the past, we’re experiencing some light ones. There’s no need to make a big deal of it and frighten yourself. But we’re definitely rich now. Even if we don’t travel the world, we can still experience the lives that we want to—” Cohen said.

“Hey, look at this!” Maher suddenly interrupted him and caused everyone to look back at the wall.

Maher’s pick struck off a large piece of rock and revealed a smooth sheet of black metal.

“This isn’t naturally formed, take a look. There are words on it!” Someone shouted.

Everyone concentrated and indeed saw rows of finely written words on it. But the words had become illegible over time. Cohen felt it with his hand and heat drew away from his palm. He turned his hand over and discovered it had turned dark.

“Black Iron rust. This metal is iron.” *(TL: Black iron rust forms under low oxygen.)*

“What do the words mean?”

Cohen was unable to answer him. He had learned quite a bit from his teacher, but he failed to guess what the strange things they found were. Still, the discovery made him excited and tense.

Even the other members were able to guess they had dug up something priceless.

“Alright, let us get this piece of metal out,” Maher immediately said. He was one who prized action over talking.

“Hold on, do you know what this is in the first place? Perhaps it’s worthless? Furthermore, this sheet of metal is so big that it’s impossible for us to bring it out.”

That statement swayed Maher’s decision. He stopped and cast his glance at Cohen.

“Let’s get that silver ball out first,” Cohen said.

The black iron wall did not offer anything else of worth, so he lost his interest, and decided to get the items that were priceless first.

But when the ball was free from its rock prison, the mine suddenly shook. It was different from the light tremors earlier, and it was as though the whole place shook.

Everyone lost their footing and collapsed onto the ground.

“Something’s wrong, that silver ball is shining!” One of them shouted amidst the frightened screams.

Chapter 50
King of the underground (1)

“Stop!” Kodan shouted.

He realized there was something wrong at the gathering site. Not a few seconds after his yell, the place suddenly shook violently.

Brendel, Medissa and Scarlett’s expressions immediately changed. Thunderous splitting sounds followed as the walls repeatedly cracked until it reached the ceiling. Dust and pebbles quickly rained on their heads.

“Leave this room now!” Brendel’s yell woke everyone up from their shock. He had naturally assumed that the area collapsed because of their fight.

He quickly retreated to one of the exit tunnels, but Scarlett’s urgent voice rang out behind him:

“My lord, watch—”

But before her words were finished, Schafflund’s mine shook again, and a large piece of the ceiling collapsed under the tremors. The light to the room dimmed immediately as the exits were blocked by the falling rocks.

[Fuck!]

It was impossible to dodge the rocks, and Brendel cursed in his mind before everything turned black.

The terrifying vibrations extended all the way to the surface. Perkins who was near the entrance lost his footing and rolled down the steps. He got up unsteadily with a bleeding forehead with much difficulty.

The rumbling sounds did not stop, and he paled as dust fell over his head. He quickly climbed back out and saw a chaotic scene unfolding before his eyes. Many of the workers were down on the ground because they fell over, but even more were fleeing

the valley.

[Did an earthquake happen? Is Mother Marsha angry?]

He started to shiver.

========== Princess Gryphine's POV ==========

There was a scent of bleakness in Vlada's autumn. Princess Gryphine's silver eyes glinted as it reflected the moonlight. She stood on the balcony and watched the thick ink-like mist cover the forest's crowns.

Some of the trees' leaves had completely fallen.

The sobering cold was a contrast to the warm room. A robust fire was consuming the wood in the fireplace, sending occasional ashes that landed on the bricks outside.

Gryphine was wearing a red robe interlaced with white threads over her nightgown. Although she was barefooted, she was standing on a white fur carpet. Her silver hair rested a little untidily on her shoulders, and she yawned once before turning back into her room.

She threw her robe onto her table, causing several parchments to fly off lightly, and she laughed a little before changing into her formal attire.

Oberbeck would have scolded her for not watching her conduct if he saw her. He was currently busy with the documents on his desk. It had been three days since the knights' tournaments, and Maynild had delivered the results in person.

She was standing in front of him, wearing a black knight uniform, which contrasted against her exposed hands and neck; many would gladly ogle at her.

They did not speak and time continued to pass.

Finally, the silence was broken when Gryphine entered the room after knocking on the door. She appeared to be slightly listless because she had just woken up, but she brought her eyes up to look at her two retainers.

"My apologies, Ser Oberbeck, Ser Maynild, I'm a little late." She said.

“You should watch yourself. Work and rest go hand in hand,” Maynild said.

Oberbeck glanced at Maynild. The knight wore her usual taciturn expression, but her concern for the princess far surpassed what a retainer would have for their lord.

“What’s this report about?” Princess Gryphine took over the papers that Oberbeck reached out to her. She briefly read it, frowned, and placed her hand over a crystal ball the size of a fist on the table.

The crystal immediately glowed, and its surface showed a series of moving images.

It was a record of the tournament for the knights, and Gryphine recognized the girl in the scene, Freya. She was slightly surprised and replayed it again.

“Is there something wrong?” She looked up to Maynild.

“Her swordsmanship,” Maynild replied.

“There’s a little problem with the girl’s swordsmanship,” Oberbeck said almost at the same time.

“She’s Duke Everton’s daughter, what problem could she have?”

Maynild nodded to acknowledge her question. She took a bell from the table and shook it. After the ringing ceased, the door opened and a young knight wearing a chest plate and a red robe with white thread, not unlike the one that Gryphine wore earlier, entered and greeted Maynild and the princess:

“Your highness. Captain Maynild, what are your orders?”

“Attack me.” She gave a simple command.

The knight was slightly taken aback, but he did not question her orders. He took a step back and pulled out his sword. As a personal knight of the royal family, he had met the requirements of a Gold-ranked swordsman. His actions were clean and smooth and showed a clear understanding of Aouine’s swordsmanship.

Maynild took a single step back to avoid the range of his sword’s thrust, while she swung her sword together with its sheath and struck her opponent’s sword downwards. Once his sword was deflected away, she immediately kicked the side of

his right knee with the same leg that withdrew a step, pulled out her blade and thrust it at his throat, stopping at mere inches.

“Maynild, your skill has improved again.” The half-Elven princess’s eyes brightened.

The knight who was half kneeling on the ground was not frustrated at all. He grabbed Maynild’s offered hand after she sheathed her sword and got up, and said with a lowered head: “I’ve disappointed you!”

Maynild was Gryphine’s knight commander. Although her position did not fall under the same system, she could command the royal family’s knights, and it would not be wrong to say she was their commander too. Most of the young knights were impressed and admired her skills. Those who were jealous spread her infamy as someone who had nothing but swords in her mind.

Maynild nodded and said nothing else.

“This is a new military swordsmanship created to finish a battle quickly.”

Gryphine thought for a while and nodded: “Yes, I can see the differences between the old and new.”

“The new method is supposed to improve on the original to make it more practical instead of relying on standard forms of attacks. In its core, it relies on using the simplest methods to cause the opponents to lose combat prowess.” Oberbeck said as he pointed at his neck, arms, knees, and the abdomen area.

“The method targets vulnerable spots like the joints in order to strike through the weak points of an armor, but it’s unlikely for someone to develop it without spending a lot of time in the battlefield.” He continued.

Gryphine thought for a while and once again watched the images on the crystal. She noticed several similarities between Maynild and Freya.

“The counterattacks and attacks?”

“Ser Maynild and I have studied it carefully. The counterattacks that she made against her opponents were unrefined, but it is clear that the essence of the newly developed military swordsmanship we’re preparing to propose is distilled in her actions!”

Gryphine first furrowed her brows at Oberbeck's subtle insinuations, before she displayed an interested expression.

"You mean to say it's impossible for her to develop a swordsmanship like this because you need an extraordinary amount of experience in fighting. She clearly did not spend years on the battlefield and was only a militia. The amount of time that she spent fighting against Madara was at most only a few weeks long."

"Yes," Oberbeck nodded, "But there's another possibility."

"Let me guess, a veteran? Captain Marden?"

"No, I investigated the old guard captain. He is competent and experienced the November War in the past, but his swordsmanship sticks closely to the original method."

"…Indeed. His protege Bannett didn't display this new swordsmanship in the tournament."

Gryphine briefly considered the possibility that Freya was a genius, but there was no indication that she showed off her skill at any given time. Everyone had followed her progress from the start, and the possibility was so small that Oberbeck and Maynild did not mention it.

"Who could have taught her?" She was a little troubled: "There are not many people she knows."

"But there is, your highness, and that person has always been in our sight."

"You mean to say it's him?" She made a strange face as she immediately realized the answer.

Oberbeck nodded.

"But he's just as young as Freya. Did someone teach him… Were you able to uncover more information about him?" She tilted her head, and her eyes sparkled with anticipation.

[…Wait, why am I feeling this way? Am I really so curious about him?]

“No. Unless we return to Bucce.”

“Is there no information to be gotten from the people who fled from Bucce?”

“They are not acquainted with him,” Maynild cut into the conversation, “I have privately asked Bannett and sent out men to ask the refugees from Bucce, but they said they don’t know.”

“Bannett said he doesn’t know and not that he’s unclear about it?”

“Yes.” Maynild also found it questionable, but no other information was gotten.

“Let’s put it aside for the time being,” Gryphine sat down and combed her hair with her fingers before tying it with a silver ribbon, “let’s go back to Freya’s swordsmanship. Are we able to get any useful information about it?

“That girl is unable to teach us anything. Ser Maynild observed her for a while, but her understanding of that young man’s swordsmanship is fuzzy at best.” Oberbeck shook his head.

“It’s pointless unless we can find that person, right?”

“Yes.”

“Maynild, are you really unable to glean anything from Freya— that man’s swordsmanship? You’re a genius in our kingdom after all.”

Maynild seemed to be pondering on something, and it took a while before she finally responded: “I’ll try my best, but you shouldn’t expect too much from me. I’m not a fighter after all.”

“I don’t understand what you mean by that.”

“Without a certain amount of experience in the battlefield, it would be hard to figure out the essence of the swordsmanship.”

“I see… Oberbeck, please arrange to have a few veterans from the November War discuss with Maynild when she returns from the trip to Ampere Seale. Maynild, spare some time on this matter during your trip. I expect great things from the new Military Swordsmanship.”

“Yes, your highness.” Both of them said.

Chapter 51
King of the underground (2)

Occasional sounds of pebbles dropping on the ground could be heard.

Brendel's eyelids flitted once before they opened feebly to see complete darkness. There were no signs of the others.

He spat out the dust in his mouth, and his consciousness started to return. He subconsciously called out his Stats Window and relaxed a little when he saw the green fonts appearing in mid-air.

The system indicated there were no broken bones or internal injuries, and he merely suffered some bruises, scratches and a minor concussion.

[I worry a little too much. The resilient body of a Gold-ranker isn't something to joke about.]

However, no matter how high his perception was, he was unable to see anything if there was no light. He wanted to try and reach for his Light Crystal, but he soon realized there was a large boulder pinning down his body. It was at that moment that he remembered he was knocked out because the ceiling had dropped on him and caused him to faint.

[If I'm a normal human being, I would have been killed immediately, but I'm going to suffocate to death at this rate…]

He took in a deep breath and pushed against the boulders on him and immediately caused the smaller rocks on it to fall off. He stopped for a moment and tried again, adding Power Break into his hands, and finally removed the debris that was on him.

Once he was free, he stood up and dusted himself off while subconsciously wiping his sweat off, before he realized that he did not work really hard enough to sweat. He took out the Light Crystal and saw blood covering his hand under the weak light.

[Damn it. There's blood…]

For a moment, Brendel recalled the time when he came into this world. He was definitely skewered by the skeletons when he saved Romaine, but how did he survive?

He initially thought it was Freya who bandaged him and managed to stop the bleeding but was that it? His HP went below negative points, and only a potion would be able to let him survive. It should not be possible for a bandage to work and he would just die from the loss of blood.

He shook his head puzzledly and studied his surroundings for a while, discovering that one of the exits was not completely sealed off. The torches on the walls were extinguished, and the surroundings had significantly changed, making him unable to differentiate the directions.

He was about to check the exit when he heard a pained groan behind him.

[Ah, right, I should check for the others.]

He turned back and started searching for the source of the voice, and indeed saw Scarlett lying still under a pile of broken rocks. Her eyes were tightly shut, and her pointed face was as pale a sheet of paper. Her eyelashes were trembling, and she showed off a weak and quiet side that he had never seen before.

But he did not have time to appreciate this alluring side of hers because of the dripping blood from her forehead.

[This is an abnormal sign. A God Acolyte's body is far stronger than a human being, and she shouldn't receive an injury to her skin— Oh no.]

He suddenly thought of a terrible possibility and carefully walked over the unsteady ground and knelt beside her. He felt her forehead and was alarmed to find her skin scorching hot. He pulled back his hand and brought the Light Crystal nearer to her face. There was a subtle black tattoo on her forehead that was slowly but visibly growing along her cheeks.

This proved that Scarlett's body was fighting against the corruption of the Blood of Gods. Each time she lost consciousness, it would be a harsh test for her. He took out his waterskin and poured it over her face, and took out a stone that was split into two.

It was the item that had been smeared with the Blood of Gods and could be used to control Scarlett, but he broke it into two to slow down the process.

He placed the two fragments on her forehead.

“Scarlett?” He said, “Wake up!”

The girl’s eyelids fluttered before they opened, revealing the supposed whites of her eyes dyed in a terrifying mix of black and red colors, but they quickly returned to normalcy.

A pair of burning amber eyes that seemed to boil with willpower and life.

“Scarlett?”

“Commander Makarov? Eke?” She looked at Brendel in confusion and spoke in a weak voice.

“It’s me.” Brendel kept the stone fragments away and said.

“…My lord?” She said after a moment of hesitation, and she closed her eyes again, faintly remembering that she had a nightmare.

She saw herself buried deeply in a red tree that resembled the color of blood. Tree branches coiled around her and the tendrils sank into her skin, draining away her blood constantly, but she was unable to move.

It was not the first time she had this dream, but it was particularly vivid this time. She was slightly uneasy and became conscious of the fact that it might have something to do with the Blood of Gods in her.

“Yes, how are you feeling? Can you still go on?” Brendel asked a little worriedly when he saw Scarlett closing her eyes.

When she moved a little, she instantly cried out in pain, as the injury on her leg sent warning signals to her mind. She lowered her head and found there was a long gash across her thigh, and blood had dyed her robes in red.

Her heart skipped a beat. Logically one would be injured from the falling rocks, but she should not receive such an extensive injury. As a Gold-ranked fighter, her resilience and healing strength was different from an ordinary person. She was also a God Acolyte, making it even more unlikely.

It was strange. She tried sitting up hastily, but the pain immediately caused her to hiss in pain and laid down again. She took in large gulps of air, and she had cold sweat forming on her forehead. Her pain was quickly replaced by dread.

[What happened to my strength?]

Brendel had told her that her source of power was because she had become a God Acolyte, but her feeble arms made her feel like she was weaker than a child. It was the same feeling back when she was young and had gotten sick.

She tried to put strength into her fingers, but it was clear that it was gone. Her eyes quickly became unfocused, and she was at a loss as she realized the gravity of the situation.

She had lost all meaning to her life when Makarov disbanded the Grey Wolves Mercenaries, which was replaced with a sense of despair that choked her. She was then captured by someone despicable and turned into an accursed God Acolyte.

It was Brendel who brought her out from the despair, and he accepted the majority of the Grey Wolves Mercenaries. It gave her an excuse to continue pressing on with her life.

Eventually, she climbed out from the pits of her despair with much difficulty and adapted to a new life. She was even a little fond of accompanying Brendel who treated her with importance even if was because she had power. It was unlike the past where Makarov had only eyes for Eke and Buga, while she was nothing more than an unimportant member who could be sacrificed at any time.

Her existence was needed by Brendel and the old Grey Wolves Mercenaries, and she was satisfied, regardless of how short it was.

[Mother Marsha, why are you so cruel? I have just gotten used to all these things, and you take away everything from me yet again? I'm no different from an ordinary person, no, I'm even weaker than one.]

She was afraid.

"What's wrong?" Brendel asked her again when he saw her strange silence: "Does it hurt?"

[A noble doesn't need a useless retainer. Amandina and Romaine are smart people who can help my lord handle administrative work. But what about me? A wild girl who knows nothing other than fighting?]

"My lord… I-I lost my power." She finally whispered.

Brendel looked blankly at her. He did not understand her answer and thought it might be due to her blood loss that caused her to feel weakened. But it was still a strange reply.

[What does this mean? Does she want me to help her up? If it's little Romaine I can kind of understand, but the girl in front of me is pretty independent…]

Brendel's eyes sharpened. It was an odd situation. He quickly took a step back to get out of her attacking range and observed her carefully.

Perhaps she was faking her expressions in order to get a chance to attack him. But he knew the signs of a God Acolyte well, and no matter how much he observed, it did not seem like the Blood of Gods controlled her.

"What?" He finally said with a little confusion.

But Scarlett's mind was filled with Makarov's cruel voice that day, a figure whom she treated like a father and teacher, where he abandoned her in front of Brendel, and completely missed the latter's actions in front of her.

She could only repeat herself while holding back her feelings of hopelessness:

"My lord, I've lost my power, and I'm afraid I can't follow you anymore…"

Chapter 52
King of the Underground (3)

Brendel once again paused in a blank.

[What kind of ploy is this?]

But he finally realized what she meant and tested her with an additional question: "You mean to say you've lost your abilities as a Gold-ranked fighter?"

Scarlett's eyes momentarily widened before she closed them with a defeated expression and nodded slowly.

"Oh, I see." Brendel nodded like it was a natural thing.

This time Scarlett was confused. She had imagined Brendel's reactions multiple times and was worried to hear his voice turn cold just like Makarov did in the past. But she did not expect his reaction to sound like he had solved a difficult puzzle!

"Ah, excuse me," Brendel apologized sincerely.

He knew bad things were happening to Scarlett. There were signs of the Blood of Gods speeding up, and when she recovered her strength again, she might become a true God Acolyte. But there was no way he could tell it directly to her face.

"Can you stand up? Here, let me help you up." He consoled her and extended a hand.

Scarlett looked at the hand in front of her in a daze before she nodded.

Brendel's voice was soft, warm, and even a little sympathetic, but it was because of these words that she felt like her defenses to her heart were being cut away.

Tears spilled out from the corners of her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Brendel became flustered when he saw her tears.

The young girl continued to cry silently before she suddenly woke up from her daze. She sniffed through her nose to stop her emotions and wiped away her tears weakly. When she realized how she acted, her face immediately flushed red.

“Nothing, it’s b-because it’s too painful… My lord.” Scarlett turned her head away and answered a little unwillingly.

Brendel cried inwardly at once.

[Your excuse is just awful… Do you think you look like you’re crying because you’re in pain? You might as well say that you’re flustered because you’re trying to hide your pain!]

He was not a fool and was vaguely aware what the girl was thinking about. Even though he did not know what she thought of the people in her past, her silence was unable to mask the fact that she was trying to escape reality. She had not accepted her situation and was still stuck in her memories, and regarded the world with fear and distrust. In the end, she had no choice but to confront her circumstances, and was immediately swallowed up by isolation.

“Can you stand up?” He said again.

Scarlett nodded weakly and attempted several times to get up to her feet. But even with his assistance, the immense pain caused her to whimper and kneel down.

Brendel felt sorry for her. She was clenching her teeth and tearing up at the pain. It was not as if he had never seen a woman cry, but she was much tougher than the noble ladies in the game who teared up easily.

“Here, let me carry you. There’s no need to keep on trying.” He said. He was still a man after all.

They could not stay here for long. Even though he did not know what was Medissa and Kodan’s situation, but their mission would fail if the old man returned to the surface. He had to fight for every second.

“How can I do… that?” Scarlett was completely stunned.

Which Lord or commander would do this? But she quickly corrected herself. Makarov would do it for Eke because the latter was the son of a duke.

[Perhaps Makarov saw me as someone who's even less important than Redi because I was an Iron-ranker back then. Damn it! I feel disappointed—]

Once she thought of the detestable youth with white hair, she felt sick in her stomach. There were no tears shed when Brendel ordered his death.

[But why is this young lord willing to bother with me? I'm not popular with the remaining Grey Wolves Mercenaries like Sanford is, and I don't think I'm pretty enough to catch his eyes… His fiancee is much better looking than me. And I have never seen him even seeking the pleasures of the flesh from anyone. His actions stop at teasing his fiance… Right now, I'm nothing but a burden right now.]

"…There's no need to waste your time with me, my lord. You need to get Kodan right now, and once you do, you can come and rescue me," she shook her head vigorously, before she said with some hesitation, "I'm a mercenary, and I won't feel too scared. If you would kindly leave me with a l-light crystal…"

Brendel sighed inwardly with exasperation. It was clear that Scarlett was feeling scared. It was still an unknown problem whether he was able to find his way out, and even if he did, he would have to take several hours. But the biggest problem was not leaving a defenseless girl behind; it was the danger that Scarlett might turn into a God Acolyte once he left her.

"You're bleeding too much. It would be dangerous for you if you're still here." He did not reveal the truth to her and dodged the subject.

"That's fine; perhaps this is Mother Marsha's will. There's no need for you to keep holding on to a burden—" She paused for a moment, smiled a little, and her voice became softer: "But I should thank you, my lord. The fact that you didn't abandon me is enough… I can't be selfish, right?"

Brendel stared at Scarlett's misty, seemingly hollow eyes.

[Makarov must have really hurt her by sending the Grey Wolves Mercenaries to their deaths and refusing to acknowledge her. She's a pitiable person, but I don't have a solution for her curse.]

"…Everlasting regret." His words came out like a soft sigh of lament.

He closed his eyes and dove in his memories of the game for a full minute, while

Scarlett looked restlessly in confusion at him before he opened them:

“Perhaps you think that if you live in Aouine’s time of peace, you wouldn’t need to go through with this melancholic fate— But is there a moment where Aouine is truly peaceful?

This continent is constantly at war and chapters are written in history books like epic poems. The flames from the wars burn cities to the ground, countless bones are piled up, and the bloodshed is like a river that flows endlessly. People band together to become stronger in order to survive, but at the same time they have to pursue pragmatism.

Eventually, bonds are weakened and the warm feelings between people disappear. Society is left with nothing but ice-like cruelty and machine-like efficiency.

Civilians rebel all the time because of the useless nobles governing the kingdom, but their resistance is unable to pull down their authority. Why? Because the thing that matters is power.

The strong rule and the weak ought to die.

Your story is not the only example on this continent. There are thousands of you and thousands of Sifrids, and many people on this continent are more unfortunate than you are.

I don’t have the power to change their fates, because I cannot change the natural rule where the mighty rule over everything. This world is much harsher than the fairy tale that I know of called Earth.

However, I think I might be able to lend a hand to the person who is in need in front of me.

So why are you not asking me for help?”

He wished to save the people that he was familiar with in the world. The princess, the Goddess of War, the many, many people who sacrificed their lives for this kingdom. He desired to rewrite history.

“…I—” Scarlett was still hesitating, but the light was returning to her eyes, and Brendel noted it.

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m a selfish person. My self-serving wish is to save this kingdom. I cannot tell if it’s going to hurt people, and I might even hurt even more innocents than the nobles you see right now. Perhaps the innocent citizens of this kingdom, or from Kirrlutz, or the nations to the far north.

However, I don’t want to see tragedy befall on the people I know in front of me because I don’t think I can ignore my heart… If a hand is not enough, you can have my back. Let me carry you.”

Brendel added his last two sentences as Scarlett glanced at the injury on her thigh, but she was still hesitating even though she looked ready to accept his aid.

“No, wait, are you refusing because of… Don’t worry; I’m not going to take advantage of you.” Brendel was already tearing up because he was cringing inwardly from the speech he made. Maybe she was refusing because she did not want to be carried in the first place.

“Ehhh?! No, it’s just that—” Scarlett felt the blood rushing to her cheeks and shook her head repeatedly.

“Then there’s nothing else to be said.” Brendel was growling with impatience and shame, and he scooped her up with both hands, ignoring her frightened squeaks.

She did not expect Brendel to be so forceful. She shrank in his arms as her blush extended to her ears, and became silent.

[H-he said he wouldn’t take advantage of me… I-isn’t this the legendary ‘bridal carry’?]

She had dreamt of Eke carrying her to the cathedral someday more than once back with the mercenaries, but it quickly became a fantasy with the appearance of Yula. But she never expected someone to carry her, although it was a little odd because she was being carried around in a dark tunnel.

She brought her head to rest on Brendel’s chest. Even though her heart was beating fast, she felt a sense of safety.

[He’s different from Eke. He makes me feel like I’m safe and I can trust in him. I’m sure Miss Amandina and Romaine feel the same way…]

She finally understood why the number of people around him continued to increase

in the past few months. His connections and abilities were indeed outstanding, but it would not explain why the people around him would choose him over the other nobles.

[Maybe Mother Marsha hasn't completely abandoned me. I'm lucky enough to meet a lord like him.]

She still felt a little sad about losing her powers. She was not a smart person and finding her powers again would not be an easy task. She shook off her thoughts and decided to take one day at a time. Brendel's actions had calmed her down.

But his current thoughts were secretly pondering on her lifespan, which could be a matter of a few days or even just a few hours.

Chapter 53
King of the underground (4)

Brendel continued to carry Scarlett through the dark tunnels, and the latter held the Light Crystal which barely lit the pathway.

The mine did not collapse at just the gathering site. Rocks and boulders have nearly blocked off their path, and more often than not, they discovered that certain areas were completely sealed off.

Brendel had considered clearing obstacles with brute force, but in order to prevent a second collapse in the mine, he chose to find another way around them.

Scarlett could feel Brendel's strong heartbeat, and she felt her own heart beating fast in response. She felt she should say something to end the awkward silence, but was unable to find the words because of the situation that had happened without warning.

After feeling her slightly flushed face for a while, she finally managed to speak: "Is it really okay to bring me along?"

"…A good commander doesn't abandon his subordinates," Brendel said, quoting his female upperclassman in the past.

"…Do you think the others are safe?"

"I don't know, but they should be fine."

Brendel shook his head. He had not discovered any signs of Jana. He summoned Medissa's card in his mind and tried to call out for her, but she did not answer. Since the card did not turn grey, it would mean that she was not sent into the graveyard yet.

He recalled that Medissa was closer to Kodan than either of them during the final moment when the ceiling collapsed. Perhaps she was knocked out, and Kodan had escaped. She was not a match for him alone.

"Are you still in pain?"

“N-no,” Scarlett quickly changed the topic, “but I find there’s something odd earlier.”

“What is it?”

“The earthquake happened after Kodan suddenly shouted for us to stop, and I don’t think that our attacks are on a scale that would damage the other tunnels. At most it would just affect the room, right?”

Brendel pondered silently. He was also suspecting this point. Even though it was a dangerous thing to have four Gold-rankers battling it out in a closed room, the origin of the cracks seemed to be unrelated to the damage caused by them.

[If this place is really a Sanctuary… No, I should investigate how extensive the damage is first.]

Brendel continued to move in the dark tunnel, ducking high and low because of the fallen debris. At the third dead end, he finally concluded that there was no way up from the passageways available. The only option was to use the lift and head downwards to the pits.

That area was a complicated maze of tunnels that led to various sections of the fourth level, and from there, he might be able to get past the dead ends and reach the third level. Jocah had informed him the lifts in other areas accessed higher levels from other points too.

The lift’s noisy descent stopped with a shudder upon hitting the ground. Brendel observed the area and realized that there was also signs of the mine collapsing, but the walls were much sturdier so the damage was less compared to the above level.

[There’s no doubt about it. A Mana Resonance from an artifact. And the source is likely from Jocah’s group unearthing something powerful. But what kind of item is it to make such a strong commotion?]

“My lord?” Scarlett interrupted his thoughts.

“Yes?”

“Please let me down. I think I can try walking now.” Her voice was a faint whisper.

Brendel lowered his head to check her wounds. The body of a God Acolyte certainly

lived up to its name. Even though she lost her powers, her ability to recover from injuries was much stronger than normal people. The injury on her thigh had stopped bleeding and was starting to form scabs.

“Are you sure you’re fine?” He asked.

But the girl insisted on getting down, and he ultimately let her feet touch the ground. She grimaced lightly for a moment when she stood up, but after a shaky test, she gradually became stable. Even though she was a little slow, but she was mostly able to walk on her own.

Upon discovering this point, she felt a little happy and smiled at him.

“My lord!” She exclaimed with a small smile.

The youth blinked at her rare smile that came without any reservations, and the latter quickly realized her mistake and turned her head away.

He thought she was quite pretty when she smiled, but there was no way he would tell her that unless he wanted to get hated. Their footsteps grated against the pebbles as they made their way silently into the tunnels.

“Hmm?” Brendel muttered to himself as he suddenly spotted a mass of white color somewhere in the darkness.

Chapter 54
King of the underground (5)

“What is it, my lord?” Scarlett asked from behind.

“There’s something in front of us,” Brendel’s voice was reduced to a whisper.

Scarlett’s eyesight was currently no different from an ordinary person, and it was difficult for her to see far ahead with the weak light provided by the crystal.

Brendel pulled out his sword and led the girl slowly ahead and realized that it was a person, seemingly a worker in this mine. He carefully studied him, but there was no visible injury.

“He’s still alive,” Scarlett took a glance and immediately judged so.

Brendel agreed. He had also seen the shallow rise and fall of the worker’s chest. The latter seemed to be merely unconscious. He tried shouting at him, but the middle-aged man did not wake up, so he took his waterskin bag and poured a little on his face.

Considering that they might be stuck in the underground and the water they had on them was limited, he refrained from pouring too much of it. He was about to slap the worker’s face, but it seemed like the worker’s eyelids twitched and opened soon enough.

His rousing was not pleasant, and the moment he saw the two people in front of him, he retreated to the walls and knocked himself against them.

Brendel hurriedly said after seeing his panicked reactions: “We work here as well, there’s no need to be frightened.”

The worker stared at them for a while before he calmed down. He studied them carefully and asked: “You’re from the administration? Foremen? Or the guards?”

Scarlett’s disguise as a man held because of the darkness, but he could see the outline of their weapons. Only the three groups would be allowed to have weapons, but it was

more likely that they were guards.

“We’re from the guards,” Brendel nodded and answered, knowing that the workers knew almost every foreman.

That man seemed relieved to find that there was help, but he quickly tensed up.

“Did you encounter monsters too?” His gaze went to their injuries.

Brendel exchanged glances with Scarlett.

[Monsters? The only monsters are my summoned spiders…]

But he thought that the situation was not so simple.

“What type of monsters did you encounter?” He frowned and asked.

“Statues, monstrous creatures in the form of statues, Marsha above!”

“Creatures in the form of statues?” Scarlett repeated his words curiously.

“There’s no need to worry. We’re here to help you. Take your time and think back to the time when you encountered the creatures. Is it a humanoid or beast-like creature?” Brendel asked.

[There are many types of creatures made of stone. The Wizard Craftsmen from Galbu, Gargoyle Sentinels, and War Puppets, but considering the environment here, Earth Elementals are also a possibility.]

“They are like beasts, but made out of rocks! Please believe me! I swear I didn’t mistake them for something else!”

“A beast form? Are there wings?”

“No!” His reply was firm.

Brendel rubbed his forehead. He had not heard of a living rock monster. Even though there were plenty of strange creatures in the continent, most of them had particular traits. Monsters made from rocks or soil were usually artificial life forms made by Wizard Craftsmen, and the other type was Elementals, although the latter was unlikely

because they did not resemble beasts.

[Non-flying animated statues rarely come in the form of beasts. And Elementals mostly come in the form of worms.]

But the worker was looking at them puzzledly for some reason, and Brendel quickly moved on to his next question: “Is there anyone else besides you?”

The workers usually worked in groups, and as expected, the middle-aged man in front of Brendel swallowed as he remembered the incident that happened earlier, and nodded quickly:

“Yes, I came in a group, but we were separated when we encountered the monsters,” he took a quick glance at the deeper parts of the tunnels, and continued with some uncertainty, “but I’m not sure where they are now, or whether they are alive… I think the monsters went after them.”

He seemed thankful to be alive, and at the same time, he was still feeling a little afraid.

“Oh, that’s right, Marhann was also here.” He suddenly recalled something.

“Who?” Brendel asked.

“You don’t know him?” The worker was surprised. “He’s the foreman in charge of our level. I heard that he used to be in the army and his swordsmanship is amazing. When the earthquake started, he said he would go to the pits to take a look. Not long after he went in, the monsters started appearing.”

The corners of Brendel’s mouth twitched. He nearly outed himself when he randomly asked a question, but it was lucky that the worker was not alert because he thought ‘his allies’ were rescuing him.

Scarlett, on the other hand, frowned when she heard the answer. “Didn’t the tunnels start to collapse immediately after the earthquake? Furthermore, what made him think of going to the pits?”

Brendel immediately caught on to the problem when he listened to Scarlett’s reply: “That’s right, isn’t it better to find a safe place to avoid the collapse at that time?”

“No, no,” the worker shook his hand, “the tremors were not that strong in the

beginning, and the walls are much thicker here, and there wasn't much of a collapse in this area. Also, the key point is that it originated from the south of the tunnels here. It seems like you were not in our level when it happened, otherwise you would have known that."

Brendel suddenly sighed when he heard the surprising information.

[That seals the deal. Jocah's group had dug out something from this mine and caused a Mana Resonance. It looks like they are likely to be dead since the point originated from their side.]

"It doesn't sound like an earthquake, my lord," Scarlett whispered to Brendel.

Brendel nodded. He decided to investigate Jocah's location.

Even though the Legacy of the Silver Lineage was not as rare as the Golden Apple, it was still a unique item. But the quest probably was not going to be easy, judging from the power of the Mana Resonance.

He suddenly turned around and placed a finger on his lips and said: "Both of you, stop talking."

The tunnels turned quiet, and only the worker's heavy breathing could be heard. Very quickly, they heard rumbling noises coming from the south, as though there were things moving across the ground.

"They're back!" The worker suddenly whispered with urgency and immediately paled.

Brendel readied his sword. He was a little suspicious in his mind. Even though it seemed many things were coming towards them, they did not sound like they were something dangerous.

Very soon, the first creature emerged from the darkness. It was a greyish-white panther that elegantly trotted across the ground, glaring at Brendel with a pair of gemlike eyes.

No— The eyes were actually a pair of gems.

The cat-like creature seemed like it was carved out of stone and had a pair of grey colored gems as eyes, but Brendel finally knew what it was.

[That's not a stone creature but soil molded with Earth Element Mana into a creature. It can take on any form that the summoner wants. Does this mean there's an Elementalist doing this, or some other defense mechanism activating and summoning these creatures?]

Brendel thought the second possibility was more likely, and it meant that the Legacy item or Sanctuary was possibly sentient. Either way, it meant there was a Fantasy-ranked item. Brendel's heart soared and his eyes nearly teared up.

It was the first time where he could get his hands on a high-level equipment.

More creatures poured out from the dark tunnel, easily more than a dozen, and their eyes glinted dangerously in front of the Light Crystal. Eventually, twenty of them surrounded them in a semi-circle.

There was no sign of anxiety on Brendel's face, and he took a step forward: "Stay back a little, Scarlett."

"Understood." The red-haired girl caught the worker who was trying to crawl away to flee the area and dragged him back to where they were.

It was safer for them to stay where Brendel was at. She did not move forward to help him because she would instead interfere with his movements, given her current state.

But she was not worried. Her judgment remained even though she lost her power, and she could see that the panthers were hardly a threat to Brendel.

Chapter 55
King of the underground (6)

The worker saw things differently. He tried to resist Scarlett's pull and started shrieking: "Let me go… And both of you should run too! These things are incredibly tough, and blades can't cut through them!"

He saw his partners smash their mining picks repeatedly on the creatures, but even when they used their full strength, they left only slight impressions on their bodies.

And when these creatures attacked, their claws easily smashed a person's body to a pulp. It was a nightmarish scene that he could still recall viscera splattering onto the walls and ground.

But his words quickly died in his throat.

Brendel swung his sword seemingly in a light, elegant stroke through thin air, yet the panther that was still a distance away from him was sliced into two. That was still not the end, as its split body smashed against the wall, and shattered into pieces.

The worker was completely flabbergasted.

"You… You…" He pointed at Brendel, glancing back and forth at Scarlett and the youth, and continued to stutter without managing to say a full sentence.

"Stop making noise!" Scarlett's slapped his hand down. But when she looked back at Brendel she was shocked to find out that his swordsmanship seemed to have become even sharper than before.

Brendel realized the same thing too. His ability to utilize the sword had become even easier. He quickly brought out the Stats Window and discovered there was a +2 next to his Military Swordsmanship stat. *(TL: When he fought his grandfather back then, he gained +1.)*

He was certain that he had gained the additional rank after fighting Kodan, and probably missed the system alert after he lost consciousness because of the falling

rocks.

This gain surprised and delighted him at the same time. Even though there were cases where fighting high-level NPC swordsmen increased the level of swordsmanship, they were incredibly rare. The increment of a swordsmanship gain was usually because of the accomplishment of a mission, and there had to be strict conditions before one gained it.

[I thought the reason why I managed to gain +1 back then was that a story-like quest progression between the old Brendel and his grandfather happened. I have never gotten an increment like this in the game from fighting NPCs, and that's over a hundred years worth of in-game time. But now I feel it's because the system recognizes the fact that I'm able to understand the grandmasters' skill in Military Swordsmanship—]

Another rock panther leaped towards him, interrupting his thought. He got irritated with the annoying gnats bothering him, so he charged into their midst and began cutting them apart. Each time he swung his sword, multiple pieces of rocks were sent flying away.

========== Romaine's POV ==========

The town had felt the impact when the earthquake happened in Schafflund's mines. The people on the streets felt the ground quiver, and shop owners held on their goods to prevent them from falling to the ground, but they only had two hands and cursed loudly when the ones they could not protect crashed onto the floor.

Residents who had relatives working in the mine panicked as the news spread to every corner in the town.

Romaine had been staying quietly in her room since the beginning of Brendel's absence because he had bought her different sets of clothes, and she had been testing them out. One of the more striking dresses looked somewhat like a maid's uniform, which Brendel had bought because of an ulterior motive.

Even though the real motive was a little immoral, Romaine was quite fond of it. Brendel would have given two thumbs up if he was around Romaine.

She had been checking herself out against the mirror when the earthquake started, and in a rare moment of clumsiness, knocked her head on the mirror's frame, causing

a bump to appear on her head.

She rubbed her injury as she saw stars in her eyes, but quickly steadied herself and got out of the room in curiosity. She went straight to the angels outside, but they stated they did not know what was happening. In the end, the merchant girl went to the innkeeper and received accurate news.

There was an earthquake in the mines. She thought about things in detail and became worried soon. She made an earnest decision after a moment:

“I want to find Brendel,” she said to the angels in a serious tone, “come along with me.”

“Miss Romaine, Lord Brendel will never agree to this,” but the angel replied so.

“Lord Brendel’s orders are for Miss Romaine to stay here in this inn without going anywhere before he comes back, without any exceptions.” The second angel was even more direct.

“To add on to my partner’s words, we are still here without any changes to our orders, which means Lord Brendel is fine.” The angel who replied to her first persuaded her.

“Even though Brendel is fine right now, that is precisely why we need to help him because he might be trapped in the mines!”

If Brendel knew Romaine was going to talk about him with her unlucky tongue, he would have rubbed her temples with rotating fists. Unfortunately, he was not there, so Romaine was overly enthusiastic.

Her thoughts were indeed rejected by the two angels who shook their heads at the same time. In a way, they thought she had a career in writing tales for the bards.

But Romaine was not dejected from being rejected. Not long after Romaine returned to her room, they heard yells and screams coming from within. The angels quickly rushed in because they had to check for danger.

Little Romaine was rolling around in her bed under a blanket like a child throwing a tantrum. Once she felt like they had entered the room, she revealed her head from the blanket as if to peek at them, and inflated her cheeks.

“I. Want. To. Go. To. The. Mines!” She said with teary eyes, with the subtle threat of ‘or

else I will make a scene'.

The angels glanced at each other with a slight shrug of their shoulders and closed the doors after they left. After this situation repeated several times, they gradually ignored her antics.

"I can see why Lord Brendel told us to ignore weird situations. From the looks of it, the advice is logical." The first angel said to his partner after Romaine's last attempt happened to be on the floor.

"Yes, he knows Miss Romaine well." The second angel nodded.

The two concluded that Brendel was very fond of Romaine.

Unfortunately for them, when she realized that Brendel's evil subordinates finally ignored her actions, she hurriedly changed her clothes and revealed a cunning fox-like smile while she executed her plan.

She wore a common-looking adventurer's shirt, and a loose pair of pants that were not unlike pumpkins with a pair pointed leather-skin boots. The combination was quite ridiculous, but because of her inquisitive looks, it made her look surprisingly adorable.

She packed her strange collection of items into her bag and started tying her bedsheet to the window. She even turned around to the door and made a funny face before she climbed out.

Despite her detailed plan, she had missed out on one detail. She was prepared to sneak down to the back of the inn as she swung from the bedsheet, but suddenly realized that it was not long enough—

She continued to swing in mid-air while her sweat on her forehead shimmered: "I-it seems like I have gotten into a little bit of trouble…"

Odum was passing by the back alley as he had always done to enjoy his afternoon beer. He happened to raise his head up and saw this particular scene.

At first, he thought he was still asleep and widened his eyes, but quickly confirmed that a girl with a ridiculous outfit was dangling from above by holding on to a bedsheet.

The dwarf lowered his head and started to think if it was a day of celebration and people were doing crazy things. But he could not remember if it was the summer festival or the harvest festival. He quickly lamented the deterioration of memories when people got old, but eventually recalled that the previous festival was a few weeks ago, and the next one was two months later.

He thought that he had gone to the wrong alley or he somehow triggered a magic spell when he entered it.

But he quickly whirled his head to check for the inn's landmarks and was certain that he was in the right place, and there was indeed a possibility that a girl was hanging from above. He supported his lower jaw and asked:

"Lass, what are you doing?" He asked.

"Excuse me, old mister, but it looks like this bedsheet is too short—" Came the reply.

Chapter 56
King of the Underground (7)

Odum spent a significant amount of effort in receiving the girl hanging in mid-air. The fat old dwarf's face was bunched up together, and his thick bushy brows were nearly knitted together while grumbling into her ears that she was too bold and completely ignored danger, and caused him as an old man to have so much trouble and worry.

But in the end, he asked her out of concern: "Lass, are you injured anywhere?"

"Ah!" Romaine stood back on the ground, patted her chest and said happily: "That was dangerous!"

But he could hardly see that she thought she was in danger, rather, her face was flushed with excitement.

[Oh, so you know the meaning of d—]

The dwarf's thoughts died in his mind when the merchant girl followed up eagerly: "That was interesting!"

"Lass, the way you're thinking is too dangerous! What would have happened if I didn't come?" The dwarf's expression became strict, and his thick accent immediately revealed itself.

"But old mister, you came," Romaine said.

Odum scratched his head, thinking that his current line of argument was probably not good enough to convince her, so he tried again: "That's a huge coincidence that I'm there. What's going to happen if I'm not? Furthermore, lass, you're giving this old man a huge amount of trouble, and the biggest problem is that you interfered with my time to drink—"

"My aunt says that drinking so much is bad for health!" Romaine interrupted.

The dwarf immediately felt a headache coming on. The girl's thought process was

different from ordinary people.

He started to wonder if rescuing the girl was a wrong decision. Perhaps he should have pretended to see nothing from the start and head off to drink his beer instead. Maybe he should not even raise his head up.

He put up a hand to stop her.

“We’re not discussing this problem! And do you think a dwarf who doesn’t drink can be called a dwarf? Lass, your aunt is…” Odum paused for a moment, feeling that it was not right to talk behind someone’s back, especially when the person in question was a female. “In any case, this is this, and that is that. Look, a normal person wouldn’t tie their bedsheet from the window and dangle in mid-air behind the inn, right?” The dwarf began to lecture her, although he started to think there was something wrong with his words.

But when he pondered about it, he was unable to find out where the problem was so he shook his head and stopped thinking. The only thought had left was that his precious time to drink in the afternoon was leaving him.

Because the girl started talking again.

“You’re right,” Romaine nodded after a moment of thinking, “but I’m forced to do it because I need to go to the mines!”

Odum did not realize that his attention was gradually pulled away by the girl in front of him, and he looked at her in stunned silence.

“…What is your business with the mine? Women aren’t allowed in there.”

“That’s because the person I like is in there and there had been an earthquake in the mines. I’m really worried. Oh! Old mister, can you bring me there?” She looked at the dwarf and suddenly blinked in realization.

“You don’t know how to go to the mines?” Odum’s beady eyes flared open.

“I think so.” She had never considered this problem. It was clear that she made the mistake of acting first before thinking again, and was quickly throwing the incident that happened a moment ago out of her mind.

But Odum started laughing so hard that he pounded his fist repeatedly into an open palm: “That’s funny, that’s really funny! You wanted to go to the mines so badly that you climbed out of the window to get there faster, without realizing how to get there in the first place. There’s a limit to make such a careless plan, lass, and even the most impulsive Mountain Dwarf wouldn’t make such a mistake. No, even the dumbest beastman would have a proper plan before they hunt!”

“But the beastmen have an adage called ‘Uimassnemont’; the capable hunter might not be smart!” Romaine said the difficult word with a stutter.

“That’s their excuse for being stupid,” the dwarf shook his head, “wait, who taught you that word?”

“My aunt.”

“No, no, what am I doing!” Odum found himself being led around by the girl. “What I’m trying to say from the start is that you can’t be too impulsive, and that has nothing to do with beastmen being smart or not—”

He rubbed his beard before he frowned. “Hold on, did you say there’s an earthquake in the mines?”

“Yes.”

“Then why don’t I know about it?” He stared at her.

Romaine looked back at him with blinking eyes. The dwarf became aware that he had said something silly. If the earthquake had happened an hour ago, he was probably napping.

In truth, he should be in the mines working, but it was not the first time he did not work and drank instead. He had helped the young noble, Perkins, with his personal problem not too long ago and won his trust.

The latter did not mind whether the dwarf went to the mine and worked since there was not going to be much of a difference if he did. Soon after, Odum frequently skipped work and drank in the inn as a dwarf’s pastime.

But Romaine’s words immediately sobered him up.

He knew about a secret within the mines and had been waiting for a long time. He was originally disappointed with the knowledge that the workers dug into a monster's nest a decade ago and the administration had refused to extend any deeper into the mines.

He tried convincing Perkins to reopen the fifth level, but the latter refused to do so, not because of the workers' safety, but for the reason that he did not want to cause trouble for himself. He could only stay in the village with disappointment, and after a while, his passion died down.

But his heart started beating faster at this moment.

"Very well, lass, I'll bring you to the mines, but you must agree—" He said.

"I understand!" Romaine immediately agreed with no hesitation.

"I haven't finished my words yet!"

"Yes! It's fine, old mister, I'll agree with the random things you say since it wouldn't matter sooner or later!"

"You're really honest… But that's kinda charming too." He sighed.

Odum began to think about the women back in his hometown when he looked at Romaine. He had grown up in the Golden Dwarf village. The village was not as interesting or diversified when compared to the humans, and even their beer brewing skills lost out to the humans.

However, their people were much more passionate compared to the humans. While this human girl in front of him was a complete handful, he liked her personality and made him happier than he was in years.

Though he instinctively realized that there would be trouble if he allowed the girl free rein.

"In any case, there are three important things you must agree if I'm to bring you there. Do you understand, lass?" He said as he began walking.

Romaine nodded, but she quickly had a new question as she followed him. "Didn't you say that women are not allowed in the mines?"

“Don’t interrupt me!” Odum frowned. He could not bring Romaine directly into the mines. It was also unlikely for him to enter the place because of the procedures during times of crisis. But he had prepared for a long time, and it was finally going to be of use.

A secret passageway to the mines’ inner sector.

Since he was a foreman, he could pretend that he was trapped there when the earthquake happened. The girl was a little more troublesome to hide, but that was just a matter of disguising her.

“Okay. But old mister, are you a Mountain Dwarf? And are mountain dwarves impulsive?” Romaine asked.

“Of course I’m not one. Those impulsive fellows have nothing to do with me. I’m a…” Odum stopped and coughed loudly. “Don’t interrupt me!”

“Okay!”

Chapter 57
King of the underground (8)

========== Brendel's POV ==========

The battle that Brendel had almost did not give him any loot, and the experience he gained was a pittance.

Before he started searching amongst the rubble, he had told the worker to stay behind for a moment while he and Scarlett investigated the creatures.

[Killing Iron-ranked creatures and below hardly nets any XP at my level. This is the same XP reduction in the game.]

The single loot he found amongst the rubble was an ogre ring. It raised the wearer's strength and was rated accordingly as a prefix for equipment. The lowest rated Strength Ring was a 'Ghoul Ring', and the highest rated Strength Ring was 'Colossal Dragon Ring'.

The Ogre Ring that he had gotten was a 20 OZ ring, which far surpassed his expectations for a loot drop. The odds were a 1/1000 chance for a level 15 creature to drop a magical equipment like this. The best item that a level 15 creature could drop was a 25 OZ defensive item, but the odds were even higher at 1/10000, which any gamer would not perceive as a possibility to get it realistically.

[But to get such an item when my luck is pretty much shitty at all times…]

He could not help but glance at Scarlett. Was she some kind of luck idol?

He inspected the ring and saw that it raised the wearer's strength by 5%. Because of the implanted Spectral Knight's crystal and Power Break, his strength was close to a hundred in stats. It could raise approximately five strength points.

But when he looked at his index fingers and thumbs, he saw that he was already wearing the Ring of the Wind Empress, the Flame Ring, the Warrior Ring, and the Minor Serpent Ring. Brendel thought for a moment and decided to throw the Ogre

Ring to Scarlett.

(TL: Minor Serpent Ring is dropped off from some mob, adds 0.1 OZ to dexterity.)

“That’s a ring that raises your strength by approximately five percent.” He said.

Scarlett caught the ring with a little confusion in her mind: “…B-but I don’t have any combat abilities.”

“…That’s a temporary thing. You can recover your strength very soon.” Brendel said.

“Is that really true?” Her amber eyes lit up immediately. She wore the ring on her thumb, and her careful expressions looked like she was guarding an invaluable treasure.

Brendel’s hands clenched into fists, and was momentarily silent before he nodded in the end.

“When have I ever lied? Of course, it’s real.”

She immediately showed a dazzling smile of delight, but her keen observation detected a subtle change in Brendel’s face, and her smile faltered.

“The reason why I will recover is that I will turn into a complete God Acolyte?”

His white lie was exposed very quickly, and he slowly nodded.

“That’s fine. I’m not afraid of turning into a monster. I’m more afraid of losing my strength since I can’t fight for you any longer.”

There was a short moment of silence between the two.

In the end, he told the worker that the search was over and it was safe to move on.

He discovered a few bodies further into the tunnel, and the worker tearfully identified them as his co-workers.

He asked the worker to wait at the third level for help, but the latter considered for a moment before refusing and insisted on going along with him.

The display of Brendel's strength had made the worker steel his heart to go along with the two. It was definitely safer for him.

Brendel had no choice but to allow him to follow.

"There's no need to be so careful with it. It's a minor magic artifact that isn't worth much." He said when he saw Scarlett fiddling with the Ogre Ring now and then.

"Y-you're right. But as a gift, it takes on a different meaning." Scarlett said.

Brendel blinked several times in response to her answer.

She changed the topic before he could reply: "My lord, do you think that the earthquake is related to the monsters?"

"Yes."

"The earthquake caused the monsters to emerge from the pits?"

"No, I'm afraid it's the opposite."

"The opposite? How can that be? I don't think these weak monsters are capable of causing an earthquake." She was surprised.

"Weak?" Brendel shook his head. That was just the beginning. If this quest involved Legacy items from the quest, then the things they were going to encounter would be something else entirely.

But he quickly cut off his words as he had found another body at the tunnel's turn.

"T-that's foreman Marhann!" The worker's voice was high from fright.

Brendel glanced at his surroundings and discovered there were two destroyed Rock Panthers near to the left of the tunnel. There were clear marks of swords cutting through their bodies. Marhann was at least an Iron-ranked swordsman based on his judgment.

He thought the foreman fought against the beasts and ultimately lost, but when he inspected his body, he discovered the wound on his neck to be a clean strike, which meant he was killed in a single blow.

[The attacker's abilities clearly outclass the victim. This mean there are even stronger monsters around.]

Scarlett came to the same conclusion. Her expression became solemn, but she remained quiet.

The worker was trembling on the ground from fear. The foreman was someone reliable and rumored to be a great swordsman, and the fact that he got killed made the worker feel like he could die anytime. He lost control of his emotions and started yelling and crying.

Brendel had no choice but to restrain him to prevent him from attracting more monsters. They continued advancing to the north when the worker calmed down.

Based on the familiar weaves and turns, he was certain that he was close to the place where he separated from Cohen and the others.

But their path was once again blocked by two groups of Rock Panthers. He cut all of them down but quickly realized that the concentration of monsters was starting to increase as though they had endless numbers.

Scarlett seemed to realize the same thing, and she reminded him in a whisper: "We have to kill our way out now, my lord, this place isn't safe."

"Yes, I agree that this place isn't safe." Brendel nodded.

However, his plan was a little different from hers. He knew that an ordinary man would not be able to flee, and soldiers or mercenaries would choose to do the same as Scarlett.

But he was a gamer.

An endless amount of creatures that one could grind in the game was unusual. He calmly and quickly searched for the leader that was hiding amongst these low-level creatures.

[There!]

He quickly spotted a smaller cat-like creature made of shiny black obsidian moving in the darkness. Even though it was just a second, Brendel had already recognized that

the creature had to be at least five levels higher than the Rock Panthers based on its material.

The youth quickly cleaved the surrounding enemies in a large arc and pursued after it. But what surprised him was the swift reaction of the creature. Before he was able to swing his sword, that black panther had disappeared into the shadows.

[That creature's speed has surpassed what it should have at its level!]

Brendel wanted to activate his Charge skill, but he lost his target as it seemingly disappeared into thin air. The Rock Panthers also started retreating like a falling tide, and he stopped chasing them in astonishment.

All the creatures had disappeared after a few seconds.

[What's going on?]

He certainly did not think it was because of his bloodlust or oppressive might that 'frightened' them away. These creatures were non-living and acted upon their instructions.

The area became open.

"What was that?" Scarlett managed to catch a glimpse of the black creature when Brendel chased after it.

"The leader. Although to be more accurate, the summoner's eyes. Regardless of what kind of summoner they are: An elf, necromancer, or beast tamer, in order to control a large army, they need to control a creature that's intelligent enough for them to use. I'm not sure how big this army is, but if that obsidian panther is the strongest creature amongst them, it's still fine."

"If it's not?" She asked.

"We're in trouble," Brendel said and walked a little faster than before.

Scarlett felt the events that happened so far were bizarre. Even though it seemed like Brendel knew what was going on, she did not like the feeling of a trap.

"My lord, let us return to the third level. Aren't our goals supposed to be capturing the

guard commander and controling the mines? Why are we wasting time with these creatures?" She whispered.

"At first my goals are to do just that, but now it's a little different."

"What's different?" She asked in wonder.

"It's… complicated."

A Legacy item from the Silver Lineage had more value than the silver mines. He would never do something stupid like switching the Golden Apple with gold mines. But he did not explain himself and continued to walk deeper to where Cohen's mining spot was.

He stopped after a few steps.

"Hmm." He uttered lightly to himself.

"What's wrong?" Scarlett asked from behind.

"Take a look at this." He walked to the cornering turn.

Scarlett limped her way over with her halberd as a crutch and discovered that the tunnel widening into a fairly big space. However, she was surprised to see the place in shambles.

It was as if a violent tempest had occurred there. Under the weak light from the crystal, she could see there were fragments of Rock Panthers intermixed with a few glaring obsidian shards.

Brendel looked deeper into the tunnel, pulled out his sword, and said: "It seems like someone is ahead of us. And that someone is powerful."

Chapter 58
King of the underground (9)

The underground world was seemingly shrouded in endless darkness. The long tunnels were mostly silent, with the exception of the rare dripping sound of water onto the ground.

Medissa had to rest after driving away large batches of uninvited creatures that came from the deeper levels. Even though she was a spirit, it did not mean her Soul Fire could continuously output energy. There was a limit that how active an undead could be.

But there was no need for her to require the use of external sources of light. Her eyes glowed in the darkness from her Soul Fire and allowed her to see far into the tunnels.

The Elven princess did not sit down. She was currently standing up against the wall while holding on to her spear. Countless shards of Rock Panther filled the area around her, as well as the path she had taken earlier. After a moment of silence, she faced towards the end of a forked corner and asked:

“Is there a lift in that direction?”

The only person who was breathing came from the other end of the tunnel. She was not alone in the darkness.

“Yes.” A voice answered her.

Medissa did not reply. She suddenly gripped her lance and readied herself in a combat stance. But she soon had delight on her face and shouted:

“My lord!”

The people who came were Brendel and Scarlett, the latter holding up a Light Crystal to light the area. They did not appear too surprised to see Medissa. Ultimately, there were only three possible people who had enough power.

Medissa, Kodan, or the culprits behind the attacks.

But they paused as the light revealed someone else in the tunnel.

“Medissa,” Brendel said, “how did he…?”

He looked at the silent Kodan sitting on the ground and immediately felt a little confused. The fearsome old man looked thoroughly battered. His forehead, face, and his bluish-grey uniform were full of blood stains. Even his greyish-white hair was a mess.

“Ser Kodan was injured earlier.” Medissa said.

She pointed out subtly and left out information. But she was certain that Brendel understood what she was had in mind.

But the old man scoffed: “Just spit it out. I have become your prisoner. It seems that this little girl still believes I have some use and temporarily sealed a truce between both us.” He tilted his head and looked at Brendel: “But she’s real respectful towards you, boy, saying that the decision is left to her ‘lord’. Go ahead and make it. Do you want to kill or torture me?”

The truth in his mind was something different. He was cursing the Elven girl’s cunning actions. When the mine collapsed, anybody’s instinct ought to be surviving, even for Gold-ranked fighters.

But he would never have known that Medissa was not a ‘living’ person. Her first action was not to retreat but to continue attacking him when the rocks collapsed around them. It was an action equivalent to suicide, and even someone as composed as Kodan received a shock.

Even though his abilities were far superior to hers, he did not have the mood to fight anymore when he realized the place was collapsing and was unprepared to defend himself. In the end, she managed to hurt him badly, and if it were not her, he would have died in a grievance with the rocks burying him as a Gold-ranker.

Though he was filled with disgruntled and stifled emotions, he was secretly impressed with her boldness. If it was him, he might not have the guts to do the same thing she did. As a veteran soldier, he had no words when he was defeated on the battlefield, regardless of the reason.

If he knew that Medissa was a spirit, he would surely regret his decision to take his enemies lightly.

Brendel nodded slightly, before asking: “A truce?”

“Ser Kodan promised to bring me along to find both of you and leave the mines. He’s familiar with this place, enough to know which tunnels lead to the lifts. He even created a tunnel of our own without triggering another collapse. Just a while ago, he told me about a lift that leads up to the main loading area in the third level. There are many tunnels in there that lead to the surface for transportation, so it shouldn’t be blocked.” Medissa explained carefully.

She smiled a little: “If it were not for Ser Kodan, I wouldn’t be able to find my way so quickly.”

Brendel guessed that it was the lift that he had taken down with Cohen when he first came in. He had seen a loading area with three different rails that led upwards. He nodded and glanced at Kodan again:

“What is his condition for the truce?”

“I think I’ll let Ser Kodan speak for himself.”

Kodan eyed Brendel again: “Boy, I know what you’re planning. I have nothing much to say as a prisoner. You can go ahead and take over this place. If you’re lucky, you can get away with it for three months, if not, a month. Palas wouldn’t discover anything wrong during this period. As for my condition, it’s simple. I don’t want to end up like Graudin.”

Brendel’s heart skipped a beat.

[How does he know?]

There was no way to hide the fact that Firburh had a rebellion, but none of the city’s citizens knew what happened to Graudin.

It was hardly surprising that an uprising would happen in that city, yet no one declared that the former lord died in the battle. Thus many believed that Graudin had fled the place through a secret tunnel that fateful night. Only Brendel’s mercenary leaders received his personal confirmation that Graudin had truly died.

[If the outside world received news of Graudin's death, then the nature of Firburh's rebellion would be different. Lord Palas will set out with his men right away, and Count Randner will not give Trentheim's remaining nobles any more time to 'resolve this situation by themselves'. If that old fox discovers that this territory is in danger of leaving his hands, he would probably bring his armies down in less than two weeks.]

The script that Brendel had in mind was Count Randner sending in his incompetent sons to solve the issue of his territory. That should happen as long as that cunning old fox was uncertain of his son's life.

A rebellion started by commoners was not something that nobles feared, especially when many retainers were loyal to Graudin. Time would pass, and the situation would slowly resolve itself without needing Count Randner's interference.

However, if Graudin died, then this little group of rebellers would be challenging the nobles to the highest degree, even if that was not their intention.

Brendel had planned for the nobles to eventually realize this fact after Lord Macsen and Lord Palas's defeat in the future.

He should have at least one or two more months, in theory.

Kodan seemed to have seen through his thoughts, and he gave a mysterious smile: "Don't worry. These are just outside rumors, but the fact that you have appeared here made me realize it wasn't a simple uprising done by Firburh's citizens."

He then shook his head: "But I'm not sure if you're crazy, or I've gone mad. Aouine had not seen a rebellion since the 'Year of the Lute'."

'Year of the Lute ' was mostly recognized for the demise of Hesse the First, who was also known as the 'King of Roads'.

He was the most infamous king in Aouine's history; a member of the royal family who came from the Seifer family. He established his own private army and stole from all merchants who passed through Aouine, regardless of whether they were natives or from other kingdoms.

The greedy king publicly announced that all the wealth transported through the kingdom belonged to him, and merchants had to give two-thirds of their goods to him. His tyrannical behavior ultimately angered everyone, and within three years he was

chased off the throne.

In the end, he was the only king who died at the hands of commoners.

It was the darkest period of Aouine and was many times worse than the current Madara's invasion. Everyone knew how badly the citizens were suffering under his rule. The term 'uprising' was rarely found in the continent's history, and that year in Aouine was described perfectly with this word.

Perhaps this was the fate of all kingdoms regarding luck and power.

The Corvado family eventually established themselves as the rulers of Aouine for many years despite having unfavorable odds, yet Princess Gryphine would fail to reform Aouine despite having more supporters than her ancestors.

Ultimately, Madara defeated Aouine with the odds against them too.

Brendel pondered for a while before he shook his head: "Your promise means very little. We might be able to get along here, but once we leave the surface, how do we ensure that you're not going to run away and inform your superiors?"

He could make Tagiv swear to its gods, but humans were a bunch of faithless people. Even though they would frequently bring up Marsha on their lips, they mostly treated it as a sham.

Kodan merely shrugged with open palms: "This old man is heavily injured. Even if I want to run, I can't."

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Brendel made a curt laugh: “You might not flee now, but that doesn’t mean that you won’t do so in the future. You, Ser Kodan, haven’t lost your skill at all; my normal mercenaries or guards can’t stop you once you recover—”

He could not possibly leave behind two Gold-ranked fighters just to watch one person in the silver mines. His new territory was about to meet its hardest moments, and his forces were weakened because Scarlett had lost her strength. While his knowledge of the world could possibly get him all the talent he wanted in the future, he had to be prudent right now.

Kodan’s hand held onto his sword before he released it again. He felt that the youth was interested in the truce, otherwise the latter would not spend so much time talking.

“Then what do you intend to do?” He asked with a stoic expression.

“Hmm… What’s the administrative officer’s name?”

Kodan looked blankly at Brendel, unable to catch up with the youth’s train of thoughts. He did not know why the topic went to that noble, but he still answered: “Perkins.”

“Perkins from the House of Kewell?”

“You know him?” Kodan’s eyes narrowed. His instinct told him that the youth was likely to be a noble as well, or he would not be able to guess Perkin’s identity so easily. Even a veteran military officer like himself did not necessarily recognize nobles from the other regions.

Truthfully, Brendel knew more about the younger generation of nobles than the older generation. In the game, the older nobles gradually handed their powers to the younger generation or even passed away, and players had to work with the young nobles.

[Perkins is supposed to be the lord of the Silman’s territory. I didn’t expect him to be

the administrative officer here. This must be the start of his career where he gains Randner's trust. I even got missions from him too. Sorry, but it seems like I'm going to ruin your bright future because of my actions.]

"I heard that he sticks to the rules," Brendel said carefully.

"This evaluation is indeed pleasing to the nobles' ears," Kodan's eyebrows raised up, "but he really is a coward with middling capabilities."

The old man was still seething over the loss of his men because of Perkin's foolish actions, and he mocked the latter without reservation.

"You nobles really love your pretty conversations." He gave a seemingly taunting look at Brendel.

But the youth did not care about the old man's probing question. He continued to ponder in his mind.

[Kodan's evaluation of Perkins matches what I know of him. The noble will surely suppress the commotion in the mines for the sake of his future, and would never notify Lord Palas about the supposed monsters too. Since that's the case… we have ample time to search the mines instead, if the old swordmaster doesn't cause a problem.]

He glanced at Kodan and suddenly thought of a new idea. He was reluctant to let a Gold-ranked swordsman go back to Randner's hands, but it was somewhat of a problem to recruit him just like that. Judging from Kodan's words and actions, he did not seem like he was completely loyal to Randner, or he would not be setting up a deal for a truce.

[This old man looks like he retains some form of knightly behavior. Persuading him to surrender would be difficult, especially when I have no clout… But.]

"Ser Kodan, why don't you come back with us to Firburh? A duration of one to six months, and I'll let you go back." He said.

Leaving two Gold-ranked fighters at the silver mines was impossible, but having them watch him at Firburh was naturally fine.

"Six months?" Kodan's eyes narrowed: "If I'm not at the mines for an extended period of time, it will be suspicious. Are you not afraid that your actions will divulge the fact

that you're stealing Count Randner's silver?"

[This wily old bastard.]

"That's not a problem at all. Didn't you get injured in the earthquake? I think Perkins will *understand* that you need some time to recuperate." Brendel's response was almost immediate as he had already thought ahead, even emphasizing on certain words.

Kodan tutted with a disdainful expression. He was certain that Perkins would 'understand', and even if he did not, the youth in front of him would make him do so. He could imagine Brendel physically threatening Perkins, and that the noble would agree to his demands in tears.

"It seems you have already made up your mind, but how would I know that you will fulfill your promise to let me leave?" He asked.

"Why do I need to promise anything?"

Kodan's mouth opened, but words failed him. He glared at Brendel.

"I wouldn't do anything to you or put you in a difficult spot as long as you accept my invitation. There's no meaning to pointless sacrifices, right? You're a veteran who survived the November War, and you know how precious life is. The winners in war are the ones who survived."

The old man scoffed: "You seemed to know the war well. Did your elders participated in that war too?"

Brendel did not answer and merely looked back. Kodan's eyes glanced at the rings on Brendel's hands, suddenly turning quiet, before he spoke again:

"It seems like you intend to stay here in Trentheim for a long time, but I have to warn you, Count Randner will never allow his territory to slip out of his grasp, even if it's this impoverished land. Are you prepared to receive a ruler's wrath?"

With the exception of the Corvado Royal Family's territories, Aouine was controlled by thirteen 'rulers'. They were comprised of six Dukes, two Marquises, and five special Counts. Their power was comparable to the royal family's, and the citizens called them the 'rulers below the throne'.

The three strongest 'rulers' were Duke Arreck, Duke Viero, and Duke Seifer, while most of the other 'rulers' were somewhat close in strength. Count Randner was not amongst the top power, but he was not the weakest either.

Kodan felt that Brendel and his men were like ants challenging a giant, and they would be crushed any given time against Count Randner's might.

Brendel laughed and shook his head when he heard Kodan's reply.

"There are two things where you got it wrong. Number one, I know what Count Randner's going to do. Number two, Trentheim is not as poor as you think."

"Having confidence is a good thing, but arrogance is a different matter, young man." Kodan's eyes thoroughly searched Brendel's demeanor.

"I agree with your words completely."

"Very well. Regardless of what you think, I still want your assurance that I can leave after six months."

"Can you promise that you won't return to Count Randner's side?"

"I'm sorry, but that isn't something I can promise." Kodan's tone was adamant.

Brendel looked at him with considerable admiration, but he did not refuse this time. "I'll give you that promise. I'm quite sure that things between Count Randner and me will be settled in three months anyway."

The old man looked at him with some surprise and shock, but Brendel merely smiled and did not give an explanation.

Medissa had rested enough when the deal was made. Her Soul Fire once again burned with brilliance, and the group continued on their path.

Brendel glanced at the worker behind them. When the latter realized that Brendel and Medissa were not miners or guards, but in fact rebels who wanted to go against Count Randner, he nearly ran away in fright. However, he quickly calmed down and considered the immediate future. If he ran away, the monsters in the mine would kill him instantly, so he decided to follow them in the end.

A quick glance at Scarlett immediately made her understand; she pretended to be aggressive and threatened the worker, and ultimately the latter could only agree to tearfully bring his family to Firburh.

Brendel soon got to know that the worker had learned how to make silver trinkets and offered him the chance to learn from a blacksmith. It was much safer than working in a mine and the benefits were much better. While the worker was still a little uneasy, he was a little expectant of the future.

Suddenly, Brendel's footsteps slowed down. It was not monsters or another human being that stopped him, but there was a black door that appeared not too far in the distance.

And it sealed off the entire pathway.

Medissa and Scarlett looked at Kodan at the same time. He had said the path led to a lift. However, the old man's expression showed that he was filled with disbelief.

"This is?" He muttered.

"Aren't we supposed to ask you this question?" Her weak voice was filled with suspicion.

"No, no, it doesn't make any sense." Kodan's eyebrows were knitted together. He turned to Medissa and asked: "Young lady, can you help me over to take a closer look?"

Medissa turned to Brendel with questioning eyes, and the latter nodded. He had been through here as well and knew that Kodan was not lying. There was no door when he passed by earlier. He had an idea as to what it was, but he needed to be certain.

Medissa lent her arm to Kodan, and both of them made their way to the cold, gigantic door, and the latter touched it cautiously.

"How can this be… How is it possible?" Kodan said.

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King of the underground (11)

“My lord?” Scarlett whispered to Brendel while she looked a little distrustfully at Kodan.

“Just wait for a little while,” Brendel said.

He was certain that the door was not there previously, and it was likely that it had to something to do with the monsters.

“There are words on the door!” Kodan suddenly raised his voice.

The rest of them went closer to take a look at it and saw unknown letters carved into the heavy steel gate. Brendel studied the angular letters for a moment before he spoke:

“These are Dwarven words.”

“Dwarven words?” Kodan turned back and looked at Brendel with a frown: “But why would it appear here? Mountain Dwarves live in Trentheim, but they don’t live in caverns or mines.”

“Are there no Grey Dwarves or Iron Dwarves here?” Medissa asked.

The Grey Dwarves branched out from the Mountain Dwarves, while the Iron Dwarves branched out from the Rune Dwarves, and both variants lived underground.

But Brendel shook his head. Their language was derived from the Dark Elves, and the words were completely different. The letters on the door were far older, and from a certain point of view, could be viewed as the true heritage of the dwarves.

“If they are not the right Dwarves, which Dwarven branch carved these words onto the gate?” Medissa asked.

Brendel thought of three possibilities, as it was likely that the gate was related to the Silver Lineage.

[Fire Dwarves, Tempest Dwarves, and the Rune Dwarves. These three Dwarven races were present during that era. Fire Dwarves are out of the question because they live in a place that is strong in the Fire Element. It's one of the last two—]

Before he could finish his thoughts, Scarlett struck the gate with her spear. There was a light ringing that came as the response, but when she took a closer look, the gate that was as smooth as a mirror did not even have a scratch on it. Its hardness was beyond imagination.

"My lord, do you know what is written on the door?" She asked with a frown.

"I don't know." Brendel shook his head.

"Kid, didn't you say that the words are Dwarven?" Kodan asked somewhat exasperatedly, "Why are you telling us you don't know?"

"I only know what the words look like." Brendel rolled his eyes.

The system in the game automatically translated the languages, but it was not functioning in this world. He could only stare helplessly at the words. He walked over to the gate and inspected it by prodding and touching with his fingers.

"But I suspect that it's a type of Barrier." He continued.

"A barrier? A magic or illusion spell?" Kodan raised one of his eyebrows: "Are there other people besides you?"

"No, this isn't a magic spell. The spells of magicians utilize the Laws of this world that are created by a higher power. But these barriers could be considered as Laws themselves—"

Kodan did not understand what Brendel was talking about, but Medissa's eyes widened.

"A Legacy left behind from the ancient eras? My lord, you mean to say that there's a Sanctuary behind this door?"

"Not a Sanctuary, but a smaller version— A Haven," Brendel said. The entrance to a Sanctuary was not as small the one in front of them. Just like when he had entered the 'Homeland of the Fairies', where two gigantic statues stood at the entrance—

It would make sense if a Haven was created underground to store the Heritage from the Silver Lineage.

He closed his eyes and placed his hand back on the cold door, and recalled the first time he entered a Sanctuary. Hundreds to thousands of years worth of history were probably behind this door.

“Medissa, do you know where the Sanctuary to the Silver Elves is?”

The young Elven Princess blinked a few times before she shook her head: “I don’t know. I have never been to our sacred lands. When the War of the Holy Saints started, the Silver Elves had already left the Sanctuary for more than ten generations. The legends back then stated that we can no longer find our way back—”

“I don’t think that’s correct. The Silver Elves have most likely returned to your Sanctuary. Do you have a name for the place?”

“It was coined as the Holy Silver Valley.”

Brendel nodded, but Scarlett was a little confused.

“My lord, I don’t think it’s the right time to discuss this right now. Should we not find ways to open the door?”

“I’m opening it right now.”

“What?”

“A Barrier that could be seen as the Laws of this world; it’s a symbolic door that represents the entrance of a place. The meaning of ‘entrance’ is to enter the place. If your wish is to go to the other side of the tunnel, then you will never open this door.”

“Enter? What place are we entering?”

“You will know in a moment.”

Brendel’s eyes were still closed, but his thoughts about the past had changed into one word, ‘Enter’. Suddenly darkness engulfed everyone, but before they could raise their panicked voices, the light returned once again—

Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it was brighter than before.

It was as if they had returned to the surface, where the sunlight reached everywhere. Their eyes narrowed in slight pain from the surroundings as they were used to the darkness just moments ago.

Scarlett and the worker hid their eyes away, but the others forcefully opened their eyes to look at the surroundings and immediately shouted in surprise.

Sudden roaring cheers emerged around them like tidal waves pouring into their ears. They were gradually able to get used to the blinding lights and yells, finally seeing clearly what the surroundings were like.

They had been in a dark tunnel blocked by a steel gate just moments ago, but now they were in an empty field lit by countless fire braziers.

But after a few moments, they realized it was not an empty field but a huge coliseum. They were standing in the middle of the field, while the audience on the seatings were cheering constantly.

There were no empty seats, and for some reason, multiple sources of bright light came from the stands and prevented the audience's faces from being visible.

[The audience is made with an illusionary spell… This place is a semi-physical dimension hidden in the gaps of space in the real world, but it's not as complicated as the Homeland of the Fairies which also affects time. Still, the noise and light are really annoying. Just who exactly is that bastard who purposely designed it in such bad taste?]

Brendel rubbed his forehead.

"My lord, what exactly is this place?" Scarlett's voice was trembling slightly, but she was calm enough to ask a question, unlike the worker who fell backward in terror.

Medissa and Kodan were silent, but they were on their guard as their hands were ready on their weapons.

"The Coliseum of Destiny," Brendel said.

"Coliseum of Destiny? What is that?" Kodan asked.

“See that sword?” Brendel raised his hand and pointed at a certain location.

Everyone else followed his finger. There was a sword embedded in a boulder located near them. The black heavy-looking longsword reflected a dull gleam, and its design was quite unique. The length of the weapon was a longsword, but the width was as wide as a palm, looking like a combination of a greatsword and a longsword.

“What is that sword?” Kodan’s eyebrows jolted a little. As a grandmaster swordsman, he was able to see that it was an excellent weapon.

“I recognize it,” Medissa said in awe, “the Sword of Earth, Halran Gaia, This is the Legacy item of the Rune Dwarves.”

“Indeed, this is the sword, Halran Gaia. Legend states that it’s connected to the ground, and when it’s used it is able to cause the ground to shake and even make avalanches happen. A Fantasy-ranked sword.” Brendel said.

[Another name that the gamers called it was the Earthquake Sword. Each time the weapon is swung, it allows the user to cast an Earthquake spell…]

The spell was an AOE attack that could be cast in a frontal direction, and almost had the same area of his White Raven Sword Arte. Even though it needed Mana, the efficiency in conversion was definitely worth it.

It was truly a divine weapon for a profession like Magic Swordsman. Even Brendel’s fingers were itching when he saw the sword.

[There’s even the additional trait of ‘Guidance’. Since the name has an ‘Earth’ in it, it could ‘guide’ that particular element… I see, so the Rock Panthers we saw came from this sword.]

“Halran Gaia… That Halran Gaia that was used by that Giant, Migael?”

“Yes. The most doted son of the Earth Mother, and known as the Crownless king of the Earth. The sword is his symbol to rule the lands.” Brendel recited the legend he knew of, and his heart fluttered a little.

He drew in a deep breath and looked at everyone with grave eyes before he continued:

“Everyone who comes here has the chance to challenge the series of tests to obtain

that sword. However, that doesn't mean there isn't a price. If you fail in the challenge, you will become a rock statue and never leave. This is where the name 'Coliseum of Destiny' comes in. You either win in glory, or lose in death."

Brendel was feeling a slight headache. The Coliseum of Destiny was posted in the forums sometime after the discovered quest in the Silver Mines and was rated to be one of the harder Legacy Quests. Right when he was still agonizing over the quest, Kodan suddenly asked:

"How difficult is the challenge?" Even though the grandmaster swordsman did not understand what the place was, he considered himself to be skilled and a Gold-ranker like himself would not act like the worker who was still shocked into silence.

"It's nearly impossible," Medissa said, "this place is created in between fantasy and reality with the Laws of this world. There is no limit to the difficulty."

Scarlett's expression changed upon hearing that.

"What about those who can't duel? Do we have to?" She asked.

Medissa shook her head: "There's no way to avoid this. Everyone has to duel in this place at least once before they gain the permission to leave."

"Everyone?" Kodan keenly caught on to the keyword.

"Yes. Everyone has to fight their own battles. The only exception is that if you're an Iron-ranked fighter and below, and you can fight in twos."

Scarlett's face paled upon hearing that answer: "What… if the person… fails?"

She had no strength right now, and passing the challenge was almost impossible for her.

"You will be temporarily imprisoned. Once the Barrier disappears, you will become a statue permanently," Brendel interrupted, "however, if someone is willing to challenge the test again and succeed, they would have the chance to save their comrade. There's no need to worry, Scarlett."

"My lord…" Scarlett naturally understood what Brendel was saying, and she looked at him with complicated eyes.

Chapter 61
King of the underground (12)

Just as everyone was whispering amongst themselves, a sudden thunderous voice interrupted everyone.

“Welcome to the Hall of Heroes, mortals!”

The voice was cold and dignified, as though it was filled with a mysterious power.

“Thou will challenge the destiny that belongs to thine; perhaps thou are just here to fight for thy survival, or maybe thou would become the king that rules the Mother Earth—”

“Now, ye lowly challengers, step out and let us see the moment where destiny is born.”

The voice echoed through the huge coliseum as though there were countless thunders, and shockwaves struck at everyone and caused them to pale. Medissa and Scarlett glanced at Brendel as he observed the entire battlefield.

He was pondering on the possible challenges he might face.

[There are different types of monster that one can face in here, but it’s dependent on the surroundings. If it’s Trentheim, then there aren’t really any famous figures around here, so it will most likely be a strong land or air monster. If it’s the upgraded version where it summons gods…]

He was secretly relieved that he did not have to fight enemies that came from legends, even if they were a lesser version. Those monsters truly made him feel goosebumps.

“We will have our duels one at a time. Let me arrange the order,” Brendel looked at the red-haired girl, “Scarlett, go ahead and group up with that worker. Both of you currently don’t have the strength of an Iron-ranked fighter, so you can be rescued as a group.”

Medissa had been confused by Scarlett’s actions for a while and was looking puzzledly

at her.

“My lord, what’s wrong with Scarlett?”

“I’ll explain to you later. Ser Kodan, please go next after them.” Brendel said.

“What?” Kodan’s eyebrow was arched so high that Brendel took a second glance at him. “Are you worried that I can’t pass the challenge too?”

Brendel shrugged and looked at Medissa and spoke in his mind.

“Medissa, we will go in together.”

“Is that allowed?”

“You’re summoned by me, so we should at least try and see if the rules allow it.”

Brendel thought the challenge would be much easier if he could fight with Medissa as a group. But before he could revel in his thoughts, the surroundings suddenly changed and mechanical rumblings could be heard. Fences were raised up near the walls and revealed a row of cages, while a large stage was elevated just a few meters away from them.

Kodan frowned when he saw people in the cages.

“My lord!” Someone stood up and shouted anxiously from the cage when she saw the people in the field: “Medissa, Scarlett, I’m here!”

Brendel’s expression turned into a grimace when he looked to the direction of the voice. Jana was in one of the cages, and there were two other cages that held Cohen and his companions.

“Mister Brendel, can you help us?” Jocah shouted.

[Damn it…]

Brendel was silent as he was in a dilemma. It was not that he did not want to rescue them, but if he attempted to do so, he would have to go through at least five challenges to save all of them. If he calculated the increase in difficulty, the final challenge would most likely be equivalent to a Gold-ranked saint.

It was not something he could gamble on.

[The highest creation from a Rune Dwarf is a living puppet that has two different types of Element Powers and stands at the peak of a Gold-ranker. This is far more superior than the Wizards Craftsmen's Diamond Golem. The former is like a Magic Swordsman, while the latter is an ordinary brawler. This fact goes to show that the Rune Dwarves are better than them in this aspect and something that they are insanely proud of. Challenging it would be foolish.]

Brendel knew that it was difficult for Medissa and himself to engage an existence that had reached the pinnacle of a Gold-ranker. It might be doable if he combined the Wind Spirit Spiders and rushed in as a group, but that hope was still small.

He could only remain silent.

"Go ahead, Scarlett. There's no need to force yourself, just proclaim that you surrender in the stage once your opponent appears!"

"But what about commander Jana…" Scarlett's voice was lowered when she saw Brendel's hesitation.

"I'll definitely save her. Go."

She nodded, one hand holding tightly to her halberd, and the other dragging the worker who had already fainted once he heard that he had to go into a duel.

The crowd around them immediately exploded into applause and wild cheers. Brendel listened carefully and realized that the audience was constantly yelling 'Glory! Glory! Glory!'. Even though he knew that that was nothing than a fake scene, he could not help but feel slightly tense in his mind.

"Does this place make you afraid, Medissa?" He glanced in the Elven girl's direction.

"My lord, I'm an undead and we are not affected by fear," Medissa replied with a smile.

Brendel immediately felt his face burn up for forgetting that simple fact. Thus he stopped talking and watched the gate in the walls opposite of them slowly open.

A frightening monster suddenly leaped out from there, with numerous chains flailing violently behind it. The beast quickly descended to the center stage, ready to attack

the red-haired girl, but the chains suddenly reached the limits of their length and jerked the monster back like a whip. An explosive crash happened and a dust cloud covered the field, but the beast once again reappeared in an instant and strained itself against the shaking chains while uttering low guttural growls.

“What creature is that?” Kodan stared at the monster and asked.

Brendel watched the monster’s three heads snarl and snapped at each other in frustration. It was over four meters tall and there were occasional roars emitted from its throat like peals of thunder. Very quickly, the coliseum was filled with a sulfur odor.

“It’s a Cerberus,” Medissa replied.

“The monsters of the sulfur rivers which followed the Dragon of Darkness once upon a time,” the Elven princess whispered, “I have fought against them in the battlefield before; they were truly troublesome foes—”

“What battlefield?” Kodan looked a little puzzledly at the Elven girl, wondering what sort of place she had to be in to fight this monstrosity.

Medissa turned her back to Kodan with a smile: “The War of the Holy Saints—”

Kodan’s mouth and eyes widened in shock. He instinctively felt that Medissa was joking, and instantly appeared like a cunning little girl.

“It’s fortunate that it’s not an Elite Hound Lord guarding the entrance of Hell. It should be fine if you’re careful since it only has the strength of a strong Silver-ranked fighter, but make sure you avoid its Breath Attacks.” Brendel also faced Kodan and said.

“Boy, are you teaching me what to do?” Kodan immediately realized that Brendel was instructing him.

“I only wish that I don’t have to rescue one more person.”

“Hmph! That’s because you haven’t seen my real capabilities, brat,” The old man stroked his sword, “you should worry more about yourself.”

Kodan was almost in a huff when he spoke. He felt that he was down on his luck. Getting ambushed, then injured by Medissa, nearly dying because of the sudden earthquake which caused boulders to bury him. It was shameful for a veteran Gold-

ranker like himself to fall for such petty tricks.

However, even if he was injured now, handling a Silver-ranked monster was not a problem for him. Even if it was a Gold-ranked creature, they typically had low intelligence and did not possess many techniques. He was going to vent his frustration on these grunts.

He even eyed Brendel: “Do you want me to rescue someone from the cages, boy?”

“There’s no need to. I’ll rescue them on my own,” Brendel quickly shook his head.

[This old man really don’t know how dangerous this event is. The Coliseum of Destiny raises the challenge every single time. It’s a Cerberus now, and the next challenge would most likely be the equivalent of a Mountain Giant.]

Kodan scoffed lightly, almost as if he was displeased with Brendel’s opinion of him.

“What’s your name, boy?” He suddenly said.

Brendel had his mind filled with the situation in front of him and answered out of reflex: “Sop… Brendel.”

He managed to stop himself from making a mistake and glared at him: “Why do you ask, Ser Kodan? Do you want to seek revenge by finding out my name?”

But the old man did not reply with sarcasm or condescension. He merely repeated the name twice.

“Brendel? Brendel…” He suddenly mysteriously laughed out once and regarded Brendel with a bizarre expression.

Brendel’s hand went to his sword instinctively. If this old man suddenly went crazy in this place, it would absolutely spell disaster.

Just as Brendel was on his guard, there was a change in the stage. Scarlett had slapped the worker awake and got him to surrender, and she did the same. Before the Cerberus freed itself from the chains, they were both sent to a nearby cage in a flash of white light.

“Scarlett!” Jana was shocked to find the young girl locked up like her. The latter had

fiery red hair just like her, and she was reminded of her younger sister.

“What’s wrong? Why didn’t you fight?” She asked with concern.

“I’m sorry. I’m injured.” Scarlett said with a disappointed expression.

Jana frowned sadly. “Those workers were trapped in the cages and asked for my help when I came to this place, so I asked that mysterious voice a few questions. Every challenge that one

Chapter 62
King of the underground (13)

Brendel momentarily lost himself in panic, before he realized that Kodan was also a veteran soldier who experienced the November War. It would not be strange that the latter knew his grandfather.

However, Kodan was from a family of knights, and his grandfather was a commoner, so how did he know about his grandfather?

(TL: Brendel's grandfather is most likely someone of importance. Unreliable narrator Brendel, in case anyone is wondering.)

But he temporarily suppressed his suspicion as the battle in the stage had begun. The Cerberus seemed to be highly dissatisfied with the loss of its prey. It howled angrily and struggled against its chains when Kodan stepped onto the stage.

When the chains the size of an arm broke apart, loud snapping sounds echoed throughout the place. The Cerberus excitedly rushed toward Kodan.

[This damned dog!]

He immediately drew out his sword and hurled his sheath at the gigantic beast. One of its head snapped at the projectile and tossed it away, while its body dragged the broken chains across the ground with grating noises.

The old man's eyelids flickered slightly, and his eyes reflected the figure of the three-headed demon dog as it pounced towards him from the air. He took a single step back and went into a stance, holding his sword's hilt with both hands.

"Scram!" He roared angrily.

A visible shockwave suddenly exploded into all directions from his figure, and the hound from hell was suddenly flung away from the tempest unleashed by the old man.

The creature that was hurled back could be compared to the Wind Bullet's speed. Its

body sailed through the air a hundred meters away.

An immense impact could be felt and heard as the Cerberus collided against the wall. Countless bricks fell onto the ground and a dust cloud formed.

[What the hell! How the bloody hell did the Sword Eruption technique get boosted so much by his core Swordsmanship skill?]

Brendel could not help but scream in his head. It was a common technique where a user in the sword could attain, but he was utterly shocked to see Kodan managing to send the creature back a hundred meters.

In the game, every technique was boosted by different qualities. The White Raven Sword Arte and Frontal Assault that Brendel possessed were enhanced by his core Military swordsmanship, while his Power Break and Charge technique were magnified by his stats, namely Power, Physique, and Agility.

The higher one's swordsmanship's rank was and the stronger one's stats were, the more powerful their skills became. But Brendel had never seen or heard of the Sword Eruption skill sending a large enemy like the Cerberus hundreds of meters away at a Gold-ranked level.

It was not as if he could not do it, but he was nearly at a level close to ninety when he did so.

But the Cerberus proved to be resilient and was not injured badly. It stood up and the three large heads shook away the pile of broken fragments. Sand and dust poured down like rain, making it look disheveled and shaken.

Brendel felt it was a pity. If the Cerberus had attacked Kodan from the ground and not from the air, the damage will be far greater.

But Kodan did not miss this opportunity. He quickly darted across the field, each step crossing over dozens of meters. Even though he did not have the Charge skill, his figure still appeared like it was a blur. Just as the monster started baring its fangs at Kodan, his blade was already above its head.

There was no time for the creature to dodge or even be afraid.

A tremendous blast filled the coliseum. Kodan's blade completely sank into the

creature's middle head with a perfect arc. Black blood spilled around its neck, and he gracefully retreated before even a single drop of blood reached him.

The Cerberus's legs skidded as the impact forcefully slammed it back onto the ground. But the aggressive beast did not give up and the remaining heads each spewed a column of fiery flames at Kodan.

The old man was already on his guard against the flames and had retreated back to where the stage was, but he did not expect the pillars of flames to have enough range to reach him. Scorching heat blasted across the ground, and he rolled on his back without stopping.

Despite his quick reactions, his clothes, eyebrows, hair, and beard were all partially burned.

Kodan stood up and bellowed with fury as his proudly grown beard for years had disappeared. He lowered his legs till they were nearly touching to the ground before he launched himself towards the creature like a projectile.

From the spectator's point of view, Kodan's fist was so small that it could hardly be seen, but the impact that struck one of the Cerberus's chin instantly reached their ears.

Loud cracking bones immediately disconcerted the youths in the cages and made them flinch.

It was almost comical, but the creature was actually lifted up in the air, while a shockwave of distorted air erupted from Kodan's punch. Its body veered uncontrollably towards the left, yet before it reached the ground, the old man had leaped into the air and landed on the final remaining uninjured head. His blade dipped into its snout and he began sprinting across its body, and the weapon seemed to cut shallowly over its skin.

However, once he pranced off the creature's rear, its body split into two and a squall of blood drenched the ground before the two halves crashed onto the ground.

For a moment, the coliseum was silent—

"Incredible…" Jana took in a cold breath as she spoke, and her green eyes dilated with shock.

She was not the only person. The youths in the other cages were completely stupefied with their mouths open, but they were unable to utter any sound. The strength of a Gold-ranked fighter was just as flashy as it was fearsome.

“He wouldn’t have gotten caught in that creature’s attack earlier if he wasn’t injured,” Scarlett gripped the steel bars and observed quietly.

Jana nodded to acknowledge Scarlett’s insight as the latter was a Gold-ranker. She knew that she could hardly understand anything that Kodan had done at her level.

At the same time, Jocah was whispering to the sickly-looking youth: “Cohen, do you think they will save us?”

“It’s hard to say,” Cohen shook his head.

“I doubt it,” Maher’s expression was filled with complicated emotions, “why would he save us when we have no relation to him? Besides, this isn’t a game and lives are on the line.”

“What’s going to happen to us?” Jocah asked.

“I don’t know.” Cohen shook his head again.

“Are we going to be imprisoned here forever?” A few youths started crying.

“Can’t you think of something?” Jocah started to feel impatient. He did not want to stay in this ghastly place any longer.

“I’ll try,” Cohen’s eyes never left the stage.

“Who are you going to ask for help?”

“Of course we should ask the guard commander to help us. I’ve heard people talking in the inn about how he’s undefeated in Trentheim!” One of the youths said.

Their eyes gradually turned towards Cohen, but he stopped replying.

Brendel was not surprised at Kodan’s victory and was actually astonished at how injured the latter was.

[Why did the old man need to spend so much effort to deal with a three-headed pooch?]

"How did you injure him?" He turned his head slightly to Medissa.

"Seismic Blast." Came the light reply.

The youth rubbed the cold sweat off his palm and wondered what kind of freakish constitution Kodan had to survive that particular technique.

But Medissa quickly added: "But it was not a perfect hit. He managed to dodge the majority and was swept away by the air currents. He was then knocked down by a huge boulder. When I started chasing him after he got up, he quickly surrendered…"

"It seems like he doesn't want to fight," Brendel suddenly thought about the moment where Kodan suddenly yelled and requested to stop fighting.

[How did he recognize me? Even though the basis of my Military Swordsmanship probably came from… my grandfather, but the swordsmanship I displayed earlier is from the gamers.]

While he was still pondering over it, the Cerberus's body turned into white particles of light and disappeared. Kodan had requested to duel yet again without waiting for Brendel's instructions, and the gate opposite to them was once again raised. This time it was a dwarf who was fully clad in armor.

As the lumbering footsteps reached everyone's ears, Medissa suddenly spoke: "My lord, I know this man."

Brendel inspected the dwarf's appearance. The latter wore a barbarian helmet which had four horns, and he carried a warhammer the size of his body. A symbol of a flaming fist could be seen on his weapon.

"I recognize him too. Lord Varian. He's a famous Grey Dwarf who became a slave of the Rune Dwarves in his early years. But the person you're seeing right now is a faker and not the real deal. I believe that living puppet has the strength of someone who had just become a Gold-ranked fighter. Kodan is in considerable trouble if he's hurt this badly."

Medissa looked curiously at Brendel. Even though she knew he was a Planeswalker, that did not explain why he knew so many things that he should not know.

The Rune Dwarves had died out centuries ago and their history was hardly known. Only Galbu's oldest wizards who poured their time deeply into research till they wore spectacles and had ashen white beards, would know about the Silver Elves and Rune Dwarves' secrets.

The weapon clashes between Kodan and Varian caused her to cease her thoughts and she paid attention to the fight.

Varian was not as agile as Kodan, but his heavy armor was like a fortress and made it difficult for the latter to present any immediate threat to him. The warhammer he used was a famous weapon called 'Flames of Fury', and each time it was swung, it caused a fire to shoot out some twenty meters around himself. Kodan had retreated and advanced several times, and in the end, his beard and eyebrows had shrunk till they were nearly caught on fire.

The battle continued to intensify, and the youths in the cages felt like their hearts were in their throats. They believed that the grandmaster swordsman was their only hope, yet it looked like it was a bitter duel and their confidence was shaken.

This was only the second battle.

Each duelist had their own wealth of experience. Varian dueled in the Rune Dwarves' coliseum in his prime, and had an excellent weapon and a suit of well-forged armor. Kodan was a veteran knight who had survived the November War and emerged from a sea of blood.

But in the end, it was Kodan who managed to force Varian to the walls with his superior swordsmanship. The dwarf's vital points were struck again and again, and although his attacks were stopped by the armor, the dull impacts were gradually transmitted to the dwarf's organs.

Varian roared in fury and spun his warhammer, completely abandoning his defenses in order to reach his opponent. A fiery blaze trailed behind his weapon and it descended towards Kodan like a meteor.

Chapter 63
King of the Underground (14)

“I can’t take this anymore!” The girl beside Cohen screamed in distress.

Scarlett’s eyes were filled with a little doubt at the scene unfolding before her.

Kodan did not retreat but pressed his attacks even harder. Grinding steel formally met for the first time as his sword violently crashed against Varian’s warhammer. Metallic screams and fiery sparks flew around them, and everyone narrowed their eyes and covered their ears.

Very quickly, the youths were shocked and excited to find that Kodan had knocked away Varian’s weapons with brutish strength. They thought it did not make sense that a heavy hammer in an overhead swing would be knocked away by a longsword.

Brendel’s heart jolted.

He had suspected Kodan was hiding his true strength to lure the dwarf to compete in strength. But what truly shocked him was Kodan’s following attack. Only Medissa and he saw a blue streak of light shine on the old man’s finger.

[Wind bullet!? Even though these fake rings could be found anywhere it’s too much of a coincidence, right?]

Brendel subconsciously looked at the Ring of the Wind Empress on his thumb.

He lost sight of the battle and missed Kodan closing in with an open palm. The old man lifted away Varian’s helmet and thrust his sword into the dwarf’s throat. When Brendel looked at the scene again, Varian had already disappeared in a flash of white light.

However, Kodan did not go uninjured. In order to succeed running through the dwarf with his sword, he had to suffer a punch from the latter.

Varian’s gloves were full of metallic edges. Not only did his punch damage Kodan’s

lungs, but it also ripped off the latter's muscles and broke several ribs.

The old man's body was finally at its limits and he could no longer hold on. He dug his sword into the ground and had to pant for a long while before he stood up straight again.

"Well done, mortal. You are allowed to select one of the cages and free the people in it, if you wish." The mysterious voice boomed from the surroundings.

"I can only open one of your cages," The old man huffed as he raised his voice to the group of youths, and he pointed at Jocah's cage, "Jocah and the others in your cage. Get out. I want to hear how you got involved in this mess later on."

The people in Jocah's cage were silent as the door swung open. The youths were separated into two groups and caught at different timings. It seemed like Kodan only rescued them in order to investigate the cause of this situation, and he did not intend to take on another challenge.

But everyone also knew that the old man no longer had the capability of continuing to do so.

Although Maher and Cohen frequently quarreled with each other, the youths had a tight bond. They felt that it was difficult to accept this decision and simply stood there in confusion. However, they ultimately knew they were powerless against their fate.

"All of you should get out of the cage first. There's no telling if the door will close again." Cohen's face did not show any signs of panic.

"But—" Jocah said.

"It's good that at least some of us escaped. I'll try to think of a solution for the rest."

"What solution do you have?"

"None yet."

Kodan did not pay attention to the youths any longer. He had seen Jocah and Maher before but recognized the group as a bunch of irresponsible scoundrels in the town, and simply did not think highly of them.

“Mortal, do you wish to continue challenging your destiny?” The voice rumbled again.

“No!”

The old man refused the challenge and limped off the stage, while he shouted at Brendel: “The boy from Torbus’s family, what do you think?”

Brendel merely shrugged in response.

Kodan tossed his weapon over to him: “Take this. I’ll lend you this sword since it’s your turn. Let me see how good the stubborn fool’s descendent is!”

He took a closer look at Brendel as he limped past the latter and muttered: “…His son?”

He shook his head quickly: “But you look like you’re just twenty years old, so a grandson then. You actually became a Gold-ranked swordsman at your age. From this point alone, you’re no less talented than that bastard is. A lion’s cub is still a lion.”

The old man sighed, seemingly lamenting over the fact that he did not have a successor.

Brendel nearly dropped the sword he received.

[Hold on! Is grandfather a Gold-ranked swordsman at my age? Doesn’t this mean he’s a Blessed if he reached the Gold-ranked status at the age of twenty?]

The information was a little unacceptable to him. It was an incredible thing for someone to become a Gold-ranked swordsman at twenty.

Brendel rubbed his forehead. The former Brendel had never asked about the origin of his grandfather, but in his memories, his grandfather was someone who moved to Bruglas at some point in his life.

Later on, his grandfather bought a plot of land in Bucce and built a mill on the outskirts of Bruglas.

Even though the former Brendel was born with nothing much, he lived a life of considerable comfort. Otherwise, an ordinary youth would have to find work or become an apprentice after militia training, and he would not have lived alone in Bucce without worrying about money.

[Come to think of it, grandmother did not seem like a commoner's daughter. She knew many things about the kingdom and was literate. But my mother definitely came from a noble's family. I've wondered why a noble would marry a commoner for a while now. No matter how wealthy he is, the union of different social circles has a strong stigma.]

Brendel searched through the former soul's memories but eventually realized that the latter had never bothered finding out about his family's status. He frowned a little and asked Kodan:

"You know him?"

"I've been with that stubborn fellow for a period of time. I was just as young as you are when I met him. I had just left my hometown, and even though I come from a family of knights, I was really just a wild brat. But your grandfather graduated from an academy of knights meant for nobles, and he was the real deal. I'm not afraid of being laughed at, but I was his subordinate for a while—"

Kodan wanted to continue speaking, but the voice above them interrupted loudly:

"The next challenger!"

Kodan eyed the sky.

Brendel put away his thoughts as well. He had an eidetic memory and met all kinds of people in the game, but there were only so many people that he kept in his mind after decades—

He felt that the relationship between Kodan and his grandfather was not as simple as he claimed. Especially when he looked at Kodan's ring which was identical to his own.

[I did wonder why a commoner would have the Ring of the Wind Empress, even if it's just a replica. When I asked the cripple in Bruglas, he claimed that it was a knight who gave the oil painting to my grandfather… Well, these questions can be asked later. As long as this old man is my hands, there are plenty of chances. It seems like my grandfather has a colorful history.]

"Let's go, Medissa." He said in his mind.

"Understood, my lord."

Both of them walked to the stage at the same time.

Cohen's face stiffened when he saw both of them enter the stage. Kodan looked puzzledly at them and called out to them from behind:

"You're going together?"

But Brendel and Medissa did not answer as they became focused. The two walked up to the center of the stage and waited quietly.

Kodan suddenly realized that the Element power the Elven girl used was Soul Energy. And yet there was only a single existence that would use Soul Energy as their Element Power.

[Undead!]

The grandmaster swordsman realized why Medissa went after him instead of seeking cover. There was no need for her to fear death. The second word that came to him was 'necromancer', but it was obviously an incorrect answer.

[A Gold-ranked Necromancer can't summon an undead with the same strength. And that boy's eyes did not have any flecks of purple or green in them. Wait, didn't the girl say that she fought in the War of the Holy Saints?]

"A Heroic Spirit!" Kodan suddenly muttered to himself in astonishment.

[Is the boy an apprenticing Sacred Knight of Flames from the Cathedral of Fire?]

Kodan's thoughts went to the strongest force in the Cathedral of Fire. They were amongst the strongest forces in the continent, and every Sacred Knight of Flames was accompanied by a Heroic Spirit from the War of the Holy Saints. In the History of Blue, King Gatel had two hundred and thirty-two knights, and there were never more than two hundred Sacred Knights of Flames.

[What am I thinking… There were no Silver Elves amongst King Gatel's knights.]

But he corrected himself again, He continued to wonder in confusion.

"…It's all over." Jocah suddenly sighed.

“Shut up, Jocah. What do you mean it’s all over? The battle hasn’t started.” Maher tutted unhappily at his comrade’s words.

“Have you forgotten?” He looked back sadly at him. “Cohen asked the announcer questions earlier, and people who are stronger than Iron-rankers will not be allowed to enter the stage together. What do you think this means when these both of them entered together?”

Maher’s words disappeared in his mind. This meant that Brendel and the girl was someone without any abilities! The youths who were freed glanced at the other caged youths. Cohen’s expressions were blank, but the others were dyed with despair.

“Damn it, I didn’t think this bastard was this useless!” Maher quickly puffed with anger: “He only looks like he’s strong on the surface. To think that I actually believed that he’s a capable fighter!”

“Didn’t you constantly say that you didn’t think he’s any good?” One of the youths said, and naturally received Maher’s furious glare.

TL: Since this is infrequently brought up, I’m going to have a refresher course on ‘talentz’ again. I had to spend hours searching on this to make sure I’m not (that) wrong, sigh. Might have mistakes in the way early chapters -_-.

Blessed – People who are highly gifted but isn’t ‘chosen’ by the gods. Reaches high levels of skillz. Tirste, a guy who belongs to the Unifying Guild, is a Blessed (Gold-ranked swordsman who hasn’t unsealed his Element Power), and had kicked Brendel’s butt. Eke is also in this category.

Chosen – People who are favored by the gods. They typically have significant flaws in their body. The exception to this is the King of Fire, Gatel. Can happen anytime and have a sudden increase of powerz. I think Yula is the only Chosen mentioned in Brendel’s era till now. I’m not sure if I TLed Sifrid as a Blessed or Chosen, but Chosen is most likely wrong.

Chapter 64
King of the Underground (15)

Brendel suddenly recalled that he needed to familiarize himself with Kodan's sword and swung it several times. He found that it was sturdy and light, but it was just a common Magic Sword.

[A pretty low-end magic weapon. I've used something similar in regards to the size and length, though I don't remember its name since it was a temporary thing.]

The ground was scarred lightly from the wind, and dust danced about with each swing. Kodan's eyelids were slightly lifted up.

"That technique really is the White Raven Sword Arte. But it's never taught outside the royal family, so how did the kid learn it?" He rubbed the remainder of his beard thoughtfully and muttered to himself.

This same action also incited a debate amongst the youths—

"What is he doing?" Maher watched Brendel's sword glinting against the light while it was swung in beautiful arcs.

"Maybe he's creating some kind of smokescreen?" Jocah said uncertainly: "Perhaps he's trying to score a victory over the enemy by creating a chance. Fighting a battle requires one to use his brains, got that, Maher?"

"Oh? And how would he see his enemies in the smoke?"

Jocah's mouth opened for a while before he rolled his eyes with a huff: "Then it must be some kind of special technique. Why would he create trouble for himself? Just think about it a little and it will be all clear—"

But Cohen was certain of a different answer after observing Brendel carefully. "He's familiarizing himself with the sword."

A few other youths chattered in response after hearing his remark.

“He’s doing that?”

“But is it really fine to change to a new sword at the last minute?”

“Commander Kodan gave his personal sword to him, and it’s strange that he’s carrying so many swords behind him. I think all his swords are of low quality.”

Even though they did not know much about wielding a sword, they were certain that it would affect his performance.

At that moment, Brendel had stopped his actions and appeared ready.

Medissa did not bring her unicorn with her because they were there on a mission, but she was just as skilled on the ground. She brought her lance upright on the ground and stood beside her young lord.

While the youths briefly wondered if the Elven girl had any capability to fight when she did her own noticeable actions, Kodan glanced at her posture and gave a thoughtful hum to show he was impressed with her skill.

The gate opposite of the challengers was once again raised, and the monster that appeared was the very same Cerberus that died earlier. Three large heads growled repeatedly as the monster’s claws dug deep into the ground. Six bloodshot eyes glanced at their surroundings and sought out the enemies before them.

Its appearance caused a small commotion as nobody expected that the creature would return again.

This time it appeared to have learned from its previous experience. It waited till the chains were broken off before shaking its whole body to remove the chains completely, then sniffed the air cautiously and slowly approached both humans before circling them.

But Kodan sensed a hidden scene happening. His nose was raised slightly as he complained with a disgruntled expression.

“The boy doesn’t know how to control his killing intent. It feels like he’s everywhere, though the little girl is masking her presence quite well compared to him.”

His frown became deeper and deeper: “But there’s something mixed into his killing

intent… Element Power? What kind of Element Power is this, strange…”

The air was rapidly becoming colder and colder, and frost started appearing on the ground and walls. A mist came out from everyone’s breath and the air suddenly seemed to stop moving, as though there was something pulling it down.

Even the youths that were a hundred meters away felt like they were stuck in quicksand.

Brendel regarded the three pairs of blood-red eyes in front of him calmly. Soon enough, the monstrous dog felt like its body had a mountain weighing down on it, and its paws were somehow chained tightly. It was tough to even take a single step, not to mention attacking.

Its three heads were shaking as though they were resisting a mighty power that was invisible. It had no choice but to sink down to the ground because of the incredible strength weighing down on it.

“What?” Kodan was taken aback.

Two words were never clearer in Brendel’s mind. ‘Stasis’ and ‘Stability’.

Right now, his passive Element power was turning into an active one.

He felt he had once again grasped the Laws of his Element Power during the fight with Kabias, and was now able to wield it freely any time he wanted.

But he knew that it was still something that could not be grasped yet. A Gold-ranker would not be able to master the Element Power completely because they were not powerful enough to handle it.

Everyone watched the five-meters tall monster lay down in front of Brendel, as though it was bowing to its king.

And the youth stood there motionlessly with a glare, seemingly accepting its submission. The people around him were shocked.

[What ability is this? The Authority of Kings?]

Kodan’s mouth and eyes were wide with shock.

“Medissa, attack,” Brendel said these two words lightly.

Unlike the others, there was a tremendous force struggling against him in his body as he desperately brought out the power of the Laws. Outside in the real world, he felt all the power in the world would be there for him to use if he just lifted a finger,

The Elven princess advanced in a silver line. Her lance extended behind her, with the tip of her blade reflecting the light as though it was the signal of death. The straight line was turned into a perfect arc before it lunged towards the monster.

At the final moment, the Cerberus managed to shrug off Brendel’s Element Power, and leaped into the air with all its strength, while its heads moved away to avoid Medissa’s thrust infused with Element Power.

Unfortunately, Brendel twisted the Laws in his mind and forcefully brought the monster down as though its jump was an illusion.

Medissa’s attack found its target, and a large shockwave completely blew the monster’s heads off in a shower of blood and bones. The corpse fell to the ground in a loud crash.

A single strike that completely surpassed Kodan’s attack.

The youths were completely astounded by the girl, not knowing what Brendel did.

[An Element power that affects space and time?!]

However, Kodan felt like his jaw had completely fallen to the ground, and had to rub his chin to feel that it was still there.

Brendel also thought he had gotten close to the truth of his Element Power. He looked at his hand, a little unsure. He had locked on to a certain space and froze time, and made his Element power manifest as an active power, though he was still unsure whether he could use his abilities at will.

“My lord?” Medissa went back to him and asked in surprise. The impact she felt from striking the three-headed dog made her feel like she was piercing something strange.

“I can’t really explain what happened just yet,” Brendel replied, thinking for a moment.

After a minute, the thunderous voice came again from the air:

“Mortal, do you wish to continue challenging your destiny?”

“Let’s move on to the next challenge first,” Brendel said a little excitedly and restlessly, “Yes, I wish to continue.”

Varian soon appeared once again.

“Let me try it this time,” Brendel said hurriedly.

He was quickly leaving the state of controlling the Laws to affect reality, and needed to experiment as soon as possible to confirm the suspicions in his mind. Medissa nodded as she looked at him, understanding his intentions.

Brendel brought his sword out with his right arm, pointing it to the ground, and walked forward with large strides.

The cold killing intent once again assaulted its new opponent.

Varian’s flashy appearance of brandishing his warhammer into the air to rouse the audience stopped in mid-air. The dwarf’s supposed composure that was supposed to pressure his opponents quickly faltered; he readied himself into a stance and regarded Brendel a little gravely.

He scoffed lightly with his beady eyes staring under his barbarian helmet, but anyone could see that he was like a wild beast which had detected a danger to its life—

“Is he really that scary? He might be good with the sword but he’s just too young!” Jocah observed Brendel carefully as he mumbled to himself.

He had thought him to be as skilled as the guard riders in the mines. No matter how much he thought about it, he could not imagine Brendel would make a dwarf equipped like a steel fortress to feel nervous.

It was especially so when he recalled Brendel’s carefree attitude.

“Eh?!” He exclaimed.

But he quickly realized he was completely wrong. Brendel suddenly disappeared and

appeared right in front of Varian, as though he had instantly teleported.

There was a shockwave of dust and afterimages that trailed behind the young swordsman, so the youths knew that he moved with an incredible speed that exceeded even Kodan's earlier charge at the Cerberus.

Varian did not react mentally in time, but his wealth of fighting experience made his arms move his warhammer through sheer instinct and roared desperately to deflect Brendel's attack.

However, at that moment, it appeared as though his arms were pulled back to its location before they reached their destination.

Brendel's blade seemed to pass through his defenses like an illusion, shimmering as though it was present and yet not, with the sword slipping into the gap between the dwarf's armor and helmet as a conclusion.

The dwarf's eyes bulged, and he sputtered out blood lightly from his lips.

When the afterimages fully materialized into reality, Brendel had a single hand blocking his warhammer, while his sword was lodged firmly into the dwarf's throat. Once he drew out his blade, the dwarf with the heavy fortress of steel collapsed heavily onto the ground, and blood slowly pooled around him.

He then flicked the blood off his sword with an outwards swing before he walked back.

TL: 'Stasis' was suggested by one of the commenters a long time ago. I used 'Frozen' in the previous TL, I think.

Chapter 65
King of the Underground (16)

The cheers from the seating stopped. There was only deafening silence.

Jocah uttered a few gurgling noises and turned around to look at Maher, who also did the same thing to look back at him. Both had disbelief in their eyes.

[[Just who exactly is this man?!]]

No matter how unskilled they were, they easily understood Brendel could not be someone simple.

And at that moment Brendel felt like a tidal wave was crashing in his mind. This was the second time he entered into an indescribable state, and it was only a few weeks after Firburh's city battle—

The definition of the third keyword of his Element Power seemed to manifest itself in his mind, but there was a paper-thin barrier that prevented him from accessing it.

When he reached out to it, the state of that illusion cracked from a sudden rush of loud cheers, and he found himself back at the coliseum feeling slightly exhausted.

Brendel blinked a few times before he sighed. It was still too early for him. If his levels were higher, he might be able to enter the barrier and move on to the second stage of the Element power.

However, this did not mean that reaching the maximum level of a Gold-ranked status would allow the person to use an Element power.

Understanding the Laws of the Element powers were critical to reaching a higher state, and there were many examples of talented people forever stuck as Gold-rankers despite reaching the status early.

[Sometimes people who are too smart might not be able to see the world for what it is, and having a zen-like mind instead is better. Though luck sometimes plays a part

too. If I really can't break the barrier, I'll just use the Ancient Glyphs made by those powerful wizards.]

There was always a way for Brendel unlike the people in this world.

He was certain that his Element power was related to space and time, because of his ability to invoke 'Stasis' and 'Stability. He glanced at the borrowed sword and took a double take, as there was a shimmering aura around it, along with green words floating across his retina.

– Element Power (Stage 1):

– +20% Accuracy

– +100% Speed

– +10% Cold damage

[Just like I thought. The Element power has been unsealed from its hidden state, and the difference between low and high ranking Element powers is clear as day.]

Brendel recalled that a Lightning-based Element power added 20% speed and 30% Lightning damage, and there was a huge difference in comparing it with his current Element Power.

The gamers in the early game were unable to get any Element powers above the 'Nature' variations, and were only able to raise the ranking through advancement quests.

The only people capable of that were big guild leaders or pay-to-win gamers.

Brendel really wanted to calm himself by downing himself in a tub of cold water when he realized that his NPC status avoided this issue.

"Open her cage." He pointed at Jana's cage when he finally reached Medissa's side and spoke towards the sky without waiting for the announcer's question.

"My lord, have you discovered something?" The Elven girl greeted him.

As one who had lived during the War of the Holy Saints, she did not think it was

unusual for any young adult to reach a Gold-ranked status regardless of any race. However, she was someone who had experienced the state of unsealing her Element power and asked with concern.

Brendel did not reply but lifted his sword to let her take a look.

“This is…!” Medissa was shocked: “A Time Element Power!”

“What’s wrong?” Brendel raised his eyebrow, as he accurately captured the surprise in her voice: “Isn’t it a common Element Power during your time?”

[It should be a common thing, is it not? Even though it was a rare thing in the game, there were at least a dozen gamers who attained a space-time related Element Power.]

His understanding of the War of the Holy Saints was an era filled with exceptional talents, and even someone like Tuman was found everywhere. *(TL: Tuman is a Planeswalker and called the Elemental Emperor during his era.)*

“What?” Medissa’s eyes widened in incomprehension: “Even during those years the only person who had it was the leader of the Silver Alliance’s Wizards, Arkasi. He was the creator of the Tower of Stars and Moon, also known as the Last Sage, who had the Time Element Power.”

The Elven girl paused for a moment before she added: “And if I was to go back any earlier, the only other person who had this would be the Dragon of Darkness himself.”

“Hah?” Brendel felt like he needed to dab away the perspiration on his forehead.

Even though he understood the game’s background pretty well, it was still not as detailed as knowing what skills they had. Medissa’s explanation took him by surprise.

[I see. So the game is still a game. The fact that a hundred-odd gamers possessing the rarest of Element Powers— Ha, ha ha…]

Jana felt a little strange when she saw the cage’s door open. She thought Brendel would rescue Scarlett first, but the youth did not bother looking at their direction after releasing her, which meant that it made no difference as to who were saved first.

“Mortal, do you wish to continue challenging your destiny?” The announcer spoke again, interrupting Brendel’s thoughts.

“Yes, I will continue to do so,” Brendel gave his reply.

The youths woke up from their stupor and realized that the youth had the capabilities to rescue them. In fact, he had completely exceeded their expectations. Maher could not believe that a young man around the same age as him was stronger than the commander of the guards, and it was not just a little.

Very quickly, the gate was raised, and every pair of eyes stared into the darkness. The sounds of orderly horses’ trottings could be heard within the shadows, and everyone waited with bated breath.

Brendel narrowed his eyes when he finally saw the first revealed enemy.

It was a knight, but to be more precise, it was a metal doll riding on a puppet horse. Its left hand wielded a round shield, while its right hand carried a lance, while it was surrounded by four different types of sigils floating and revolving around it.

“Type IV Hunter Knight,” Brendel said.

“What’s that?”

“An invention by the Hazell kingdom. Be careful, this thing possesses the peak strength of a Silver-ranker.”

The Hazell kingdom was located in central Vaunte, somewhere to the west of Kirrlutz, and the borders between the two kingdoms were separated by mountains that extended all the way to the clouds.

Their citizens were said to have come from another continent, and not descendants of the sages from the War of the Holy Saints. They believe in the powers of Magic Artificing and held the largest forces of gunners and cannoneers.

There were even tanks and aircrafts amidst their armies.

Kirrlutz frequently warred with Hazell, and despite possessing military might many times more than Aouine, it was unable to gain any advantages over them, which showed how formidable their country was.

The youths watched as thirty metal knights rode out.

“There are so many!” One of them said.

“Isn’t this unfair?” Jocah had completely forgotten about the fact that Brendel had brought Medissa in, which was against the rules.

“This is despicable. They’re fighting with numbers!” Maher ground his teeth as he hissed through them.

“Fighting with numbers?” Brendel managed to hear the youths’ complaints.

The third challenge was thirty times harder than the first if he looked at the numbers, or maybe even more if they had some kind of tactical formation. He looked at the edges of the walls and smiled inwardly before he looked back and pointed at a metallic creature’s lance:

“Be careful of their weapons. There are actually guns installed in them—”

“Guns?” Medissa did not understand.

Brendel suddenly realized that the technology of Magic Artificing was two to three hundred centuries ago, and he quickly explained: “Think of it as a type of crossbow with powerful penetration. It won’t do much harm to Gold-ranked fighters, but it would hurt if we get hit. Make sure you protect your eyes and throat.”

Medissa nodded.

“Also, their four colored sigils hovering around their bodies are activated one at a time. Red represents a line of fire towards their enemies; make sure you pay attention to that as it’s a long-ranged attack. Blue means it’s guarded with a magic ice shield. Green represents an acceleration of speed, while yellow means that it will encase itself in a layer of rock.”

“Understood.” She found it easy to understand Brendel’s explanation but was also curious about the intricate designs of the Hazells. Even though Galbu’s Wizard Craftsmen had powerful designs to their constructs, they did not have such refined details. “Do they use tactics, my lord?”

Both of them had just entered the Gold-ranked status. Handling ten peak Silver-ranked units would be their limit. Even though their extensive battle experience made them far stronger than the normal Gold-ranked fighters, they would definitely find it

difficult to face them head-on.

But Brendel shook his head: “Just protect yourself and leave the rest to me.”

Medissa paused in surprise, but Brendel raised his hand and snapped his fingers, and suddenly the light around the coliseum dimmed a little.

Everyone else looked up subconsciously before their bodies stiffened.

Two hundred Wind Spirit Spiders carrying a shining sword on their backs suddenly appeared from magical formations. They glided in the air elegantly, and this scene caused the cheering from the audience to stop.

“Fighting with numbers—” Brendel said, “that’s my line.”

Chapter 66
King of the Underground (17)

“What are those things?” One of the youths said.

The youths had their mouths agape as they stared at the spiders without blinking, almost as if they were afraid of missing a detail.

Countless Holy Swords were hovering on top of the Wind Spirit Spiders which had assembled into a gigantic diamond shape.

They resembled a constellation.

The Type IV Hunter Knights naturally saw the same thing as they raised their heads. Each prism crystal lens detected and regarded them as an immense threat, and all the constructs made the same response.

Their guns unfurled together from the lances, and thirty-odd mechanical constructs aimed at Brendel’s body with red lasers at the same time.

“Watch out!” Someone shouted from the direction of the cages.

The revolution of gears and cogs could be heard spinning vigorously with a high-pitched whine.

“Ptyoona!” Medissa shouted in ancient Elven.

Bullets fired at the youth and caused the dust in the air to agitate wildly. Medissa’s reaction against this attack was to raise her lance and command her Element Power to surge out of her, which extended into a gigantic pair of wings made of Soul Fire.

All the enemies’ bullets smashed into hexagonal-shaped crystal-like barriers when they approached the flames. Half the stage was filled with vivid showers of sparks for a brief moment, and the constant high-pitch metallic clinks made many to cover their ears.

The Type IV Hunter Knights changed their target to Medissa, but Brendel made his move and pointed his finger at the very edge of their group.

Buzzing noises could be heard from the sky as the Holy Swords flared up in a blazing heat. Rotating magic formations appeared on the Wind Spirit Spiders before they were drowned out by the light generated by the Holy Swords.

The spectators tried imagining what would happen next when the counter-attack came, but the spectacular display still surprised them. It was a scene where most of them would not forget for the rest of their lives.

The Type IV Hunter Knights' reacted by halting their attacks and their yellow sigils rotated to their front. They started huddling together in a group. The sandy soil beneath them rumbled and rocks protruded from the ground, encasing them in rocks.

Countless pillars of light soon struck the fortress. Fiery heat seemed to vaporize the moisture in the coliseum, and the youths thought that the coliseum was in danger of becoming destroyed.

Kodan suddenly remembered a Kirrlutz's famous quote to describe the war in their historical text, the Poem of Grey:

"We saw columns of clouds split open, and the sky turned blood-red as though burning steel was in the air, and golden pillars of light rained down from to the earth and purged the living creatures with a sea of fire."

The old man had survived the November War and seen wizards display their destructive might against an entire army, and he thought he would never have to see such a sight again. This scene once again brought out the nightmarish events that were buried within his heart.

He did not realize it himself, but his eyes dilated and darted everywhere, and his breathing became ragged as he tried to reach out for his sword.

He failed to do so.

The grandmaster swordsman was startled and a sheen of cold perspiration covered him before he realized where he was. Still, the shock remained in his mind and he looked on in slight confusion. The destructive firepower seemed like it was capable only from an Archmage.

Brendel snapped his fingers.

The pillars of light started converging to a single point with a terrifying buzz and began drilling through the rocks that were covered with layers of magic.

These barriers deflected part of the firepower, but one could see that the rocks were turning into molten liquid.

The youths were rendered speechless. Just when they thought they had seen the limits of a battle, there was a new standard.

A rain of fiery destruction against the layered barriers of magic defense.

Jocah froze at where he was standing while Maher retreated in fright as soon as the beams of destruction moved in their direction. The latter crashed onto the cage's steel bars, and he jumped up like a startled rabbit. When he realized what he bumped into, he found his forehead full of cold sweat.

Cohen's skin color was saturated with a golden hue while he continued to observe. Both his hands firmly held on to each other without moving a muscle. Unlike the others who were attracted by the beautiful magic, his eyes were on Brendel.

"This is…" Jana watched the display of magic in awe.

She finally knew how insignificant her mercenaries were to Brendel. It could not be more laughable for them to persist in believing that they were something worth of value.

There was completely no reason for this young man to appear in such an impoverished territory. With his strength, he could have gotten any position he wanted and be awarded plots of lands that were far better than Trentheim.

It was a laughing joke. Why he would choose to get Graudin's territory with his strength, to the point where he would fight against Count Randner and Aouine's upper echelons—

Jana found that she could not find any reason that would explain it.

But she finally remembered something. That fateful night where Graudin got his retributions, was when Brendel rode to the city with resolute eyes, bringing along a

little girl.

Jana suddenly recalled the Poem of Grey describing a heroic knight who led an army against impossible odds. Several centuries ago, this quote was also used on the Ancestral King, Erik—

[The emissary sent by the Gods to gather everyone under a single flag. Fate changed as they rode as one—]

The Type IV Hunter Knights' defensive magic lasted for a short while, but every pillar of light fired into a single spot and the barriers were finally penetrated through.

It caused the rocks to turn into ashes and vapor quickly. Molten steel poured out from the hole and onto the ground, while loud cracking sounds could be heard as glass was gradually formed on the floor from the extreme heat.

The pillars of light moved faster and faster to destroy the remaining enemies on the battlefield. In less than a minute, they were all destroyed and the pillars of light stopped firing.

Smouldering embers clogged the coliseum with a nasty choking gas. The fortress of rock was completely pierced through and none of the Type IV Hunter Knights survived and was turned into metal scrap under their created grave.

Even Medissa felt surprised at Brendel's magic despite her experience in the War of the Holy Saints and glanced at the array of Holy Swords above her head.

"Did we just win the challenge, my lord?" Her pleasant voice asked.

"What do you think?" Brendel replied with some exasperation.

The Elven girl seemed like she still wanted to see more.

If he was not a Planeswalker, these thirty-odd metal constructs would really present a problem to him.

He sighed slightly as he lowered his hand. Controlling the battlefield without a problem felt good. It was a slight pity that the Holy Swords did not have enough firepower. Three converging pillars of light nearly failed to pierce through the constructs' Silver-ranked defenses.

The coliseum became silent as though Brendel's actions had presented itself as a problem.

[…Shit. Did I overdo it? It's possible for the Coliseum of Destiny to set a personal difficulty. In the game, this place is actually a shitty Fantasy-ranked dungeon that allows gamers to challenge themselves.]

But after a moment of silence, a voice suddenly appeared in his mind, and words started spreading across his retinas.

– You may choose to redeem an additional reward for successfully completing three challenges.

Brendel rubbed his forehead in delight as he remembered his experience in the game.

The core reward of this Coliseum of destiny was certainly the Sword of Earth. If he wanted to get the sword, he needed to attempt two more challenges.

There was an additional rule when one decided to challenge.

From the third challenge onwards, every additional challenge would net him a reward, and it would become better and better. There was also no limit to how many times one was allowed challenge, and the gamers who attempted it stated that doing it over thirty times would eventually net them rewards that were even better than the core rewards.

But it was obvious that he did not dare to attempt it.

– If you do, you will not be able to release the prisoners in the cages.

[Of course, I acc—… Eh?]

He finally remembered more details about the rewards. If he took the additional reward he would not be able to free Scarlett this round.

[Damn… it.]

Brendel's mind worked furiously.

He glanced at the longsword embedded in a boulder. Ever since he lost the Thorn of

Light, he wanted to find a weapon that he could use, and did not want to give up on this opportunity in gaining one here. The battles ahead in Firburh were unavoidable and there was no telling how difficult it would be.

If he wanted Halran Gaia, he would need to fight three more battles. He would be able to pick the next two additional rewards and free Scarlett along with the core reward.

But choosing the additional rewards meant that he had to give up on saving the youths.

[If I choose to rescue them here, what's going to happen in the battles ahead in Firburh and Valhalla? How am I going to protect my mercenaries and soldiers without sufficient preparation?]

He was at a crossroad of no return.

He closed his eyes and clutched his wrists, cursing at his weakness.

In the end, he chose to abandon the youths.

[I wish to redeem the additional rewards.]

– Are you certain you wish to redeem your reward?

[Yes.]

– Please choose your status.

Brendel blinked once. He had never encountered this in the game.

– Normal status

– Planeswalker status.

"Eh?" Brendel was stunned.

He had never seen a game that would change the rewards based on a profession. Sometimes rewards could be chosen but they were predetermined. He hesitated for a while when he saw the choices, but he chose the Planeswalker.

The words changed again.

Chapter 67
King of the Underground (18)

A screen was displayed before him. On it was a roulette, and from the numerical description, Brendel found there were one hundred and seventy 'normal' bronze cards, with forty 'rare' silver cards. However, it appeared that the rare cards were currently greyed out, possibly because he did not have the qualifications to unlock it yet.

"My lord?" Medissa's voice suddenly went to his ears.

"Give me a few minutes," Brendel said and pondered for a while.

His eyes went back to the cards. He looked and read them one by one in detail, before stopping at two cards that seemed to have the best quality.

– The Altar of Dripping Blood

– (The Wolf's Den III)

– 25 EP, 200 Mana

– Barrier Nest

– You can sacrifice 5 Grey creatures to summon the Earth Dragon Voltaire into play (Sub-dragon, level 50 Boss)

– This card will enter the Graveyard if Voltaire dies or if the Altar's barrier is destroyed.

– When Voltaire is on the battlefield, sacrifice a Grey creature every day or the card enters the graveyard.

– 'There is a low rumbling roar nearby within the cave.'

– The Plains of Gems

– (Wondrous Scenery VI)

– Special Plains card

– Tap the card, deposit 2 Light EP to your Elemental Pool.

– Tap the card, pay 2 Light EP, add 20 Wealth.

– 'No one knows what nature offers beneath the grass.'

The second card held Brendel's attention over the first. Regardless of Wealth or EP, they were resources that he needed badly, especially the latter, as he did not have proper means to replenish Light EP.

"Scarlett," the dispirited youth shouted through a tight jaw, "wait there for a while, I'll free you after two battles."

He had been spending his resources conservatively, and getting a Land card that could continuously allow him to cast other cards, was much better than the opposite. The wealth gain on it was just as important too.

[Golden Battle Flag, Sun Blade, and Pristine Angel are all cards that need 5 Light EP to activate, and the last one even requires me to pay 1 Light EP to maintain it. I can't really be called a Planeswalker if I can't use my cards… Display Planeswalker Cards.]

– Treasure Cards: Eternity Orb, Golden Battle Flag, Holy Sword, Silver Colt.

– Creature Cards: Highland Squire, Mercenaries of Lopes, Pristine Angel, Wind Spirit Spiders, Unicorn Knight

– Resource Card: Rich Gold Mine

– Magic Cards: Magic Control, Sun Blade, Sprint Drive

– Land Cards: Garden of the Holy Tree, Rougen's Swamp, Loxar's market, Nest of Storms, Ashen Volcano

– Event Card: Bitter Ordeal (Used)

[I've already used the Bitter Ordeal card on Ciel, so it's greyed out. Based on Ciel's

explanation, a deck of cards needs at least forty cards before it can be used in a realistic combat without issues. I'm not even halfway there. Rather than a Planeswalker, I'm more like an apprentice or something. Display EP and Wealth income.]

– Garden of the Holy Tree, 1 Water EP/day

– Rougen's Swamp, 1 Dark EP/day, tap card to produce an additional 1 Dark EP.

– Loxar's market, 1 Earth EP/day, 2 Wealth/day. Pay 2 reputation, tap, and gain an additional 6 Wealth/day.

– Nest of Storms, 2 Wind EP/day.

– Ashen Volcano, 2 Nature EP/day, 1 Fire EP/day.

– Rich Gold Mine, 4 Wealth per day.

– Elementalist profession, 1 EP of all types/week.

[I'm not tapping the Garden of the Holy Tree because the Rich Gold Mine needs an untapped land. Hmm. Ciel had mentioned that nature cards have the best summons too. Sooner or later, I would want to get these cards. Display EP expenditure.]

– Unicorn Knight, 6 Wealth/day, 1 Dark EP/day

– Mercenaries of Lopes, 2 Wealth/day

– Highland Squire, 1 Earth EP/day

– Pristine Angel, 1 Light EP/day

[Maintaining my summons means that I don't have a way to use any other cards related to their EP. Casting the Wind Spirit Spiders only requires my mana and a little Wind EP, but the Earth EP required to sustain the Holy Swords means that I have to save it for at least half a month. In fact, I'm actually resummoning Ciel every day to avoid paying his maintenance.]

And it was not without drawbacks.

Brendel had to alternate tapping his land cards and recasting to gain resources and

save Earth EP. Most importantly, he was unable to get 1 reputation per day if Ciel was not maintained on the battlefield.

This profession could not be treated as his trump card if it was unstable all the time.

He felt the profession's immense potential, but to get it working he needed more cards. After thinking it through for a while he could not help but mutter:

"The system of this profession is a little intriguing."

He tossed the rewarded ball onto the screen, and it spun round in the roulette, and his eyes followed the ball closely. After a few seconds, the ball slowed down and missed the Plains of Gems, and landed somewhere to the north instead.

Everyone frowned with anxiety as they watched Brendel stay motionless. The latter's eyes seemed to gaze off into empty space, yet there was nothing they could see in his line of sight.

[Stop! Stop!]

Brendel yelled for the ball to stop at the next best card in his mind, the Altar of Dripping Blood, but it landed a few slots away instead.

– Fire Claw Spearmen

– (The Flame Tribe II)

– Costs 15 Fire EP

– Fire Lizardmen Warriors, level 27 Creatures

– Place a company of battle-thirsty Fire Claw Spearmen into the battlefield.

– Pay 5 Wealth/day when Fire Claw Spearmen is on the battlefield

– 'There is the smell of enemies amidst the flames.'

[Oh fuck off!]

Brendel cried with disappointment in his mind, but he at least had the senses to not

show it to the world. The window disappeared, and a red card appeared in the air before it landed right on his hand.

The illustration of the card was a group of lizardmen warriors, though their appearances were quite different from Vaunte's normal Lizardmen. They had bright red scales much thicker than normal Lizardmen, and each wore a suit of golden armor that was plain in its design, while their backs carried a battle spear the length of their bodies.

But what caught Brendel's attention was the gold diamond-like eyes. The creatures in Vaunte which had golden irises meant they had the blood of dragons flowing through them, with their blood purity comparable to a sub-dragon species.

Although their low levels meant they were just short of the Silver-ranked status, their lineage was quite unique and must have flourished at some point.

[This explains the battle-thirsty trait. Dragons have it and morale is instead increased if they are injured or if they take the initiative to attack.]

It was not a perfect ratio, but a +1 Morale meant an approximate increase of 10% in stats.

It was quite the buff, though Brendel was a little annoyed at getting a Creature card and not a Resource card. In addition, the Fire Claw Spearmen needed 15 Fire EP, and its maintenance was close to the Unicorn Knight.

No matter how many times he looked at the Fire Claw Spearman card, it could not compare to Medissa.

But he ultimately nodded a little when he saw the word 'squadron'. Aouine typically defined a company of men to be a hundred, while Madara set it at eighty. He was not certain how many Lizardmen there would be, but it was unlikely to be lower in numbers.

Brendel did not use the card and sent it straight into his deck.

This card materialization and disappearance happened before everyone's eyes except Kodan because Brendel's back was facing him,

"My lord?" Medissa was summoned by Brendel and she recognized a Planeswalker's

card, but she did not know why the card appeared from thin air.

“Ah, it’s just a reward from winning that battle. Let’s continue the challenge,” Brendel finally recovered his senses.

“Are we still going to continue?” Medissa was surprised.

He nodded gravely in response.

“Mortal, do you wish to continue challenging your destiny?”

“Yes, I wish to continue.” The youth proclaimed loudly as he gazed at the longsword.

The coliseum was momentarily silenced.

But unlike the previous times, the gate was not raised. The sand suddenly parted and was sucked as though there was a hole in it. Before long, a gigantic cage was elevated past the ground, and the monster within made everyone gulp—

It was a dragon.

Chapter 68
King of the underground (19)

Brendel secretly wiped his palms when he realized it was not a dragon, but a subspecies of a dragon— A drake.

The monster's front legs towered over the challengers like a pair of tall towers. It was covered with blue-green scales which were as shiny as polished metal and reflected the cold light from the coliseum. Each scale was several inches thick and it looked like it was clad in a layer of steel-plated armor.

The special characteristics of this creature were its ugly, triangular-shaped head with spiked horns shaped like they had been carved into sharp edges. Its deeply inset eyes were a light blue color, but its irises had flecks of golden flames, showing clearly that its ancestors were pure-blooded dragons.

[Adra Drake, a type of wind dragon. It's fortunate that it's not a mature adult…]

If Brendel was to compare the Cerberus against it, the former would be a puppy. The winged monster in front of him was the top of the food chain in the Mountain of Calm Tempest, and the natives who lived there called them the Tyrants of Wind.

There used to be a legend about these Adra Drakes in the game. They were supposedly descended from the Sky Dragons during the era of the Dragon of Calamity, but the quests involving the creatures ultimately led gamers to Kirrlutz's royal historians who disputed this claim. The truth to them was actually much closer to the Mountain Dwarves' lore.

The Adra Drakes descended from Blue Dragons. The latter described as the fairies of the clouds, but one would find the drakes very different in terms of temperament. They were aggressive predators carrying the Wind Element in them, unlike their ancestors which carried the Ice Element within their body.

But regardless of whether this monster was a mature adult or not, it was still standing near the apex of a Gold-ranker.

[…Wait a minute. An Adra Drake uses the Wind Element, right? Isn't this a bloody counter to the Wind Spirit Spiders?!]

Brendel cursed the announcer, but he could only grudgingly accept the results. The Coliseum of Destiny must have scanned the Wind Spirit Spiders and responded with a monster that had near immunity to it.

[But it seems like this damned place is able to see only the superficial contents. The attacks from the Holy Sword are based on the Earth Element, and they are the best counters to Wind Element creatures.]

His mind was filled with malicious revenge.

But the others had different thoughts. When they saw the creature which was tens of meters tall, making it big enough for the people in the cages to look up at it, they could not help but draw in a cold breath.

Fear started to grip their hearts.

The youths who had never left Schafflund with close to no worldly experience were still able to recognize for what it was.

It was a dragon.

Even though they did not know what difference there was between dragons, wyrms, drakes or wyverns, they knew that they held villainous roles opposing heroes in bedtime stories.

Every one of them had heard about the legends regarding the Dragon of Darkness and the Dragon of Twilight.

These creatures were the last of the Golden Lineage, and in their body flowed a mysterious and noble bloodline.

Jana and Kodan had seen Aouine's scouts in the past, which were called the 'Winged Dragon scouts'. But they suddenly realized their mounts were really winged lizards, and not truly related to the creature in front of them.

The Adra Drake unfolded its wings and swung them at the cage holding it. The gigantic metal rods were instantly pulverized into flat pieces.

“This… is a dragon’s power.” Someone muttered.

Maher was the first to recover, or perhaps he was cruder in his personality. He tapped Cohen’s shoulders roughly and whispered: “H-hey, he’s challenging again. Do you think he’s going to rescue you all?”

Cohen did not answer and felt his heart pounding in his throat.

Even though he knew that the monster’s target was not on them, he could not help but feel that a light beating of its wings would create a gale strong enough to send everyone into the air— Then they would be killed as they crashed violently into the ground.

Although it was not unreasonable for him to think that way, the truth was even if there were one hundred Adra Drakes, they would not be able to break the barriers—

“Cohen?”

“Shut up!” Cohen snapped, getting angry for the first time. “Stop attracting attention when there’s a monster out that’s capable of swallowing us up in one bite!”

Maher scratched his head and backed away silently.

Even though the dragon had Cohen’s attention now, the scene where Brendel stared blankly into the air had caused him to ponder something.

His hand reached into his pocket to find something.

Medissa quickly recovered her senses after the monster destroyed the cage imprisoning it.

“An Adra Drake.” She pursed her lips tightly and hissed through her teeth, and she subconsciously gripped her silver lance tightly—

This was a creature that posed a huge threat to them.

“My lord, even though this beast’s body appears to be clumsy and heavy, its speed in the air is incredibly swift and nimble—” The Elven princess warned Brendel in a whisper.

Before she had the chance to finish her sentence, the drake suddenly took off to the air with extended wings. A faint green glow appeared on its body and it sailed through the air with incredible speed, leaving behind a ghastly trail of green particles.

Before the youths had the chance to react, the gigantic monster had already charged into the midst of the Wind Spirit Spiders. The Adra Drake was familiar with these weak critters as they also lived on the same mountain, but the golden shining Holy Swords on them made it feel threatened.

Its instincts were not wrong.

And its initiated attack managed to destroy a large portion of the Holy Swords' formation.

"Scatter and fire at will!" Brendel watched the collapse of its formation and immediately gave his order to the spiders.

2 Earth EP was taken away from his Elemental Pool, and a huge golden net was weaved in the sky.

But what followed next made Brendel see something that he would never forget in his lifetime.

The Adra Drake easily steered through the dense concentration of lasers like a slippery fish. Approximately seventy percent of the Holy Swords' attacks did not connect, while the remainder of what struck the drake's scales did not hurt it and was even used as momentum to sail through the air.

The speed of the dragon's rotation appeared seemingly slow. Its wings allowed the pillars of light graze the tips of its wings to help it shift left and right, dodging the majority the attacks.

Yet with its leisurely pace, it somehow allowed one to capture its movements.

That illusion quickly passed and the Adra drake was directly in front of another large field of Wind Spirit Spiders.

[Its actions are so fast that they appear like the blades of a helicopter… I didn't get to see them in action because I was at a high level and had killed them in a heartbeat. These creatures of the Wind Element are just like what one would expect. They feel

almost graceful.]

The Blue Dragons are known for dancing through dark clouds filled with lightning at an extraordinary speed. The gamers in the past who had encountered these ancestral dragons compared them to the Adra Drakes, and declared the latter as true descendants that lived up to the name of its ancestors.

[Alright, the time to dwell on the past is over. I'll have a much easier time if it's a Gold-ranker on the ground, but it seems like there's going to be a little bit more challenge here.]

"Medissa, summon your unicorn and engage it." He said.

"Understood, my lord!"

The Elven princess leaped into the air in an elegant arc, and the spectral unicorn appeared through a dimensional space to receive her.

Medissa landed comfortably on her steed and took the reins and continued flying. The unicorn trotted through the air as though the air was made out of solid ground and started pursuing the Adra Drake. Even though the gigantic creature was swift, the unicorn did not fall behind.

Brendel decided to observe the situation a little longer.

He took a moment to observe the unicorn's flight. They were proud creatures with strong combat prowess, and only the Silver Elves managed to use them as steeds.

The Unicorn Knights were the strongest combat units of the Silver Elves, and each mature unicorn was even capable of using an Element Power. They were rated to be almost at level 60, the rough equivalent of a peak Gold-ranked fighter.

[There are some kinds of Laws in play here that restricts the Unicorn's strength. Only speed is left in Medissa's mount. The core aspect of the card is definitely Medissa, or I would see that unicorn exceeding her abilities.]

The Adra Drake felt a threat approaching from its back. Even though Medissa was less powerful than it was, exposing its back to her would have the same results to how Kodan left an opening to her earlier.

It gave up trying to destroy the Wind Spirit Spiders and turned around to battle with Medissa instead.

Both Adra Drake and Silver Elf crossed each other in flight.

Even though the Adra Drake was at a disadvantage because it lost the initiative, Medissa was the one who got injured.

The Adra Drake had caught on to Medissa's lance and attempted to claw at her, forcing her to steer downwards. The dragon rotated a few times and smoothly took on the higher position without injuries.

Medissa did not escape unscathed. The critical attack by the monster was avoided, but the Wind Element of the claws had left deep marks on her armor.

It was a unique point of Wind Element creatures. Galbu's wizards craftsmen even copied a lesser version of it and made a shield with a Wind Element spell weaved into it, allowing the shield to exude a unique defense that would repel enemies from approaching.

The girl on the unicorn felt her cheeks and found blood covering her palm. She looked up with alarm and caution.

Chapter 69
King of the Underworld (20)

The Wind Spirit Spiders spread out and shot out golden pillars of light yet again to form a magnificent net.

Brendel's Elemental Pool dwindled to 3 Earth EP, and he immediately tapped Loxar's Market in his mind to increase it by one.

The effectiveness of the Holy Swords was low. A single pillar of light could hardly pierce through the Adra Dragon's outer Wind Element defensive barrier, not to mention melting dragon scales that were several inches.

But multiple convergences of concentrated beams did not succeed either, as it took time for the spiders to rotate the Holy Sword, and the Adra Drake slipped through easily.

[There's a flaw. The Wind Spirit Spiders' levels are much too low. Their Agility, Perception, and intelligence are all inadequate for them to make a precise strike on the Adra Drake. Numbers can cover this weakness, but having half of what I started with isn't enough. Shit, letting that creature have the first strike is my mistake.]

The Wind Element that the Adra Drake had was boosting its Agility by at least 300%. Medissa could barely engage its attention to stop it from targeting the Wind Spirit Spiders.

Brendel did not waste any more time and lowered himself into a stance, while his hand caught a card that materialized out of thin air. He flung it into the air and leaped just like Medissa. A Magic Formation appeared and the Silver Colt appeared.

"He also knows how to summon a horse!" Someone amongst the youth shouted.

Their eyes were glittering with excitement. The battle had surpassed legends and fairy tales that they heard of. If the dragon was the most frightening thing they knew of, then Brendel and Medissa were the strongest people they had seen in their lives.

Kodan was completely engrossed by the memorable scene before him as well.

The November War might have been bigger and darker where everyone fought to their last drop of blood, but it could not compare to the elegant battle between the dragon and its challengers.

There was a sense of mystical adventure; two heroes rose up to face an impossible opponent. The grandmaster swordsman's memories of his youthful self were evoked, and he rubbed his ring on his thumb.

Brendel tapped the side of his steed's head, and the mechanical creature shot towards the Adra Drake like a meteor. The youth activated the Charge ability in the middle of its rush, and the boosted speed sent a violent shockwave that made everyone cover their ears.

He aimed for the Adra Drake's weakest spot, the stomach.

But the Adra Drake was perceptive enough to realize the second threat to it. It first swept away Medissa's attack with her lance with a wing, then spun around and attacked Brendel by whipping him with its tail.

A banshee-like wail broke through the air when its tail hurtled towards Brendel, and the latter pulled away in response. He grabbed the steed's stomach with his legs and laid flatly horizontal, allowing the attack boosted with Wind Element to miss him completely. However, the sharp air currents from the aftermath still managed to cut a few strands of Brendel's hair.

It appeared that Brendel's intention to attack the Adra Drake had failed, and he became the one who was hunted.

The Adra Drake flew upwards with stunning speed before it turned around completely and charged towards the youth in a flash of green lightning.

"No!" Scarlett shouted, surprising the youths and Jana beside her.

Her yell made several imprisoned people in the cages realize they were gripping the steel bars tightly.

It seemed like the aerial battle was a disadvantage for Brendel and Medissa. Jana looked up anxiously, realizing that the dragon's strength and size were beyond her

imagination.

But Brendel did not think much of it.

It was a common trick for a dragon to charge at its prey after striking it with its tail and he moved on to his next plan. He climbed back on to his steed and dove downwards while yelling out an order to Medissa:

“Prepare your strongest attack!”

Medissa glanced at Brendel and nodded. The latter raised his sword and gave the Wind Spirit Spiders new orders. Multiple pillars of light converged into focal points that sought to block the path of Adra Drake. As more and more beams fired at it, the light became so blindingly bright that it blocked the Adra Drake’s vision.

Finally, the gigantic monster gave up and allowed Brendel to gain some respite.

[2 Earth EP left. It’s time to hunt.]

Brendel patted the Silver Colt’s neck and it flew upwards once again, making their way past the beams of light and carefully hid from the drake’s line of sight. Another card appeared in his hands while they did so.

The Adra Drake suddenly realized that it had been goaded into attacking the youth and lost sight of Medissa. Even though it merely stopped for just a moment, Medissa finally found a chance to slip into its defenses after following it closely.

“Seismic Blast!” Medissa’s charge was a straight line that went straight for the beast.

The slender body of hers found explosive strength at this moment to dig deeply into the drake’s flesh, and a bestial scream of pain shook the entire coliseum.

Even though it tried to dodge the attack at the last moment, the spectral energy from her Element Power caused a maelstrom and condensed its surroundings before it exploded with sheer intensity.

The lance easily pierced through its outer layer of magic defense and the impact from the blast shattered its scales and reached directly into its back.

A shower of blue blood fell from the sky and rained onto the ground, with some of it

directly converted back into Wind Element because of the concentrated purity in its blood.

The Adra Drake nearly lost consciousness from the pain as it fell from the sky.

The Seismic Blast was an ancient technique of the Silver Elves that converted Element power into sheer destruction, although its weakness was how slow the attack was. Even though the Adra Drake outclassed Medissa in every way, the latter still managed to injure it greatly.

Brendel was ready as he passed through the light blue vapor; a card was raised in his hand:

“Display!” He shouted.

The illustration on the card was a group of charging cavalry. Once he let go of it, it floated into the air and shone brightly.

– Sprint Drive has entered into play. The Planeswalker has paid 2 Earth EP.

– The summoner has connected with the Unicorn Knight. Overall Power Rating, techniques, and stats will be shared.

Brendel felt his strength double. He stood up on the Silver Colt and activated Power Break, readied himself with a stance and swung his sword upwards to the dropping Adra Drake without sparing anything in his body.

He lost his footing after his attack and fell out from the Silver Colt, but the mechanical beast’s body moved nimbly and allowed him to sit back without any further incident.

His Sword Arte seemed to hang in the sky without being unleashed for a moment, before it was sent towards the dragon with a deafening explosion.

It was no longer a simple distortion of air. Brendel had converted part of his Element Power with the Seismic Blast technique and sent it into the White Raven Sword Arte. Nearly thirty meters of glowing particles in an arc spread out and cut across the air, reaching over a hundred meters.

Confusion set in because the barrier started shaking even before the dragon was struck, as though time and space had been reversed.

“How’s this possible! That stable control of his Element Power seemed like he had trained in it for years! It’s completely different from his earlier fight against the dwarf!”

Kodan froze up like he was a statue. He did not know what kind of devilish magic Brendel had used, but the increase in skill happened before his very eyes.

Who was capable of having a breakthrough in power in mere minutes? Was there any race out there in Vaunte that could do so?

“…Bloodline of a Golden Lineage?”

Kodan suddenly wondered if Brendel had come from a lineage that went all the way back to the ancient eras.

Screams echoed throughout the coliseum. The attack from the youth’s sword had completely severed both the Adra Drake’s wings, and another shower of blue rain fell from the sky. The Adra Drake was no longer a child of the sky, and it descended quickly like a flightless bird.

Finally, it crashed heavily to the ground in an immense dust cloud with a dying shriek.

Everyone felt the ground shake. They were completely shocked. The intensity of the battle had surpassed their imaginations, but the speed that the battle was finished with was the complete opposite of what they had expected.

Brendels and Medissa’s assaults on the Adra Drake took a mere thirty seconds.

The youths exhaled heavily. Part of their minds was still reveling in the earlier battle, and the remainder of their thoughts were waiting expectantly on what Brendel was going to do next.

But they were disappointed yet again.

After the mysterious youth landed on to the ground, he did not look at them in the slightest, nor at Jana and Scarlett. He simply stared into the distance.

Brendel had a better grasp on how the roulette worked, and he sent the ball in with accuracy.

He got the item that he wanted.

– Plain of Gems acquired.

He nodded with satisfaction and readied himself once again for the last battle. The challenge was most likely going to be an army led by a commander.

“Prepare for our last battle, Medissa.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Chapter 70
King of the Underworld (21)

Kodan looked at the youth with complicated feelings.

He entered the Gold-ranked status thirty years ago, yet the youth seemed to be blessed by the gods and had reached the same level of control over his Element Power as him.

Even if the person was blessed with talent, they would never attain such mastery at such a young age. A possibility was being favored by the Gods themselves, but they would be disabled in some form, so he thought of something else.

“Young man, who’s your Guardian Spirit?” Kodan called out to him.

“What?” Brendel turned around and said puzzledly.

“Stop pretending, you clearly know what I’m talking about!” The old man was angry enough to shout: “This is important, tell me quickly—”

“What are you talking about, what am I supposed to know?”

Brendel was truly confused. He thought that the grandmaster swordsman might ask if he was going to save the youths up there, yet it was a strange question with unfamiliar terms. He watched the old man walk up to the stage in annoyance, but an invisible barrier blocked him.

The thunderous voice once again reverberated throughout the coliseum and interrupted them:

“Mortal, do you wish to continue challenging your destiny?”

“Yes,” Brendel said.

“Brat, answer me!” Kodan slammed on the barrier with his fist.

Brendel glanced at him and put a palm up to tell him to wait. The coliseum suddenly

turned darker.

“The next match will be the Duel of Ordeals!” A voice announced over their heads.

Brendel’s expression immediately changed.

“Do you have any idea what the match is, my lord?” Medissa asked curiously when she saw his reaction.

“…It’s a type of extreme challenge. No matter how much strength you acquire, you will be turned into an ordinary person. In this stage, you must use pure skill to defeat your enemies.”

“Skill? What’s the exact definition?” Medissa arched her eyebrow slightly.

Brendel tapped a finger on his blade: “Combat techniques.”

Medissa reflected on his words for a moment. It sounded like it was advantageous to them, but her lord did not seem happy about it in the slightest. Considering the challenges earlier, it could not be something simple.

“Do you know anything about the Duel of Ordeals, Cohen?” Maher asked gingerly.

“No.” Came the simple reply.

“What are they arguing about?” Jocah’s attention was on Kodan. He was worried whether all of them could leave the place.

“I don’t know.”

“Why does he keep on challenging the duels without freeing us or his remaining companion?” Someone asked.

“Maybe there are some rules we don’t know about? How is it possible to construct a place like this in the mines? To build it only as a game to catch and release people?” Another youth said.

The other youths looked at the blurred faces of the audience and a few found his words somewhat agreeable.

“Hmph. It’s not as if you don’t know how sick these nobles’ hobbies are. Perhaps they just want to have perverse fun!”

“But look at this place! It’s a mine! Why would they set up their entertainment in this place? No matter how much I think about it, this incident is because of the odd thing that we dug out earlier.”

“I agree as well! Besides, that was a dragon! How much money do they have to throw in to get ordinary people like us to fight it? To be honest, I feel like this is a dream or something. Maybe this place isn’t real.” One of them touched a steel bar from a cage and felt the heat in his fingers dissipate.

They were momentarily silent.

“His goal is that sword.” Cohen’s voice was not loud.

The sickly young man had waited till the youths quieted down before he spoke, making his words feel weighted. He had seen Brendel glance at the black broadsword several times and made a conclusion.

The others felt it was a logical deduction once he spoke.

“Does he not intend to save us?” One of the youths said.

“Why should he?” Came Cohen’s reply.

“Cohen?” Jocah looked at him.

In his mind, Cohen was someone who did not like speaking much, but he had a better idea of the world and provided the best answers.

“Well, I can try persuading him.” Cohen’s voice was small, as though he was trying to convince himself.

“With what?” Maher asked with incomprehension.

“A trade.”

Maher’s eyes turned wide: “Are you thinking of using your worthless things to trade with him? Angering him won’t do us any good!”

Cohen did not answer and merely looked back at him. However, his attention was drawn elsewhere very quickly.

Sudden lines of golden words appeared in the air. Dwarven, Elven, Dragon, Ancient Kirrlutz and many other languages. But what shocked Brendel was the existences of multiple familiar languages that should never have appeared in this world.

[It… can't be! It can't fucking be true! How can there be languages from Earth!]

The youth's body trembled greatly and he gulped in utter confusion. Multiple possibilities exploded in his mind.

Perhaps he was somehow lying unconscious on some hospital bed and was dreaming of this world? Or perhaps this world was somehow connected to Earth in some strange ways? Or perhaps because of how Earth created the game, another world would somehow be created?

Crazy theories spun in his mind and for a moment, the thought of possibly returning back to his original world surfaced, causing his emotions to explode within him.

"My lord?" But Medissa's concerned voice brought him back to his senses.

"Yes…? Yes." Brendel's chaotic thoughts were quickly shut down by a greater desire.

He had stolen someone else's identity, resolved to live as him, and swore to save the kingdom. His past life had nothing to do with his current one any longer. He raised his head to look at the instructions again as he wiped the corners of his eyes furiously with the back of his hand.

It was not the time to be affected by emotions, perhaps when everything was over he could reflect on it.

He read the familiar words in the air:

1) Limitation in Strength. (The duelists are limited to 10 OZ in strength.)

2) Limitation in techniques. (All techniques unrelated to weapons will be disabled.)

3) The challenger shall be given worthy opponents.

Jana drew in a cold breath as she read in the ancient Kirrlutz language which was not too different from the modern version. Even though Brendel's power astounded her, it was clearly different from training with a weapon for years.

No matter how talented one might be, even if they became a Gold-ranker at a young age, they required time to match someone who had talent and years to go along with it.

The people who were widely recognized were old white-haired duelists who had reached their eighties or nineties. *(TL: The humans in this world live over a hundred easily.)*

"There's no need to worry, Jana," Scarlett's voice came from behind. She seemed to see through the worry in the mercenary commander's heart and appeared confident, but in truth had placed her concern deeply into her heart: "Lord Brendel's swordsmanship is excellent—"

"I know he's very skilled, but if the previous challenge was a dragon, then this opponent of his would be even harder. Even if it's just Aouine alone, there are many Sword Saints."

Scarlett's confident expression froze and she started to worry too.

Brendel's thoughts were the same as Jana. He wondered what opponents he was going to face. Suddenly, a new power washed over the stage, and he felt something in him got severed.

Medissa, the Wind Spirit Spiders, and the Silver Colt under him disappeared, and he landed on the ground with both his feet.

[The Planeswalker's energy has been cut off? Not only that, I feel like I'm being drained. It looks like my stats are going down.]

Brendel felt a numbing sensation on his scalp. He had originally hoped that this cheat-like ability was able to bypass the rules, but it seemed like the Planeswalker profession was still considered part of the Laws of this world.

But he did not rely too much on his Planeswalker identity, and was not truly affected inside. He took in a light breath and adjusted his thoughts before staring at his surroundings cautiously.

Darkness washed over the coliseum next, and a second later, he found that he was on a dueling stage made out of granite blocks cut to perfection.

His eyes searched the area, and discovered a familiar dark figure coming out from the shadows.

“Buga?”

“The Cross Sword, Buga.”

Kodan and Jana were able to recognize him. He had considerable fame with a unique stance and swordsmanship, easily allowing both of them to identify him.

Kodan frowned deeply. He had met Buga when he was younger and knew of his potential in the sword, but he was slightly relieved as Torbus’s lineage was surely as good as Buga if not better. The young man was of his blood after all.

Jana sighed with relief as well. She had seen Buga on her way to Lantonrand and heard rumors of his skill in the sword, but she believed that he was much easier to deal with when compared to famous grandmaster swordsmen.

Before the two people had the chance to gauge who the winner would be, another shadow came forward.

Brendel cursed loudly in his mind.

[Damn it, Tirste? There’s one more. Shit, this time it’s Ebdon… Who’s this last person?]

There was a fourth shadow that came out, but his face was still shrouded in darkness.

Brendel’s body reacted on its own by trembling a little without its owner noticing.

“That’s!” Kodan’s expression completely turned to one of shock.

“T-t-the Dragon of H-H-Hararth…” Jana’s expression had also changed, and she felt like her throat had been stuck with something when she saw the fourth person’s attire and longsword.

“Who’s that?” Scarlett’s brows furrowed together and asked in confusion.

Jana turned her head and looked back with an expression of defeat and panic, but words refused to come out.

But Brendel did not have the time to worry about who the fourth person was. He suddenly realized he was in deep trouble.

It was one against four.

Chapter 71
King of the underground (22)

========== Odum's POV ==========

"Ouch!"

A girl's yelp of pain echoed throughout a dark tunnel, and the dwarf who had just crawled out at the end of it had to turn back his head again. He saw Romaine clutching her forehead with tearful eyes as she tried to make her way out.

"What's wrong?" The old dwarf patted the merchant girl's left hand and saw that her pale forehead had a red patch on it.

His eyes bulged and exclaimed with exasperation: "Why did you knock yourself again? Didn't I tell you that this tunnel was dug for my own personal use? It's definitely going to be a low ceiling for you, so you need to be careful about how you move about!"

"But you didn't warn me again after that." Little Romaine clutched her head, complaining and muttering with a frown.

"Lass, this doesn't need to be reminded all the time!" The dwarf sighed and lent a hand to pull her out from the pits, "Alright, how is it, do you still feel pain, girl?"

"Of course it hurts!" Came the reply without any hesitation.

"Well, you must hold it in even if it hurts. If we dwarves stubbed our toe on a sheet of metal, we wouldn't even make a sound." Odum went close to the forest's edge as he spoke and looked down. The road to the mines was just below them. "Alright, we're pretty much in the Silver Mines now. Quickly now, wear your bandana!"

But Romaine was apparently more interested in his earlier words.

"Is it really true?" She stared back with big round eyes as the dwarf made his way back to her: "Even if you stubbed your toe, you wouldn't make a sound?"

“Of course.” The old dwarf clearly saw that the little girl did not believe him. He glared and yelled angrily at her: “Lass! I’m an old dwarf whose beard is longer than your hair. Do you think I’m lying!”

He watched Romaine flip open her bag and search it with great interest. Soon enough, she brought out a flat object that was black in color.

And his jaw soon unlodged itself and hung loosely.

“What is that?” Odum said with great suspicion.

“A metal plate!”

“What are you doing with it?”

“Testing if it’s true?” The merchant replied curiously with innocent eyes.

“Get! Why would a dwarf do such a ridiculous thing!” His expression immediately changed: “Lass, why do you even have this thing in your bag to begin with!”

Her reaction made him blink in an odd manner.

The merchant girl was tilting her head with a large smile, with her long finger moving across her face repeatedly as she spoke smugly: “Shame on you, you’re bragging! My aunt didn’t lie to me. She said dwarves love to brag!”

“What did you say!” Odum’s temper flared up and he raised his fist. But he suddenly remembered that she was a young girl and he had lived a long life. He could not possibly beat her up or her aunt, for that matter. In the end, he coughed and reluctantly let it go. “Let me tell you, little girl, only witches would make that claim!”

Odum did not know he had hit the nail on the head.

He thought for a moment and decided he had to at least maintain his dignity: “The reason for not trying is there’s no need to. Also, we’re in the mines and we sneaked in here. It would be bad if we get discovered just because we made a bunch of noises!”

“Really?”

“Of course! Lass, do you think a dwarf in my position would lie to you? I’m different

from those cunning humans!"

But before he could finish his words, he heard a yell that came from the forest:

"Who's inside there?"

The old dwarf's words were silenced. He turned his head back stiffly to peek out from the bushes and instantly discovered a group of patrolling riders. He did not know when they appeared exactly, but evidently, the loud exchange between Romaine and himself had caused them to be discovered.

"Oh, this is bad." Odum frowned and placed a finger to his lips: "Don't speak, got it?"

He emphasized his words as he was afraid that she would cause trouble.

But the girl nodded obediently like she understood, though she stared at her surroundings looking a little excited.

The two trespassers whispered amongst themselves, but that did not mean that the people out there had failed to overhear their mumblings.

"The people who are inside the forest, stop hiding and come out right now. We definitely saw you." The commander signaled to his men. They untied their guns below their saddle and took them out, and he waved his own threateningly: "If you don't come out, we're going to attack."

Romaine immediately cast her gaze back at the dwarf. Even though she had a weak sense of social interactions, she traveled enough with Brendel to know the knights were not giving out empty threats.

'What should we do next?' — said her eyes.

The dwarf did not need her reminder. He immediately stood up from the bushes in a hurry and raised his hands: "Captain Mordel, it's me, don't shoot!"

The captain of the riders was slightly taken by surprise but he quickly lowered his gun: "Odum, so it's you, old fellow. You're sneaking in again. Well, Lord Perkins is asking for you," he suddenly glanced at Romaine and asked puzzledly, "who's this?"

"…She's one of my relatives." The old dwarf's skin was nearly not thick enough to spit

out this lie without blushing, but he had no choice to give a shoddy excuse for this unexpected encounter. “What does Perkins want me for?”

“Your relative?” The riders immediately ‘understood’ and some of them even made fun of him, “oh, I didn’t know you had a daughter—”

“Cut out your prattling!” Mordel quickly interrupted his men. “Something has happened to the mines, and Ser Kodan has gone in to check it. Lord Perkins wants you to help out—”

There was clearly not much respect in the riders’ tone when it came to Perkins.

Odum snorted through his nose.

“What exactly happened in the mines?”

“It seems like someone has dug into the pits again. Monsters came out and injured the miners. I have to thank Mother Marsha later. Today’s not my duty to guard the mines—” Mordel clearly did not have the disposition of a military officer, and appeared to be even relieved. “And the events are just like what you have probably experienced. There’s an earthquake, and it’s a real mess inside the mines.”

The dwarf’s heart skipped a beat when he heard the heart of the mines were dug through again. But the news of the earthquakes and monsters made him turn his focus on that aspect. “An earthquake? Are the tunnels preserved? Hmm, the emergency tunnels A4, A12, B3, are they still usable? And how about the lifts?”

Odum knew the mines like the back of his hand. He immediately asked about the stable tunnels that would lead to the fifth level.

“I’m not sure,” Mordel shook his head, “I don’t dare to go in right now. You can try asking information about it from the guards there, but old fellow, you can’t be serious about going in. You must think carefully. There are monsters below, and there’s no need to work so hard by putting your on the line for that ‘Lord Perkins’, right?”

“Hmph. What would you know?” The dwarf answered grumpily.

“Fine, fine, then I wish that you will croak faster, old man,” he leered at Romaine, “Don’t worry, I’ll help take care of your relative—”

“Fuck off!” Odum roared in fury.

The riders laughed and started moving away.

The dwarf turned back to Romaine with apologetic grumblings, but he quickly lost his ability to maintain his dignity. Romaine was looking at him with curiosity and repressed laughter.

“Well, it’s not really very important—” Romaine nodded earnestly, “I won’t laugh or look down on you for bragging about how respected you are on the way here!”

Odum was immediately rooted to the spot and felt like his reputation was ruined.

Chapter 72
King of the Underworld (23)

Brendel nearly allowed his sword his sword to clatter on the ground when he finally realized who the fourth person was.

It was his grandfather.

The former Brendel did not have fond memories of his grandfather when the latter trained him during his childhood.

A certain fragment floated before Brendel's eyes.

The taciturn old man forced the boy to measure the distance with every single thrust and was not allowed to make a mistake. If the boy was off with his attack, then his grandfather would parry against his attack and wound him with welts that lasted for days.

Brendel closed his eyes to reflect on his state of mind when he felt certain sections on his skin crawl. When he opened them a second later, the sensation was gone.

[These are people who had defeated me in one way or another. Buga was the last person I fought who used his Element Power and forced my loss. Tirste nearly killed me with his thrust. Ebdon proved to be stronger against me when I fought against at my level. Finally, my grandfather whom the former Brendel had never won. But this is a challenge in skill where all our stats are equal…]

Brendel sifted through the fragmented memories of his grandfather and his former self.

[An orthodox swordsmanship. Straightforward offense and defense. My grandfather doesn't seem to be very impressive. In terms of swordsmanship, Ebdon probably has the best swordsmanship, since he retains his knowledge of his past life. Buga is troublesome because of his two-step attacks that are just filled with power and speed. Tirste's swordsmanship is mostly based on fencing.]

Tirste, who had an oddly seductive appearance for a man, relied on his Gold-ranked stats to overwhelm the opponents with quick thrusts. The Duel of Ordeals limited him the most since his swordsmanship relied on stats to make it work.

Brendel glanced at each of his opponents while they slowly surrounded him in a circle. He decided to go after Tirste as it was annoying to deal with thrusts, but the situation was still unfavorable since he had to fight against numbers.

Once the Coliseum of Destiny accepted a challenge, there would be no possible way to stop it other than losing and surrendering.

Although the youths at the walls were not able to read what the rules were, they realized the difficulty of the challenge went up each time. It might be possible that the opponents were strong enough to resist Brendel's strange power. Some of them clasped their hands tightly and hoped they were wrong.

Kodan stood there in momentary shock. Even if he went inside to substitute Brendel, he felt that he would not be able to do anything. Torbus's skill in the sword would easily defeat him every single time.

[I'm not sure if he's the real or it's just an illusion. But if he's real, I hope he goes easy on his grandson.]

"Watch out!" One of the youths yelled out.

Tirste made the first move. Even though his speed could not be seen as quick, the path of attack he had chosen was in Brendel's blind spot.

The warning was well-timed.

Brendel's head shifted slightly to allow his line of sight to reach Tirste's position and swung his sword behind his back, causing the latter's thrust to veer off its target.

[As expected, Tirste's fencing swordsmanship isn't impressive. Around the skill of a level 40.]

The initial exchange between their swords made Brendel feel that the latter's threat was lower than he expected.

His other three opponents started moving once Tirste attacked. Brendel leaped back

and knocked into Tirste as hard as he could while continuing to face them.

The viscount stumbled a few steps and Brendel elbowed his abdomen as hard as he could. The impact sent him sprawling onto the floor, but before he could give the finishing blow with his sword, Ebdon swooped into Brendel's front with burning white flames in his eyes, while Buga approached squarely from his back.

[These bastards really know how to work together,]

Brendel cursed in his mind.

He dared not to engage them from the front and back as it would spell certain death. He hurriedly avoided Ebdon's overhead slash, kicked off the ground, and rolled across it to distance himself away from the two incoming men.

The Pale Knight immediately followed up with a technique. Two slashes that came in the form of a vertical and horizontal direction were released to Brendel's direction.

[It's one of Madara's Arte, Cross Strike!]

Brendel pushed himself off the ground and leaped into the air with a somersault, avoiding the well-known technique that was easily fatal to many in the early game. Madara's military swordsmanship pursued close combat with speed and strength, but Cross Strike was one of the rare ranged attacked it had.

Ebdon's technique sent a small storm of dust into the air, and Brendel narrowed his eyes a little when he landed on one knee. But before he was able to stand, Ebdon's sword traveled a straight line to his neck.

Brendel gritted his teeth and received the attack with his blade. Steel clashed together, but Brendel managed to subtly angle his sword and push Ebdon back. But his counterattack was stopped short when a heavy greatsword appeared from the left in his eyes—

Buga's greatsword made Brendel retreat yet again.

Ebdon did not miss the opportunity and once again went on the offensive. His two opponents tightened the space where Brendel could retreat in just a few moves. Since his blade could only parry another at any given time, it made most of the people feel that he was going to get cut down at any given time.

And that moment came. Ebdon and Buga's attacks came together at the same time where Brendel had no space to evade. Screams leaked out of several people's voices, but Brendel pulled one of the stolen guards' swords and parried both incoming blades.

Unfortunately, the strength of his left hand was not the same as his right.

Buga's greatsword changed direction, but before it did so, it managed to slice across Brendel's face, and the latter sucked in the dusty air with a hiss. He immediately cursed in his mind.

[Fuck, why can't you pick somewhere else instead of my face!]

The youth's body quickly turned around with the aid of Buga's attack. He first pried open Ebdon's defenses with Frontal Assault with his left sword and unleashed Power Break on the other.

The Pale Knight was sent flying back; his sword was blown away and became embedded in the ground.

[Pity. I can't chase him because Charge isn't based on a sword technique. It's dangerous to chase Ebdon without it.]

Brendel's mind remained clear. An ordinary person might have chosen to rush out and try to strike Ebdon while it was down, but the first directive of Madara's Military Swordsmanship was to exchange blow for blow if it was unavoidable. An undead was dead, after all, so why would they bother to defend themselves?

As expected, Ebdon immediately went for its sword, instead of fleeing to allow the others to cover for him. Brendel took one step towards the undead general before stopping.

This action made the latter believe the youth's attack was coming, and it went further into a defenseless stance to allow rotational strength to be added to his blade.

Brendel took another step.

A powerful roundabout swing that hit nothing because Ebdon misjudged his opponent's distance.

But Ebdon's military swordsmanship hid a trap in its attack.

The opening that it showed to Brendel afters its wide swing was even bigger than before, If he took the bait, its blade would be swung once again. And with Brendel's third step, it thought that it had the youth right where he wanted.

Brendel soared to the sky.

The swing of Ebdon's blade cut nothing but empty air.

Tirste had gotten up a few moments ago and rushed to Ebdon's side to help it, but Brendel flung his sword at him with Power Break in mid-air, and the projectile forced Tirste to guard against it. His advance was stalled and his fingers trembled after deflecting the sword away.

Ebdon's counterattack had completely left itself open. Buga was on the other side and could no longer tie Brendel down.

Brendel sailed through the air in an elegant arc and thrust Kodan's sword—

Time seemed to slow down when people realize that Brendel's attack was going to pierce through his target.

Everyone watched with bated breaths. This battle was different from the past yet again. Unlike the duel against Varian, Brendel's dazzling skill in the sword was seen for the very first time. Even though it was not as grand as the battle against the Type IV hunter Knights or the dragon, they still felt as though they were intoxicated.

The youths did not really understand the level of skill presented before them, but they could see that Brendel had completely overturned a supposedly impossible situation and gained the upper-hand once again. This was even crazier than the stories in the inns, where the protagonist in front of them would keep on winning against the odds—

But the script did not progress as they thought it would.

Brendel's eyes saw his grandfather stay rooted in the very same spot since the beginning of the battle. He did not understand why the latter did not move, but there was no possible way that Ebdon could be saved now.

Reality betrayed his convictions.

A terrifying wail broke across the air like a whip and Brendel felt his hair standing up in terror. He could certainly pierce through Ebdon's throat, but if he did so, the wind blade from his grandfather would cut him into half.

The youth immediately turned his body and launched his own White Raven Sword Arte. An explosive blast of wind immediately hurled him across the stage, and he crashed into the ground, rolling across it several times uncontrollably before stopping himself by digging his sword into the ground. His fingers were numb and throbbed painfully—

[I lost in technique?]

Brendel was shocked.

While it was true that he could not unleash the full potential of the White Raven Sword Arte in his position, he knew that he would lose even if he had his feet planted on the ground.

The youths uttered cries of pity when they saw Brendel knocked away in mid-air, not knowing his plight.

"Torbus's skill is much weaker than before. What's going on?" Kodan frowned deeply.

Brendel's opponents slowly surrounded him again. But this time they were cautious enough to stop and observe for signs of a weakness first. The youth hurriedly arranged his thoughts.

[The Coliseum of Destiny created my opponents based on the skill what they had shown in the past. It's not unlike that Golden Demonic Tree. Buga and Tirste did not use the full extent of their skill when I encountered them, so they definitely don't reflect their counterpart in reality. But my grandfather—]

Brendel was momentarily confused.

He could not remember much about him, but the level of his grandfather's skill exceeded even Kodan, who was the strongest swordsman he had seen so far. Did the Coliseum of Destiny dig into some subconscious memories that he did not know of?

The youth believed he would find out the truth once he crossed swords formally with his grandfather. But he was still disappointed that his efforts were fruitless at the very

end of the attack and even lost part of his stamina.

Chapter 73
King of the Underworld (24)

The second round commenced with Torbus leading the attack and Brendel immediately shied away. The position he was in did not allow him to fight against four opponents.

His target was Tirste yet again, and he unleashed the full extent of his military swordsmanship against him. The tip of his blade wavered at different vital points, making it difficult for Tirste to know where the blade was going to go next.

Brendel's sword went for Tirste's fingers, and the latter was barely able to deflect the attack in time. But the youth's deflected sword seemed to correct itself into another path of attack and succeeded in wounding Tirste's left leg.

The androgynous man staggered backward, but Brendel did not follow up and retreated instead, as Torbus had come in with a straightforward slash from the sides.

Rushed footsteps shuffled across the floor as three blades tried to cut the youth in three different directions, and he soon suffered another wound.

Metal clashed desperately with each other as Brendel tried his best to whittle his opponents one at a time, while completely avoiding a match with his grandfather. However, his three other opponents seemed to pick up on what he was doing and were content to let Torbus take the charge and lead them.

Brendel seemed to look like he was doing fine to most of his spectators, but the truth could not be further away.

His grandfather did not show that earlier attack, and fought with incredibly simple strikes and thrusts. That was when Brendel knew that he was not entering into a match of skill, but one of attrition.

His grandfather was spending a minuscule of stamina to exchange for Brendel's desperate defense, forcing the latter to exert a considerable amount of energy, and this plan was working because of the two to three different points of attack from his other

opponents which he needed to defend against.

And it was getting only harder.

The coordination of the three swordsmen was getting better and better. He knew that the illusionary equilibrium between them would be shattered once he made a mistake.

[It's fortunate that I got an increase in my military swordsmanship against Kodan earlier, otherwise, I would have been cut down several times…]

In the previous fight against Kodan, Brendel had forcefully incorporated his knowledge of Kirrlutz's swordsmanship from the game into his core Aouine's military swordsmanship from the system.

Kodan's usage of Aouine's military swordsmanship was powerful strikes that linked from one point to another, allowing for endless variations to keep on attacking.

But Brendel's usage of Aouine's military swordsmanship was based on the gamers, where attacking was based on feints and counters that could be repeated again and again with incredible efficiency. In addition to this style, he added in Kirrlutz's Flash Strikes which were aggressive and lightning fast.

This pattern had caused Kodan to hesitate in his attacks, and he was now using it once more against his opponents.

But it was primarily because of Brendel's incredibly extensive knowledge of the different types of swordsmanship that saved him.

His eyes were concentrating so hard on his opponents that he picked up even the slightest movements of their muscles, and his body responded to the amount of information that was fed to his mind.

Each move from his opponents could be identified and dealt with accordingly, and the exchange of defense and offense continued.

Seconds turned to minutes.

Despite his utmost efforts, the wounds that Brendel suffered were starting to pile up. The noose was tightening around Brendel's neck as he was forced closer and closer to the barrier's edge.

Brendel's body and mind were screaming with pain. His breath became shallow and the corners of his eyes were darkening. His thoughts became sluggish, but his counters against his opponents still happened.

Each time Buga, Tirste, and Ebdon attacked, he was able to send back a flurry of attack and feints instead of purely guarding against them.

The unification of the gamers' use of Aouine and Kirrlutz's swordsmanship was happening right before his eyes, turning the efforts of the gamers' research into reality.

[No, it has exceeded the previous world because there are elements of the military swordsmanship from this system that I'm using as well—]

Brendel's mind suddenly sharpened when he realized he was undergoing a metamorphosis.

He took a step back as he deflected Tirste thrust to send it to Ebdon's incoming sword, then parried Buga's greatsword with Power Break to force the gigantic weapon down so that his grandfather's attack faltered slightly, then borrowed the strength of his grandfather's affected slash to take another step back.

The White Raven Sword Arte struck against the floor and sent dust flying into Ebdon's helmet and Tirste's eyes, momentarily blinding them. The inferior Flash Strikes technique that he emulated was swift enough to pierce through Buga's defenses and caused him to bleed.

[While the system doesn't recognize my efforts officially, it seems that I'm capable of executing the techniques to a certain extent with my stats and Military Swordsmanship rank.]

He was not the only person who noticed his change.

Kodan was able to perceive it as well, and he could not help but be jealous of Brendel's talent that seemed to increase to no end in sight. If he was the one fighting on the stage, he thought that he would not be able to last more than three rounds of attacks from the four opponents.

The way how Brendel managed to defend against their attacks appeared as though he had fought against them hundreds or even thousands of times before.

It made no sense to Kodan, but he could only attribute it to Brendel's talent. And the fact that he merged Kirrlutz and Aouine's swordsmanship made it truly unbelievable.

[This isn't any of the sword styles taught by the Guardian Spirits… This boy, is it true that he doesn't know what that term means? How can this be!]

Kodan's questions continued to pop out one after another. The legacy item of Torbus was in Brendel's hands, Yet it seemed like he had no idea what it was.

And even without the aid of the Guardian Spirit, he still managed to become a Gold-ranked swordsman.

[Is this the meaning of talent?]

Brendel went all out against his opponents.

In a moment of folly, Tirste had made a mistake and allowed Brendel to disarm and kick him away. Buga received a punch to his throat and allowed Brendel to get him off-balance. He was then flung to the other side of the stage.

His grandfather directed his blade to him in an overhead chop, but Brendel managed to defend against it by taking out another sword with his left hand, and intercepted it with the aid of Power Break, while his right hand struck out the White Sword Raven Arte against Ebdon, forcing him to retreat to the side as far as he possibly could to avoid the wind slash.

[Time to duel!]

Brendel roared in his mind.

There was no doubt he had to take down his grandfather first. Every time he launched a fatal attack on the other three opponents, his grandfather would obstruct it and nearly caused him to receive a fatal attack instead.

The youth discarded his left hand's sword and went back to a single weapon. Time seemed to slow down as he unleashed the full extent of his techniques against his current opponent.

And he discovered that his grandfather's swordsmanship changed.

The simplistic thrusts, slashes, strikes, and chops suddenly took on an additional trait.

Endless.

An endless array of defensive lines. A perfect sphere where no attacks could penetrate through his grandfather's defenses. If Brendel was able to activate his Analyze skill, he was certain that he would see how exquisitely precise his grandfather's use of Aouine's military swordsmanship was. Each feint that Brendel made was useless because his grandfather's blade seemingly mirrored his own, always ready, always there to impede whatever attacks that he had planned in mind.

Kirrlutz's swordsmanship was almost laughable. It was utterly useless. Even though the tempest-like attacks from Brendel seemed like he was forcing his grandfather back, he knew that the latter was purposely retreating in order to conserve stamina. A single step and a shift in body posture to let an immature thrust go past effortlessly.

Each time Brendel took a step forward made him feel like he was getting caught in a trap. The techniques of the gamers were somehow getting analyzed in full by his grandfather, and each time their blades met, he could not help but feel that a counterattack would come.

Cold perspiration had already drenched all over his body from the intense pressure.

He had no choice.

He admitted that his grandfather's knowledge of Aouine's military swordsmanship exceeded the collective research of the gamers in the past world.

The exchange between them continued till Brendel went past half the stage. His grandfather finally made his counterattack as though he was satisfied that the youth's swordsmanship could no longer present a threat to him.

An explosive clash of metals echoed throughout the Coliseum.

[Again… It's my loss.]

Brendel nearly dropped his sword from the impact and staggered backward, while his grandfather stood at where he was. He had put in everything to make a contest of power. The result was having his fingers feeling nothing.

He stared wordlessly at Torbus. He still had not given up.

[Would deception work? Should I try and create an opening to let my grandfather make a mistake?]

There was a chance since he had the ability, Unyielding Will. A bait that might entice even the latter. But Brendel's instincts told him that it was highly unrealistic.

At this moment, Kodan shouted out to him.

"Boy!"

Brendel's exhaustion was at its peak. He could barely recognize that it was someone from the outside calling out to him, but he did not understand why the old man would want to distract him, and was a little annoyed.

[Are you trying to get rid of me at this time by distracting me?]

"Where's your Guardian Spirit?" Kodan yelled.

"This again?" Brendel muttered to himself.

Kodan realized that Brendel truly had no idea what he was talking about, and corrected his words.

"Your ring, use your ring!"

[Ring of the Wind Empress? But skills and items unrelated to sword techniques are sealed.]

The youth did not bother to reply.

The old man was taken aback when he saw Brendel's displeasure. He suddenly understood the problem.

"Boy! Wait, I'm not asking you to use it. Express your desire to the ring and wish on it with all your heart! That ring contains a secret! Your grandfather has used it in the past in the same way!"

Brendel finally looked back at Kodan with surprise.

Kodan jumped a little when he saw Torbus moving. “Watch out!”

Brendel suddenly felt death creeping up to him. The sudden distraction had momentarily caused him to lose his concentration—

Chapter 74
King of the Underworld (25)

Brendel's head immediately snapped back, but his reaction to his grandfather's longsword was slow. It was an unerring thrust imbued with a technique similar to Power Break, no, a technique that was superior to it. It felt as if the blade's sharpness had already reached his heart before it even reached him.

Brendel's heart palpitated. Blood rushed to his head, and he faintly put in the idea to swing his blade upwards to try and divert the attack as much as possible, while his body sunk a little to evade the sword's path. But the fatal thrust seemed to follow his heart like a magic spell.

It was too late. Brendel felt the metallic feedback from his sword, yet Torbus's sword was not deterred in the slightest in its path. Cold steel reach his skin and broke through.

[I… failed? But I haven't succeeded in the things that I needed to do yet—]

Brendel's cry of lament echoed in his mind. The amount of effort that he put in for months and had risked his life repeatedly to save the kingdom was all for naught. Frustration assailed his heart and he could not help but tear up.

Pain flared through his flesh as his opponent's blade continued to reach for his heart. It was all over. Brendel's thoughts could not help but think back on the people he had encountered in this world.

A second passed.

Brendel had taken a step back when he felt the impact from the blade. And he was immediately bewildered. How could he possibly be pushed back like he was being struck by a blunt weapon? When he glanced at the trembling blade in his chest, he was shocked to find blue light emitting from the wound.

An unknown power was pushing the foreign body out of his chest with force.

An explosion rang out.

Brendel and Torbus hurled dramatically away from each other.

Screams and yells rang out from the coliseum when they saw the youth getting run through with a blade, then confusion set in when they saw a blue light forming into the shape of a human figure, standing between him and his grandfather.

Very quickly, they saw that it a translucent woman who had long hair going past her shoulders. She wore an Elven longsword on her sword belt while fully clad with plate mail armor.

Kodan blinked several times when he saw Brendel's Guardian Spirit. He thought the Guardian Spirit was going to be Torbus's former Guardian Spirit.

[Certainly, there are females amongst the Twenty Four Knights, but I really did not think the one who answered him would be a female knight.]

Kodan was shaking his head inwardly. His own Guardian Spirit was the Wind Destroyer, Suorat, while Torbus had the Grey Swordsman, Grice. The female knights amongst the Guardian Spirits had their own swordsmanships as well, but surely they were unsuitable for males.

In addition to that, there was even a female knight whose main weapon was a bow and not a sword. When he took a second look, Kodan thought it was probably not the female archer, as the description of her appearance was a ponytail along with a long cloak.

But one thing was clear. This was truly Brendel's first encounter with his Guardian Spirit given his stunned expressions.

[If this boy managed to climb to this level of skill without unsealing his Guardian Spirit, then how far would his limits be in the future!]

Kodan was unable to gauge.

But unlike what the spectators were seeing, Brendel was experiencing something entirely different. Time had slowed down in his vision. Noises ceased and he was in an isolated space.

It was similar to the first time when he encountered Tuman.

He did understand, however, that the Ring of the Wind Empress had something to do with his situation.

[How's this possible? Even the Planeswalker's abilities were shut down, so how did the ring work in this duel?… Unless the Laws of the ring are similar to the Coliseum of Destiny, and it became a loophole.]

"Boy, this is the second time that I have saved you."

A beautiful voice wormed inside Brendel's ears from behind. It was filled with an elegant, aristocratic-like tone. Brendel could only imagine nothing but a woman filled with exquisite charm.

"Who're you?" Brendel was shocked, whirling around to find a stunning woman with Elven features on her face.

He didn't know there was a third soul in his body ever since he teleported to this parallel world.

"I'll explain these things to you later. This isolated space cannot last. Your improvement is certainly incredible, but it's still not enough to deal with these enemies. Let me use your body."

Brendel jumped a little upon hearing that. There were spirits and ghosts possessing bodies in the game, and he retreated hastily. But the Elven woman beckoned to him and his body, or soul, walked towards her while ignoring his commands to stay away from her.

He found himself merging with the spirit.

And he was back into reality. The woman who suddenly appeared on the stage had disappeared. His opponents looked around in confusion, but they did not stand idly and cautiously surrounded him.

"Don't be afraid," the female voice in his head spoke, "concentrate and observe the ring in your hand."

Brendel's mind spun quickly.

[The real Ring of the Wind Empress? Osor's Divine Artifact, The Wind Empress's Lament? How's that possible, and how did my grandfather have a ring that's at least a Fantasy rank?]

The true Ring of the Wind Empress that the gamers found was an artifact that allowed one to implement an Aura of Wind Element. It bestowed the ability to control the Wind Element Power temporarily and went past the simple spell of a Wind Bullet from the replicated rings.

Yet a spirit or soul suddenly appeared out from nowhere from this supposedly fake ring in his hand. It was as if the gamers had it wrong, and the fake replica was actually the real deal.

"Boy, stop getting surprised," the female voice urged, "quickly get used to it and focus. I can only manifest in my state for a short while. This isn't the proper way to activate the Holy Seal."

"The Holy Seal?"

"The reason for our manifestation is to pass our legacy to the ones worthy of succeeding it. But you're in danger and require my assistance, so I'm forcibly breaking the Laws of the Holy Seal and manifesting myself before you. I need you to unseal the ring so that I can lend my knowledge to your body and mind through it. I'll explain the matters concerning this to you in the future—"

Brendel was still confused, but understood the danger he was in and quickly studied the Ring of the Wind Empress.

A brilliant flash of light poured out from the ring—

Brendel suddenly stood up and roared, and a dominating aura filled the stage. It stopped his opponents from advancing any further.

Knowledge poured into his mind and his body became lighter. One thing immediately came to his mind as familiar techniques came rushing back to him—

[I have returned as the warrior in the game.]

– Ring of the Wind Empress (Unsealed)

– +1 Agility

– Magic spell: Wind Bullet

– Holy Seal activation: Guardian Spirit has been released.

– Possessed state.

– Shared techniques are available.

Green words appeared in his retina.

[…Guardian Spirit? That's a term I have never heard before in the game.]

Two terms caught the youth's attention. 'Possessed state' and 'Shared techniques'.

Brendel easily understood the first term.

Was he possessed by a spirit? Or ghost? Or soul?

It usually indicated some kind of debuff, and gamers understood that warning well enough.

The second term was familiar as well. This term was typically reserved for wizards in the game where large ritual spells were cast. Many people to 'gain' that spell through the main caster. It was the same thing when he used Medissa's techniques just a few minutes ago.

He suddenly became curious about the description in his Stats Window and opened it. He once again froze in shock.

He still held his old titles: Commoner, Militia, Mercenary, Elementalist, Scholar. There were skills as well attached to the various professions as well.

But there were three new professions.

– Swordsman

– Sword Saint

– Knight of the Seal.

[The first two professions are easy to understand. The former is a basic profession for a player, while the Sword Saint is a popular Advanced profession. I have never seen the third profession before, but the thing that surprised me the most… Is the number of techniques and swordsmanships shared.]

There were ten-odd swordsmanships that were added to his stats window. Brendel certainly knew of them, but he did not expect this strange woman to be so skilled. There were less than twenty people in this era with her strength in the entire continent.

“Are you a Wind Elf?” He asked, thinking that she came from the distant past.

“Shhh,” the woman said, and Brendel felt an enjoyable sensation on his lips, as though she had placed a finger there, “the noble me shall answer your questions later. Pay attention, your enemies are about to approach.”

Brendel glanced at his surroundings. His four enemies had once again surrounded him.

“Here, let me help you out—” The woman said.

But Brendel refused immediately.

“No.” The youth flatly denied her.

“Hmm?” The female Elf was surprised.

“This is my duel.”

The system had restored his body and mind to be similar to his former body in the game. Once he had these skills, he was confident that he would not be any weaker than anyone here. Even if he was back in the War of the Holy Saints, he would still be considered one of the strong.

“Boy!” Kodan yelled out again.

He knew what had happened when he saw Brendel shouting earlier. His Guardian Spirit had also done the same thing of merging together with him when he was young,

and the amount of information transmitted to him nearly incapacitated him because of the pain. His Guardian Spirit had to unmerge with him in order to keep him conscious, and he assumed that Brendel went through the same thing.

And in the past, he had to deal with his danger with an incomplete understanding of the techniques that was forced into his mind.

“Knowing the techniques is different from executing them! Perhaps I can give you some pointers on using the techniques given to you! Tell me, do you recognize any of the swordsmanships?”

But he would never be to guess that Brendel was already capable of using the techniques available, and that he had even surpassed the techniques that were given by the system. In addition to that, the system handled the information overload and he was completely unaffected by the merging.

Chapter 75
King of the Underworld (26)

His grandfather took the lead to attack again, with the other three following close behind. It was the same strategy that they used earlier, and Brendel recognized that his stamina was getting low.

The youth decided on his swordsmanship.

He took out another sword from his back and fell into a familiar stance. It was a swordsmanship that his friend in the previous world was gifted in. He had put in considerable effort into it, but the skill ultimately clashed with his class and gave up on using it.

[Two selves. The first self shall perceive his surroundings and make the decisions, and the second self shall handle the body's power and control.]

A delicate balance was created from a near-meditative state.

"Duel wielding?! Boy! What are you doing? There's no one who's capable of executing a new swordsmanship just like that—"

Torbus was the first to attack.

[A slice to sever the jugular. Parry with the right sword, counter-thrust with the left sword.]

Brendel's machine-like efficiency nearly reached Torbus's level of control.

His grandfather retreated against his counter.

Then Tirste approached from the youth's right, while Ebdon moved in from the opposite direction.

[Tirste's attack is a feint. Ebdon's is using Madara's overhead strike. Step into Ebdon's space to take initiative.]

The youth lunged at Ebdon, forcing him to change into a defensive posture in a hurry.

[Parry against Buga's greatsword, then use Power Break and deflect it to Tirste.]

A loud metallic grind happened as he superbly changed the angle of Buga's two-handed attack, and stopped Tirste from approaching

Kodan's eyes nearly popped up of their sockets. If they were not properly affixed to his head, they would be rolling about on the ground. He recognized the Wind Elves' swordsmanship.

The Sword Dance of Wind.

[H-he's using the swordsmanship like he has been practicing for years— No, there's no hesitation in his moves at all. It feels like he has combat experience with the swordsmanship! What kind of talent is this!]

"Boy!" A female Elf's surprised voice echoed in Brendel's head again.

She had been with Brendel ever since he left Bucce. He had never displayed any signs of knowing Elven swordsmanship, yet his skill in it appeared like he had been using it for years.

"What is it?" Brendel's mind was clear enough to even squeeze in a reply to her, as though he was watching the duel from the sidelines.

"Your talent in the sword is truly enviable. I think that person is the only one who can match you." A soft sigh escaped her throat, and it nearly crashed his perfect state of mind when he listened to it with a hundred percent focus.

He did not know who that person was but made a guess that it could have been King Gatel. The latter was considered the best talent during the era of War of the Saints. Even if there were countless prodigies back then, he still stood out amongst them.

Confusion set amongst his opponents with the exception of his grandfather.

The old man rushed into Brendel's space with a defensive approach meant to wear him down, and the youth felt a cold dread in his head when he saw the other three opponents realized the strategy.

Not only was his grandfather's skill outrageous, he was fighting with the ability to command.

[Just who exactly was my grandfather? Damn it, the others are coming back again.]

A storm of blades struck at Torbus, while he suppressed his other three opponents. The reversal between Brendel and his opponents had already shocked the spectators. It was especially potent amongst the youths, who believed Brendel to be the equivalent of a God of War.

"As expected of the former owner of the ring. His skill is impressive." The female Elf said with admiration.

Brendel did not reply as his mind went into overdrive to find a weakness. Unlike the people watching from the outside who saw him suppressing everyone, he knew that his grandfather's defense was like an impenetrable fortress. Even if he was at his peak condition to use the Sword Dance of Wind, he was not certain that he could win.

In addition to that, the moment he tried going after the other opponents, his grandfather would rescue them out of danger with incredible accuracy.

[There's no choice. I have to switch back to a single longsword.]

Brendel did not wish to use the second swordsmanship he had reserved as a trump card because it would certainly drain all his stamina. There was no telling what would happen after this match because Medissa had been dismissed, and Scarlett lost her strength. What would happen if Kodan tried to take advantage of the situation?

He stopped his offense and retreated quickly. His opponents did not rush to pursue him.

The swordsmanship that he intended to use was the very same one that his previous avatar had used at level 130. The amount of time he had spent using it in the game exceeded all others.

This particular swordsmanship was passed down in history from the War of the Holy Saints and spread to the north, finding its way to a particular kingdom.

Brendel sheathed his left sword back into his belt and readied his other sword into an aggressive position. His legs nearly touched the ground as his body wound itself

tightly.

[The symbol of the Kingdom of Knights, and gamers had further improved it — The Swordsmanship of Charging Tempest!]

At that moment, it seemed like Brendel had cheated and activated the Sun Knight's Charge skill.

Tirste was surprised to see the youth suddenly appear before him. Torbus was in front leading them, not to mention that Brendel was supposedly a great distance away.

Buga and Ebdon were not able to see how Brendel did it too.

Torbus could only look back in surprise, but when he did so, he discovered that Brendel had already pierced through Tirste's throat.

"Boy, that doesn't appear to be my swordsmanship." The Elven woman looked upon the scene with astonishment.

"I adopted and improved it," Brendel said shamelessly.

Torbus caught glimpses of a sprint from Brendel that removed all semblance of defense or offense, and his center of gravity was so low that he might as well be running on fours. The latter did not waste any time and darted across the field to reach Ebdon next.

But before the youth could reach him, he found Torbus in his path. An explosive clash of steel happened between them and both took several steps back.

"Don't!" His grandfather's expression changed and he spoke for the first time.

This was the first time Brendel heard him speak, and the old man's surprised face quickly disappeared from his view.

It was because he had leaped into the air to avoid Buga's greatsword from behind. His grandfather's warning to the middle-aged swordsman was too late as the youth decapitated him from mid-air.

Ebdon was next to be cut down from the beast-like charge and it disappeared into a pile of black smoke.

Torbus had given up on defending the undead knight and merely stood there to wait for Brendel to get ready.

The youth was panting heavily and perspiration was pouring down his face. His muscles were trembling and straining with pain.

The Swordsmanship of Charging Tempest was different from the Sun Knight's Charge technique. The former relied on pure physical prowess, while the latter was a technique that had a waiting time before it could be used again.

His grandfather nodded to him, as though to signify they were ready to start their final duel. Brendel lowered his sword towards the ground and readied himself to sprint again.

Six consecutive flashes struck Torbus's defenses in different directions, with each attack from Brendel getting stronger, and the old soldier who survived the November War realized that the youth's offense had become great enough to distort his defense.

He would eventually be defeated if he just continued to defend. Waiting for the latter's stamina to run out was not an option anymore.

The seventh exchange would be the last.

Both of them concluded that thought.

Brendel did not hold anything back and used every bit of his stamina for his final attack. His grandfather's stance was nearly broken from the previous lunge, and he was certain that it would end in the next attack.

The distance closed rapidly between the two.

A sudden impulse struck Brendel.

Nearly a century worth of experience in the game was warning him that he was going to be killed. In his mind, he could see a sudden change in stance where Torbus would sacrifice his arm or his life to get in a strike.

It was all over for the youth.

The Elven woman had sensed the very same thing and concluded it as such, and she

instantly regretted allowing Brendel to continue dueling when he insisted on it.

But there was a reason why the gamers were able to surpass the NPCs. Their ingenuity was able to lead the techniques used in the game to greater heights.

The Charging Tempest Swordsmanship was originally developed for swordswomen in the past to use both power and speed. Multiple refinements were made to make sure that the body was allowed to remain balanced when it was used.

But gamers disregarded the notion of having it balanced all the time and instead overloaded it with speed and power.

The reason why Brendel was able to turn so easily despite that the increase in speed was having a pivot point. He had flicked his sword against the ground to control that balance every time it was required. When he saw his grandfather's change in stance, he immediately drew up his left sword and thrust it into the ground, allowing him to suddenly brake and instead soar into the air.

Torbus swung his sword in a clean line that should have cleaved Brendel into two.

Brendel's body spun multiple times in the air before he swung his sword in an overhead strike.

His grandfather had changed into an attacking stance and was thus not able to retain his unique defense where he was ready for every attack. He barely managed to meet Brendel's blade in time, but found that his sword was pushed aside from the youth's momentum.

Brendel's blade emerged from the other end of the old man's chest.

"How artful…" His eyes met Brendel's gaze as he spoke. "Well done, young man."

Torbus vanished in a pile of black smoke after his last words.

Chapter 76
King of the Underground (27)

“Currently, the only lift working is in sector a03, but mister Odum, are you certain you want to go down?” A worker said as his gaze shifted between Odum and Romaine.

He was leading Odum and the girl deep into the mining tunnels, and behind them were ten-odd soldiers.

Perkins had been completely frightened out of his wits because Kodan was gone for hours. When Odum appeared and requested to venture into the mines, he nearly jumped up in joy as the dwarf was the noble’s final hope to solve this situation.

As for the strange appearance of Romaine?

Perkins did not even realize a girl had appeared beside the dwarf, and even if he did, why would he interfere with his savior’s choice? Who was going to care if the dwarf was willing to bring his daughter into the mines?

Upon hearing the worker’s question, the dwarf snorted through his nose.

“That’s a stupid question. Why else would I come here?”

He glanced at the trembling soldiers behind him; they were obviously frightened from the mine’s rumors.

“You can go back if you don’t wish to follow us.”

The soldiers were relieved to hear that, but someone amongst them asked: “What if Lord Perkins questions us about it?”

“And what has that to do with me?” The dwarf growled.

Bringing these soldiers down was a problem for him since it interfered with his goals, but it was also true that he did not want to go down without any guards. There were many people who claimed they encountered monsters, and he might meet the damned

creatures along the way. Even though he was capable of using a weapon, he was not particularly good at it.

"…Just find an excuse, or is there not one amongst you lot who knows how to lie? I'm not going to expose you—" The dwarf continued after a moment of hesitation.

The soldiers finally nodded: "It's very thoughtful of you to think of our safety, mister Odum."

The group quickly reached the lift.

Romaine looked around curiously. If it were not for the fact that there were so many people, she might have fiddled with all the mechanisms in front of her. Just as she was hesitating, the dwarf prodded her and got her to enter the lift.

The worker who led them did not follow: "Mister Odum, I won't be going any further. Please stay safe."

"Naturally I'm going alone without the other miners or guards. You humans are really cowards."

The guards' expression contorted, but the worker responded with a little embarrassment on his face: "I assume the lifts for all the sectors are the same and there's no need for me to teach you how to operate this particular lift, right?"

"You do know that you're talking to a supervisor?" The dwarf rolled his eyes and operated the levers and the machinery started moving. It slowly descended and left the worker and soldiers behind, which then picked up speed and the walls quickly flew past the two passengers. The air was becoming warmer as well.

Romaine soon woke up from her docile state when there were no outsiders. She gingerly reached out to the walls flying past her eyes with her hand. Odum immediately smacked her hand down and glared at her.

"Lass, do you want to lose your hand?" He roared.

"I'm sorry!" Romaine apologized in an instant.

At that moment, the lift suddenly slammed against solid ground and both of them became unsteady on their feet. Odum lifted the torch and found the exit led to a

narrow tunnel that was filled with stale air. He thought for a while, shook his head and extinguished the flames.

[…Damn it. I forgot to bring along a Light Crystal. Even though I can take the lift back up and get from them but that's too shameful. A supervisor forgetting to bring the necessary items?]

Since he was capable of seeing things in low light, he decided to continue.

"It's really dark," Romaine said, her big eyes reflecting the incredibly weak light emitted from the minerals in the wall.

"Shhh! Just follow me!" Odum said.

"Why did you extinguish the torch?"

"Because we're deep underground and air is precious here."

"How about a Light Crystal?"

"I don't have that—"

"But it's so dark."

"There's no helping it!"

"But I really want to have a light source."

"Oh will you just shu—" The dwarf's words died in his throat. The area in front of him was softly illuminated all of a sudden. He blinked a few times and almost thought he was dreaming. He turned around with his beady eyes opened to the widest he could make them, and saw Romaine raising a glowing hand up.

"H… How did you do that?" Odum stuttered once.

"I don't know, my hand just lit up, how interesting!" Romaine turned her palm back and forth.

"You don't know?" The dwarf felt she was pulling his leg.

“That’s right,” Romaine nodded obediently, “I just want a light and my hand just lit up. Amazing, right?”

“This is the first time?”

“Yup.”

The dwarf tiptoed and touched Romaine’s forehead.

“Nothing, how strange,” Odum shook his head, “…I’ve heard stories about special humans shunned by wizards and witches because their blood carries mana in them— Did your family ever do the same thing like you are doing now?”

Romaine thought for a while: “Brendel says that my aunt’s a witch.”

“A witch,” Odum’s eyes became even bigger, “that’s impossible! Witches and that special… cannot coexist. Unless she’s not your real aunt, are you adopted?”

Romaine was cross. “My aunt is my aunt!”

Odum raised an eyebrow at her angry retort.

[That’s true. What does someone’s else family has to do with a dwarf like myself?]

He suddenly felt that he had more and more bad habits coming out ever since he met this girl. He scratched his head: “Very well, it’s good that we have a light source, follow me closely. Don’t lose yourself in this place alone. It’s not a game.”

“Understood.” Romaine nodded.

But this meek behavior only lasted for a few seconds as she pointed at something. “Odum, what’s that?”

The dwarf turned to follow her finger subconsciously and was taken aback by what he saw—

Chapter 77
King of the Underground (28)

The invisible barrier disappeared the moment Torbus was defeated.

Kodan lost his balance and nearly had his face planted against the ground, but he did not forget his skills at the last moment and managed to push himself up with a single hand, cursing audibly. He completely forgot to ask Brendel how the latter got Torbus's ring due to this distraction.

At the same time, Medissa reappeared where she was earlier and blinked in confusion.

Brendel was feeling vexed.

He was not certain whether his phantom grandfather had ever praised his past self. A warm joy seemed to spread out in his body, but part of him was still thinking about Aouine's swordsmanship used against him earlier.

[If this was a match that did not cap our stats, if that swordsmanship was a little faster… More than anything, that strangely defensive style seemed like that phantom was limited in many ways. That is surely not the limits of my grandfather]

He was hardly satisfied at his victory over the illusions because he felt that the future ahead of him was becoming uncertain. Was there going to be a duel in the future where he could not win even if he regained his former strength?

He stood there reveling for a moment as his emotions spun like a maelstrom, staring blankly ahead with his sword held tightly in his hand. After a long while, he finally noticed green words flashing in the corner of his vision, and shook his head, waking up from the daze.

A woman's voice rang out in Brendel's head as soon as he was done thinking, as though she had been waiting for him.

"It seems that it's not a coincidence that you're able to call out to me. Surely the word genius is insufficient to describe your talent in the sword."

Her voice was just as pleasant as before, tickling his ears and made him want to listen to more of it.

“Can you tell me who you are now?” Brendel asked with a slight frown.

The woman parted from his body again and presented herself before him. When Brendel looked at her again, he could not help but feel that her regal presence had a strong contrast to her mature beauty.

It was oddly alluring, and he even forgot to breathe for just a moment.

Her ornate trinkets around her head resembled the designs on a certain character in the War of the Holy Saints; it was just that the particular character wore a veil and he did not recognize her the first time he saw her.

“Orthlyss—” She began to speak.

“Wait, Are you one of the twenty-four…” Brendel interrupted when he suddenly realized who she really was.

He had suspected her to be a Heroic Spirit from an ancient era, but it took on a different meaning if she was one of the twenty-four knights of the Wind Empress, Osor.

“Interrupting me, boy?” Orthlyss pushed her finger against his lower lip with a smile in her eyes, “Yes, I’m one of the Wind Empress’s knight. You can call me by my nickname, Lyss.”

Brendel blinked a few times as he looked at her features.

[The Elves who became the Wind Empress’s direct knights were naturally the most prominent heroes of that ancient era. Unfortunately, they all perished in the battles against the Dragon of Darkness. In fact, Orthlyss’s the origin of the profession ‘Knight of Keen Blades’. The youngest and the last knight who was still alive in the Battle of the Grey Marsh, and the favorite disciple of the Divine Archer Suoya. In order to allow the King of Fire to advance, she died defending her route.]

The Wind Elves were just as famous as the Silver Elves, and when Brendel converted Orthlyss’s age into human years, she was no older than a sixteen-year-old.

[But she looks… Does age increase when one becomes a Heroic Spirit? Why does she

look so mature?]

“Why do you—” Brendel said, but quickly paused while he stared curiously at her and decided to ask something different: “Earlier, you said that it was the second time you saved me?”

“Have you forgotten the fire in Bucce, boy?”

The faint scars on Brendel’s body started burning as he recalled the event where the skeletons stabbed him with their swords. He then shuffled uncomfortably when he remembered his first fight against Ebdon, and the moment when his grandfather’s sword pierced through him.

[This makes it the third time I nearly died. I even thought that night was due to the skill ‘Unyielding’.]

He secretly let out a sigh in his mind.

“Thank you,” he said.

“There’s no need to thank me, boy. The noble me is your Guardian Spirit. Saving you is helping myself. I don’t want to sleep for centuries again.” She replied with a smile.

Chapter 78
King of the Underground (29)

“I had thought all the Wind Empress’s knights slumbered into their final rest, but to think that you have become Heroic Spirits,” Brendel said after a moment, “…can you tell me what a Guardian Spirit is?”

Heroic Spirits did not come from unfulfilled wishes or through sheer willpower.

It was through a complicated process held in sacred places, and an example was the Crimson Palace that was currently controlled by the Cathedral of Flames. The building was housing the Heroic Spirits from the War of the Saints and they nurtured the people who were anointed to become the Sacred Knights of Flames.

For a ring to be able to summon and link to the Wind Empress’s knights, it could only be said that the Ring of the Wind Empress was equivalent to a Divine Artifact.

“Guardian Spirits are actually Heroic Spirits carrying the name of the Wind Empress. Our Empress had twenty-four rings made and we sealed our souls into the rings. The other knights and I entered a contract with Mother Marsha to allow our souls to stay here in this world and nurture the next generation of heroes; youths who have potential like yourself. During our era, powerful souls were exceedingly important, because these souls became the best army to stop the Dragon of Darkness—”

“An army comprised of Heroic Spirits?”

“Yes. Be it the Wind Empress or the King of Fire, their abilities to create a Heroic Spirit came from the knowledge of the Dragons. The sages in our era also gained knowledge from the Dragons. It was a truly desperate war. You would understand how brutal it was if you were born in that era.”

Thoughts of the Silver Elves surfaced in Brendel’s mind. They were Heroic Spirits who willingly stayed behind to fight against the Darkness, along with Mother Marsha’s blessings.

[But there really isn’t a mention of the Guardian Spirits or other Heroic Spirits from

other races in the game. It's unlikely that only the Elves and Humans have Heroic Spirits. What about the other races?]

"What happened to the other Heroic Spirits from other races after the war is over? Did the contract with Mother Marsha somehow end after the various races established their kingdoms?"

"Unfortunately, I don't know what their fates were."

Brendel expected an answer like this. Orthlyss was killed in battle before the war ended, and it was a normal thing that she did not know what happened to them.

"Now that the war has ended, do you… regret being sealed in this ring for all eternity?"

Orthlyss looked at him for a long time before giving out a sigh.

"There was no choice." Each word was stated softly and slowly.

There was another long pause.

"If no one were willing to make sacrifices, then the Dragon of Darkness could never be defeated. And for the generations ahead of us, if there ever comes a time where evil surfaces, when will the flames of wars be extinguished if heroes are not made? We chose to seal ourselves so that civilization can continue."

He listened to all her words attentively in silence. The ancestors of the past were truly sages compared to the nobles in this era. Yet the wisdom and sacrifices offered by them to offer peace led to a moral decay after the various races lived in comfort.

"Ser Orthlyss," Brendel's tone was much more respectful than before as he changed to a new topic, "is it possible for me to retain some of the skills like before?"

"…I don't understand how you were capable of using the swordsmanships as though you've been training for years." She shook her head as she watched Brendel clear his throat. "It's the first time I've seen this. Do you mean to say that you have forgotten how to use them when I separated from you?"

"Erm…"

"In any case, it was a temporary solution to merge my body with you. I can, however,

teach you the swordsmanships like I'm supposed to. Reaching for the moon in a single day is supposed to be impossible, boy."

Brendel stole a glimpse at Kodan.

[A Guardian Spirit's task is to cultivate a person's talent as much as possible. A talented person with the aid of the strongest knights in the War of the Holy Saints as a teacher. Certainly, their growth would be incredible. Kodan's certainly outstanding as a Gold-ranked Swordsman, but considering that my grandfather displayed enough skill to threaten me even at my best, it's clear who is better—]

Brendel suddenly narrowed his eyes, and the Elven woman immediately did the same, even raising her head upwards as if to look down on him.

"The ring holds a limited amount of power. While it can be recharged over time, it's not possible for me to appear and save you all the time. Like I said, merging with you is a temporary thing. I know that I'm a noble being, but I don't have the power you're craving for, boy."

"Oh." Brendel's ears actually turned red. He was thinking that an incredibly high-level NPC was going to escort him while he went after the various quests in his plans.

"Do not forget this. The Guardian Spirits are only meant to pass down their knowledge. Four rings were circulated to the humans, and the reason why your grandfather had one of them is because the Elves owe your lineage a favor."

"My lineage? What is the favor?"

But Orthlyss did not reply.

[Is there a familiarity bar somewhere like how it is in the game? Maybe if I raise my familiarity with her I can squeeze an answer out?]

There was a considerable amount of freedom in the game where players could coax an answer out from the AI, but for certain legendary NPCs, there were conditions and they had to be familiar enough with the players.

Brendel toyed around with the idea before he pondered on the things that his grandfather hid from his family. He caught Kodan and Medissa waiting patiently at one side in the corner of his eyes, and realized he was still in the dueling ring.

The green words were still flashing in his eyes. It was probably because of this system that somehow blocked the announcer from starting the next match.

[There are far too many things to think about. The sudden appearance of Earth's languages; how this system works to interfere with the Laws of this world and vice versa. But I'm going to be utterly shocked if I ever get an answer from this place. The first thing I should do right now is to get the core reward, and release S—]

"Mister!"

Someone from one of the cages called out to him just as he started to walk over to the Dwarven sword.

Chapter 79
King of the Underground (30)

Brendel turned around to meet Cohen's eyes. He knew it was him who called out, but there was no real possibility that he could continue dueling. The difficulty in the Coliseum of Destiny scaled each time and the next round was most likely a match using Element Powers.

[Orthylss has already said that merging cannot be done again, and Medissa is a level 40+ character. I'm almost certain that the next match will at least be a level 60 NPC appearing. Since it's a contest of Element Powers, even if we're in our best conditions and I bring out all the Gold-rankers I have, it's unlikely that we will win.]

"I'm sorry, but I don't think I can help you." He said simply.

The truth was he had roughly guessed that the youths were the ones who had triggered this situation.

But it was him who led them to that mining spot. The fact that he failed to realize that there was something strange in the silver mines ultimately caused numerous deaths to the workers. He even dragged his subordinates into this mess.

There was a strange feeling in his mind when he denied the youths' request, but he ignored it and was prepared to go towards the sword again.

"Please wait, mister!" Cohen shouted after Brendel's back. "Perhaps we can come to a deal! You can choose to accept or refuse after hearing what I have to offer, please!"

Brendel hesitated for a moment and walked to the youths' cages. Listening to Cohen's final request with sincerity was something that he could at least afford to do, but he did not know what the latter was able to offer. The youths did not possess any abilities and were just mere workers. He even recalled that Maher had said that the Cohen owned something strange and worthless.

But what that sickly-looking youth brought out surprised him.

Brendel's expression changed to one of deep thought when he saw two Cards of Fates in Cohen's hands. He did not expect that the latter would be able to bring them out.

[I've benefitted greatly from the Planeswalker profession since it allowed me to handle situations that were supposedly impossible.]

He thought there might be a chance, though it was also true that he was greedy for them as a gamer.

He studied them through the system.

Fire Claw Lord

– The Flame Tribe I

– Costs 20 Fire EP

– Fire Lizardmen Warriors, Level 33 Elite

– Battle-thirsty

– When Fire Claw Lord enters the battlefield, all Fire Claw members gain +1 Command

– Pay 1 Fire EP, all Fire Claw Spearmen gains the ability 'Charge'

– Pay 1 Wealth and 1 Reputation per day when Fire Claw Lord is on the battlefield.

– 'The Fire Claw Lord is the best commander amongst the Army of Hellfire.'

Dwarven Treasure Vault

– (Visionary Artifact III)

– Costs 30 Will

– Artifact/Illusionary World

– Target a creature card (Dwarf or Kirrlutz Human). Target gains three appropriate equipment from Dwarven Treasure Vault

– ‘The Dwarven Treasure Vault glitters with golden light.’

Brendel read the cards through the system and regarded the first card with disappointment. It was not at a level where it would help in the next round, as the level 33 Elite creature was roughly the equivalent of a fighter that had just entered the Gold-rank.

“My lord, that first card is silver in color. Look at the title, that is most likely the core card of the series!” Medissa had followed him from behind and could not help but blurt out at the discovery.

Brendel was momentarily surprised and read the contents again.

[‘The Flame Tribe I’. The ‘I’ usually means it’s the best card out of the ‘Fire Claw’ series. Considering the fact that the card is silver in color, it also means that it’s a rare card to get as well. But even if I bring the two Fire Claw cards out, it’s not likely to make a difference in the next match.]

“Do you know anything about the other card?” He asked.

“An equipment card… You can try asking Ciel about it.” She said.

Brendel looked at her in surprise.

“We can communicate through such a long distance? Is there no limit between a Planeswalker and their summons?”

“I don’t believe there is, my lord. Ciel and I are naturally able to hear you calling out to us, while the Nightsong Tiger who’s the core representation of the Mercenaries of Lopes will be able to hear you.”

Brendel nodded and called to Ciel in his mind without wasting time.

“My lord, did you get something good again?” A youthful, relaxed voice rang out in Brendel’s head.

“How’s the situation at your side?”

“Haha, would you like to take a guess?” Ciel said, but after Brendel refused to reply, he coughed and continued: “There’s a fellow over here who’s suspicious about your

identity and requires you to educate him."

Brendel was puzzled over his answer, but he was currently in a considerably tricky situation so he explained the card quickly to Ciel.

"My lord, is the back of the card silver in color?" Ciel said.

"No, it looks like a normal card."

"A normal equipment card raises a summoned creature's level by 5. Take a look at a creature's card, my lord. I believe you can see a number painted there. Since the card gives out three equipment, then it will raise the target card's level by 15."

"…Numbers and levels, hmm."

"What's wrong with that, my lord?"

[Because the NPCs in the game don't use numbers and levels to describe a creature's strength. It's the first time that I realized this, but the fact that my system can accurately reflect a Planeswalker's card even though it has never appeared in the game…]

"No, nothing. I'm able to let you use this card, right?" Brendel said.

"I'm afraid not, my lord."

"Why is that? It says 'Kirrlutz human'."

"I'm a Highland Wizard, and my lineage comes from the Silver Alliance. Even though our blood is mixed with Aouine and Kirrlutz's lineage, the rules state that we are Galbu's descendants."

"I see, so no one can use this card."

"No, that isn't true. The Mercenaries of Lopes can use this card."

"Wait, what?" Brendel frowned: "Felaern and Dia are Wild Elves, and there are various mixed races that are not from Kirrlutz, and there are no dwarves in the group either."

"But the core of the group is the Nightsong Tiger and he's a true citizen of the Lopes

region. And that region is part of Kirrlutz."

"…Is this true for any group summoned cards, where a core creature would represent the description on the card?"

"Yes."

"I see."

[This card does seem better the Golden Battle Flag that I have. That card raises all my creatures level by 1, but what is the use of +1 level? In addition, I have to pay an extra 5 Light EP.]

Brendel's mind rearranged the information he had. If he was allowed to bring in the Planeswalker's cards the next match and added everyone in the duel…

[Insufficient to win the next battle.]

He made this conclusion.

"My lord," Medissa spoke in his mind, "I don't believe there's only one copy in each series. If it's impossible, we should give up on the cards."

Brendel rubbed his forehead thoughtfully.

[But the odds of getting the same card is really small. Once the chance to get it slips by, it's gone. Unfortunately, Medissa's right. This is impossible.]

He suddenly noticed Jana, Scarlett, and Orthlyss staring strangely at him. It seemed like he was blanking out almost every match and it would be shameful if he was seen as an airhead.

The way how Orthlyss spoke reminded him of his female senior, and he felt she would almost start teasing him any time now.

But his eyes went back to Cohen instead of explaining himself.

"I'm sorry, but I have to refuse your proposal," He said, and announced loudly to the ceiling, "Open her cage!"

He pointed at Scarlett's cage and declined the additional reward for winning the previous duel, but no sooner than he did, an unexpected voice suddenly called out to him.

"Brendel, you're here!" A crisp and pretty voice echoed throughout the stage.

His eyes widened and turned to the source of the voice subconsciously. His heart beat violently when he saw a familiar face that was filled with surprise and delight, and he could not help but clench his teeth.

[…Karma. This is karma for being greedy and not saving the youths and Scarlett straight away!]

He watched her run towards him in stunned silence as she clutched her large bag to prevent the contents from spilling over.

"Brendel—" She ran straight to him without paying attention to the others, her eyes slightly red. "I was really worried about you! My aunt isn't around and I thought if something happened to you…

When she came closer, she lowered her head and suddenly shuffled her feet together: "I know I shouldn't leave the angels' supervision and I'm going to get scolded again—"

She suddenly noticed Brendel's expression when she glanced out of the corners of her eyes. His face was a mixture of regret and bitter sorrow, and there seemed to be tears in his eyes. It was the first time she saw such an expression on him.

D-did I do something wrong?" She stuttered.

"…No, there's nothing wrong. I'm the one who's wrong." He said with a broken voice.

Chapter 80
The unexpected guests

Brendel finally understood what was wrong. The words he used against Makarov back then could now be applied to him. Was he any different from them when he turned away from the youths? If he rescued them instead of choosing the additional rewards, it might be possible for him to reserve the last chance to free Romaine.

[What a hypocrite. What happened to that oath to be generous and benevolent, or to be brave and unflinching?]

He cursed himself.

“Mortal, you have proven yourself. This is your reward—” The announcer’s deafening voice once again rang out at that moment.

The longsword that was embedded in the boulder suddenly vibrated loudly. It seemed to shrug off the invisible restrains on it and flew towards Brendel, making everyone gasp.

Brendel raised his hand and it flew straight into his palm, shaking unsteadily. The youth immediately felt a power rising from within, making him feel connected to the earth beneath him. It was as though he would never fall over as long as he stood upright.

The silent coliseum suddenly exploded with a chant:

“Z’roe! Z’roe! Z’roe!”

Everyone could hear that the waves of cheers were full of respect and harbored no ill intentions, though they were slightly dazed by the volume.

Brendel felt like he was anointed as a king by holding the sword, and he quickly shook his head to shrug off that feeling.

“Do you have any idea what Z’roe means?”

“That’s… actually a name. It’s the ancestral king of the Rune Dwarves, but that name eventually took on the meaning ‘Conqueror of the earth’.”

Brendel studied the blade and saw the words written on it. However, he was not surprised to find that it was written in English. Everything that could happen had happened already.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know what the words on the blade means.” Medissa also noticed the words.

“The owner of the sword shall rule the great earth.” Brendel said with a twitch in his eyes.

“My lord, you can read the words?” Medissa widened her eyes in shock. Even Orthlyss did the same.

Brendel rubbed his forehead as he noticed his mistake, and quickly made up a lie: “I studied the language amongst certain old books from the Black Tower.”

Medissa nodded, but the Knight of Keen Blades narrowed her eyes with suspicion.

Odum had been staring and marvelling at the architecture once he entered the coliseum. He was completely engrossed into the details and did not pay attention to anything else, until the ground suddenly shook and the Dwarven longsword went into Brendel’s hands. His expression immediately changed when he saw that happened.

[T-that’s the sword of Z’ore! So this is the treasure left behind in this place? But why did the sword go to a human. Wait, that voice earlier said something but I didn’t pay attention!]

Green words were filling Brendel’s eyes. He had heard of the blade and knew that it was a level 45 Fantasy blade. The price of it was beyond imagination when it was released in the game.

– Halran Gaia

– Gold-ranked rarity (Fantasy)

– 34-42 (Bludgeoning/Slashing)

– +22 Strength, +17 Agility, +20 Phsyique

– Additional skillsets:

– Earthquake: The wielder is able to automatically release an Earth Spike to their target (Affected by user's Strength stats.)

– Elemental Lord: The wielder is able to summon 6 Obsidian Panthers to battle.

– Nest of Rocks: Pay X Grey Crystal and X Rock Panther will be generated. One Rock Panther will be generated per day (10/300, automatic generation if crystals are paid.).

– Nest Upgrading is available to Obsidian Panthers:

– 1 x Black Mana Crystal,

– 1 x Rock Key,

– 1 x Sage Slate,

– 6 x Amber Gemstones

[This is incredible. The stats on this is at least a third higher compared to similarly ranked swords. I've heard rumors about the sword's abilities but to think this is actually a portable Nest that can be upgraded!]

The Ring of the Wind Empress was somewhat like a portable Nest as well, since it allowed a high-level summon to appear. While the Halran Gaia was a lesser version, upgrading the ability would mean that he could have three hundred Obsidian Panthers in a year, and each Obsidian Panther had the peak strength of an Iron-ranked fighter.

Not only that, portable Nests were typically allowed to be upgraded twice in the game, but this sword might be possibly unique enough for it to be upgraded multiple times.

Brendel's troubles were nearly swept away by joy at this discovery, but he quickly regained his senses. First of all, it did not solve the situation in front of him, and the second was how difficult it was to locate the various items required.

He sighed again. Suddenly he caught a dwarf not far away from the sobering Romaine.

[Isn't that the dwarf I saw in the inn? His name is… Odum? Why is he here?]

"My lord, is it possible to let me try again?" Scarlett had gotten out of the cage and moved unsteadily to the edge of the walls, seemingly ready to jump down from there. "I feel like some of my powers c—"

Jana suddenly pulled her away. She knew that Scarlett wanted to risk her life to save Romaine. However, as Jana observed Scarlett's frail body, it reminded her of her sister who had died at the hands of Graudin. She did not want to let another noble take the life of the girl in front of her.

"Let me go, Jana." Scarlett tried to shrug off Jana's tight grip, taking the latter aback.

Jana stared at Scarlett's fierce determination and slowly released her hand, and sadly watched the latter go back to the edge of the walls.

But Brendel's reply and solemn glare stopped Scarlett from jumping down. "There is no second attempt."

[Even if there is a new attempt, how much power have you gotten back? A silver rank? Your peak strength is a starting Gold-ranked fighter. You need to beat the Cerberus, a creature that Jana couldn't defeat by herself, to gain the permission to leave, then fight Varian. A hopeless attempt piled on another hopeless attempt.]

"Mortal, do you still wish to continue to challenge your destiny?" The announcer's voice finally rang out.

Brendel looked at the fretting Romaine who somehow realized the severity of the situation.

"I wish to delay my challenge!" He said, and the coliseum turned silent.

[Have I gotten numb to the loss of lives? Why was it okay for me to abandon the youths up there?]

Romaine was the first person he met in this world. In his mind, his character had been largely preserved by her innocence and silly antics even though he had to face countless bloodshed. She was also the person that the past Brendel was most fond of and someone the latter would never give up on.

In a way, her presence was even more important than the Goddess of War.

Freya represented the unfulfilled dream and regret that he had, while Romaine was the person who anchored him down to reality and made him feel less lonely in this senseless world. When he thought about it, the reason why he did not seek out his 'parents' in this world was because he was subconsciously denying his ties to this world.

[I can't make another mistake here. If I don't rescue Romaine, then I will never be myself ever again.]

"Your request is acknowledged, mortal," The announcer's voice finally spoke again, "a new mortal has entered the dueling grounds, will you challenge your fate?"

"Wait! Please give us a few minutes!" Brendel shouted.

He began to feel that it was fine for him to be turned into a statue with Romaine even if he failed, because he ended up doing what he wanted to.

"My apologies, Medissa," Brendel shook his head and gave the brightest smile ever since he came here, "it seems that you might have to wait here until the next Planeswalker comes along."

"That would be unlikely, my lord. When I was recreated with the Laws of this world, I glimpsed upon the world that you envisioned as a Warrior. Each Planeswalker has their own beliefs and thoughts, and the same card would likely summon a different person instead—"

"…I see."

"My lord?"

"Yes?"

"About Scarlett, have you realized that you're the only person she believes in after the Grey Wolves Mercenaries disbanded?"

"What?" Brendel looked at her with a frown: "I took in some members as well, right? And that Eke, if I'm not wrong, she likes him."

“Autn’sda’ttkares—” Came the reply.

[People are tied to one another…?]

Brendel silently recalled the Elven proverb used in the game.

The Elven girl continued: “When a person is treated with importance, that person will also treat them with importance. The Elves believe there are very few true friends in a single generation, and we treasure these relationships that rarely come by. I can feel my lord treating us with great importance, and Scarlett feels it clearly. I was an illegitimate child, but I can feel your respect and civility towards me, and I treasure it greatly—”

She smiled and nodded: “There’s no need to feel any guilt, my lord. I’m sincerely grateful to have met you.”

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