



琥珀之劍
Heroes of Amber

破曉之刻

緋炎

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緋炎 | PUTRON
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可歌可泣的故事，不在於英雄式的犧牲，
而在人們舉劍反抗的決心！

繁花與夏葉之年，第一次黑玫瑰戰爭爆發……
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面對無情亡靈引燃的烽煙，孱弱的蝶翼緩緩振動……

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The Amber Sword

– 琥珀之劍 –

**- Volume 3 -
Royal Authority and the Rose
(II)**

**-Author-
Fei Yan**

**-Artist-
Sadon999**

[WolfieTranslation]





Chapter 81

Difficulty

Maher and Jocah got upset when Brendel refused to accept Cohen's offer, especially when the sickly youth's hands grasping the bars slid down as though he had given up. Even if they were freed and went outside, it was a fact that they had caused this incident.

The conclusion was almost certain death for all of them even if they got out. If Cohen and the other youths could not be freed, they intended to stay behind.

Maher was especially vindictive against Brendel. The latter was at least a noble, and probably someone of considerable importance because of his combat skills. If it was not for him, they would not have been imprisoned.

[If that bastard loses, it's all worth it. Getting trapped with all of us is worth it to get back at him.]

Brendel was secretly thankful that the announcer gave him extra time. Perhaps winning the sword was the reason. He turned towards Romaine and said:

"Romaine, we will leave the stage. When the announcer asks you the question again, raise your hand and say that you're giving up, do you understand?"

"Y-yes. Brendel, did I do something wrong?" Romaine asked again.

"...No. I think that trying to do the right thing and failing is better than doing the wrong things to do the right thing."

Cohen suddenly shouted: "Mister Brendel, catch!"

Two cards left the sickly youth's hands and were flung to Brendel's direction. The latter turned around, saw his actions and waved his hand. A wind carried the two cards and allowed the cards to land on his hands.

"Are you crazy!" Maher looked at Cohen's actions in disbelief.

But Cohen gave a satisfied smile at Brendel's confused reaction and said:

"Mister Brendel, I don't exactly know why you came here. Given your skills, I'm sure that you will be highly regarded anywhere, even if you're not a noble. Why would the silver mines interest you? It doesn't seem like you came here specifically for rare crystals or to challenge this strange place..."

"But I believe you are destined for greatness."

"I don't know how the cards work, but I saw you taking and using them during the duels. I also noticed that you blanked out during the third and fourth duel and received cards, but you did not do so in the second duel."

"That means this Coliseum did not award you any rewards on that round because if it did, you would have at least told that rescued subordinate to wait for rescue, since you did so for your other subordinate during the third round."

"But I don't think that you are in the wrong."

"While you sought for power, you did not leave your subordinates behind and instead risked your life for them."

"We don't serve you, nor did we attempt to save our lives by making a deal with you during the start. Perhaps if I had acted sooner, there would be a different outcome."

"However, if I have to guess why you had to come here, it's something that has much more gain than just mere trinkets..."

Brendel's eyes widened when he realized Cohen was about to reveal his secret.

[T-this guy!]

"...Perhaps you wish to find a way to gain control of the silver mines?" The sickly youth said.

Cohen's words made everyone fall into a shocked silence, but he ignored them and continued: "I'm intrigued by Trentheim's new lord. As I've said before, I do not think you are wrong. No, on the contrary, I think you're on the path to be a wise lord, more so than the other nobles ruling these lands, and your name will surely be written in history books and sung in bards' tales."

He suddenly went into a coughing fit, and the girl beside him patted his back and supported him.

“We’re certainly insignificant people... and perhaps it’s too late for us to change our fates, but I can at least try to change yours. And if you do escape, I shall be part of your legend.”

Brendel stared at Cohen in complete astonishment. He did not know how to gauge the young man in front of him.

“I hate to disappoint you, but I might still fail the next challenge even with these cards,” he said.

Jana and Scarlett held their breaths when they heard his answer.

“Boy, wait, are you...” Kodan suddenly realized Brendel was going to attempt the challenge again.

Cohen suddenly laughed. “It seems that my lord did not deny any of my words. No, Lord Brendel, since you have already accepted the cards, I’m satisfied with whatever the results may be.”

The youths were completely dumbfounded by the chain of events.

They felt like it was the first time they truly knew Cohen, and they felt a little distant and worried about him revealing such a secret. Brendel might choose to silence him even before this place turned them into statues.

At the same time, they felt like they had to raise their heads up to look at him because he seemed to be sitting in a place unreachable by them.

In fact, he seemed to be sitting in a place where he could look at that noble, Brendel, straight in the eyes.

It was unthinkable.

Brendel’s expression changed a few times.

[This person’s insight is unbelievable. Did he reveal my secret because he knew that Kodan and I entered into a deal? Wait, perhaps this person is someone of

importance—]

“What’s your full name?” He suddenly asked.

“Cohen Kvaern. My teacher gave me that surname.”

[You’re that Lord Kvaern!?!... I see, so this is the person who eventually reached the pinnacle of power. I certainly remember that he lived in Trentheim when he was young. But how did he start gaining power? By simply acquiring coldsteel in the mines? Or is there still something else that he found?]

The history in the game had Lord Kvaern replacing Lord Randner, and he took over the latter’s entire territory. It was a legendary tale where he started from a commoner and eventually rose to the position of a duke.

Brendel furiously went through his memories when he realized a small possibility.

[Did I create this mess and changed history? Or is this possibly part of the history that’s supposed to happen?]

But the announcer’s voice finally rang out again, as though the coliseum was tired of waiting.

“Mortals, will you challenge your fate?” The announcer’s voice rang out.

“Romaine, give up on the challenge.” Brendel had no choice but to stop his thoughts: “You’re Odum, right? Go along with Romaine and give up, I’ll attempt the next challenge.”

“What did you say, boy?” Even though Odum’s voice was a little low because of his age, it was loud.

It was an insult to tell a dwarf to give up on a challenge, and no dwarf would back down from it because it was a cowardly thing to do. It was especially so when he was a Rune Dwarf with the bloodline of a Silver Lineage.

Not to mention that this was a sacred place where countless ancestors were watching him.

How could he back down right here?

“I might be old, but I will never back down! Especially when this place is the territory of us Rune Dwarves, you impudent brat!” Odum roared.

Kodan immediately smirked upon hearing Odum’s words. He had never heard such fitting words in his life, to the point that he saw the grumpy old man in a better light.

[Torbus’s grandson certainly has no manners, but—]

“Odum, why are you down here?” Kodan asked.

The old dwarf still had more complaints in his chest, but it quickly died down when he saw the Gold-ranked Kodan in an injured state: “Commander Kodan, what happened to you?”

“That’s because your Rune Dwarves’ territory is a fine place indeed,” the old man raised a bushy brow and replied with a huff, “come to think of it, are you not a Gold Dwarf? When did you become a Rune Dwarf?”

“I merely stayed in the Gold Dwarves’ territory when I was young, I’m a full-blooded Rune Dwarf!” Odum was furious to hear someone suspecting his bloodline.

“Fine, I’ll believe that you’re a citizen of the Silver Lineage, what are you doing down here?”

“I...” Odum suddenly blinked at Kodan’s sinister smile. It seemed like the latter had baited out his secret, and the old dwarf tried to think of an excuse while he stuttered.

Surely he could not say that there was a rumored legend where a treasure vault buried here and as a real Rune Dwarf, he had the authority to inherit it all? Leaving other greedy nobles aside, Count Randner would turn him into a genuine dead Rune Dwarf first.

“M-more importantly, why do you have Halran Gaia?” The dwarf tried to change the topic and turned back to Brendel.

“You recognize this sword?” Brendel looked at the dwarf and asked with surprise.

Even though Odum said he was the last bloodline of the Rune Dwarves, Brendel had encountered too many of such ‘last bloodlines’ in the game. The majority of them in the whole continent had already forgotten about their Legacies.

In fact, one could trace the current citizens of the continent back to the Gold Lineage if they tried.

But the era of the Gold and Silver Lineage were already over, and so was the Era of Darkness. The current Vaunte was a different thing compared to the past Vaunte where Gods and legendary figures were still around.

“Ahem, of course,... my lord,” Odum lowered his head slightly and spoke more respectfully when he remembered that the youth was carrying Halran Gaia.

The corners of Kodan’s lips went up to reveal his teeth. He suddenly felt disgusted at the sudden change of the dwarf’s attitude.

[Why is this old bastard changing his tune faster than that cowardly Perkins and sucking to the brat? I’ve experienced his stubborn attitude before. Sure, that sword looks like a good sword, but is it really that important?]

Kodan’s gaze went to the sword, and so did Brendel.

“Is this sword very important to you?” Brendel said.

He brought his sword a little closer to the dwarf, but he naturally had no intention to give it to him.

“Rather than it being rather important, it has something to do with a... legend.” Odum was a little disappointed in his heart.

There were many legends about the Rune Dwarves’ treasure vaults, but there was only one of the Halran Gaia. If the sword appeared here it meant that the sword was the only ‘treasure’ here.

[This is really such a waste of time. I waited years to get my chance to get nothing. I’m just a minor branch of the Rune Dwarves too. I didn’t even learn my ancestors’ architecture skills that rival Galbu’s Wizard Craftsmen...]

Chapter 82

Legacy

There was an indescribable feeling deep inside Odum's heart. The knowledge he had about the sword was a certain prophecy. Perhaps the reason why he stayed here for so long without giving up was that the place called out to him.

He stared at Brendel's sword again, hesitating.

[If I tell the human that the Rune Dwarves are required to acknowledge the wielder of Halran Gaia as our king and that the wielder would lead us to rebuild the kingdom, will he even believe it? But this is a damned human and a stranger at that, and I'm supposed to acknowledge you as my king? My poor old bones!]

"A legend?" Brendel said.

Odum gritted his teeth. He decided to weave a story and take his chances instead. He coughed loudly and continued: "I'm afraid that the legend is only for the ears of the Rune Dwarves. But it seems that you are interested in leaving this place, based on the earlier discussion?"

"Do you have a solution?"

"Yes, my lord," the old dwarf initially thought of using 'my liege' or 'your majesty' when he realized the youth carried Halran Gaia, but he felt the words were unacceptable to him, and probably everyone in this place would be shocked out of their wits, "the solution is actually very simple—"

He paused and carefully pointed at the sword: "If you lend me the sword for just a while, I might be able to let everyone leave easily."

"What?"

Brendel was surprised. His puzzled eyes went to Medissa who looked back just as confused.

“Odum, what the hell are you trying to do. Let me tell you that this boy is even more skilled in the sword than I am. If you try to pull off any strange tricks, be careful that your head gets cut off from your body.”

The old dwarf immediately thundered after he understood what Kodan was saying: “Everything I said is the truth, you damned—”

He suddenly realized that the guard commander was still someone powerful. Even though he was a stubborn person, he was at least not a fool: “This sacred place was constructed by us Rune Dwarves solely for the purpose of putting this sword here. Since Lord Brendel has already taken the sword, it shouldn’t be a problem to leave here!”

“There’s such a rule?” Brendel asked.

He had never heard of such a function in the game.

“Of course. My lord, the Legacy items of the Silver Lineage are meant for their descendants. However, you can be recognized as a person worthy of receiving the Legacy even if you’re from a different race,” The dwarf’s tone was once again different towards Brendel: “though, as a Rune Dwarf, I should be able to open this space if I wield that sword—”

Brendel glanced at Kodan, but the latter looked just as surprised as anyone else. Even though the old guard commander had worked with Odum, his understanding of the dwarf was merely the knowledge of how stubborn he was.

[There isn’t really a choice here. Even if this dwarf tries to pull off any tricks, the coliseum will deal with it. Probably.]

There was also a worming suspicion in his mind about Cohen, the appearance of the dwarf, and the gamers who completed the quest in the game.

It was only a short moment before he tossed the sword to the dwarf.

“Go ahead and try it,” he said, looking back at Cohen.

[It will be good if this works out for everyone.]

“Is there something you wish to say, my lord?” Cohen noticed his gaze and asked.

“It seems like you have a chance to leave your own name behind in songs and books.”

“Why are you so certain that he’s capable of releasing us?”

Cohen watched everyone leave the dueling grounds except for the dwarf who walked to the center, and he asked puzzledly.

“It’s just that I believe in history,” Brendel said.

“History?” Cohen repeated the word, not understanding.

But Brendel did not answer and merely watched the stage closely. The dwarf raised his sword and waited.

“Mortal, do you wish to challenge your destiny?”

“Yes!” Odum said in a thunderous voice.

But the gates were not raised and the coliseum was instead filled with silence. After a moment, the announcer’s voice came again: “I sense a familiar blood in you. Are you our descendant?”

“Yes, I’m a proud citizen of the mountains and boulders, the child of steel and fire, revered ancestors. For hundreds and thousands of years, we have experienced difficulty in the wilderness, but we finally managed to overcome all obstacles and come here to allow our souls to enjoy our deserved respite—”

“This is our homeland, and where we started from.”

The coliseum was momentarily silent, but the announcer’s voice bellowed:

“Respite? No, that moment has not yet arrived!” The voice echoed repeatedly, as though it was furious to hear the dwarf’s answer, while the place shook and made everyone unsteady on their feet: “Descendants of the Rune Dwarves! You have to continue to struggle against the Chaos and rebuild what we have lost with your Champion, only till then will your souls be welcomed back to this sacred place!”

“And that moment has arrived, revered ancestors.”

“...Is that so?”

The dwarf suddenly glanced back at Brendel with some hesitation and a little disbelief, but he raised the longsword in his hand.

“Dazzmoteshremm!” The dwarf yelled.

Brendel did not understand what it meant, but Medissa explained to him with a frown.

“It’s ancient word of making an Oath. I think it’s part of the Holy Alliance’s Contract during the Era of Chaos.”

[That contract from the Era of Chaos? That’s even older than the Era of Darkness’s.]

The lore in the game stated that every sentient creature in this world signed an alliance with Mother Marsha as the witness to fight against the Twilight Dragon, and a Law bound the alliance together. This was the era when the Gods still lived.

It was considered ‘meaningless background details’ by Brendel since the supposed Gods did not have any impact on the game.

There was another Holy Alliance’s Contract where the majority of the various civilizations fought against the Dragon of Darkness after the Twilight Dragon, but it was much weaker compared to the original copy.

Brendel did not know what the details of both contracts were, only that they were both divine artifacts.

Soon after Odum said the word, the entire coliseum suddenly shook and everyone was blinded by light. They felt like a seal was lifting, and knew that the dwarf was telling the truth.

However, Brendel saw something different in that rumbling space. It was as though he was hallucinating—

A strange painting appeared before him.

A black moon atop of a black lake, and in the center of the lake was a tall tower...

The painting changed and turned into numerous black-clothed men walking on an endless wasteland...

Black words appeared in his eyes:

- XVI: The Tower
- The Fallen 'Moon' has stolen the light.

[This looks like the image I saw during Fortress Riedon's escape...!]

- XX: Judgement
- The light has been lost.

Words continued to be written in his eyes.

- XVII: The Star
- The Silver Lineage is lost on the grand earth, advancing (seeking) on the thorny path in the darkness amidst ignorance.

Then the words vanished and he found himself back in the silver mines. He shook his head to clear his mind and saw Medissa looking at him with concern. He nodded to indicate he was fine.

When he glanced about, he saw Romaine approaching carefully bit by bit, as though she wanted to ask if he was out of concern, but was also afraid that she would be caught by him. He found Romaine's cat-like walk to be funny.

"You know, we really need to thank someone." He said to Medissa.

"Yes?" Medissa looked back in slight surprise.

"We need to thank Romaine for bringing us good luck," the youth turned around with a solemn face and his both hands pinched her cheeks with lightning speed: "right, little Romaine?"

"Ow! Ouch, hurts, it hurts, Brendel... I-I won't do it again..." Romaine's face did not escape his grasp, and she narrowed her eyes from the pain as tears nearly spilled out. She quickly admitted her fault: "I-I'm sorry, really..."

Her eyebrows were almost bunched together. She wanted to retreat, but was afraid to

pull back because of the pain, and remained stuck in that position.

Brendel glanced at the dwarf before he looked at Romaine again: “Do you dare to run about again?”

“I, I won’t...” The girl’s eyes went to the left and right when she said that.

Brendel sighed inwardly. She was definitely not going to change. But he decided to bring her along everywhere as long as they were traveling together. He was not going to be able to handle it if this situation had to happen again.

He let go of his hands.

The light disappeared and they found themselves back in the darkness.

“Why is it dark again?” Romaine’s voice immediately rang out.

“It’s because we’re back in the silver mines,” Brendel replied simply.

[I have much to reflect on... Earth’s languages, the fact that I chose not to save the youths, that the system is affected by the Laws of this world, and the strange images when I left that place—]

Brendel’s thoughts suddenly went to Halran Gaia. Now that he and his companions were out of danger, he could not help but get excited about having a new sword.

[But, well, I guess I can start thinking about the loot I gotten from that place first... Let’s see, upgrading the portable Nest: Tamar can make the Black Mana Crystals with a Black Crystal and Mana Fragments. A Sage Slate can be bought at Ampere Seale, though the battles at Chablis really makes me want to stay away from it. However, the Amber Gemstones are directly controlled by the kingdom, and a Rock Key is even harder to obtain—]

Chapter 83

Ambush

TL: Tirste is one of the important members of the Unifying Guild and nearly killed Brendel during their first encounter with each other.

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

As the beginning of winter approached, the forest of the Patalone region became devoid of life and the trees turned bare, but the creepy atmosphere made it seem as though monsters were lurking at each side of the main road.

The sounds of galloping horses could be heard from afar; eleven knights soon appeared and parted the thick milky mist and invaded the silent morning.

In order to maintain a certain speed, the riders allowed their mounts to run at a slower pace. Their destination was still a hundred miles away and they had to preserve the stamina of their horses.

All the riders, except one who had a long black robe completely covering him, wore a full set of heavy armor and were armed with swords and crossbows that occasionally peeked out from their cloaks. They were highly alert and their eyes constantly darted around them.

There were wild beasts that still lurked in the forest.

The riders continued to advance and soon reached a small river. The river's surface had not turned into ice yet and the surface was glittering in the day's light.

When they reached toward the bridge that crossed the river, the leader of the riders suddenly raised his hand in vigilance and they pulled their reins to halt the horses.

The same leader cut through the air with the same hand to his left and right, indicating that there were people ambushing the two areas. He turned his horse around and pulled out his sword that hung from his waist.

The riders quickly assembled into a circular formation around the person with the black robes to protect him. Their quick and orderly actions proved they were well-trained, and even the veteran scouts from Aouine's armies would not do better than them.

And with the actions of the riders, the forest also shuffled noisily. Cleverly hidden soldiers started pouring out from the foliage. They wore decorated leather armor, which implied they were private soldiers working under a noble. Each carried different weapons; axes, sword and shield, even crossbows.

The people who ambushed them launched a forceful assault when they realized they had been made, but the riders reacted more quickly and fired their crossbows at them.

The rider with the black robes was an exceptional marksman; he deftly equipped himself with the crossbow hanging from his waist and shot bolts at the attackers as they emerged from the foliage, reloading and firing with incredible speed.

The riders around him were skilled at shooting as well. Many of their bolts found their marks in the enemies' throats as the soldiers rushed toward the main road.

The remainder of the soldiers were smart enough to take cover behind boulders and advanced slowly, waiting for the riders' projectiles to run out.

After the momentary cat-and-mouse game they had, the riders ran out of ammunition, and the soldiers rushed at them once again.

The riders suddenly took out hand axes and flung them into the midst of the attackers. Screams echoed throughout the vicinity as some of the axes pierced across their faces but did not end their lives immediately. Birds further away from the battle took to the air as the commotion frightened them.

While it was true that another row of the soldiers went down from the unexpected attack—

“Quickly, overwhelm them! They are out of projectiles!”

“There's no way they can win against our numbers!”

The air that was filled the stench with rusted iron from the blood spatters only made the soldiers bloodthirsty. The soldiers were nearly ten times the riders' numbers and

they were determined to finish off their enemies, even if they had to suffocate the riders by piling on them.

Yet the riders who faced the soldiers remained calm, and the latter was perhaps further agitated by their behavior. They started to hurl insults at them.

The soldiers soon realized their opponents were far more powerful than they could have ever imagined.

When the riders pulled out their swords, the battlefield took on a dramatic turn. The white mist swiveled around them as they swung their swords at the impulsive ambushers.

The soldiers who stood behind their brethren were soaked in the blood and fat that rained across the ground. Limbs and flesh decorated the feet of the riders; the body parts were somehow turned into a wall that stopped the advance of the soldiers.

The latter had been told their enemies were knights, but they were not informed that each was an elite Silver-ranked swordsman.

The soldiers further at the back continued to push forward, but quickly realized they were facing opponents who were like death reapers.

In just a few seconds, their morale was completely shattered. A third of their forces had been cut down as soon as they approached the knights.

Once their heads cooled down, they realized how terrifying their enemies were and retreated faster than when they charged at them—

The battle was soon over.

The leader of the knights stopped and took in a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the blood-soaked ground and cold winter air. He raised his hand to stop his knights from pursuing them.

He had lost count of the number of times they were ambushed. Pursuing them was meaningless as there were no targets of value. It was more important for them to finish their mission.

They dismounted to inspect the area and a few cleaned their swords by rubbing on

the corpses' clothes before sheathing them.

No one spoke during the process and there were only the occasional stomps from the horses.

The leader of the knights swept the area with his dark grey eyes. He looked at the corpses but did not find any specific insignia on them. Neither did he find any flags.

He pulled back his hood, revealing a middle-aged man, and signaled to the rider with the black robes to indicate that it was safe. The latter also revealed himself by pulling back his hood.

The person wearing black robes was Viscount Tirste.

The youth's face was considerably thinner than it was a month ago and had almost turned to a pallid complexion, though his green eyes were still as bright as before.

"This is probably the last ambush." The youth's voice was shockingly low and forced, as though his throat had been pierced several times to produce an incredibly hoarse tone.

He coughed once, almost as if to show how difficult it was for him to speak.

"Do you have any idea who has been attacking us?" The middle-aged man asked.

"Duke Arreck."

"These are his men?" The middle-aged man was slightly taken aback. "Isn't that bastard trying to play nice with us?"

"Nobles are two-faced knaves," Tirste said with a shrug, "so you shouldn't expect much from me either. I will stab you in the back if there's a chance."

The middle-aged man laughed: "Well, that's not surprising. But there's no need to remind me of trust, since my men are the only people I trust."

"Hmph."

Tirste did not bother to look at him again and was about pull his hood to cover himself once again. However, his actions froze at that very moment.

There was a ray of green light within the forest, and his face contorted in alarm.

“Over there, watch out!” He roared and pointed into the forest with his sword.

The middle-aged man immediately turned around with his sword ready, only to find that a green light striking his chest.

[What is this mag-]

His thoughts were cut off and his puzzled expression was forever turned into stone in that instant. Tirste and the other knights watched the commander turn into a statue before their very eyes.

[That crazy monster has once again caught up with me!]

Tirste’s heart raced as he realized the nightmare that was torturing and haunting him, was once again before him.

He wanted to lift the reins and urge his horse to run away, but it was as though his hands were filled with lead and did not listen to his panicked commands.

There seemed to be a gigantic humanoid covered in a full suit of emerald-green armor ‘walking’ out from the forest, but the distance between that monster and the knights was dwindling like magic.

The bizarre attack on their commander and manner of approach confused them.

Were they supposed to take out their swords and rush at it? But how were they supposed to fend off that strange attack when they did not even get a glimpse of how it started? Even if they wanted to form a plan to see if they could take revenge for their commander, they had to at least know what they were facing.

The knights pulled out their swords but did not know whether to attack or retreat.

The monster continued to move towards Tirste. The latter who was a Gold-ranked swordsman uttered a weak voice that was more like a groan:

“You...”

The monster was nearly in attacking range.

One of the knights finally could not handle the pressure, mounted his horse and charged towards the strange humanoid with a brandished sword. But the attack made by the knight was stopped with a single hand. The knight was then flung into the air along with his horse, breaking several pine trees in the process before they smashed onto the ground without further movements.

The sudden display of strength shocked everyone, but the knights finally recovered their senses and also charged towards the emerald monster with naked blades. However, that strange emerald armor that had countless patterns and mottlings suddenly shone and created a barrier around him, stopping the blades from even touching the armor.

It was Damascus Armor, plated armor that was forged with rare metals and infused with extremely potent magic. It defended against magic spells and even isolated physical attacks.

Even when Aouine was at its strongest, there were only a few suits of armor made with the efforts of the royal alchemists, wizards, and blacksmiths. Their numbers were scarce, and the people who owned them were definitely influential.

The knights staggered and tried to guess the identity of the monster. Unfortunately, they did not realize that their time was limited. Tirste had not warned them of what the monster was capable of, and the knights were gradually turned into stone, be it their suits of armor or even Magic Swords.

A few discovered the strange phenomenon and immediately discarded their swords but it was useless. In a few seconds, the knights were completely turned into rock statues.

Tirste felt his sanity crumbling when he saw this situation, but found that he was still able to piece coherent thoughts together even when the emerald monster was before him. He desperately wanted it to be a dream that he could wake up from.

Strangely enough, that monster merely raised his head and stared at him through a helmet. He did not speak or attack and simply stood there without moving.

Chapter 84

Freya's letter

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

Time seemed to slow down.

The young viscount felt cold perspiration all over his body, and he had to use every bit of effort to squeeze out a question: "What... exactly do you want?"

The Emerald Knight pointed at the bundle of cloth tightly wrapped around an object. His meaning was clear; 'I want the sword'.

"You allowed that sword to be brought out! Why do you want it back now!" Tirste roared, panting greatly.

This was the first time he felt he was toyed with in his whole life, and felt that the humiliation he received was similar to a little girl being played with. He wanted the monster cut him down rather than to continue this game, yet when he glanced at the statues, he subconsciously shivered—

The Emerald Knight did not react to his anger, nor was any emotion shown because of the helmet covering his head. He pointed at the sword again, then at his chest.

'I want the sword.'

[How am I supposed to explain myself to the members and elders of the Unifying Guild if I hand the sword over? They even sent a group of elite knights to protect me, and I got them all killed. I even lost the Lionheart! I'll definitely be punished heavily—]

Tirste was recognized by the upper echelons of the Unifying Guild, but his awarded position would be shaken for failing this task. While it was true that he was a 'Blessed', he was not the only one.

He glared with at the Emerald Knight with bloodshot eyes, but the only expression that he saw was his own from the reflection of the helmet. He was certain that he

would be turned into a statue if he refused.

[Why hasn't this monster turned me into a statue? There's no reason for him to leave me alive. He could easily take over the Lionheart instead of giving me a choice to choose. Merely to toy with me? But that's a senseless reason.]

He hesitated for a long time and finally made a difficult decision. He undid the knots to the bag and tossed it over to him.

"Why haven't you killed me?" Tirste asked at the same time.

The Emerald Knight received the sword with his hand. He did not seem to be concerned if he was attacked by letting his guard down when he did so. Tirste's hand almost went to his sword when he saw the opportunity but pushed down the thoughts to do so.

Leaving the matter of the magic armor aside, the monster's skill in the sword was beyond imagination and he had personally experienced it for himself.

"You refused to bow down to fate, but you're willing to do so for your masters?" The Emerald Knight asked as his gaze behind the helmet penetrating through Tirste.

It was the first time Tirste heard him speak. The voice was affected by the helmet and it was difficult to discern the age of the knight, but it was certainly a man.

"Who exactly do you mean? The king and the nobles? Or the Unifying Guild?" Tirste was frowning out of dissatisfaction.

He resigned himself and stopped thinking about the Unifying Guild's punishment. Even if he had to die, he wanted to find out why the monster was torturing him for the past month.

"There is no blame for wanting to go against the rules of society, but it is foolishness to be used by others because of that—"

"Then the Unifying Guild? I'm just using them."

"Weak."

The Emerald Knight threw out his final word and turned around to leave. Tirste

watched him walked to the bridge in a matter of seconds before the latter threw the Lionheart into the icy waters of the lake.

[You madman!!!]

Tirste yelled in his mind as his eyes followed the sword, but he quickly calmed down.

It had nothing to do with him whether the monster was insane or not. But the word 'weak' resounded within him. He smiled bitterly to himself as he wondered how he was going to receive the punishment from the Unifying Guild.

His eyes sought the Emerald Knight again, but the latter was nowhere to be found and seemingly vanished into thin air.

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

Freya, who had come from the Bucces village, felt that the days in the Royal Knights Academy were passing faster than the places she had been in. It only seemed like yesterday when the withered leaves on the ground below the bald trees dyed the academy's scenery in a hue of gold and red.

She was currently sitting on the stone steps during the training's break.

The girl rested her chin on her sword with both arms around it, and she stared out at the dark green silhouette of the distant mountains in a daze. She finally realized that winter had come, and it had been half a year since she arrived at this place.

Because of the great difficulty to adjust to the new environment, she hardly paid attention to her surroundings. The trees' leaves grew vigorously in summer, before they turned to form a sea of red in autumn, and finally withered as winter approached.

The year ended in such a manner.

She lived each day as blandly as a devout priest. In order to become stronger, she had to give up on pastimes. Every day was alternated between training and breaks as she desperately tried to reach her goal of becoming stronger—

Was it for the sake of everyone in Bucces? Or to answer to that youth's expectations of her?

Every time she recalled Brendel's warm and concerned gaze, she could not help but feel her heart beating a little faster, becoming tense enough to be breathless.

She felt ashamed for feeling that way from time to time, but she could not shake his image off.

"Brendel..."

She muttered his name, not noticing that there was someone before her. She immediately raised her head up to meet a woman's solemn gaze with black hair that reached her shoulders— Her face immediately flushed red and she stood up with her hands moving about in a fluster.

"What's wrong?" Maynild tilted her head and asked.

"N-nothing..." Freya lowered her head and denied subconsciously, feeling that even she would not believe that answer.

[You idiot! Why can't you make up a lie like that scoundrel who's capable of doing it all the time!]

But the serious female knight in front of Freya did not admonish and order her to be alert like she usually did.

Instead, she patted Freya's head, causing the latter to nearly turn around and flee in fright.

"Are you missing home?" Maynild took away her hand and asked in a low voice, her face expressionless but her eyes caring.

"N..." Freya started to shake her head but suddenly nodded. If she did not pretend that it was so, she could hardly what she was really thinking about.

Maynild sighed at the weak lie and felt that she was able to guess what Freya was really thinking about, but she did not question her and instead reached into the bag on her belt.

"There's a letter for you," she said.

"Brendel's letter?" Freya blurted out, then blinked several times, before she cupped

her lips with her hand when she realized her mistake.

Maynild's lips twisted upwards slightly. It was the first time Freya ever saw her smile.

"So that lucky person is called Brendel, hmm—"

"L... what do you mean by lucky..." Freya's head was lowered again, feeling her ears burst into flames. Her voice was so small that she could hardly hear herself, but she received the letter carefully with both hands.

The sounds of horses could suddenly be heard as they traveled through the main entrance. It was rare for people to come into the academy during winter, and the two women turned their attention toward the unexpected visitors.

A white horse carriage parted through the light morning mist and slowly entered the academy. It passed by both of them and went deeper into the academy.

[That's the direction of the princess's residence. Not anyone can enter that place, and it's tightly guarded by the royal knights—]

"Who would these people be..." Freya asked when she realized where the carriage was going.

Maynild's eyes paid attention to the symbol; it was a shield with vivid purple gillyflowers on it.

"Someone from the Lantonrand's family, probably another person who can be considered lucky," she said after a moment, but her tone was a little unfriendly.

"Who?"

"Nothing," Maynild shook her head, causing her black hair to shimmer against the light, "you should focus on yourself, Freya. But you're improving very quickly so there's no need to worry too much."

"T-thanks."

"...Oh, and did that worthless man come to trouble you?"

Freya looked back puzzledly before realizing Maynild was talking about Sangany, the

second son of an Earl from somewhere.

Sangany had gathered a group of men to go after Freya with malicious intentions, but somehow Maynild found out and personally went out to teach them a lesson. He was almost expelled because of this incident.

However, the matter was ultimately put aside without any punishment on his side. While Freya did not understand much about the nobles' affairs, she knew there was political interference in regards to this matter. Still, she was grateful to Maynild because she was just a commoner.

“No, there isn't any trouble from him,” Freya said.

[Is there something that I should be worried about?]

She did not know why Maynild suddenly talked about him.

Chapter 85

The new owner of the silver mines

Maynild's expression was serious.

"You should be a little more careful these few days. That bastard is acting up again recently, but this time his actions are more covert and I'm unable to find evidence of his wrongdoings—"

Freya frowned and looked worriedly at her.

"There's no need to worry yet," Maynild's black eyes were resolute and she drew in a light breath, "I'm still here. Still, you should just be a little more careful."

She glanced at the disappearing horse carriage as she cautioned Freya again. The sky to the north was a little dark, as though it was an omen for a terrible storm.

[Is this storm going to come before the winter ends?]

She knew that there were people in the academy who were starting to feel uneasy.

This place was supposed to be a land that was a safe haven for all, but it was possible that it was actually the center of a chaotic maelstrom. The peace it had now was nothing more than an illusion.

[The negotiation battle has begun in Ampere Seale and it will soon turn into a true war.]

"Do you think you can take on the responsibilities??" Maynild suddenly asked.

"I'm sorry...?" Freya said in confusion.

Freya's startled expression made Maynild laugh and the latter covered her mouth slightly.

"No, nothing," Maynild's voice sounded like she found something amusing.

Two weeks had passed since the strange earthquake in the Schafflund mines—

While the troubles in the north intensified and seemed like war was about to break out any given moment, the town's citizens lived as though nothing had happened. Even though there were deaths in the silver mines, they were quickly forgotten by many. Only the injured and family members of the dead would remember this unfortunate day.

Most people went about their usual schedule within a short week, forgetting all too easily.

On the surface, the silver mines seemed like it had not changed, continuing like it had been for the past few decades. But things were different when one looked deeper.

Shortly after the people who were trapped in the coliseum escaped from the silver mines—

Brendel and Medissa went straight to Perkins's office and forced him to surrender, which the noble did readily. Jana was then ordered to lead twenty-odd Iron-ranked mercenaries to watch him constantly at all times.

There was a good excuse to replace the injured and dead soldiers by enlisting them as such. However, this solution would not last very long as Perkins explained that Count Randner would not let his silver mines be employed with unknown soldiers.

The longest that Perkins could delay was two months, but it was enough for Brendel.

Kodan then announced to the workers and guards that he would transfer all his authority to Perkins and rest to recuperate from his injuries.

In truth, his speech was composed by Brendel to mislead them.

Contrary to what Brendel knew of the noble, Perkins was cowardly and responded by working harder on the documents before him in the days after the change in management, to the point where the administrative personnel who was kept in the dark praised him.

They thought their superior had turned over a new leaf when all the responsibilities

in the mine had fallen onto his lap. Even Count Randner's spies who were sent there to monitor him wrote positive remarks about him for the past two weeks.

Naturally, each report by the spies was intercepted by Brendel to ensure that his secret was still safe. When he showed them to Perkins, the latter actually cursed Randner for not trusting him.

Though, Perkins cautiously looked around him to ensure that none of Randner's spies were around him. Brendel shook his head when he saw Perkins's actions.

In order to soothe the cowardly and ambitious noble, Brendel promised that he would not reveal this conspiracy and that Perkins was free to find a solution on his own if the secret was ever revealed. The latter soon started to find someone who resembled him and planned to act like he was imprisoned as a last resort.

Even though it seemed like a weak solution, Perkins was still relieved to possibly have a way to avoid taking responsibility for the loss of the silver mines.

Kodan was escorted to Firburh shortly after he made his speech by Medissa and Scarlett. When the old man saw Ciel, he understood there was no way he could escape. But he rejected Brendel's further attempts to recruit him and reminded the latter to keep his promise and release him when the time was up.

Brendel who was staying at the inn in Schafflund, could only smile and shake his head when he saw the report that came from Trenheim.

Even though there was definitely a relationship between his grandfather and Kodan, the latter did not even mention a word about it after they left the mines.

Brendel was considerably interested to find out his grandfather's secrets, but he was a patient person and he had more important things to deal with.

He glanced at the lithe figure buried in a mountain of accounting documents near him. He had reprimanded Romaine again when things settled down and thought that she would throw up a tantrum by ignoring him, but she held on to his hands for the past few days like a precious treasure as though she was afraid to lose him.

She was even working hard at the documents and cleared the numbers required for his administration in Schafflund. She was now working on the flawed sections in the reports that Perkins and the past people who governed his place, or more notably the

amount of embezzled funds done by them.

He wondered if he was a little too hard on her, but there were moments where she slipped back to her usual self, and he believed that it was only a matter of time before her antics started appearing again.

Brendel's eyes went back to the report on the table, but his mind was thinking of something else.

He was immensely appreciative of Cohen's intelligence, and the fact that the latter would rise to become a duke proved he was someone worth going after. Unfortunately, to Brendel's surprise, Cohen and the youths rejected him and stated clearly that they would leave this place and follow their original plan to see the world and make it on their own.

[It's a pity, but since they're still in town for the next few months, there might still be a chance to get them to change their minds.]

Strangely enough, while he failed to recruit the people he wanted to have, there was someone else who stuck around even though he had no interest in him.

Odum, the dwarf who claimed to be the last bloodline of the Rune Dwarves, seemed to be appearing in front of him almost as if he was doing it intentionally. The bad-tempered dwarf seemed to alternate between respectful tones and angry shouting whenever he appeared.

The performance Odum had in the silver mines did make Brendel believe in his words, but the youth was not exactly certain he wanted to see the dwarf.

It was because of Halran Gaia.

He was secretly worried that Odum's goal was ultimately the sword.

[Even when I told him I'm not giving the sword back, he still lingers around with that crazy attitude... Urgh. This mad fellow.]

He shook his head, stopped thinking about the dwarf, and continued to read the report.

The Nightsong Tiger was about to reach Schafflund in a few days in order to secretly

transport the silver ore in the warehouse.

Ciel had found Graudin's private coin factory in one of the gardens within Firburh. Surprisingly, there were still remnants of Graudin's private soldiers who shut themselves by barring the entrance and even claimed that they would fight to the very last man against the mercenaries.

This act naturally angered the mercenaries, and the captain leading them at that time wanted to fulfill the private soldiers' wishes by killing them all. His fiery temper was about to be unleashed on them, but Ciel denied his request to attack.

'Wait and see.'

It was only one sentence.

But a day after the wizard's reply, the private soldiers who seemed keen to resist for all eternity came out to surrender. The mercenaries were momentarily stunned by the wizard's mysterious foresight, though their marvel was somewhat lessened upon learning the truth.

It was quite simple.

The news of Lord Macsen's utter defeat had spread throughout Trenheim—

Chapter 86

Omens of war

TL: As a reminder, Macsen and Palas are areas within Trentheim. Lord Macsen, Lord Palas are not surnames. Medieval title calling = Lord + Region Name. i.e, Brendel – Lord Trentheim, if he gets the entire place under his control and recognized as the lord.

Also, Firburh is the capital of Trentheim.

Approximately ten days ago on the battlefield near Firburh—

A faint scent of soot, smoke and burnt flesh permeated the air.

Even though it was winter, Brendel had given strict orders to the Nightsong Tiger to deal with the bodies properly. A rampant plague was something that the youth did not want to risk, even if the weather was cold enough to start snowing.

As time was a factor, the Nightsong Tiger split up the mercenaries into various groups to set up multiple burning sites. Corpses were gathered and tossed into pyres to be burned, which poured trails of choking black smoke upwards into the sky.

Lord Palas's scouts entered the forest a few days later to investigate the news of Lord Macsen's defeat. Their heartbeats quickened when they found occasional armor fragments, shattered blades, and darkened blood spatters left in the forest, proving that a fierce battle had taken place.

While they found burnt remains at the site, they were not certain whether they belonged to the rebelling party or Lord Macsen's men.

Since the rumors stated that the rebels had won a victory, they made their way to Lord Macsen's region instead of going to Firburh directly. While it might be true that the latter was defeated, they thought Lord Macsen had escaped safely.

But to their utter shock, the region had been taken over by a group of mercenaries called the 'The Amber Sword'.

When the scouts questioned the local citizens, they learned that these mercenaries led Fortress Riedon's refugees out from a heavy siege comprised of multiple undead armies.

The mercenaries eventually went to Port Gris and out into the Wilderness, with the intention to search for arable land and become Pioneers.

(TL reminder: Wilderness is the area not blessed by Goddess Marsha, and a Fire Seed allows her protection to come through and prevent monsters from attacking. The people who set out to find new land are called Pioneers.)

But no one knew when they turned around and moved to Lord Macsen's territory instead.

The scouts suddenly realized that things were not as simple as they seemed. The idea that it was just a group of rebelling citizens who successfully took down Graudin was unlikely when there were so many strange circumstances.

Lord Macsen was also nowhere to be found.

The scouts were close to the truth.

Brendel's letter to Leto was to order them to set out from Port Gris and head toward the direction of the Wilderness, before changing their direction to Lord Macsen's territory if the noble attacked Firburh.

Lord Macsen did not even know that his territory had been taken over when he was captured by the Nightsong Tiger.

The scouts began to think that the leader of the rebels was someone who was highly capable.

Brendel on the other hand truly viewed the attack from Lord Macsen as nothing more than a 'village fight'. He had fought against huge battles with complicated tactics in the game, especially the ones against Madara where he had to fight against overwhelming odds.

It was also why he dared to allow Raban and Cornelius to join the Nightsong Tiger in battle as a learning experience.

Still, the youth understood that the next battle with Randner would be a bitter one.

The final destination the scouts infiltrated was the outskirts of Firburh.

“It seems like the rumors are true.” One of the scouts returned after speaking with the locals. “Someone sighted the rebelling army returning with a number of prisoners. Judging from the information we uncovered, Lord Macsen’s army was completely defeated, and all his men were either killed or captured.”

The scouts became silent.

Even though they already realized the conclusion when they first visited the place where the battle took place, it was still something that made the hair on their skin stand.

The leader of the scouts, an old man who had been through many battles, received the other scouts’ gazes for instructions.

“It’s an unnatural thing. I’ve been a scout for decades, but this is the first time I’ve seen such an effective ambush. The most important thing to do now is to return to Lord Palas with this news.” The old scout thought for a while and said.

“I heard that Captain Carglise participated in this battle.” One of the scouts said. *(TL: Carglise = Lord Macsen’s son.)*

Carglise had trained under Lord Palas and the latter taught everything he knew to the young man. Since Lord Palas did not have children of his own, he saw Carglise as his own and the latter did not disappoint him by having exemplary achievements in battles against Highland rebels. Lord Palas’s men also regarded him highly.

Lord Palas also agreed to Carglise’s desire to serve Princess Gryphine. While the old knight was loyal to Count Randner, he was more supportive of the Royal faction and hoped that his disciple would assist the kingdom and restore it to its former glory.

“It’s strange that Captain Carglise got ambushed even if it’s a good one. When he led as the scouting commander, he never fell for the traps set by those cunning Highlanders.” A young scout said.

The others nodded, except for the scouting leader:

“Now isn’t the time to think about this matter. I’m going to split us into two groups. The first group shall return to Lord Palas and report to him, while the second will infiltrate Firburh and try our luck to discover who our opponents really are.”

“Isn’t it risky to investigate this strange enemy at their base of operation?”

“What’s the point of scouting if we’re unable to gain any useful information at all? In any case, I’ll pick two of you to come along with me, while the rest of you return back to Lord Palas.”

The rest of the scouts looked at each other in uncertainty. While they believe they would not encounter any real danger because of their skills, they felt like they were walking on thin ice because of the mysterious enemies.

===== Ciel’s POV =====

As the scouts discussed amongst themselves, Raban and Cornelius first exchanged glances before they turned around to look at Ciel.

The youth wore a conspicuous red robe and was sitting on a nearby boulder just a few meters away from the scouts. Beside him was the leader of the Subterrane Dwellers, Tagiv, who looked a little fearfully at him.

The young wizard’s magic had completely erased their presence. No matter how skillful a scout was, they would never be able to detect their presence. In fact, they were so close to them that they were able to listen to their conversation.

Raban was impressed with the scouts. They had chosen a remote area where there were little hiding spots and were constantly paying attention to their surroundings. Their hands were always close to their weapons and their strength seemed close to Silver-ranked fighters.

But he was even more shocked at Ciel’s magic. He came from Karsuk and had seen the mysterious wizards from the Black Tower, and he was absolutely certain that this youth had the same air as them.

[I’ve heard rumors about Brendel being a Highland knight, I’ll believe that, but does it make sense that a wizard from the Black Tower serving as a squire to a knight? Just who is that noble?]

“Those scouts are bold,” Cornelius said, bringing back Raban from his thoughts.

The scouts separated into two groups, one moving towards Firburh, the other heading back to the Palas region. They quickly vanished into the main roads.

“Hah,” Ciel rubbed his forehead, his action resembling Brendel greatly.

His master was truly excellent. It was baffling to him that the young noble seemed to know everything, and he idolized him so much that he started to imitate his actions in the recent days.

But he soon laughed at himself before speaking: “I didn’t expect that fellow Carglise to be so popular with Palas’s men. He’s constantly demanding a duel between one of you. Are you not interested in accepting?”

Both Raban and Cornelius’s faces turned strange upon Ciel’s teasing.

During the ambush against Lord Macsen, the biggest problem they had was that youth, Carglise. His combat abilities were truly remarkable. The Nightsong Tiger, Raban and Cornelius engaged him in a three-way fight, yet the youth’s swordsmanship was brilliant enough to keep them at bay. If it was not the fact where Lord Macsen was captured, it was actually possible for that youth to pave a bloody road for his escape.

Fortunately, Carglise surrendered.

Lord Macsen and Carglise were put under house arrest and they were treated considerably well, but the latter kept yelling for a rematch and demanded duels. The three mercenary commanders avoided the place.

Ciel had told Brendel that someone needed to be taught a lesson; that was Carglise.

“What are your thoughts on them?” Ciel shook his head with a smile after seeing the silence from both men and changed the topic.

“...Did our lord predict the scouts?” Cornelius asked as he looked at Ciel pointing to the scouts.

Tagiv was starting to be dissatisfied. It was the one who alerted the humans that the enemy scouts had entered the area, yet was it was being ignored.

“Oh, right, the credit of discovering the scouts goes to Tagiv.” Ciel suddenly said and nodded to Tagiv, spotting its discontent.

Tagiv immediately puffed up its chest.

“And?” Raban frowned and asked.

“We’re to capture the scouts heading to Firburh. As for the others, we’re to let them go.”

Cornelius and Raban exchanged glances.

[Letting them return will let Lord Palas be on his guard. He will prepare an army much bigger than Lord Macsen.]

[What is our lord thinking?]

But Ciel raised his head to the sky and mused to himself thoughtfully. He had guessed what Brendel wanted to do; it was going to be an all-out battle.

Chapter 87

The gathering storm (1)

===== Brendel's POV =====

The silver obtained from Schafflund restored some life to Firburh.

At the same time, the gains that Brendel received from the Rune Dwarves' Haven were beyond his expectations, and the youth believed that he had enough strength to take on a bigger challenge.

At this point in time, his eyes were cast to the north and he was prepared to give the nobles an announcement—

A new force is on the rise.

[The letter to Gryphine should reach her any moment now, and so is the news of Lord Macsen's defeat to Lord Palas. Count Randner will get the news of the defeat in a few days.]

Beneath his palm were a few written pages assessing the number of troops that he had and the terrain around Firburh.

[The things to consider next would be Randner's reinforcements to Lord Palas. He might send in ten thousand men from his own region, but he's unlikely to send in Gold-ranked fighters since that would be his core strength; what he really wants is to show his hand to the other nobles so he will present a large army. There's also the consideration that Madara worked with Graudin, so I should expect undead enemies. In addition, when I look at the Palas region on the map —]

His eyes narrowed. There were densely populated areas consisting of Highland natives.

[The plan is certainly to have an all-out war, but there's the possibility of my men being outnumbered ten to one... In conclusion, there's a need to secure more men of my own. Delaying for a while would be good here. Hmm, doable.]

His mind began to spin as he began formulating an overall strategy and the plans to support it.

In order to prove to himself to this old kingdom, he needed to have a complete victory in order to warn his future enemies and gain the trust of his possible allies. It was also imperative that he did it as soon as possible.

===== Gryphine's POV =====

Gryphine was sitting down on a comfortable chair with a high back that was decorated with laces before a mahogany table covered with documents.

She wore a set of specially made army uniform that was silver in color. While it gave her a strict and sharp look, it also brought out her lithe figure that could only belong to a soft and gentle girl.

Her thin but dense eyelashes were flickering quickly as she scanned through the two documents in front of her; a letter and the day's report on the important information—

Gryphine tapped the table's surface thoughtfully as she blinked her silver eyes, and finally lifted up her head. It was rare for her to put her full attention to read.

Maynild and Oberbeck were not there. It was another group of people, and she knew only one of them.

“Teacher.”

An elderly man who wore a scholar's long robes bowed respectfully before the princess. He was the royal court's archmage Fleetwood, and he currently did not have the arrogance when he faced Brendel.

Gryphine was his best disciple and also a hope to revive the kingdom. Even though he was strict during his lessons when he taught her, he was now respectful to her as a courtier.

“Your Highness.”

Gryphine smiled in return, and her eyes moved on to the others. Even though she did not know personally, she was able to guess their identities.

The only young man in the group who had a rosy appearance and a little lost would be Eke.

Beside him was a middle-aged man. Even though he had a weather-beaten appearance, he still kept an air of nobility to him. She recalled meeting him when she was very young, the cunning fox Makarov, and the person who once led the royal faction.

The third person was a man who had a robust figure with hands full of calluses. She thought it was certainly Buga.

The final person was undoubtedly the lord of the Matthiola region, Count Barre. Even though she had not seen him before, she heard that he was a noble who did things in a unique way.

Her eyes paused on each of them for a few seconds, using the information she had gleaned from the reports she received in the past and managed to guess all her guests' identities with her own eyes.

Fleetwood did not even need to introduce them.

[Today's guests are quite famous. Duke Lantonrand's son, the Cross Sword's successor, the leader of the former Royal Faction, and the next person to be called Cunning Fox after Makarov.]

Even though the Lantonrand region was small and situated beside Ampere Seale and the Arreck region, Duke Lantonrand's support was critically important to the princess. It was good that history of the past Dukes of Lantonrand and Dukes of Arreck did not get along, and this generation's dukes were sworn enemies.

Her gaze landed on Eke for a while longer.

The young man's face started to turn red when he felt her eyes. He still had not adjusted his identity— perhaps anyone who turned from a nameless mercenary to the son of a duke would be stunned even now.

Eke had not expected the princess to be this beautiful.

As a half-elf, she was touted as the brightest gem on Aouine's crown. Her aloof elegance that came from her Elven blood seemed to be mixed in with a human's

warmth, and anyone who met her for the first time would easily be infatuated with her.

Even though she was young, she already possessed the potential for anyone to fall in love with her appearance.

“Lord Eke, Lord Barre, Lord Makarov, and Ser Buga. I’m pleased to meet you, and I thank you for still supporting the Corvado royal family.”

The group was quite surprised to see her point their identities out correctly.

Makarov was feeling slightly glad. The princess was just as excellent as the rumors had stated. Hope was not transient as it appeared when the Corvado royal family had a successor like her.

He believed that talent was the most important thing, but loyalty and resources were equally as important. The first prince was aggressive and impulsive, and Makarov disliked him. However, he was feeling much more relieved with the princess.

But he suddenly recalled another youth and the oath that he made. He quickly shut his eyes and shook his head inwardly, tossing out the memories of the past.

Count Barre, on the other hand, did not get moved by the princess’s polite attitude, neither was he interested in it. The rumors about her capabilities would be grossly inaccurate if she did not have this amount of insight.

He instead glanced at the two reports on the table. She had been focusing it with strange intensity when they came into the room. The strangest thing was how she looked at it and smiled at the same time, and he was certain that she did not notice it herself.

Naturally, he did not point that fact out, nor was it his turn to speak. He turned his gaze to Fleetwood.

“There’s no need to be so polite, Your Highness. We should apologize for being late— There was something that we encountered along the way,” Fleetwood bowed and raised his head, “may I ask what is the situation to the north?”

“The dark clouds are filling the sky.”

Gryphine turned her head and looked past the window, describing the movements of the northern armies of the various dukes.

“Their speakers have reached Ampere Seale and they are starting to convince the greedy merchants.”

“Are there no plans made to counter them?” Makarov asked.

Everyone’s eyes fell on him. After becoming a mercenary for a decade, he had become more practical and cared less about the rules amongst the nobles. Under normal circumstances, it was not yet the turn for him to speak.

But Gryphine’s silver eyes glinted. She was more appreciative of people who spoke up instead of holding back.

“I’ve asked Princess Magadal to assist in this matter and she would be setting out soon. She has close ties to the Cathedral of Flames and her contacts are many. There’s a chance to turn things around,” she said.

“Would it be the princess who’s very devout?” Fleetwood asked.

“Does she have proper guards? At this stage, our actions are closely watched to the point where they might as well be transparent to the enemy. Once Princess Magadal leaves, she would most likely encounter assassins.”

“Naturally. Maynild is the leader of the guards protecting her.”

Buga’s eyebrow was raised. Maynild was Lady Ida’s daughter and had family ties with Duke Lantonrand. He had met her when she was still young, but her talent in the sword was already blossoming and he was certain that she had become an excellent swordsman.

He nodded slightly to Makarov’s questioning looks. The latter had also heard of her name, but he still questioned the princess’s decision: “Even though Lady Ida’s daughter is an excellent swordsman, but she is still someone who has not left the Academy. I believe that you need a more experienced leader.”

Gryphine nodded: “Which is why I waited for everyone to arrive here and delayed Magadal’s departure.”

Makarov's eyes widened slightly at her answer and exchanged glances with the rest of the group. They bowed their heads to the princess.

"We're grateful for your trust and would be glad to escort Princess Magadal," Fleetwood said.

The room turned silent.

There was still a secret contract to be settled between Duke Lantonrand and the Corvado royal family, but the group felt that it should be the princess who should initiate this topic. While it was possible for them to talk about pleasantries, no one had the mood to do so when the pressure from the north was so great.

In the end, the princess spoke again with a small smile:

"Everyone should take a seat. Perhaps we can talk about things that are more relaxing. I've been hearing bad news day after day. I believe Lord Eke was a mercenary for a few years? It is quite remarkable and interesting even amongst the nobles."

Her eyes also went to Makarov for a moment, bringing him into the topic.

Eke was suddenly taken aback as the attention focused on him. He started to stutter several words out before the princess spared him.

"Ah, yes, and I also recalled that teacher Fleetwood said that you encountered some trouble. You have always been on time when it comes to appointments, do you mind telling me what delayed you?" She continued to ask.

Fleetwood nodded and said: "Yes, to tell the truth, this has to do with the Golden Apple!"

Gryphine's felt her heart beat violently and her pupils dilated a little. While she still kept her expression, as usual, Count Barre saw that minute reaction.

Chapter 88

The gathering storm (2)

“Brendel?” Gryphine repeated the name she just heard.

Her thin eyebrows finally shook a little and a streak of astonishment flashed across her silver irises for a moment.

“That youth said his name is Brendel? Most people would hardly choose to reveal their name in that situation.” She said with a frown, staring at her guests intently.

“Most people,” Count Barre interrupted, placing his hand on his chest and bowed: “would do so, but I think he isn’t one. For him to have such a close relationship with the Silver Elves, I’m afraid he’s unlike most people, Your Highness.”

Gryphine interlocked her fingers to make a single fist and rested her chin on it. She pondered a little blankly.

[Golden Apple, Silver Elves, Dragon Magic, and Highland Knight...]

“You said he’s a Silver-ranked Swordsman?” She said

“I believe so.” Makarov nodded.

“Twenty years old.” Gryphine’s mind was a chaotic mess as though a hurricane had gone through it. Oberbeck clearly stated that he was an Iron-ranked swordsman. She suddenly turned to Eke who became a little startled: “Isn’t that the same rank as Lord Eke?”

Buga nodded and replied: “That young man’s a true genius. But there’s one thing about his swordsmanship that bothers me...”

“What is wrong with his swordsmanship?”

“There’s a familiar shadow to his swordsmanship, like... someone I’ve seen before...”

“Please speak freely, Ser Buga.”

“Sword Saint Darius.” *(TL: Darius Torbus Cadirosso)*

“Sword Saint Darius? But you just claimed that he used Aouine’s Swordsmanship in a revolutionary manner. How can that be linked to the Sword Saint when he left this world a long time ago?”

“His stance and movements. Although I believe his techniques have surpassed the original Aouine’s swordsmanship, his foundations have the same origin as Darius—”

Gryphine’s heart skipped a beat when she heard the word “surpassed”.

“It’s indeed very rare to see a twenty-year-old swordsman reaching the Silver ranks.” Fleetwood chimed in, and his eyes went to Eke.

The youth lowered his head with embarrassment.

Gryphine nodded inwardly. There was also a number of excellent youths that appeared from the recent tournament.

[Sometimes I wonder if Mother Marsha still blesses our kingdom when there are so many talented youths in this kingdom, but why is the situation so difficult right now?]

She felt a little tired but immediately forced herself to turn her attention back to the group with her will. She took in a deep breath and her face even paled a little when she got to the crux of this topic:

“Grandmaster Fleetwood, you mentioned the Golden Apple. Is it true that it’s not Soulbound to him?” She asked with a serious expression.

“Yes, this old man swears on the honor as a mage who has worked for the royal family for decades. I am certain that it’s not Soulbound.”

The Golden Apple was said to be able to change a person’s destiny for the better. If she possessed the Golden Apple, would it be possible for her timid little brother to become Aouine’s true king?

[But why did that youth not eat the apple yet? Could it be that it’s a fake? But my teacher wouldn’t be wrong about this... Perhaps the Golden Apple is the reason as to

why the Silver Elves are so close to him? No, that isn't the end. A Highland Knight possessing Dragon Magic?]

There were legendary tales about Highland Knights, Silver Elves, and Dragons. Her heart started to beat quickly and her eyes gleamed: "Is it possible to recruit him?"

The group of men turned silent. As someone who possessed the Golden Apple and had a relationship with the Silver Elves, they were willing to recruit him.

But Fleetwood's arrogance, Makarov's greed, and the threat of Count Barre's men had offended the youth. Even Eke's presence would be annoying to him, although he did not know that.

Even though Brendel seemed to favor the Royal Faction, this was hardly a point that they could use.

"That would be difficult." Makarov who was the most practical person amongst them answered instantly.

"I'm not too sure about that—" The princess suddenly smiled, almost bursting into laughter when she thought about this matter: "If this is the same person that I know of."

They looked puzzledly at her as she took the letter and stretched out her hand and prompted them to read it.

Makarov received the letter and began to read out loud.

"On the seventeenth day of the Month of the Autumn's Twilight, I address this letter to Her Highness, Princess Gryphine Corvado Ordellis, from the city Firburh of the region Trentheim.

On the previous night, there was a movement of Madara's undead army under the leadership of the 'Black Lord' Incirsta that launched an unexpected attack on Firburh. This assault on the city led to thousands of casualties, and in the battle, the previous Lord of Firburh, Baron Graudin, died in combat.

As a Pioneer Knight and the Lord of the Valhalla region, I had received Graudin's warm reception during my travels. As one who is duty-bound to protect the ideals of the kingdom as well as to pay respect to my reception from Graudin, I took up the role of

defending Firburh.

The undead was driven back after a night's battle. However, in order to prevent the undead from attacking again, your humble knight shall take up the reins of leadership for a temporary period. I will handle the city's defenses and administration, until the moment where Your Highness appoints the next lord for this city—"

Makarov's expression suddenly contorted for a second, but he recovered quickly with a cough and continued to recite the letter's contents:

"I hereby hold Count Randner responsible for the Madara's invasion and demand actions taken for his culpability in this matter. He had known that Incirsta's undead army was at the southern borders and allowed them to pass through our lands unchecked. In order to prove this matter, I have attached a Recording Crystal detailing the battle."

Makarov raised his head.

"The Recording Crystal is with me, please continue," Gryphine said without batting an eyelid.

"There's no more, Your Highness."

"No, check again, there's one more word."

Makarov's eyes searched for that word and immediately widened upon finding it.

"Brendel." He said with quivering brows.

A momentary silence filled the room, before he tried to make light of this incident: "I knew that Baron Graudin was derelict in his duties, but this young man is much too bold and..."

It was clear that the youth was the one who slew Graudin and blamed the undead. He even pointed his finger at Count Randner.

"And..." Makarov thought for a moment but was unable to find a word for Brendel's audacious behavior.

"Preposterous!" Fleetwood's tone was sharp and cold: "This is a challenge to the

kingdom. He has broken the nobles' rules!"

Gryphine's throat stiffened when she heard the words "nobles' rules".

Count Barre wonder if it was contempt that caused her to have a supposed lump in her throat.

"...What does everyone think of the truth on this matter?"

"I believe in Ser Brendel's integrity." Eke suddenly said with a clear voice, standing up and bowing slightly: "I know him as a true knight."

His sudden action surprised everyone.

Chapter 89

The gathering storm (3)

“Young man, you ought to know that people are quite capable of deceit,” Fleetwood said.

Makarov and Count Barre agreed when they heard this remark. The years of battles they had against other nobles had made them realize anything was possible when people were involved. The princess did not agree or disagree with her expression and merely watched the youth intently with her eyes.

“Grandmaster Fleetwood, Ser Brendel specifically came back to aid me when it was a life-and-death situation. I can hardly believe a morally upright person would be capable of such deceit. But most importantly, it was his oath that convinced me—”

The naivety on the youthful face disappeared as he locked eyes with each man in the room.

“The fact that the legendary Lionheart recognizes him is proof that his rebuke of us was right.”

“What?” Gryphine blurted.

Fleetwood had briefly mentioned about seeing the Divine Resonance during their journey to her, but Eke somehow seemed to hint that it happened because of the mysterious youth. Her eyes turned to her teacher curiously and the latter knew that the incident between Brendel and them could not be kept under wraps any longer.

This secret was originally meant to be kept from the princess because it was an embarrassing encounter. Fleetwood did not expect Eke to spill it out, and the questioning gaze from the princess meant that she wanted an answer and would find out one way or another.

The grandmaster wizard nodded to Makarov, who sighed at the thought of explaining how he was censured by a youth no older than twenty. He detailed the entire encounter to Gryphine.

“Your Highness, this isn’t something that we intentionally tried to hide,” Makarov added.

Gryphine nodded and said generously: “Different circumstances with different viewpoints can easily lead to conflict. It’s understandable to avoid reporting certain things. This was taught to me by Fleetwood—”

Fleetwood immediately bowed his head. Gryphine was actually grumbling to him for keeping this a secret. He felt alarmed and relieved at the same time; alarmed at his superior doubting him, and relieved that she was merely hinting her displeasure to him.

This was ultimately a sign of their familiarity with each other.

Makarov and Count Barre exchanged looks. They were also relieved as Gryphine showed that she would not pursue this matter.

As subordinates of Duke Lantonrand, they were supposed to work for the Royal Faction since their superior chose to stand with them. Hiding things from the princess could cause rifts and they needed to avoid this at all cost, especially at such a critical juncture.

“I am curious. What exactly were the words Brendel said that caused a Divine Resonance?”

“He asked if we still remember the Ancestral King’s beliefs.” Makarov’s voice trembled a little.

The truth was that he was shaken by Brendel’s words.

[The youth said our defeat is fated even if we took the Golden Apple. The change that we can get from it wouldn’t lead us to victory against Madara, and to hear him deny our blood and tears for the past decade is truly infuriating — yet I’m unable to refute his words.]

“That is—” Gryphine suddenly recalled a certain story from Oberbeck.

A Highland Knight led a group of near defenseless refugees and cut through a path at Madara’s undead armies. It sounded like it came out from a fairy tale that could only happen during the era of the Ancestral King, when the fiery blood of the noble knights

had not cooled yet.

The most exhilarating aspect of this story was that it happened in this era that she was born in.

This was why she could not help but keep the knight of this story in her mind.

“Do you still remember his exact words?” Gryphine said subconsciously.

“I—” Makarov’s mind started to blank out.

He recalled the youth’s burning eyes of righteous anger, as well as the moment that Scarlett suddenly appeared. Count Barre detected the odd change in him and instead answered:

“Let me do it.”

“You have my gratitude, Count Barre.” Gryphine nodded slightly.

Count Barre’s expression became slightly solemn:

“His exact words were: ‘I recall a story. During Aouine’s brightest era, the Knights of Aouine would carry their horns and swallowtail flags. With their blades pointed forth, they would blow their horns and charge forth—’”

Makarov suddenly sighed and he took over: “The golden emblems from Corvado, Grinoires, and Arreck were woven onto the swallowtail flags. The nobles in that era held on to their oaths— Do you still remember that oath?”

Gryphine suddenly closed her eyelids a little, her hands clasped in front of her, and repeated about the oath in her mind that she knew well.

[I swear upon this sword and stay true to this oath!]

“I swear upon this sword and stay true to this oath! I will lead my citizens away from wars and killings, to distance ourselves from the arrogance and greed of the empire’s nobles; I will never repeat the mistakes of the empire’s bloody history. I will ensure that the nobles will be faithful to the Knights’ code of being fair and disciplined, brave and unflinching, generous and benevolent. I will enforce this oath to the end of my life!”

When the final word was said, Gryphine's heart was full of overwhelming emotions.

She could almost picture the youth saying the words clearly and loudly. Her heart pounded. She thought no one would understand what she truly desired to achieve in her life. She hid her emotions behind a mask and constantly did things that were against her beliefs to deal with the situation before her.

Yet when someone appeared with the same beliefs as her and was achieving it in spite of the obstacles... Her mask shattered a little and she could not help but become stunned.

But what she did not know was that she had another self in another world.

In a game called The Amber Sword, Aouine was like a boat traveling through a dark stormy sea, and Princess Gryphine had constantly worked to sail through it with her unshakeable will.

The dream was like a moth to a flame.

The Goddess of War, countless people within Aouine, and the gamers within the kingdom, gathering together in order to fulfill the Regent Princess's dream.

The dream where she could fulfill the Ancestral King's promise to protect the kingdom and its citizens, where the knights would vanquish the darkness and lead everyone to warmth and safety.

In the end, that dream was extinguished.

However, the Gryphine of this world opened her eyes as if she woke up from a world that was filled with darkness. Her fatigue was suddenly gone. Even though the dark clouds to the north were gathering and it seemed like a storm was about to descend, she felt like she suddenly found something that would lead her to her destination.

"That young man's words are right, but only when dreams can be achieved in reality can they be called practical. The difficulty of achieving them is not reduced just because we have the willpower to do so."

Gryphine paused for a moment.

"He has sent us an invitation into his world. What exactly is his aim by sending us this

letter? Please, feel free to express your thoughts—“

Chapter 90

The Gathering Storm (4)

“He’s showing us goodwill.” Makarov concluded simply.

“Are you sure he’s not trying to make us his shield,” Fleetwood frowned and disagreed, “offering us evidence of Count Randner’s wrongdoing and his territory? If we become allies of this youth, we’re forcing Count Randner to join hands with Duke Arreck.”

Gryphine creased her brows.

Count Randner was not a reliable ally to the Royal Faction and was more like a knife to their backs if he joined them. But it was also true that he had not stated where his support would be, and it would be foolish for her to force him to join her older brother instead.

“Hmph. That scheming Count.” She said a little irritably.

“The situation’s a little interesting.” Count Barre laughed once.

That youth was daring enough to take the city but his action could hardly be seen as impulsive. By delivering his letter at this particular time...

It was truly an excellent timing and definitely not a coincidence.

Brendel’s move was thrilling and dangerous as though he was walking on a thin wire.

Count Barre glanced at Makarov.

[I’m sure the Cunning Fox of the previous generation has already noticed this fact. But what does the youth want from us exactly? If he wants actual support from us with this letter that’s not even a loyalty pledge to our faction, isn’t he a little too naive? No, he can’t be this foolish if he sent out this letter. Then... he just wants to be acknowledged by the Royal Faction? But even if we do so, how is he going to handle the aftermath when Count Randner marches in with his army?]

Mere accusation from this letter would not prevent Count Randner from sending his men to attack Firburh—

Count Barre was extremely curious about this matter. If the youth were to succeed in defeating Count Randner's army... He found that he was unable to imagine how things would end up if this scenario happened.

Makarov spoke after he thought for a while: "I believe that young man understands our position on Count Randner."

"You mean..." Gryphine pondered for a moment before her eyes turned to the letter again.

"Why did he send this letter?" Makarov nodded, "No, it's not to insult our intelligence—"

His joking words made Count Barre and Gryphine chuckle, though Fleetwood lightly tutted.

"He's really showing us goodwill," Makarov repeated his conclusion again.

"I agree with Makarov's words. The youth is showing us goodwill, but he does not intend to join us. He also knows clearly what position he is in." Count Barre said.

"Then what does he want?" Fleetwood's silver eyebrows knitted in slight confusion. Even though he had been in the royal court for years, he had spent his whole life on Magic techniques, and still lacked an understanding fights between the nobles.

"Isn't it clearly stated in the letter?"

His dislike for that youth was not as important as the Royal Faction's interest, so he considered the possibilities carefully. If the Royal Faction were to acknowledge his words and put pressure on Count Randner... Even though he did not have a good impression of the youth, this transaction seemed like it was still very much in favor for them.

"He wants us to denounce Count Randner openly?" He said after a while.

"No, there's no need to do so. The Royal Faction's silence on this matter is enough. The youth's target is clearly Count Randner, and only him. We need not get involved in this."

“But his actions have challenged all the nobles. No one dares to openly occupy a legitimate territory awarded by the king to a noble. This is no precedent—”

“Which is why he’s trying to avoid the situation where everyone attacks him by sending us this letter. Did he not state that he’s just temporarily taking over the territory until the princess appoints someone?” Count Barre shook his head with a smile.

Makarov glanced at Count Barre, wondering why he was biased to that youth when he known to be mostly neutral.

“Unfortunately, this excuse would only work if people are truly convinced of it. An excuse and a false accusation are two entirely different things. Your Highness, have you watched the contents of the Recording Crystal?” He said.

“I did. There’s indeed an army of Madara’s undead, and it’s certainly not a small one,” Gryphine scoffed lightly, “I don’t want to ask about the dirty acts between Count Randner and Madara’s undead, but just how effective is this letter with the Recording Crystal?”

It was clear how disgusted she was when she spoke about Count Randner.

“It’s strong evidence, at least enough to question Count Randner on the failure to detect Madara’s invasion.” Count Barre said, his admiration for the youth continuing to increase.

“So let us see what advantages we can gain from this. I believe that youth knows that we cannot give up Count Randner as an ally, but there’s one point that made me very surprised.” Makarov said gravely, causing everyone to pay attention and wait for his words.

“He’s probably trying to become a chess piece.”

“A chess piece?” Fleetwood was confused.

But Count Barre’s eyes immediately widened with delight, even he did not manage to see what Brendel was trying to do: “Impressive! This is indeed a chess piece that forces Count Randner into a bad position!”

“Yes,” Makarov nodded, but contrary to Count Barre’s delight, he was feeling dread.

Leaving aside the part where Brendel clearly knew what the Royal Faction currently needed, his knowledge of the current state of the entire kingdom had left Makarov highly alert.

“Count Randner will soon find out that we will be keeping our silence on this matter, and that this Brendel had seemingly cast his lot with us... The scheming Count will then ponder about the situation if he chooses to side with Duke Arreck during this time—”

Makarov paused for a moment.

“And he will realize that he’s surrounded by his enemies.”

Count Barre quietly listened to Makarov’s thoughts. He could not help but check out the man’s white sideburns. The latter was certainly living up as someone who once led the Royal Faction. He could not help but admire the experience Makarov had.

“Is there anything that the youth can get by becoming a chess piece?” Gryphine acknowledged Makarov’s words by nodding: “We can throw him away at any given time if Count Randner pledges his loyalty to us. Surely he understands this point.”

Fleetwood was taking everything in. He found that the youth was not as irksome as before when Makarov explained his thoughts and said after some hesitation:

“It does seem like he’s standing on the Royal Faction’s side. Perhaps he’s willing to join us. But, the only thing that we can do right now is to conceal this thing—”

Count Barre shook his head inwardly and glanced at the old Archmage. A scholar was indeed just a scholar; they could never participate in politics.

“What the youth wants is very simple. He wants to play a game of balance. He’s a neutral party who believes that Count Randner will not cast his lot with us—”

“An admirable gambler.” A voice rang out from outside the office. The knights outside opened the door and allowed a noble wearing a mink coat to walk in.

The familiar face made Makarov pause slightly.

[This is... Oberbeck? I remember him as a pretty capable youth when I was leading the Royal Faction.]

The youthful innocence of Oberbeck was gone, replaced by a sharp and firm air. He even had a new nickname, the Wolf Lord.

Oberbeck glanced at Makarov, then bowed slightly to the princess.

“Your Highness,” he greeted Gryphine, then turned to Makarov, “Lord Makarov, it has been a while.”

Oberbeck’s position within the Royal Faction was currently considered higher than Makarov, but his humble attitude made him feel pleased.

Makarov nodded back with a smile: “Lord Oberbeck.”

Oberbeck continued to exchange short greetings with the other men and caught up to the discussion that had happened so far.

“Let’s continue with the discussion. I believe that Makarov and Barre’s analysis is logical, but I have another thought as to what the youth wants—” He said

The room fell into a silence.

Everyone’s eyes were on him. Gryphine was the only person who knew that Oberbeck understood Brendel best amongst them.

“The people who do not even have the value as chess pieces are worthless, the people who become chess pieces without even knowing are fools, but people who are like this young man and become chess pieces on their own will, they are chess players.”

“Chess players?”

“Yes. Even if they only control a single chess piece, they are chess players. And on this chessboard, he’s now standing on a place high enough to meet us. If he’s a chess piece, then we are chess pieces. The only advantage we have over him is possessing more resources than he does.”

The others in the room were speechless.

“Oberbeck, you mean to say that he wants to get involved in this game as a player?” Even Gryphine felt disbelief. She drew in a light breath: “If this is true, his real goals are to take advantage of us? This is certainly quite displeasing.”

“Yes, and yet the only option we have is to accept it. His suggestion is still the most advantageous option for us.”

“This sly fellow,” Fleetwood suddenly felt he should not participate this discussion as he listened to all the complicated analysis on the letter. He rubbed his temples and asked tiredly: “Then what should we do now?”

“We can choose any option as long as it doesn’t directly interfere with the parties involved in this matter,” the Wolf Lord concluded mysteriously, “and after that, all that’s left for us to do is to watch that youth’s brilliant performance against Count Randner.”

The group of men looked at Oberbeck with disbelief. Even Eke who was confident in Brendel’s abilities became worried.

One was a youth who had no resources, the other was an experienced Count who had a large force.

Count Barre momentarily thought about the Silver Elves, but they stated they would not interfere with Aouine’s internal politics. He did not understand where the youth’s confidence came from to participate in this game.

But Gryphine knew why Oberbeck spoke in that manner. The report that came in almost at the same time as the letter had a simple line:

‘Trentheim, Lord Macsen’s utter defeat.’

Chapter 91

The gathering storm (5)

The Randner region was situated between Arreck and Vlada's borders. The area was designated during the rise of the kingdom's beginning with strong military forces to prevent the Highland natives from attacking the northern areas. Over time, the control of the south got stronger and became a true defensive line against invaders.

Count Randner situated himself in Fortress Patalone. Even though it was not the biggest fortress, it had a long history of a hundred and thirty years, and the construction method was influenced by Elven design that resurged in popularity. It was currently deemed to be a rare work of art from that era.

It was the House of Randner's biggest pride and showed how much they respected traditional values. This respect had also won them considerable prestige from nobles of higher ranks.

Interestingly, the current Count Randner who had a 'good reputation' of being two-faced, benefitted just as much as Fortress Patalone's fame.

It was a few days after Lord Macsen's defeat, and a few riders urged their exhausted horses toward Fortress Patalone. The gatekeeper of the fortress was a veteran soldier who had guarded the fortress for half his life, and it was the first time ever since the November War that he saw such urgency from the riders.

The riders and their horses looked like they had been traveling without rest, and the gatekeeper quickly realized that they were carrying armbands that signified an urgent report. The news of the unrest in the north had also reached his ears, and he immediately ordered the guards to raise the gate.

The gate was raised halfway noisily, and the riders rushed in without even waiting to confirm their identities and rode straight to the heart of the fortress.

The report from the scouts was quickly transferred to the chamberlain. There were three levels of reports in regards to their urgency, and upon listening to the scouts' explanation, he quickly stamped it with the highest level of urgency and handed it to

his aide who started running in order to send it to Count Randner.

This level of urgency had not appeared for nearly a decade.

The chamberlain then quickly pulled a rope that rang a bell in Count Randner's office. It was an antiquated system that was replaced by magic, but Count Randner had a quirk of disliking magic and would use machines whenever he could.

It was well known within the nobles' circle that he thought that magic was unreliable.

Count Randner was currently in his office. He wore a monocle, a fur coat with a silver ruff that matched with his neatly trimmed beard, and a faint smile that held a sliver of warmth, though anyone who knew him well would know that he was hiding his thoughts.

His hair had turned completely white and no one could guess how old he was, but they would never underestimate him; he was known for amongst the higher echelons as a noble who participated in the November War.

It was a war that left the kingdom greatly wounded and any survivors from that war were perceived as skilled.

The person who sat in front of Count Randner and caused him to wear a smile was a Highland native in the Randner region. These natives would hardly admit they were citizens of Aouine. The majority of Highland natives were considered barbarians, but there were exceptions like the ones from the Karsuk region and were instead highly regarded.

Two centuries ago, the Highland natives in Aouine were still considered as barbarians, but they were gradually influenced by the kingdom's civilization. However, there was one point that had not changed yet. The Highland citizens still pursued their freedom, and the kingdom could never tolerate the danger of letting become independent. Randner's region was still fraught with small skirmishes every year.

There was of course exceptions, and a few groups of Highland Natives were willing to accept Aouine's rule. The guest Randner had was one such person, and came from the area that the Count governed himself.

He came with a simple goal. He desired to have their taxes exempted.

Madara's invasion had caused significant damage to the agriculture and production sectors. Even if the heavy taxes were exempted, they would still find it hard to survive since they could not collect any harvests.

The kingdom seemed like they could not see this point and instead increased their pressure on them to pay their taxes.

Count Randner carefully listened to his guest speak about their circumstances. He always wore a smile, but he did not express his opinion. Even though he seemed like an affable old man, his guest did not dare to see him as one.

Just when his guest was about to plead for Count Randner's understanding and state his request, the bell rang.

Count Randner's expression changed. It was the first time since this afternoon where he was unable to maintain a smile.

He could not remember how long he received this level of urgency.

"My apologies, but I have to leave for a while. Please wait." He got up with a frown and nodded ruefully as he spoke.

"Certainly, my lord," the guest stood up in a panic and a little fearfully, not daring to show any signs of dissatisfaction.

Count Randner left the study room and pushed open a door that led to an adjacent room. He saw that his advisor and his right hand waiting for him. Since these were his trusted men, he did not bother to keep a smile and instead changed into a dark expression: "What's wrong?"

"It has something to do with Trenheim," his advisor answered.

"It's still that matter?" Count Randner received a silver-tipped pipe from a servant, sat down on a chair and took in a deep breath before he continued to speak, "that useless fool still hasn't solved that rebellion? It has been half a month!"

The old noble said with some anger.

"There's new information regarding this issue from Lord Palas."

“Palas?”

Count Randner paused.

Even though Lord Palas was Graudin’s subordinate, he was once his subordinate and had also participated in the November War. Even though he only participated near the end of the war, Count Randner admired his abilities and began to groom him.

His loyalty could be trusted and Count Randner saw him as one of his most trusted subordinates. Therefore he calmed down when he heard it was news from the old knight.

“What exactly did he write?”

The advisor did not answer and instead presented the report.

Count Randner carefully read through the report. He stood up, paced a few times in silence, before his sullen eyes glared at his advisor.

“That worthless piece of shit. His soldiers are useless swill as well... When did this start?”

“Approximately fifteen days ago.”

“That’s right, fifteen fucking days! Trentheim is in such a huge mess and it took this long for the news to reach me, what the fuck are you and the rest of Trentheim doing!” he threw the parchments into his advisor’s face, causing them to scatter all over the room.

“My lord, this is unlikely a simple rebellion. No matter how much Lord Macsen underestimates them, he shouldn’t be defeated by an army made of civilians. The fact that the news can be delayed so long is also because of the enemy’s control.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that, you halfwit!” Count Randner roared in fury, but he quickly calmed down: “...The real enemies are definitely made up of mercenaries, but they are insects that buzz only if they smell profits. This is clearly a ploy.”

The earlier reports stated that Graudin had offended the mercenaries, but Count Randner was certain that the mercenaries would not go against his son as they would offend the entire nobility and even the kingdom.

He sat down in his chair and tapped the emerald ring on his thumb. His advisor had been with him long enough to recognize that the Count was thinking, and wisely shut his lips to wait for the old noble to make his decision.

“I’m concerned with two things.” Count Randner said after a long pause: “One, is Graudin dead or alive? Two, who is the mastermind behind this?”

The advisor did not speak. He knew there was more to come.

But at that moment, the front doors were pushed opened forcefully with a groaning sound and a tall man walked in with large confident strides.

“Father.” The man’s loud voice reached Count Randner first before he could reach him physically.

Count Rander’s lips closed until his son stopped before him.

“Didn’t I tell you to knock on the doors before coming in?” He said coldly.

“You did say that the accomplished don’t care about the trivial things, father.”

The man wore a black shirt with long sleeves that was covered by a coat with gold cuffs, along with a longsword hanging from his belt. His features made him look like he was in his late twenties, but he was past forty.

He was Count Randner’s second son, Andrei, and the only son who was not appointed with a land of his own, as he had willingly given up to do so in order to assist his father.

“So you heard the news?” Count Randner was not offended by his son’s thoughts.

The urgent report must have caused a significant amount of panic, and he was not surprised if his son knew about the contents of the letter.

“Well, I’ve heard that it was urgent. What happened exactly?” Andrei glanced at the people in the room, then his eyes hovered over the parchments on the floor, before dropping down on the sofa comfortably.

“Your younger brother has gotten into trouble.”

“Really?”

“It sounds like you’re happy to hear that.” Count Randner’s eyebrow was raised and he sounded like his temper was going to flare again.

“My apologies, father,” Andrei lifted up a cup to make a feeble attempt at disguising his emotions, but he ultimately laughed and put it down, “I know I shouldn’t do it, but I just can’t control my emotions.”

Count Randner shook his head with resigned reluctance. He had done the same thing when he was young. In the end, this was a small matter to him.

But a family squabble was different from someone else hurting his descendants. It was rare for nobles to try and harm other nobles openly. Scheming was very different from murder, and the blood of a noble was precious.

Count Randner was furious over this report and had decided to make it a blood feud, and he planned to announce to the entire kingdom that his family was not to be trifled with.

“Firburh has been taken and there has been no news on your younger brother. I believe he’s most likely dead. Also, Lord Macsen suffered a complete loss to the rebels.”

Andrei was shaking his head when he heard that his younger brother was missing after the rebellion at Firburh. If Graudin was killed because of mere civilians, House Randner would be disgraced. If this news got out to other nobles, Andrei felt like he would not be able to raise his head in front of others.

However, he sat up in surprise when he heard that Lord Macsen was defeated. Count Randner’s advisor continued to explain the report in detail.

[This isn’t a game anymore.]

Andrei was someone who could read between the lines. He immediately got up and said: “Father, there’s something very wrong about this. Please allow me to gather our men and let me lead an army straight away and exact revenge on the leader of this rebellion.”

But Count Randner shook his head with a little disappointment as he looked at his son.

“Do you know who’s the mastermind?”

Andrei knitted his brows, not understanding the question.

The experienced Count Randner pointed at his temple: “The sword in your hand can cut down your enemies, but it can’t bring you towards victory. You should think again.”

“...The biggest suspect is the one who benefits most from this incident.”

“Yes,” Count Randner nodded: “the kingdom will eventually split into three factions, but as of right now, the Royal Faction is the most likely culprit behind this rebellion. The crafty little wench... No, the people around her are the ones who would propose a scheme like this. If they are trying to force me to make a decision because of the situation in the north, they truly are underestimating our House too much.”

“But this might also be an attempt to cause tension between us and the Royal Faction, father.” Andrei did not want his father to choose Duke Arreck’s faction.

Rather, he wanted to have an arranged marriage with the princess. With her aid, he could easily become the head of House Randner.

There were also the rumors of the princess’s beauty and her fame as “the brightest gem on the kingdom’s crown” that even reached the kingdom’s neighboring country, Kirrlutz, despite her young age.

But Andrei’s thoughts did not escape Count Randner’s eyes, and he glared at his son coldly: “You fool. Do you really take me as someone who cannot see what you’re thinking because I’m outraged?”

“Father?”

“Your pathetic thoughts of lusting after the princess and the family’s position are clouding your judgment.” Count Randner’s voice was severe: “Marrying the princess? Do you really think that’s possible? She would think of choosing the Kirrlutz empire even before she considers our House! If you can’t attain the things that you want, then stop thinking about it! House Randner cannot become overly greedy, so only reach for the things that you can get, do you understand?”

He rapped the silver pipe onto the table: “Listen well, it doesn’t matter which side House Randner supports, the most important thing is that this House retains its autonomous control over our region at all times. This is the most important thing.”

Andrei was momentarily stunned at his father's words, but he quickly shrugged his shoulders: "Understood. So what should we do now?"

Count Randner tapped the emerald ring on his thumb: "Since the Royal Faction killed my son, House Randner will definitely pay this with blood. I'll torture and slaughter every single mercenary in that city as revenge. Then I'll see what move that little wench and her men makes—"

"Oh?" Andrei got excited and patted his sword, ready to go into a battle.

"No, House Randner cannot send its members to quell a small rebellion like this. We will be lowering our status if we did so." Count Randner shook his head, displeased with his son's eagerness: "The Royal Faction and Duke Arreck are looking at us very closely, and we cannot allow ourselves to be underestimated at this point of time."

Andrei made an unsatisfied noise with his tongue. He unbuckled his sword irritably and threw it onto the sofa, before plopping down lazily again: "Very well, father, you have made your point. However, even though Lord Palas has a pretty good army under him, he isn't very much stronger than Lord Macsen. I doubt that old knight is capable of winning if we don't send our men, since the report stated that Lord Macsen was defeated completely."

Count Randner nodded. Even though his second son's actions were frustrating to him, he was outstanding when it came to military affairs. His other sons were not as useless as Graudin, but they were still middling.

"Continue," he said.

"Let me think. You're going to send some of our men along with the Highland natives. Ah, don't tell me you're thinking of having Madara send in their undead soldiers too? While they do have military strength, they are not humans. Lord Palas is a knight who's quite rigid, and he might not be able to control them. Besides, can you really trust that Incirsta who's always putting on that stupid grin on his face? I heard that he's only a Baron in Madara's ranks."

"And would that be reasons enough for not trusting that undead?" Count Randner scoffed. He turned his gaze away from his son and looked at his advisor: "Draft two letters for me."

"Yes, my lord. What would you have me write?"

“The first letter is to be sent to Madara’s nobles. Tell them the thing they want is still in Firburh. They must send out their forces if they want to complete the transaction with me. The second letter is to be given to that messenger of the Highland natives. Tell them if they’re willing to participate in this war, I’ll exempt them from taxes. I’ll even provide provisions for their armies they send out!”

Chapter 92

Brendel's chief architect

Andrei scoffed lightly at Count Randner's instructions, but he had to admit that it was a good move to use Madara's undead to kill their enemies.

Count Randner's right-hand man was slightly startled. The exemption of tax and providing free provisions would certainly spur a significant amount of desperate Highland natives to participate in the battle, due to the damage caused by Madara's invasions on their farmlands.

They would not refuse and simply could not refuse.

Furthermore, these barbarians were no strangers to battles.

With such strong incentives, the Highland natives participating in this battle would surely be more than ten thousand, and this figure did not include Madara's undead or Lord Palas army.

The scale of the army made him a little excited. His lord who always played down his strength had decided to show his might to Princess Gryphine and Duke Arreck in this battle.

Aouine had not seen such a battle for a decade, maybe even two. A new generation of talented youths might have appeared, but this did not mean the old Count had lost his vigor.

He glanced at both Count Randner and his son. Even the former's eyebrows had turned white, but his eyes were still sharp.

Everyone knew that once the two letters were sent out, no one would be able to stop the battle from happening. While everyone was paying attention to the North's impending battles, no one could have expected that the beginning of the kingdom's civil war to begin in its most southern borders.

Indeed, who could have expected a battle to take place over a destitute and remote

place like Trentheim?

===== Brendel's POV =====

Brendel understood that he had made a move that caused 'history' to change. Once Lord Macsen's defeat was announced, it meant that he had placed himself on the upcoming civil war that would decide Aouine's fate.

As for the results, it would depend on the performance of each faction.

However, Brendel was currently not thinking about this problem.

He was in a large horse carriage that departed from Schafflund and was heading back to Firburh, and was instead staring vacantly out the window at the blue sky.

It was a bumpy ride due to the uneven roads on the hills.

He left behind all administrative works in the silver mines and left during a certain night. It was not because he received news of Count Randner's preparation to send out a huge army to crush the borders, neither was it the delivered letter from the Regent Princess to Firburh.

It was for an entirely different reason.

He soon turned his gaze at the changing scenery outside the window and landed on the dwarf opposite of him. The latter was staring at the youth with open eyes.

"Mister Odum," the youth finally opened his lips first, "I want to know what you're doing."

"Huh...?" The dwarf showed a puzzled expression and blanked out for a few seconds, before he stuffed his mouth with desserts: "Fhat Im woing?"

The dwarf welcomed himself to the specially made desserts by Felaern that filled a hidden compartment in the carriage. He had eaten approximately half of it and was finishing the other half off.

Brendel looked at the massive amount of chewing with slight annoyance and felt that he had lost his appetite. Perhaps this was the dwarf's strategy to prevent him from eating the desserts.

At the very least, it was working.

“I don’t believe I invited you to travel along with me?” Brendel asked with some exasperation in his tone. “Don’t you have a good job in the silver mines? I didn’t cause you to get dismissed so why are you hovering around me every day—”

The youth paused for a while and thought. He sighed deeply and added: “For the past two or three weeks—”

“Gough?” The dwarf choked and smacked his chest loudly and swallowed the tart he was having: “Erm, well, you see! Lad, this is a good question...”

Brendel felt the sides of his lips spasm. If there was a chance, he would definitely kick the old dwarf down the horse carriage. He replied coldly:

“Mister Odum, may I ask you to leave the carriage if you don’t have an answer?”

“No, no, no!” The dwarf shook his small, fat hands, “Of course not, I’m definitely not leaving!”

“And the reason why you can’t leave?”

“Well... Hmm, let me think,” Odum was troubled.

[I can’t say that I want to observe you for a while to see if you have the potential to become the King of the Underground, and that all the Rune Dwarves would then need to follow you, right?]

He felt like he would be treated as insane if he said that. After pondering for a few more seconds, he finally found a lousy excuse: “Lad, don’t you need people to work for you?”

Brendel felt he was to laugh out loud with sarcasm, but he spoke in an annoyed tone through his grinding teeth: “Very well, old dwarf, what can you do?”

“I... I can mine, yes, I’m skilled at mining. I-I have been taught by the Gold Dwarves, even though Rune Dwarves are not famous for mining, but the Gold Dwarves are proficient—”

“Please, stop talking now,” Brendel shook his head, “since you’re so good at mining,

why aren't you staying in the mines?"

The old dwarf stared back with big round eyes, opened and closed his mouth a few times before he stuttered: "Well... I mean, even though I'm good at mining, I actually want to switch professions..."

He said with a smile.

A very forced smile.

"Oh?" Brendel suddenly felt a little better. At least the dwarf seemed to know how strange his actions were. "Then what do you want to do?"

The youth's tone was both sarcastic and malicious.

Odum grabbed his hair. It was a difficult question.

[Urgh, this damned question has hit me in the guts. What else do I know other than mining? Are you pulling my leg, lad? You're making things hard for me on purpose. If this was anyone else but you, I'll punch them so hard that they see stars!]

After hesitating for a while, he finally said with much strain: "You know... I know a little... about construction..."

He did not lie. At the very least, he knew a little about constructing structural supports in the mines. It was his hobby too, and he could at least consider himself as someone who knew a little about building something.

But his knowledge did not come from the Rune Dwarves and he did not inherit their famous skills. In the end, he was still a miner.

But Brendel pricked his ears upon hearing that.

He obviously knew that the Rune Dwarves built grand structures in the underground, but he was not certain whether Odum inherited their skills. Since the old dwarf said he had them, his mood started to change, even throwing the gloom in his heart back to his mind.

"Did you say construction?" His voice was thirty percent higher.

Odum jolted and his eyes twitched a little at the youth's sudden enthusiasm, and the lack of confidence in his reply was even less: "J-just a little, I think..."

But the stubborn character of a dwarf suddenly boiled in him. He realized he could not make himself look weak. He was a dwarf, and a Rune Dwarf, and in him flowed the blood of a Silver Lineage!

"Lad!" He coughed out loudly and cleared his voice: "There has to be a beginning somewhere for everyone. Even though I said I know only a little about construction, I meant that my experience isn't enough. As you well know, I've worked in mines my whole life."

His reply was full of holes and even Romaine would probably not believe him. Unfortunately, Brendel had visited a ruined city made by Rune Dwarves in the game and was awed by the scale and design. It did not help that Odum had performed that miracle with Halran Gaia as well.

He nodded as he felt that Odum was talking about not having a budget to construct grand cities:

"I understand. You mean that you're lacking in funds. Don't worry, I'll give you enough money, so you can build a city for me."

"You want to build a city?" Odum yelled.

The old dwarf was so shocked that he started perspiring. A city was not like a simple building. He started to imagine himself trying to build one with his current knowledge.

In the future, at some random place, an unsightly city that became a famous place, oops, it was actually an infamous place.

It was teaching material for all dwarves. Odum could even hear a grumpy old voice speaking to a group of young dwarves.

"Alright, you lads, take a look at the braggart Odum's infamous work! This foolish dwarf even forgot to make the damned city gate—"

Odum shook his head and threw away the nasty thoughts out of his mind. Brendel's eager eyes were staring at him—

“How about it?” Brendel continued to speak to Odum with a tone that sounded like a devil trying to tempt him: “A city that’s also an impregnable fortress, and once it’s built, your name shall be remembered forever by everyone—”

Brendel seemed to believe his own words, and his eyes stared into the far-off distance:

“Hark, the Grandmaster Dwarven Builder Odum’s masterpiece, a city that withstood a thousand invasions and the test of time. He brought back the glory of the Rune Dwarves that were known for their skill in construction.”

Odum blinked a few times when he heard Brendel speaking about glory. Brendel’s confidence and descriptions of the city’s image had made him forget that he was actually an amateur.

[Yes! Of course! I carry the blood of a Rune Dwarf, even if I’m worst builder amongst my race, I still wouldn’t be that bad!]

He immediately strengthened his resolve and nodded forcefully.

“I look forward to your skill, mister Odum.” Brendel was also relieved.

[How silly of me. I should have asked him earlier whether he’s an architect. It’s lucky that he insisted on joining me. It wouldn’t be a problem if I want to build a fortress now.]

Brendel felt like he had profited immensely, and so did Odum.

Chapter 93

Return to Firburh

“You’re Firburh’s lead architect now. If you need anything, go ahead and speak with a young woman called Amandina, and if you want you can take over the duty of repairing the walls.

There are a few important people that you should know. My blacksmith, Grandmaster Bosley, and two of the mercenary commanders working under me, Raban and Cornelius

If you have any questions you can ask them. It will take a while for me to gather enough funds and get you builders, so I’ll let you know when to start building a city.”

Brendel pondered for a moment, before continuing:

“There’s a library in my manor. You’re free to enter it and see if there are any related books to the Firburh’s construction, especially if you want to repair the walls. Firburh’s design has been changed several times to make the heart of the city resemble something like a fortress. You might get interesting notes from the past nobles and architects.”

Odum blinked a few times, suddenly realizing that the youth in front of him was the new “lord” of Firburh. Even though he could care less about the fact of who was in charge of the city, he suddenly realized the person in front of him was the leader of the rebels.

[The fact remains that I’m a dwarf without any real skills in construction. Also, it doesn’t look like this lad has a lot of money. Doesn’t this mean I have to work with limited funds? If I screw this up... I’m not even given workers who know about construction too!]

What would happen if he failed to construct the fortress the youth wanted and squandered money instead?

He imagined speaking to Brendel:

“Ah! My lord, no one will be able to break down this fortress!. That’s because there’s no gate at all! And it fulfills the promise of being well-known too!”

If the youth was bold enough to murder a noble, he would definitely have no qualms about murdering him for this failure. He started thinking of an escape route.

[Hmmm, I don’t really care about this human kingdom, and I can go back to the Gold Dwarves as a respectable veteran miner. I can probably try to escape anytime I want if I plan well... Also, the Gold Dwarves and humans are not truly on good terms. If I mishandled the construction, maybe I can brag about it and make it seem like I swindled the humans. It will be recognized as an achievement amongst the Gold Dwarves!]

Brendel’s expression suddenly turned dark as though he had read Odum’s mind. His eyes narrowed as though he had sensed something incredibly displeasing, and the old dwarf suddenly remembered Kodan’s words about the youth being someone who was even more powerful in combat compared to him.

Odum gulped and trembled once. He broke into a cold sweat.

But Brendel did not pay attention to Odum’s frightened behavior.

Ciel suddenly spoke to him in his mind, stating that Scarlett had taken a turn for the worst and she might not live past the next day. He started to brood.

The journey was filled with uncomfortable silence for Odum, as Brendel reached out to Orthlyss to ask about the Blood of Gods and ignored him.

[Ser Orthlyss? Have you recovered enough to speak to me?]

“Do you need me for something, boy?” Came the whisper in his ears.

Brendel was glad that the Heroic Spirit replied. She lived during the Era of the Holy Saints, and the forces of the Darkness and Chaos were far stronger than what it was now. The Tree Shepherds and the Blood of Gods were not things that were unfamiliar to Orthlyss.

“There are only two methods that I know of that will permanently cure her. One, invoking the strongest Holy Words to weave the spell of Astral Healing. It’s a spell that nearly ignores the Laws of this world and reverses cause and effect. This way, it would

be possible to return Scarlett back to her former self before she was implanted with the Blood of Gods. However, I only know of the Holy Saint, Farnezain, who was capable of casting this spell.”

“I don’t think anyone is capable of casting this spell in this era,” Brendel said with a frown.

[Not even the gamers have this spell. It seems like only the ultimate NPC or World Boss would have.]

“The second method would be signing a contract with Mother Marsha. I believe that the effects will be even better than using Astral Healing.”

“Do you mean that she has to meet with Mother Marsha? But she hasn’t appeared before anyone for centuries.”

“I see. It’s not exactly necessary to meet Mother Marsha directly; there are artifacts that allow one to meet with her and sign a contract.”

“...I have never heard of these artifacts before, and it sounds like it’s impossible to find one in such a short period of time.”

“Then I’m sorry, boy, I don’t have any more ideas. Perhaps I can think of something else when I check your friend’s condition.

After a few hours, the gate to Firburh was raised. The shiny black horse-carriage was driven into the city. Because of the many mercenaries gathering at the gate with an air of slight excitement and solemn discipline, everyone knew that the young lord had returned.

Since Kodan was sent back with Scarlett and Medissa a few days ago while Jana stayed behind in Schafflund, the mercenaries in Firburh got to know that the youth captured the silver mines with only thirty-odd mercenaries.

Was it not a miracle?

Even though they knew that their lord was capable, this deed had made it seem like he could do anything.

The mercenaries escorted him with to the base of the huge manor with much fervor

and stopped there. Odum alighted with an exhausted face and was about to be led away to a guest room before Brendel called out to him.

The youth thought the old dwarf's exhaustion was due to him being unused to riding in a horse carriage and politely told him to rest well. He even apologized for suddenly not speaking halfway through the journey and explained that one of his mercenaries had gotten very ill which caused him to be moody. Odum's ears turned slightly warm when he realized the real reason behind the youth's attitude.

The old dwarf could hardly face Brendel's eyes and wondered if he should tell him the truth. In the end, he decided not to. It was not beneficial to either of them, and he was worried that Brendel might faint from the shock.

The youth did not look too well too.

Also, Odum was even more afraid of the mercenaries around him who were looking at Brendel like he was a saint. If he caused harm to their lord, he might get quartered right there. Even bravery had its limits, and there was no need for him to be hacked into pieces even if he had to die.

He thanked Brendel for his kindness.

When the youth reached his destination, he opened the door to a quiet scenery filled with green and red colors. The past owners of Graudin's manor had also planted evergreen trees around the manor so that the place would be filled with some greenery throughout the seasons.

He did not change anything to the manor when he conquered the city. However, when he glanced at the building in front of him, he realized that the curtains' colors had been changed into a pale yellow, which was a color that he was fond of.

[It must be Felaern's doing. The manor feels like home.]

Even though he did not know how the older Wild Elf knew about the colors that he liked, he felt a little happy to a meticulous arrangement like this, especially when he always felt a slightly disdainful feeling from her like a disapproving secretary when she followed him around.

The word 'home' was far and distant to the youth, and he felt like it had nothing to do with him anymore. The old house in Bucca was just a temporary stop or symbol that

he would never be able to return to his old world.

Perhaps there was a family in this world waiting for the original Brendel to go back, but the current Brendel felt like he was unable to cross this invisible line. He knew that as long as he felt this way, he would never be able to meet his family of this world.

He studied the quiet manor as he alighted. The guards stationed there were looking alert. The place was orderly and clean, making him feel at peace. The youth closed his eyes and breathed in the winter air deeply.

He could sense the hopeful gazes of everyone around him, and they made him realize he was indeed the owner of this city. In order to save this kingdom, he had gotten all of them involved in his dream and there was hardly any way out for them. If he were to lose the upcoming battle against Count Randner, everyone would be killed.

But he was confident that his actions would not disappoint them at the very end.

He felt someone approaching him and opened his eyes, jumping a little when he found that it was Felaern was standing before him with a stoic expression. She carried a thick book and stood straight with a dignified posture; even the most professional etiquette teacher would not be able to point out a mistake.

The Nightsong Tiger ordered her to cater to his needs ever since the battle at Firburh, and she had done a fantastic job as Brendel's secretary and personal maid thus far.

[There's really no need for her to do this job. Although—]

Brendel briefly wondered if he could get her to wear a pair of spectacles and a tight dress to cosplay an office lady worker, but he quickly shook off that thought.

"I like the manor's change," he thanked her.

The older Wild Elf regarded him with a pair of eyes that resembled a dead fish and the youth coughed, wondering if she read what he was thinking. But she nodded a second later, probably satisfied with Brendel's words.

"A bath has been prepared for you," she said.

He nodded and entered the manor while taking a few more glances at her as they walked in. As an Elementalist himself, he could feel the change of power in her even

without using his system.

After he emerged from the silver mines, he attached the Dwarven Treasure Vault card to the Mercenaries of Lopes and raised their levels. Each of the Mercenaries of Lopes became top Silver-rankers, and their abilities matched Aouine's second-tier commanders.

The Nightsong Tiger's skill in commanding an army was good as well, and the youth started to consider making him the backbone of his armies.

[But there's a problem with their identities. If anyone of them is struck down and revived later, what would my men think? Even if they accept that the Mercenaries of Lopes are summons, the latter would hardly inspire them to charge into dangerous battles when death hardly means a thing to Mercenaries of Lopes.]

He rubbed his forehead. He could think about that point later.

"I'm skipping the bath, bring me over to Scarlett's room right away."

"Are you not going to rest just a little, my lord?" Even though her tone was flat, the contents of her words showed her concern.

She knew that Brendel had traveled from Schafflund without resting at all. Judging from his appearance, he had not been resting much when he was working in Schafflund as well.

Indeed, he only slept for four hours every day ever since he conquered the silver mines.

"No, it's fine," Brendel said anxiously.

He had dropped everything in Schafflund and rushed back to Firburh. While he was not sure whether he could save the kingdom, he had to at least keep this promise that he made in the silver mines that he would save her.

Chapter 94

The girl's thread of fate (1)

Ciel allocated Scarlett into one of the manor's southwest room. The main color of her room was light green, and past the windows was a spectacular display of faraway trees with a majestic orange-red color, contrasted against an ink-like painting consisting of mountainous landscapes and the Dark Forest.

The young wizard was currently waiting outside her door as he had received news of his lord's arrival. Brendel appeared moments later along with Felaern, and his first question was:

"How is she?"

"She's not doing very well. Romaine, Medissa, and Amandina are all in there—"

Brendel nodded and pushed the doors open. Scarlett's room was not really a patient's room as there were no signs of any herbs or medicine. A light cold breeze came through the windows and he immediately saw the scenery, making him nod inwardly to Ciel's choice.

In the center was a canopy bed, and the valance was fluttering lightly against the wind. Scarlett was lying in the center with a pale face and lightly closed eyes.

This was the first time Brendel had ever seen her braided hair come undone. Her soft red hair had a wave-like sheen to it, and it covered her face partially. Her expression did not have her usual stubborn scowl and was instead replaced with a face that was deeply asleep.

Unfortunately, it was a deep sleep that was plagued by nightmares.

Her facial muscles twitched involuntarily and she was frowning slightly as though she was in great pain.

Medissa and Amandina stood up at the same time and greeted him. Medissa nodded lightly, while Amandina stared at him with worry.

Scarlett returned to Firburh without any issues but she suddenly collapsed a few days ago. Amandina only knew that the silver mines were captured but she had no idea about happened exactly.

When she questioned Medissa, the latter merely frowned and explained that Scarlett did not want to reveal the details. She further said that Brendel would be returning immediately and an explanation could wait until then.

Amandina's heart was sinking.

The experience at Chablis with Felaern's 'death' made her realize how pure-hearted she was. Even though she tried to ensure that her heart was not affected by emotions in order to become a worthy advisor, she could not help but shed silent tears.

Even though it was naive and foolish to hope that no one in this group would die, she did not want to give up praying. Brendel even told her that there would be bloodshed over the nobles' wars, and that victory could only be gained upon the sacrifice the lives of thousands.

[To be cold in your thinking but not cold-blooded.]

She could not help but recall these words when she saw him. With her lord's inexplicable capability, perhaps Scarlett could still be saved.

Brendel returned their greetings. He quickly caught the sight of Romaine slumbering on Scarlett's bed. Her eyebrows were even dancing a little like she was fighting something bravely, though her drool on Scarlett's blanket made his eye twitch a little.

Still, the youth knew her personality well enough, he realized she must have exhausted herself to help Scarlett, and he did not have the heart to scold her.

"What did Romaine do to be so tired?" He asked out of curiosity.

"She was telling Scarlett stories," Medissa answered. "because her aunt told her stories whenever she got sick, and she was cured when the story was finished"

"I see."

Brendel nodded. Romaine's aunt was most likely a witch, and she probably used Holy Words or something similar to cure Romaine.

Unfortunately, while Romaine might have the potential to become a witch, she obviously was not one right now and she could not imitate her aunt.

Brendel did not wake Romaine and instead observed Scarlett.

[It's been only ten days, but she looks much thinner.]

Scarlett was so pale that her veins could be seen, and the patterns on her neck had spread all the way to her face.

Brendel's heart fell a little.

Ciel had done his best to delay the corruption from reaching her brain, but Brendel also made the same judgment. There would not be a girl called Scarlett by tomorrow morning.

[Judging from the severity of the patterns, the place where the Blood of Gods that was implanted on her body is her heart. The person who implanted it is experienced; he first killed her, then revived her with the Blood of Gods. If this is a spirit or something similar, I can destroy its will, but the Blood of Gods is something that simply corrupts the body and mind by instinct and it won't stop. And if I find a way to destroy the Blood of Gods entirely, it's also the thing that sustains her life.]

Amandina and Medissa watched Brendel's expression closely and realized that he did not have the usual confidence where he solved seemingly impossible situations.

"My lord?" Medissa could not help but ask.

"Let me take a look, bring your ring closer to her." Orthlyss spoke in Brendel's ears, pausing momentarily as Brendel heeded her words, "the girl's corruption has reached her mind. I think it won't take more than half a day before she's completely gone. I'm sorry, boy, but I'm unable to think of a solution."

"I see," Brendel muttered to himself, "then there's no choice but to use my method, though it's quite foolish."

"You... have a solution?" Orthlyss's voice was surprised.

"I can delay the Blood of Gods from taking over her body."

Orthlyss was dumbfounded. Even if she was in her real body, she could only extend the girl's life by a day. Perhaps if she was back in the Dwarven Haven, she could have borrowed the power of the Laws in that area and extend her life, though it would still be limited.

But the youth actually said he was capable of extending her life?

Chapter 95

The girl's thread of fate (2)

The people in the room, except Romaine, heard his words. Ciel had never seen Brendel so serious before.

"My lord, what does that mean? Are you able to save her?" Amandina blurted out.

"No, my solution only delays the inevitable. The Blood of Gods is not something that comes from the mortal world. Any ordinary means would be greatly limited. You might not know this, but Scarlett is already deceased before she was given the Blood of Gods. The Blood of Gods is the sole reason why she has returned from the dead. One can say that reviving the dead is a taboo, but the Blood of Gods holds the overwhelming power to overturn the Laws..."

"Do you mean to change her into a spirit like Medissa?" Amandina asked.

"...No," Brendel hesitated before answering, "I'm uncertain of how things will turn out if I do that. My ability to turn a spirit into a card ultimately adheres to the Laws of this world, and the Blood of Gods is something that's outside these Laws. In addition to that, it's incredibly unfair to be anchored to this world for all eternity."

Brendel glanced at Medissa, but the latter shook her head instantly.

"My lord, this was my decision to be turned into a card. I believe you should ask Scarlett directly. I think she would not refuse."

"...Even so, I would not use it unless there are no other options. The Blood of Gods can still take over her consciousness."

Brendel had discussed this option with Ciel during his journey back to Firburh, and the latter shared the same opinion.

"I believe Scarlett was merely an Iron-ranked fighter and became a Gold-rank after given the Blood of Gods. While the Blood of Gods offers temporary life and strength, these two things are actually a by-product of the power that consumes Scarlett's soul.

The power also strengthens her body so that it finally becomes an avatar of the evil gods.”

“Is there no way to resist this power?” Amandina asked.

“If she’s alive while the Blood of Gods is used on her, she can resist it somewhat. But that itself is nearly impossible because of the tremendous energy from the Blood of Gods. Even if she somehow manages to overcome it, her body will be in shambles.”

Amandina shivered. Even though she had heard rumors about how terrifying the Tree Shepherds were, she merely regarded them as fables. In her eyes, they were merely robbers or bandits, and this was the first time she understood that how evil they were.

Perhaps the Unifying Guild was just as frightening.

“Why are they doing these terrible deeds?!” She asked through clenched teeth.

“To go against civilization, or to bring back chaos. I don’t know.” Brendel shrugged. “In any case, the Blood of Gods in Scarlett’s body is on the verge of consuming her soul entirely. The foolish solution I have is to provide energy to her body in order to resist it. If this solution was used when she’s still alive, perhaps she can overcome the Blood of Gods, but now, it’s merely delaying the inevitable.”

Ciel asked in a surprised voice: “But the Blood of Gods is capable of corrupting said energy quickly. Even if you spend a year of Trentheim’s income, you can only delay it for a few days. What is it that you have that could sustain her life, my lord?”

“Spend Trentheim’s income on what exactly?” Amandina asked.

“Well, Health Potions for an example,” Ciel said.

“We do have Health Potions.” Amandina said with a frown: “We found a few of them in Graudin’s treasury. Even though I’ve set them aside to be used on a battlefield, I can bring them out now. How many do you need?”

“A hundred bottles.”

“T-that many...” Amandina was taken aback.

“A day.”

Amandina was completely speechless; she finally understood Ciel's surprise. Surely Brendel did not have an endless supply of Health Potions on him.

"Then... doesn't it mean that there isn't a solution," she said.

Medissa was quietly taking in everything. She too had a certain understanding of the Blood of Gods, and knew that this method was impossible to sustain. She did not know why Brendel viewed it as a valid solution.

A cough suddenly came from the center of the room and attracted everyone's attention. Scarlett slowly opened her eyes. Her body was wet from cold sweat because of the nightmares that she had. She slowly and feebly turned her head to the side.

[Who are these people...]

She looked at them in confusion and blinked several times. She had woken up to hear them talking about things that did not make sense to her. But after a moment, she finally realized they were talking about her.

There was a young man in front of her looking worried.

This youth had once told her that he would never leave her behind. She had only known him for a few months, yet he was there when she needed someone, while Makarov, whom she had known for more than ten years both as a father figure and a teacher, said that she was nothing more than a sacrifice.

She could hardly move a finger. She laid in bed and her mind slipped in and out of consciousness and felt like she was going to be pulled back into that dark abyss once again to be haunted by shadowy creatures.

She knew clearly that it would not be very long where she would go back into Mother Marsha's embrace. She was not worried and even a little disinterested. It was about time, and she was tired of everything.

"How are you feeling?" His warm voice suddenly pulled her back to reality.

Suddenly she realized why she continued to hold on in her nightmares, even though she had already forgotten what she was waiting for.

Her eyes widened slightly when she finally recalled who the youth was. Tears started

spilling out.

“My... lord...” She blinked weakly, struggling to bring her voice out.

Chapter 96

The girl's thread of fate (3)

Amandina glanced at the silent people around her before putting back her suspicious gaze back on Brendel. Though she did not have Medissa's eyes for people or knew what happened in Schafflund's mines, even a fool would be able to see how fond Scarlett was of Brendel.

The youth patted Scarlett's head and the latter's sweet smile moved him.

But her fragile body made her smile look like it was about to break anytime.

"Welcome back... My lord." She had not eaten for several days, and the only sustenance she had was water. Her voice was nearly in a whisper.

"I've returned," Brendel said.

"Have you settled the things in Schafflund?"

Brendel did not answer and merely smiled.

"Have you come back to see me, my lord?" There was a little hint of hesitation in her voice, but there was had a trace of expectation in her eyes as well.

She suddenly shut her eyes and held her breath. The pain plaguing her suddenly struck her body again and she could only wait for it to pass. No one dared to speak at that moment.

Soon Scarlett gasped a few times before her breath went back to normal. She turned to the other side and stared at the scenery outside the window and asked softly:

"Can I be saved?"

"...Yes." Brendel nodded.

"Is that true?"

“Have I ever lied?”

Scarlett was taken aback for a moment. Had Brendel ever lied?

“But I feel... that you’re lying to me!” She sounded like she had given up and was even throwing a tantrum to express her frustration. “I... overheard your conversation.”

She stared at the leaves against the golden rays of the sun: “It’s not a practical solution. Even I feel it’s pointless for me to continue dragging on.”

Her smile was ever so sweet.

“How can you say that!” Amandina interrupted her and took a step forward a little angrily, but she felt sadness above all other emotions.

Brendel merely raised his hand. He nodded, though it was not to acknowledge Scarlett’s decision but to affirm his decision to use his solution to save her.

“Do you have any other wishes?” He asked gently.

But the others thought otherwise and held their breaths when they saw Brendel’s nod. Scarlett’s eyes went back to Brendel, almost in tears again.

Brendel said he would not leave her behind, but in the end, he still did. Even if it was something that could not be helped, this only meant that the promises made to her would always end up as lies.

[Am I too greedy? Have I asked for something that is always impossible to achieve?]

She had tried her best to do everything she could to please others, but what she got in return was pain that seemed to cut her heart into pieces.

The red-haired girl stared at Brendel with wet eyes and in the end asked with a resigned voice.

Why was she unable to save the ones she loved?

Why was there no one who could save her?

Why did she have to turn into a monster at the end of her life?

“My lord... I... Back in my hometown...” She paused several times before stating her final request with a sob: “There’s a tradition...”

She tried to steady her emotions so that she could get her last request out to Brendel.

[You horrible, evil liar... But why can’t I hate you?]

“When someone is about to die, the people closest to them would kiss them on their forehead, and their thoughts would be left behind... And even if they are to depart to another world, they would not forget the people closest to them...”

She struggled to get up: “My lord, can you become... the person closest to me? Even just for this moment, then you can...”

[End my life—]

She suddenly collapsed back onto the bed and muttered with confusion as the abyss pulled her back, her gaze looking far away at something else: “Commander, Eke, Yula, all of you, why are you abandoning me...”

Amandina could not help but turn her head away. She rubbed her eyes and sniffed hard, unable to hold back her emotions. But Medissa and Ciel stared straight at Scarlett, determined to see this through.

“Close your eyes, Scarlett.” Brendel’s voice was gentle.

Scarlett was back in Chablis again. She could hear the rustling of leaves as the wind blew across the landscape. It was where she grew up in. She remembered her beginning and ending in this illusion of hers. In that moment, she remembered the laughter of the Grey Wolves Mercenaries around her.

She grew up with them, and their smiles were ever so vivid, especially Eke and the commander. It was a time where she had no worries, but they were so very far away from her. When she tried running after them, they were instead getting further and further away. When she called out to them, it was as if they could not hear her.

But a familiar voice called out to her to close her eyes and the girl looked vacantly in front of her before she obeyed. She wanted to open her eyes and reach out to them, but that familiar voice spoke again:

“Don’t move.”

And she continued to shut her eyes tightly.

Something cool pressed against her lips.

Suddenly her focus came back and she remembered the request she made. A shriek nearly escaped her throat. She felt her ears, no, her entire face burn.

[H-how can he kiss me on the lips... E-everyone’s watching!]

Her heart beat violently as time continued to pass. Her mind felt like it was filled with rocks, and she was about to die not from the corruption but from the burning shame.

And it seemed like he was getting bolder as the sensation went all over her lips.

She tried to blurt out angry words, but it was as though he had been waiting for that moment; the moment she opened her lips, a wet sweetness invaded her mouth. Scarlett’s squirming actions immediately froze.

[T-t-this pervert!!!]

“Pfff—” Someone tried to stifle a laughter.

It was the last straw. Scarlett’s hand immediately went up and smacked the offending person’s... hand?

She suddenly realized what she was doing. Why did her mind suddenly become clear?

An indescribable sweetness.

Her pain had completely disappeared. She felt energy returning to her with every breath. A warm current spread from her mouth, first to her throat, then to her entire body, pulling out her blurry thoughts from the abyss she was in.

She opened her eyes. Amandina and Felaern’s bodies were turned away while trying to hold back their laughter. However, Ciel and Medissa appeared to be utterly stunned, and their gazes were on Brendel’s hand.

It was a shining golden apple, with a slice missing from it.

Brendel's lips were slightly lifted in an incorrigible manner, while his eyes were slightly narrowed to form an impish line. But when he saw Scarlett getting up with a stunned expression, he suddenly turned solemn and brooding.

[The lifeforce provided by the golden apple will extend her life, but it doesn't stop the corruption. Rather, it will strengthen the Blood of Gods in her. The legend about the Golden Apple states that it can change one's destiny. I can only hope it changes her fate.]

This was the only solution he had.

[That little female dragon also said there's something applied to this apple. Even though it's unlikely to be poison, I doubt it's anything good either... Wait— her face is really red. Is the Golden Apple really poisoned?]

Even though he teased her as a joke, he did not expect her reaction to be so strong and thought that the dragon really did something to the apple.

"Do you feel there's something wrong?!" He asked urgently.

However, it sounded like their lord was making fun of Scarlett, and this caused the two girls to break out into uncontrollable laughter.

Scarlett wanted to find a block of cheese, smash her head into it and die right there to end the shame.

Chapter 97

The girl's thread of fate (4)

Scarlett was saved.

It was like a miracle—

The room's atmosphere became boisterous and it took a long time before the joy abated. No one expected Brendel to come up with a way to save Scarlett from such a dangerous situation.

However, it proved one thing. Their young mysterious lord was omnipotent!

Amandina had countless moments where she had this thought, and this time was no different. She pulled back her gaze from the youth, feeling the burden on her shoulders lift.

Scarlett was looking at the golden apple that was on both her hands in a daze. When she felt Amandina's gaze on her, she smiled back weakly, and the latter sighed in her heart.

[This foolish girl!]

Amandina shook her head and that the girl in front of her could not be saved any longer. When Scarlett hugged the Golden Apple like it was the greatest treasure in this world, Amandina knew that Scarlett was going to find a way to pay Brendel back her whole life.

Just a few moments ago, Brendel handed the Golden Apple over to Scarlett while Ciel informed everyone that it was the legendary Golden Apple. Scarlett acted like someone who got struck by lightning when she heard that, and the Golden Apple fell out of her hands. If it was not for Brendel's lightning reactions, this would be the first Golden Apple that smashed to bits in history by dropping onto the ground.

In that moment, Amandina finally realized, just like how Medissa did, that this seemingly tough red-haired girl had an abnormal reliance on other people, as though

she was living her life based on other people's opinions.

The most sorrowful thing for her was that this world was one where most people had to rely on themselves, and it was rare for a stranger to spare a thought for another person.

It was especially so for nobles similar to Makarov. They would never stop moving forward and only stop for profits.

The efforts that Scarlett gave would never be rewarded. If the Grey Wolves Mercenaries and she could see this point, they might feel a little better at Makarov's betrayal.

Unfortunately, the Scarlett that Amandina knew was a weak but stubborn girl.

The young noble lady glanced at Brendel, feeling fortunate that the lord she was pursuing was an anomaly.

Generous, merciful, and full of humanity.

His every action seemed like it did not match the world of the nobles. Yet, if she was to say that he was not one, she could not convince herself. Only a noble would know so much about that the politics of that world and conduct himself with such dignity.

If she took every event that happened and put it on the table... This youth was not only a noble but one who had a powerful House backing him.

This was made evident by Kodan's arrival as a prisoner.

Since she was the person temporarily in charge of Firburh's affairs after Brendel was gone, she quickly got to meet up with this old guard commander.

She had been studying on the important figureheads amongst the nobles in order to realize Brendel's future plans, and thus recognized him as one of Count Randner's best knights.

Kodan was born in a lineage comprising of knights and had participated in the November War, and served beside Count Randner for many years. When she spoke to him, she discovered that his attitude towards Brendel was strange and it made her suspicious.

There was no doubt at all. He recognized Brendel —

When she asked Medissa, she found out that he knew Brendel's grandfather and even served under him for a period of time. With the bits and pieces of information she discovered that would not interest any normal commoner, she put together a complete image.

Brendel was from a powerful House that had a long history but kept a low-profile.

[Sometimes I wonder if I'm blessed by the gods. I left my dark home in Bruglas and met with this strange youth, and became his advisor just like that.]

At least from the time when she left her home, she had never truly regretted it and felt that she was fortunate to meet him.

[Though, I must say that Golden Apple makes me feel a little jealous.]

It was something that came out from legendary tales and could change a person completely, to the point where it affected an entire kingdom's destiny.

Before Scarlett's recovery happened, she had not even considered that this legend was true.

However, the fact that he had this Golden Apple would mean that he could buy off any of the strongest forces in the kingdom, and even become a duke regardless of whether it was the Aouine or Kirrlutz's kingdom. Even the pope of the Holy Cathedral of Fire would want it. As long as the youth wanted to, he could exchange it for almost anything that he wanted.

That was how priceless it was.

And it was simply given away to a girl whom he had just met for less than a few months. Certainly, Scarlett was a Gold-ranked fighter, but a Golden Apple's value really had nothing in common with her other than the word 'gold'. In fact, the Golden Apple was the worth of at least a hundred Gold-ranked fighters.

She did not understand why he did it.

But Brendel had a different perspective in regards to the fruit. The only thing he saw here was that he should not have this item in the first place. Amandina believed there

was a powerful House backing him, but he obviously did not.

But even if he did have the power to retain the apple, he would never deal with Aouine's rotten nobles or make a deal with Kirrlutz who was looking for a chance to take over Aouine.

He was here to change Aouine's fate, not become part of the kingdom's problems.

The youth obviously knew how easy it was for him to live comfortably in this world, but that was not part of his goals. It was especially so when he met people like Makarov and Graudin, and his belief only got stronger with each passing day.

Therefore he did not really care about the Golden Apple.

If it could cure Scarlett, he did not mind giving away a hundred apples away to save her life.

But Scarlett also saw things differently from Brendel, and just like Amandina, understood the value of the Golden Apple.

She heard that Makarov, Buga, and two other important nobles nearly started a battle against the Silver Elves over this Golden Apple. The greed in their eyes could not be any clearer.

There was never any doubt that her former commander would choose this Golden Apple over her life a hundred times.

Why would this youth just make such this decision so easily like it meant nothing to him?

She glanced at the people beside Brendel to seek an answer, and her eyes fell onto Medissa who was discussing with Ciel—

"My lord," Medissa finally spoke, "I understand what you're trying to do, by using the tremendous Lifeforce from the Golden Apple, you seek to replenish her strength... but..."

She frowned deeply: "If you do this, this is just like drinking poison to quench a thirst."

"This is a choiceless solution since there is no other solution. By slowing her condition

down, there might be another answer. Still, using the Golden Apple in this manner, I'll probably drive the people who want this apple mad." Brendel laughed.

Ciel nodded and also grinned while he glanced at Scarlett: "Indeed, to use this precious material for such a matter."

Scarlett lowered her head upon hearing Ciel's words. She also started to feel that it was wasteful when she thought about it. She got to eat the legendary Golden Apple for an incurable disease. It was unthinkable.

Brendel immediately shot a murderous glare at Ciel, and the latter realized his mistake: "Miss Scarlett, don't overthink this, I'm not saying it's wasteful, it's just that the Golden Apple is priceless, and I think... Ha ha, I suddenly remember something appropriate that's an equivalent exchange—"

Everyone's eyes were on him.

Ciel shrank a little, but he giggled: "Well, if this Golden Apple is used as my lord's dowry for Scarlett's hand in marriage, then the debt would be offset, right?"

"Hand in marriage?" Scarlett blinked blankly.

"Well, you know, becoming our lord's wif— ommph!!" Ciel said as he tried to dodge Brendel's sword hilt, but as a wizard, he would never be able to avoid Brendel's attack at such a close range. He immediately yelled out in pain as the sword's hilt sank into his abdomen, causing him to fall over.

Brendel was furious over Ciel's lips and had attacked him mercilessly, expecting that scoundrel to roll about on the floor for several minutes in pain. Medissa glanced at the writhing wizard and showed a rarely seen 'you deserve it' expression.

Scarlett finally understood what Ciel was talking about and her face flushed red.

Brendel was worried about what she was thinking and said: "There's no need to heed what this idiot's words. If you want to pay back the investment of this Golden Apple, then make sure you live properly from now onwards. Remember, you're my most important combat strength amongst my subordinates."

He took a deep breath: "I believe there's going to be a huge battle in Trentheim very soon."

Scarlett paused for a moment but nodded furiously without lifting her head back up.

Chapter 98

The girl's thread of fate (5)

Medissa discreetly pulled Brendel's sleeve and spoke into his mind: "My lord, the Golden Apple can only delay the danger temporarily. Do you have a real solution to this?"

Brendel paused for a moment and thought aloud.

[Ser Orthlyss, do you have a solution if we have a couple of years?]

"I did think of a solution when you pulled out that Golden Apple. The solution I had earlier was to destroy the Blood of Gods, but why not try and overwhelm the Blood of Gods now with a mental fight now? The apple gives out Lifeforce that strengthens the soul, and she is in a better position to fight back." Orthlyss replied.

Brendel pondered for a moment to himself.

[Indeed, the Golden Apple is the best item for Wizards and Elementalists because it enhances the Will stats. But it's not an easy task for a native of this world. There's no cheat here where Scarlett can level up with XP, and the Golden Apple would only delay things for a year or two. To be truly effective, she needs to take on a Wizard or Elementalist profession and raise her level to the point where she can gain an Element Power—]

Unlocking an Element Power in two years?

Brendel shook his head inwardly when he thought about it.

Still, it was a solution that was better than no solutions, and it was not as if there were no chances. There were a few extreme methods that he knew of that could unlock an Element power derived from an Elementalist.

Now that things had come to this point, he could only try.

For now, he kept these answers to his heart and threw down a few words that evaded

giving a real answer.

“Amandina, take care of Scarlett. The rest of us should leave so that she can rest.” Brendel said.

“Wait, let Romaine sleep a little more,” Scarlett said.

In the end, everyone except Amandina and Romaine left the room, with Brendel closing the door lightly.

Even though Scarlett had recovered, her body was still weak and she needed to rest properly. Brendel was also quite worried about little Romaine. She worked even longer hours than he did in Schafflund and seemed to have accompanied night and day with Scarlett when she returned.

Brendel rubbed his forehead when he thought about the extra ingredients that little female dragon left behind on the Golden Apple. He still had no idea what it was, but at least the matter about the fruit was over and done with.

Felaern soon led him to his room where he took a bath and rested later.

When he woke up, he went to the study to check up on Firburh’s report and spotted Odum in the library.

“Mister Odum, have you found anything interesting?”

“Yes, there are some notes about a drainage system and garbage disposal for a city.”

Odum’s eyes were gleaming slightly.

The Gold Dwarves were famous for mining and digging tunnels. Since they lived underground, they did not really think about hygiene, In fact, they rarely bathed their whole lives. They ate food that was in the soil and the only pollution they cared about was about the water they drank.

However, amongst their complicated maze of tunnels, they had a unique tunnel system to handle garbage.

A city that had hundreds of thousands of people living in it would produce a large amount of rubbish which would pollute water. If the polluted water and rubbish were

not handled properly, they would lead to plagues, which was why areas with low levels of civilization did not have large cities.

Odum discovered the direction he should go into.

The drainage system could be developed in the way how the Gold Dwarves handled rubbish, and if he borrowed their methods, it might work out quite well.

As for the walls and gates, he had some architecture skills that he learned from the Mountain Dwarves. By combining his knowledge along with the books and squeezing out his potential as a Rune Dwarf, it seemed like things were not as complicated as they looked.

Brendel was considerably pleased as he exchanged words with him.

However, the people that he called into his study later were a different story.

He reviewed the reports where the mercenaries fought against Lord Macsen, began thinking about the mercenaries, and realized that he did not really have people around that excelled in leading like he thought earlier. Other than his summons and himself, there was really no one else who could lead the war against Count Randner.

“Why didn’t Ciel go along with the rest to at least oversee Lord Macsen’s battle? Did you feel that his expertise is needed elsewhere? Or did you think that it’s enough that the Mercenaries of Lopes led the rest of the mercenaries?” He questioned the commanders who led the battle.

Ciel and Amandina were also called in to listen.

“There are more casualties than your plans anticipated against Lord Macsen. Did you do a review about why it was so?” Brendel continued. Silence answered him, and he rubbed his forehead:

“I’ve been leading the mercenaries against bigger odds ever since Firburh’s battle against the undead and Graudin. Ever wondered why we succeeded? It’s because there are Gold-ranked fighters fighting in crucial areas. I’m not saying that they should hold your hands in every single battle, but at least make sure that they are there to ensure there are no loose ends. You had one for this battle, so why didn’t you at least get him out there? It’s not as if there are reports of enemy armies appearing out of nowhere and Ciel had to stay in the city to defend it.”

In truth, he did not realize he was asking for near perfection. Since he had fought for over a century of in-game years against the nobles and emerged from a sea of corpses, it would not be wrong to say that his experience outmatched against nearly everyone in the kingdom when it came to battles.

[Even though Amandina has strong analytical skills and a broad view of things, I still feel she needs more experience. Yes, she placed most of the scouts correctly around Firburh that would anticipate other enemy movements, but what's the use if she lets Ciel sit in the city when there's no need to?]

Amongst the various mercenaries, Amandina was perceived as an impeccable advisor. She was calm and decisive, had her opinions with strong insight in regards to various policies and yet they were never reckless. She could even foresee events that others could not.

There was even her extensive knowledge of monsters and the environment, as though she had insight into everything. They felt like she could even match Ciel, a wizard from the Black Tower, on these aspects.

The mercenaries who got called to her meetings were usually confused when she spoke, yet it sounded like her words made sense somehow. They wondered about her background.

Raban who had a better understanding of the nobles frequently looked at Amandina with an odd gaze. In his eyes, Amandina was like the children who were specifically raised in extremely affluent families to be their children's loyal companions. Because of his relatively crude background, he had often wondered if she had to meet their lord's 'special' needs.

This conjecture was not limited only to Raban. Many mercenaries had the same thought. Amandina's authority was far beyond what an advisor would have, and that level of trust could only have one explanation.

Amandina was Brendel's woman.

Sadly, Brendel was far too busy with his various thoughts to notice the small things like this. Since Amandina ignored the rumors and did not mention it to him despite realizing what they were thinking, it ultimately allowed this misunderstanding to continue.

Brendel continued to lecture Amandina with a dissatisfied tone on the things that she could have done better. It did not mean that she was shunned, instead, the mercenaries believed that she was viewed with importance.

The level of competency that their lord wanted made the mercenaries secretly shake their heads in disbelief. Yet the youth's words were full of logic and pointed out things that could lead to a serious problem. Everyone could only redraw the line where the word 'competent' really pointed to.

A new aura started appearing on Brendel. Everyone thought that he was a scion of an extremely powerful family and was sent out to rule a territory on his own for training.

Eventually, they were all dismissed and Brendel started to ponder about the commanders.

[Raban's a former cavalry commander of Karsuk. He's probably the only one who's stable and disciplined, and he does things better than Jana. But as a mere cavalry commander, his foresight isn't good enough. Jana is someone who spends too much time on details and can hardly see the bigger picture, but she can be trusted.]

Brendel was satisfied with Jana's actions in the mines and allowed her to stay in Schafflund to oversee Perkin's actions. He doubted that she would do anything that would betray him.

[As for Cornelius, he's too much of a bootlicker. He does have the capability to lead, but unless I solidify my position, I can't really trust him with too much power since he might get ideas. Even though all of them can become fine commanders, but there really isn't enough time for them to grow stronger.]

He shook his head. Yes, he was asking for too much, but where was the talented personnel that he needed?

Chapter 99

The guest from the Red Bronze Dragon Mercenaries (1)

“My lord.”

A few hours later, Ciel entered Brendel’s study room and called out to him. The latter was buried in documents when he glanced up at Ciel before going back to reading.

“Speak, ” he said.

“There’s a new report. There’s movement in the Palas region.”

“From Amandina’s scouts?”

“No, it’s from the Red Bronze... Ahh, no, the Amber Sword Mercenaries.”

“Did they sent their report from Lord Macsen’s territory?”

“Yes.”

“Oh?” Brendel was surprised.

This was the first time they had sent information on their own initiative. Even though he had gotten them to attack Fortress Minst, he was not exactly certain how loyal they would be.

It was possible that some of them might have different ideas since they were former guards in Fortress Riedon. Leto and his men were unlikely to betray him, but it was hard to tell with the others.

“Let me see the report,” he said.

Lord Macsen left his oldest son in charge of defending the fortress. In order to prevent his son from abusing his power and perhaps harming his other brothers, he took the

mercenaries and most of the soldiers away with him, leaving behind a few soldiers who were neutral.

Unfortunately, this created a great chance for Leto and the others. The Amber Sword Mercenaries successfully infiltrated the fortress and attacked in the middle of the night, causing the guards to be captured as prisoners.

After Fortress Minst was controlled, Leto forced Lord Macsen's oldest son to send letters out to the various retainers in the region, including priests and the lower ranking aristocrats, invited them to a 'banquet' and captured them successfully.

After this was done, Leto sent out his men to attack the nearby areas with lightning speed. Even though the process was not a smooth one, the experienced commanders such as Mano, Batum, Gaspard, and Taron, effectively led the mercenaries against the remaining soldiers of Lord Macsen's subordinates to victory.

[How surprising. Taron and Gaspard. The former is a commander within the White Mane Army, while the latter is a guard commander in Fortress Riedon. It's interesting that they still choose to stand on my side instead of going back to the nobles. I can understand why Leto, Mano, and Batum chose to follow me, but these two...]

Brendel pondered for a moment. Would it be better if he called the first two back to him so he could keep a closer eye on them? How risky would it be for him if they chose to betray him in the upcoming battles?

In the end, he decided to leave it aside and focus on other things as he could not find an answer.

"Leto and his men did well!" Brendel praised them lavishly.

His only expectation was for the Amber Sword Mercenaries to capture Fortress Minst, but they surpassed his expectations by capturing more than half of the Macsen region. While it was true that Lord Macsen and his men did not govern his land well, it was also true that these mercenaries were great in commanding.

[With this, we can redraw the defensive lines. The Macsen region controls important stretches of forests and mountains where the Palas region can attack from. Controlling these areas means we can dictate where the future battles can be.]

"The person who delivered the report is still here?" Brendel asked.

“Yes.”

“Who is it?”

Ciel suddenly revealed a slightly flippant smirk: “My lord, why not take a guess?”

Brendel shot a glance at him from the corners of his eyes. Ciel who was standing close to the table could see that the youth’s hand was reaching for Halran Gaia’s sword hilt, and he gave a yell that resembled like a strangled chicken:

“Nonono, I mean, there’s no need to guess. He’s waiting outside. I’ll have him sent in right away. Should I get Felaern and Medissa in too?”

Brendel nodded. Felaern would take notes while Medissa was there as his bodyguard.

He was slightly taken aback when he saw Gaspard entering the room. He had thought it would be Batum, as the latter expressed much interest in following him.

Gaspard appeared shocked when he saw Brendel too. When he entered the room along with Ciel, Felaern, and Medissa, but his attention was immediately drawn to Brendel instead of looking at the girls.

The youth’s appearance had become more mature compared to six months ago, and his seemingly youthful and shy innocence seemed to have receded greatly. His cheekbones had become more prominent, as if to show off his sharpened aura that seemed to penetrate Gaspard’s soul. The faded black attire that he wore did not diminish the air of nobility around him.

The only thing that did not change, was his relentless gaze of steely confidence that he displayed during Fortress Riedon siege.

The youth was playing with his sword by passing it to his left and right hands as he observed Gaspard with a carefree smile. However, the mercenary felt goosebumps all over his skin. Luc Beson had a similar feel to him.

Cold and decisive. These traits that could only come from the battlefield.

“My... lord?” Gaspard spoke in hesitation.

But the longer he looked at Brendel, the more he felt that there was hardly a

comparison with the commander of Fortress Riedon. For a moment, his instinct was screaming at him to run away when their eyes met. It was like there was a sharpened blade filled with bloodlust on his neck, yet when he blinked in fright that feeling was gone.

[...A Gold-ranked grandmaster swordsman?]

He gulped. It was just a fleeting moment, but the fact that he felt slight perspiration on his forehead meant that his instinct was not wrong, and he was able to make this conclusion because he knew Luc Beson as a top Silver-ranked swordsman.

The pressure that was given out by Brendel far surpassed the commander of the White Mane army in Fortress Riedon.

After Brendel led the fight against the undead, Gaspard felt like he had benefitted greatly and improved his skill quickly in the past few months. He was very close to reaching the standards of a Silver-ranked fighter, and it would not be wrong to say that his improvement was the fastest amongst the mercenaries, and arguably only Taron did better. He was originally not Leto's match, but now he was able to fight the latter to a draw.

[This truly means that it was not a fluke when he fought against that undead general. But it only had been six months... No, at most he's a Silver-ranked swordsman?]

Brendel nodded in response to Gaspard's greeting.

"I didn't think that it would be you," the youth said honestly, "it must have been tough to fight against the nobles."

It was only then that the former guard remembered that Brendel led the charge against the undead.

"My lord," Gaspard bowed his head sincerely.

The Red Bronze Dragon Mercenaries acknowledged Brendel when the youth led the charge against the undead, but as time went by, some of them had forgotten the emotions they felt at that time. When Brendel asked them to take over Lord Macsen's territory, there were many who were against it and an internal conflict happened.

It was sheer insanity to attack the nobles.

But Gaspard, Taron, and Batum stood firmly on Brendel's side. While Gaspard did not know what the rest of them were thinking exactly, he had his own thoughts.

He was once Fortress Riedon's guard commander in charge of security, and because of the nobles behind him, he was allowed to act lawlessly. Every commoner had to address him respectfully. He was not a fool; he knew that their deference to him was to mask the fear and hatred within them. At that time, he did not care much about it, because in his eyes the only thing that mattered most in this world was power and authority.

These were the attributes that were needed in order to rule the masses.

It was only until the moment where Brendel led the refugees and defeated Madara's undead which was far stronger than the nobles, that he realized there was something else that could move others and give everything that they had.

The youth called it 'ideals'.

Chapter 100

The guest from the Red Bronze Dragon

Mercenaries (2)

Many things were going through Gaspard's head when he saw Brendel again.

He had once hesitated in Bruglas over the decision to join the Amber Sword Mercenaries, but he chose not to go back to become a city guard. Still, even after his decision, he wavered as he traveled along with Leto and the others. They escorted various groups of refugees on their way to Trenheim, fought against bandits, and had a lifestyle that was much harder than when he lived in Fortress Riedon.

He did not know why he persisted.

But he did understand that the refugees who traveled with the mercenaries, who even hated him in the past, now greeted him with respect.

Their greetings did not change; it was Captain Gaspard.

There was something different now.

He realized that he could no longer throw away his current life or go back to what he used to be. Somehow along the way without him knowing, there was a word called 'responsibility' that was growing in his heart.

It was the reason why he supported Brendel regardless of his thoughts, along with Taron and Batum.

[I'm not supporting this youth governing this city, but the youth who changed me. If someone like him possesses this much charisma to change someone like me, then he definitely has the ability to lead the people under him to a better place.]

Truthfully, even though he supported the youth, he was actually internally conflicted about the orders from him. As someone who had served the nobles for some time, he understood the rules of their games. The order that Brendel gave was going against

the entire kingdom.

“My lord... You said that you would be inheriting a land, but you didn’t tell us that you would be inheriting it in this manner.” He said.

“Hmm. Well.” Brendel stood up and came closer to Gaspard while stroking his chin. He understood what the latter was insinuating, but he did not expect him to think that deeply.

Surely he could not tell him that it was just something that he came up as a whim?

The youth secretly exhaled with relief. If Amandina was there, she would have glared at him without leaving a place for him to hide as this was a sore point.

“There’s a place that I’m going to inherit, and this incident was a little accident. Graudin crossed the line by interfering with me, and I had to deal with him. However, I’ll get that place.” Brendel nodded with an embarrassed smile while he started to change the topic.

Gaspard eyed the youth.

“But what about Count Randner? I don’t think that he would let this affront slide,” he said.

“It’s the reason why I wanted to see you. Was it the elderly Leto who had you come over?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Brendel’s respectful tone when he mentioned Leto made Gaspard relieved. The youth had not sent any further instructions or even anyone to Fortress Minst and simply left Leto on his own.

This gesture confused some of the mercenaries, including Gaspard, but he now knew that it was Brendel’s trust in Leto’s foresight. The people who did not understand Brendel’s intentions were worried about Count Randner’s retaliation and started making plans to flee and hide within the forests before moving elsewhere. They were mercenaries after all, and they treated death lightly.

Except that his initial guess was right. Brendel truly did not remember that he still had

the Amber Sword Mercenaries because he was completely buried in work in Schafflund. Occupying the Macsen region was a preparation for the battle against Count Randner, and he could care less about attacking other regions within Trentheim since these aristocrats were poor.

Brendel tapped the table behind him with his fingers, and he started to frown.

“My lord?” Gaspard said puzzledly.

“The war is coming a little faster than I thought—” Brendel said.

“What?”

“The report you delivered. Lord Palas in the history books is supposed to be someone who’s steady and experienced. He already has the knowledge of Lord Macsen’s defeat, so he should slow down and become more careful...”

“Lord Palas in history books,” Ciel repeated somewhere close to him in a serious manner. He was already used to the strange word choices from his lord.

Brendel shot an irritated glare at Ciel, and the latter quickly shrank back.

“Instead, the number of his knights have increased. This means that he has already received the instructions of Count Randner. It’s a sign of the next battle that is to come.”

“What?” Gaspard raised his voice in alarm. He knew that Count Randner would seek revenge, but he did not expect it to come so quickly. He had not even made mental preparations.

“My lord?” Medissa raised her voice.

Brendel shook his head to indicate that there was no need to worry yet.

“What should we do?” But Gaspard became worried.

The advisors that he saw in Fortress Riedon were mostly comprised of the lower-ranking aristocrats. As for people who were even more capable and higher in rank, he had only seen them from afar. Count Randner’s military might was not any weaker than the other dukes.

It would not be wrong to say that Brendel and his men would be crushed like bugs, so why did the youth speak like it had nothing to do with him? In fact, his attitude was like he was facing some country bumpkin and not a Count with powerful military might.

“Are you afraid?” Brendel suddenly asked.

“Not really,” Gaspard hurriedly shook his head. Of course, it was a lie. How could he not be scared?

“Indeed, there’s no need to be scared. If we can win against Lord Macsen, then we can win against Count Randner. Enemies are supposed to be treated with importance and not to be feared.

Gaspard nodded.

“Are we going to war? How much time do we have?” Felaern asked while she readied her book.

Brendel chewed his lips before answering: “His full army will come in a month, at the very latest, two months. But Lord Palas won’t leave us alone during this period. It’s important that we are prepared for skirmishes.”

Everyone was momentarily silent.

Medissa and Ciel knew that the upcoming battle would be the biggest trial for them and this land.

Once Brendel became victorious, he would get the recognition of the Royal Faction, and once he did so, the loyalty of the citizens in Firburh would become stable.

In this era, the entire continent perceived reputation and legitimacy as extremely important things. No matter how much he tried to gain the loyalty of the citizens, it would never work if he did not have these two points. The citizens might praise the person privately, but they would not stand together with him.

Brendel knew this point clearly.

[Again, it’s this question. In the best outcome, I might be able to gather one or two thousand soldiers, including the mercenaries I have now. Tagiv’s forces might reach

over three thousand, but it will never put the fate of their entire tribe of my hands. Lending half of the Subterrane Dwellers to my aid is a great sign of respect for me.]

Brendel thought for a while on how to deploy these men now that the lines of defense had changed. Although Count Randner's army might go up to twenty thousand men, it did not mean that the initial skirmish would have that number.

Trentheim's rebellion probably had little effect on Count Randner's overall situation, but this was a moment where Duke Arreck, as well as the Royal Faction, were pressuring the cunning old man. It was enough for him to get tired from dealing with them, not to mention that the rebellion was like a fire was burning in his backyard; his hands were full.

Lord Macsen's utter defeat had sent off a warning signal.

His reputation must have gotten a beating for this rebellion to happen now.

[But a loss in reputation hardly means anything. Count Randner won't ask for the other nobles for help because of the two factions watching him. His pride won't allow it. Since Graudin worked with Madara, I won't be surprised if Count Randner tries to borrow their strength again. Even before I came to Firburh, Madara was already interested in Sifrid. Considering Incirsta's personality, he won't give up easily. If Count Randner had an agreement with them, Madara will send out their army.]

"Any news of Madara's movements?" Brendel turned to Ciel and asked.

"They are quite meek recently and seemed to have retreated out of Trentheim," Ciel replied.

"Make sure you keep an eye on those damned bones. I suspect they were colluding with Count Randner even before the initial war started." Brendel sighed.

[Incirsta should actually thank me. If I didn't eliminate Kabias, he would actually get fewer resources.]

Brendel remembered Madara's history quite well. Incirsta's greatest trouble was from the Shadow Lords' interference who did not trust him because of his inexperience. If Tarkus did not support him, then Incirsta would have trouble standing out in the War of the Black Rose.

[I'm getting sidetracked. I'm naturally willing to bolster my defenses and wait for the opportunity to fight back, but my opponent won't give me this chance.]

(TL: 先为不可胜，待敌之可胜. The raws used these two sentences. It's chopped up from Sun Tze's 昔之善战者，先为不可胜，以待敌之可胜: "The people who are good at war would create conditions so that the enemies could not gain victory over them, and then they would wait till they find an opportunity to defeat the enemies.")

"The scouts that were sent to Aouine's southern armies at the borders. Did they managed to find them?" Brendel asked.

"Unfortunately, there is no news from the majority of them. The ones that sent back a reply gave useless information."

"I see. Although, by the words 'no news', you mean they ran away and fled elsewhere." Brendel laughed.

[There goes the plan on getting the support of the southern armies to curb Madara's forces. It seems like I have to rely on my other plans...]

Chapter 101

Trentheim and the young lord (1)

“Ciel, I want you to speak with Raban and Cornelius, and have them send out their most trusted men to search for the southern armies. The majority of the people that we have sent out earlier and are most likely gone.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“As for you, Gaspard. Tell Leto I have already started preparing for Count Randner’s counterattacks. He should continue to monitor what Lord Palas is doing and inform me of any changes. I’ll leave everything else to his judgment, but I won’t suggest him to attack any other regions other than Macsen. Oh, and one more thing, if there are still refugees following you and if you have spare blacksmiths from the Macsen region, send them over here.”

“Understood, my lord.”

Brendel gave his instructions and thanked Gaspard before he dismissed everyone. He then sat back in his chair and continued to study the reports.

The city walls and other areas that needed repairing were progressing in an organized manner, but it was projected to be finished at the beginning of the next month, which was a week later than was estimated. The resources spent on it were also much greater than projected, and the only people who benefitted immediately were probably the workers when they received their compensation.

[It seems like the start of the project wasn’t smooth.]

He remarked to himself before moving on to the next page.

Nobody was willing to work for the young lord who took over Firburh ‘illegally’. Graudin’s presence still lingered, and Count Randner’s infamy weighted down on their hearts like a mountain.

The policies that Amandina set up in a generous manner was immediately met with

resistance. Dangling resources in front of the citizens hardly convinced them and could not conquer the fear from the other nobles, or perhaps it was because they feared retribution that might come in the future.

Based on her observations, if it were not for the mercenaries around Firburh, along with the fact that the citizens who also held the same fear towards Brendel as a noble, a massive number of citizens would have fled the city long ago.

In the end, she realized where her mistake was and started to use forceful measures to correct it, becoming like what a noble's lackey would do.

She bade the soldiers follow her, came to the outskirts of the city during the morning, and forced the citizens to gather at the city square. Tools were handed out to them and the mercenaries watched them perform the tasks given to them.

Even though she tried to reduce bloodshed on her part, her actions still invited a riot. The people who incited the riot were beaten severely, and the title 'Lady Devil' quickly spread throughout the masses.

But their attitudes started to change when this Lady Devil arranged an extravagant dinner for them.

Loaves of white bread that were rarely eaten by commoners and a pot of stewed meat soup—

Well, it was not exactly stewed meat soup. When it was poured into the bowls, there were only a few pieces of shredded meat and the soup was almost as clear as water. One could see the bottom of the bowl, and even Amandina frowned when she saw the lacking contents in the pot.

But it was not the mercenaries trying to be mean or miserly. They hunted in the forest and gotten quite a few kills, however, it was hardly enough to feed hundreds of men.

Amandina was worried that the workers would grumble about the given meal, but it was proven that the outcome was contrary to her expectations.

The citizens of Firburh were more like impoverished refugees who experienced a famine. Their eyes became brighter than the starving wolves in the forests when they smelled the aroma of the soup.

They considered the loaves of white bread to be a delicacy, only bought or made during celebrations and important days. As for acquiring meat, it depended on Graudin's mood during the end of the year, where the remaining scraps would be sold from his feasts.

It did not matter whether the soup was clear.

Amandina again found a mistake in the way on how she perceived things when she saw the workers gorging themselves on the food.

When she lived in Bruglas, the food that she ate was just small slices of hard black rye bread every day, and after she left with Brendel, she was actually highly pleased to return to having proper meals and never looked back to her old life.

One could only imagine how much more desperate the citizens were to acquire food.

With the response that she saw from the first dinner given to them, she was certain that their minds would change with the right persuasion.

She declared that everyone could enjoy the food every day if they continued to work.

This promise caused a commotion amongst the workers. Even though they were doubtful about the promise, the majority of them were interested to see if the promise was upheld. Though, even if they did not want to, the mercenaries would put on fierce expressions and made their choices for them.

Their suspicions were eventually dismissed with each passing day. The Lady Devil's promise was indeed true. A loaf of white bread and a small bowl of 'thick' stewed soup was served every dinner.

This decision quickly diminished the sources of meat available in the city because the mercenaries did not succeed in getting good hunts every day. Small amounts of cured meat made from sheep or pigs were used to supplement the lack of meat. Livestock meant for Graudin and his men's consumption were also included.

The supplies eventually did not meet the required demands, and Felaern repeatedly grumbled about it to Amandina. If this continued, Brendel would not have a decent meal when he came back from Schafflund.

This apparently succeeded in persuading Amandina. It was between her respected

noble lord and the citizens of this city who were strangers. She spent almost no time to decide on it.

However, she continued to enforce her promise. She had the mercenaries cut down on their training and got them to hunt longer in the forest to make up for the lack of meat.

This action brought an unexpected positive effect. The workers apparently got news on how the Lady Devil provided their meals.

She made the mercenaries hunt in the lord's private hunting grounds.

This action moved the citizens, and there were even a few who secretly requested the mercenaries to tell her that the loaves of white bread were good enough for them.

It was possible that the young lord of this city would punish this generous and trustworthy girl.

Amandina's confidence was bolstered when she heard their gesture and told the workers that it was not her, but the young lord who issued the instructions, so they had nothing to worry about.

This small explanation pushed all the credit to Brendel.

The youth's action of suspending the taxes was quickly remembered, and he gained unquestionable prestige overnight.

Brendel still did not know about this matter, as the report in his hands only described the actions that Amandina did.

Approximately ten days into the repairing the walls, the workers asked if Amandina needed more men to repair the wall.

This was a signal to show that her actions had attracted more people. Not only that, the power held by the nobles were starting to weaken against the trust in their new lord.

People were starting to waver.

However, despite the increase in manpower, the project was still delayed. They had a bad start and no one was proficient in construction.

Grandmaster Bosley more or less limited the mistakes made, but he was obviously more suited to create a magic armor over laying down rocks on the wall.

Brendel finished reading the report and went to Odum again.

The dwarf nodded as he listened to Brendel's explanation, stated that he would check the site immediately, and was soon escorted to the site.

Though he was not really reliable, he did learn a few things from the Mountain Dwarves and was able to rectify unresolved issues. The repairs eventually progressed faster and were finished at the end of the month, saving time from the estimated delay.

Amandina invited Brendel and his important confidants to take a look at the completed repairs. They stood quietly and approached the city walls, which appeared in and out from the morning mist.

She sighed with relief, though she lightly frowned in the next moment and looked back at Brendel with an apologetic expression:

"I apologize for wasting so much time, my lord—"

But Brendel's eyes were full of praise when he looked back at her.

[This is a priceless treasure that I dug up from Bruglas. I haven't realized it till now. I used to think I was lucky to find someone who can create Magicite but she's much more than that. This is even better than finding gold coins on the floor!]

Amandina was a quiet girl, but she had her own principles, dreams, and beliefs. Brendel wondered what sort of karma he had to get such an extraordinary manager to work for him wholeheartedly.

He was worried about the progress of the city walls' repairs dragging on from unforeseen circumstances. Additional delays would lead to even more delays and the probable snowing would be an issue. Examples would include an increased expenditure of food and risk of injuries.

Bosley and Odum's performances were also satisfactory, though the latter seemingly appeared to be a little timid all the time.

Chapter 102

Trentheim and the young lord (2)

“What do all of you think?” Brendel suddenly asked.

His question was mostly directed to Raban and Cornelius who were conversing quietly a slight distance away. They were rubbing their hands a little with their breaths coming out in white mists. After Jana left, the two of them became even friendlier than before as they continued to work with each other.

Truthfully, the two commanders had known each other even before they met Brendel so they had no problems working with each other. They paused when they heard the question, but it was Romaine who replied almost instantly after Brendel asked his question.

“I find that the repairs of the city walls look wonderful. What do you think?” The merchant girl said, looking back at Brendel with big eyes as if she wanted to see if he agreed with her.

“It’s true,” Cornelius also said, “and it has surpassed my expectations. Even though it’s a little late to say this, my mercenaries and I participated in the middle of the repairs. We’re not familiar with this type of work, but Miss Amandina did a fantastic job directing us. While I wouldn’t say that it’s perfect, she surprised me—”

Everyone loved being praised.

Amandina could not help but take a second look at the attractive middle-aged man. Even though she looked like she was not pleased with his glib tongue, she could not help but agree with his assessment.

There were many issues in the beginning, and almost every small decision she made had some kind of unforeseen consequences. But it was also because she had handled the numerous incidents that cropped up that she became quick at resolving them.

“Indeed, it was surprising.” Raban did not use many words and got straight to the point.

Amandina secretly glanced at Brendel. In her heart, the youth's opinions were more important than the rest of them. It was the first time she felt her heart beating this fast and was worried that there he would be dissatisfied.

Her eyes teared up when she saw Brendel's unreserved praise in his eyes. She found her nose becoming stuffy and felt that her hard work had paid off in the past month.

She sniffled, turned her head away, and attempted to avoid crying in front of so many people, which would most certainly be an embarrassment to herself. She was still Brendel's advisor and the city's administrator; it would be unseemly if she cried like a little girl.

But she spotted Medissa passing a handkerchief discreetly to her when she turned her head, and she received it gratefully. This subtle action made by the Elven girl was not detected by anyone with the exception of Brendel, who shook his head with a wry smile.

"I apologize. What I really mean is this: 'What do you think of that night?'" Brendel said.

Everyone else was momentarily silent as they thought back about that fateful night battle. They were hot-blooded and bold during that short duration, but it took days or even weeks, to fathom what they had done exactly.

Under Brendel's encouragement, they participated in the battle to kill a lord recognized by the kingdom.

They would not have dared to think about it in the past, but to their disbelief, they had really murdered a lord. Whether it was because they were goaded, encouraged, or even threatened into doing so.

There was nowhere to run now.

After that night, one month passed by in the blink of an eye, but they did not break down mentally like they thought they would. Now that the wall was completed, it seemed like it was symbolizing something.

Perhaps under the youth's leadership, they were no longer mere rebels, but people who were on the cusp of a revolution. Why would they have any doubts about the final results when the youth was so confident?

“You might not know this, but I really don’t think that much about the distant future. Perhaps you also believe that I’m a noble who could care less about your lives but I don’t think that way at all—”

He spoke sincerely, but it was a question how many people believed in his ‘truth’.

“I came here to inherit a land further south of Trenheim that belongs to my ancestors,” Brendel lied through his teeth with a hint of truth in it, “and I had not planned to kill a lord and take over his lands. However, the education that I received told me that the existence of nobles ought to fulfill something called ‘noblesse oblige’. We receive better education and privileges because we have the responsibility to bring the citizens under us out of a difficult situation.”

Brendel took a pause as he pointed at everyone: “Authority and responsibility go hand in hand. King Erik said this: Nobles define responsibilities. Power is responsibility; authority is responsibility!”

Everyone looked silently at him in slight confusion. His words were pretty and engaging, but they did not know what he was talking about.

Amandina had a strange expression in her eyes. She vaguely felt that the youth was pursuing King Erik’s ideals and was trying to get back the honor that Aouine had lost.

This was the most mysterious aspect about him and it was the reason why she was attracted to him. It was becoming almost fatal, as a fire lit in both her eyes.

Suddenly, it started snowing.

The snowflakes were very light at first and were almost undetectable. But when they landed on everyone’s faces, they felt like cold rain was drizzling on them. Everyone lifted their heads.

“Before this,” Brendel stared at the sky. The dark clouds signified the impending battles: “I have not been the lord of any land... Neither do I have the experience of leading one. Amandina and all of you are the same.”

He lifted both arms up, allowing the snow to gather on him:

“We are not so different. Each one of us is learning how to handle everything, be it on how to run a region or to fight our enemies. We are all trying to learn how to walk and

our first step might be difficult, but this isn't a problem.

The problem is whether each of you is brave enough to stay behind and face what is to come. Our actions might look like they are insignificant, but they are shining as brilliantly as the first time when King Erik led his citizens out from Kirrlutz.

His actions have been proven they could cut through the darkness and that you should not be ashamed to pursue this dream!

This dream of ensuring that the citizens are not affected by the nobles' greed and arrogance.

Regardless of whether you see this as an honor, or you're here because you have made a promise to me, or the responsibilities to the citizens as a noble, you must stand here.

I ask you this question.

How much longer do you want to run away from the plights of these citizens?"

His palm gestured towards to the commoners who were watching from a short distance away from them. His voice raised to a yell, expelling his breath into a mist, making him appear divine and mysterious.

"I ask all of you. If you were to become Aouine's new nobles in the future, would you still remember the things I said today? Would you still remember that nobles are the definition of responsibility?"

But no one answered him.

Raban could not believe his ears. He did not dare to think about the hidden meaning behind the youth's words. He glanced at the man next to him, but Cornelius reacted by staring blankly at Brendel.

The latter also knew what Brendel was trying to do.

He was saying:

'From now onwards, you're my retainers, and you would gather under my House through thick and thin, regardless of good and bad times. You're my knights and will act as my sword to expand my land.'

At that moment, Cornelius felt endless energy surging within his body. It was the first time his heart felt like it was being set on fire after working as a mercenary for decades of great struggle.

The chance he had been waiting for was right in front of him.

Every mercenary thought the same way, except Scarlett who felt it was enough for her to follow Brendel. Romaine did not need to think too much about his words either because she had already treated him like he was her world.

His summons naturally did not react as they were already loyal to him.

But Amandina bit her lips.

She did not understand why this youth who had almost no foundations to speak of would be able to be so charismatic with just confidence and dreams.

It was almost as though it was a power that captured everyone's heart, and even when she saw through the outlines of his real plans for the future, she was already sinking in his dream. She closed and opened her mouth several times, but she did not find a response.

[Yes, he's saying 'become my retainers', but that's just part of it. He's forcibly changing the rules of the game. He wants to create new nobles to replace the old ones.]

Chapter 103

Trentheim and the Young Lord (3)

TL: Alistair is the wizard guy who had his companions killed by Graudin. He was a little cynical about Brendel because he thought all nobles are the same, or at least until Brendel came back to kill Graudin.

=====Alistair's POV=====

The first year of the War of the Black Rose's winter was colder than the past seasons. The moisture in the air was frozen into powdery snow which fell from the dark grey sky.

Alistair laid in ambush amongst the shrubbery at the mountaintop overnight. He was still wearing his dark green robes but he was almost frozen from the cold. Snowflakes fell on his face and he felt the chill pierce through his skin.

[The first snow of this year.]

He used to overhear the conversations between Grandmaster Ciel and Lord Brendel back in Firburh. The contents of the conversations were about the northern situation, the armies of the dukes, the princess's fate, how Madara invaded Aouine, even the activity in Kirrlutz...

[The upcoming battle in the north is delayed long enough that it will only happen after this winter.]

Alistair came from a small family that was considered part of the gentry. His hometown was in Karsuk, but it was situated in a remote area and his knowledge about society was limited; he merely watched high nobles pass through the area.

While he lived a life better than most commoners, it became worse each year.

He knew that he had to change his own fate and went on an adventure. A wizard had taught him for a period of time and hearing the stories from his teacher was a fatal attraction to the youth.

This chaotic world seemed to have opportunities everywhere.

Thus when his teacher passed away, he went on a journey that he had always dreamed of.

But his luck was not as good as he thought.

Two of the companions he encountered along the way who almost had the same background like him, died in the middle of their adventure. He and his other members had no choice but to stay in Firburh and decide whether to return to their homes or continue their journey.

He never expected Graudin to kill all his other companions. It was as though only despair remained in his future. He stayed behind, wanting to assassinate Graudin even if it cost his life.

But sometimes fate was simply just that fickle. He met the young noble, Brendel, and participated in that battle and continued to serve under him until he was reassigned to become part of Ciel's Wizard Corps. *(TL: The original term I had was Wizard Army but someone in the patreon suggested Wizard Corps. Anyone else want to take a shot?)*

As Ciel's right hand, he naturally had the opportunity to listen to the discussions between Brendel and Ciel.

That was the first time he thought of Brendel as a true lord who ruled over Firburh. The latter's insight towards the events around him had shown him a whole new world. It was something that his teacher had never taught him before.

From that moment onwards, he became a true supporter of Brendel. He knew that he had caught onto an opportunity, or perhaps he had already reached the place that he was searching for.

He soon volunteered for the scouting mission that was deep in the Palas region.

Since the scouts needed a talented person familiar with magic, he naturally got into the team.

Ciel even complained to Brendel that he stole his right hand.

But Alistair did not regret his decision. Rather than staying silently beside Lord

Brendel, he felt he should catch his attention through physical actions. He was someone out for adventure, or he would not have left his home to reach Firburh.

The youth stared at the sky for a long time, before he finally came back to his senses. He slowly reached forward and looked down from his vantage point, taking care not to make a single sound to avoid the attention of the guards. There were yellow tents set up in the forest with people milling about.

Suddenly there were soft shuffling noises behind him. That direction was supposed to be guarded by his companions, and it should be them, but it was possible that it was something else.

Alistair immediately became tense.

“Cab... bage...”

A strange password was uttered. Ciel was the one who instructed them to use it.

Alistair relaxed. It was his companion. He turned around and asked: “Woo ham eye?”

“Melf.” *(TL: DND reference. Melf is a Grey Elf and a fighter/wizard.)*

That name was given to another wizard apprentice. Because that person was an orphan, he only had a nickname, and Lord Brendel gave him that name.

[So it's you, you lucky darned fellow. Hmph.]

Alistair could not help but think that way when he recognized who the person was.

“Alistair, how is it? Is the area below us the place where Palas's knights set up their camps?” Melf came over quietly like a cat with his back hunched over and whispered when he reached Alistair's side: “But Rat and the others said there aren't any camps around other than this place—”

“These aren't the Knights' camps.” Alistair shook his head.

“It's not?” Melf appeared stunned.

Alistair nodded as he tried to massage his frozen and slightly stiff legs: “They are Highland natives.”

“Highlanders? Huh. But are they not in bad terms with Lord Palas! Why are they here? Wait, are they planning to attack the region at this point in time? That’s really helping us out!”

“No, it’s not that simple. There are many groups of Highland natives, and they might be coming for us instead.”

“What? A-are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m much more familiar with them than you are. Alright, you should head off and pass the message to the various scouting groups. My group is preparing to retreat. Our clothes won’t match the surroundings if it’s starting to snow, and we will need to change our clothes before coming here again.”

Melf nodded and moved off.

===== Brendel’s POV =====

Amandina was distributing the workers’ wages at the southern gate, and each person would get only a few copper coins. It was not a lot of money, but it symbolized something and was better than nothing. She originally wanted to cut down on this expense, but Romaine said that it was part of revitalizing the economy and asserted that the money must be given to them.

In the end, Amandina was unable to convince Romaine and had to give up. However, in order to get back at her, she forced the latter to stay behind and help out.

Brendel laughed a little when Romaine tried to slip away, only to be caught by Felaern who was sent out by Amandina because she predicted it a long time ago.

Romaine put on a tearful expression but was unable to persuade Amandina, who had no exceptions when it came to work. Brendel had already escaped the moment when the two girls argued in the beginning, so Romaine could not hide behind his back as a final trump card.

He was the only exception to Amandina’s iron-clad administration and did not know if he was able to resist Romaine’s teary eyes. Therefore, he hid in a corner to watch the merchant girl put on a bitter face with great interest.

After a short while, Brendel left the southern gates along with Scarlett and Medissa. A

mercenary came up and greeted everyone.

[Hmm, I recognize you. You're... an Elementalist. Are you not working under Ciel?]

Brendel recalled that he asked Ciel to recruit people who had the talent for magic, and the latter went around to choose from adventurers and mercenaries.

Third-rate Elementalists, conmen, fake witch doctors, apprenticing magicians to make up a so-called army of spellcasters. The number of people who could truly use magic was few.

Since Ciel was a Gold-ranked wizard, he did not really have to put in an effort. Many voluntarily left the mercenary groups they were in to join Ciel's Wizard Corps. Even though many mercenary commanders complained, Ciel had Brendel's support and he did not really encounter trouble.

Brendel wanted to set up an army made up of wizards because of how effective it could be used strategically in a battle. This was proven in the later part of the game where the gamers first utilized the concept before the NPCs started copying them. Even though Ciel grumbled about the majority of these people were unworthy of being in the 'Wizard Corps', Brendel did not care. At the very least, it was his first specialized army.

Since there were talented people in them after all, they could be nurtured to become the backbone of a Wizard Association. Unfortunately, his plan was not going well. Ciel had the capabilities of a Grandmaster, but he did not have the experience of teaching. The so-called Wizardry Corps was still a sham.

But that did not mean the Wizard Corps was useless. The wizards had varying degrees of experience, but there was a single common point.

They all knew how to write and read.

The Wizard Army had the part-time job of helping Brendel, Amandina, Nightsong Tiger, and Ciel's tasks to handle information and administrative work.

Currently, the person in front of Brendel belonged to Nightsong Tiger's 'Intelligence Network'.

"My lord, there's urgent news from the 'people in the north'. The report states that it

has something to do with the Highlanders—”

Brendel blinked a few times before he recalled that the Nightsong Tiger and Leto had sent out scouts to investigate the Palas region, and the former was the one who planned the entire project to investigate the news about Count Randner.

The Nightsong Tiger selected the better wizards from the Wizard Corps and had them disguised as adventurers while scouting the land.

However, Brendel was the one who suggested the usage of familiars. It was not a new idea, and there were examples of wizards sending their familiars as messengers throughout the eras. However, it was rare for a wizard to be used as a scout, and thus this method was not widely used.

Gamers witnessed the increase of talented wizards in the game years after the War of the Black Rose, and the method became more and more popular. Eventually, there was a breakthrough in using magical artifacts to communicate more reliably, but it was obviously not that year yet and Brendel thought of using this ‘primitive’ method.

With this method, the time taken would approximately be a full day from the Palas region, which was much faster than the normal duration of one week. However, there was a lack of wizards who had enough stamina to act like a scout. Only three groups were formed, and information about the knights in the Palas region was limited because of the insufficient scouting.

Brendel skimmed through the report.

[It seems like the nobles are still underestimating us. Well, their numbers prove that they are treating us as a threat, but the way how they set up their defenses is a joke. Also, it seems like Lord Palas isn’t controlling them very well.]

Lord Palas was a traditional Aouine general. He stuck to the rules and had a strong discipline, but his attitude would most certainly draw the ire of Count Randner’s knights. The Highlanders were even less interested in listening to his commands, and this allowed Brendel’s wizards to be able to infiltrate their lax security.

Still, it was true that the nobles could not imagine to send wizards to the frontlines and act as scouts. Even Amandina and Ciel were stunned when Brendel mentioned this method.

Chapter 104

Trentheim and the young lord (4)

The insane strategy mentioned by Brendel was now proving to be an excellent one.

The wizards had the capabilities to cast illusive magic to aid the scouting party, and they were able to send messages back far more quickly through their flying familiars than the previous scouts could.

The scout relayed Ciel's message to Brendel as he unfolded the parchment:

"My lord, though you have proven that you're right, I must remind you that this will only work in the beginning of a war. If our opponents realize what we're doing, the loss of even a wizard will be something that we can't bear."

Brendel nodded to the scout's words, but his expressions become graver as he read through the report, his face appearing even darker than the grey clouds in the sky.

Scarlett and Medissa glanced at each other worriedly. They had rarely seen Brendel show such a solemn expression and they wondered what the report mentioned.

"My lord?" Medissa whispered.

"The contents of the report is quite simple. A group of Highland natives appeared in the Palas region." Brendel said.

"Isn't that quite normal? They are frequently seen fighting with Lord Palas, and it's not just one or two years, but decades." Scarlett asked, her mind thinking that it was fortunate Lord Palas was going to encounter trouble.

"No, this is an addition to the enemies that we're going to face." The youth gave a helpless smile.

"What? But why would they attack us?"

"There are many branches of Highlanders, and the report identified them as the ones

coming from the east of Mountain Graham. While they are subordinate to Count Randner's rule, their autonomy to their own lands is very strong. They hardly travel in large numbers, and certainly would not leave the land that they rule—"

"And so..." Scarlett did not really understand military affairs, but she knew there was something odd about them from Brendel's tone.

"I can hardly imagine they would be there to celebrate the upcoming festival. I have no idea what Count Randner promised these stubborn people, but they are definitely here to attack us."

"It's not a problem. It's the same regardless of whoever comes; we will defeat them." Scarlett scoffed lightly.

Brendel smiled at Scarlett's attempt at boosting his confidence.

"Is it a big problem?" Medissa asked.

"Definitely. If Count Randner managed to persuade one group of Highlanders, I can assume that he's offering the same conditions to the other groups. It's difficult to say how much pressure we will face." Brendel's tone was light, but his mind was not very certain about the odds.

[I've predicted the Highlanders would help them. Now the question would be on the food supplied to them. I have no idea how much food Lord Palas has in his region, or how much food Count Randner is supplying. If I can... I would want to delay this battle as long as possible to waste their food.]

"Should I get Miss Amandina, my lord?" Medissa asked.

"No, it's not necessary," Brendel rubbed his forehead, "but I'm more curious about the person who sent out this report."

"What do you mean?"

"The report even included where the Highlanders came from. This is a clear insight into the situation at hand. The things I just mentioned must have crossed this person's mind."

Brendel only knew so much because he had 'lived' in this world for decades. No one in

his group was able to predict that the Highlanders was a trap, and Ciel only understood this point after he explained it.

[I wonder if anyone else would be able to understand the meaning of this report if they read this... Just who is this scout?]

Brendel suddenly discovered that the Elementalist who delivered the report was still staring at him. It was as though he was waiting to speak.

“Is there something else?” Brendel asked.

“Yes, my lord...” That Elementalist’s expression looked a bit odd, and he was stuttering: “Actually, Ciel had given me another additional letter. It’s addressed to you.”

“What do you mean by additional letter?” Brendel frowned as he wondered what stunt that fellow was pulling off now.

“Would you like to see it?”

“Of course,” Brendel snapped.

Since it was addressed to him, was there any reason not to read it? But he stared at the Elementalist in front of him a little suspiciously. No matter how much he thought about it, his attitude was strange.

“Erm, my lord, would you mind turning your head away first?” But the Elementalist’s face became even stranger.

[Turning my head? Is this a prank?]

Brendel did not react and saw that a spear-like shadow coming from his side. Scarlett had her halberd on that Elementalist’s neck.

“Take it out!” Her voice said coldly.

That Elementalist was terrified and trembled with a bitter face before taking out a creature from his robe.

His familiar peeked out at them.

Brendel immediately identified what it was, and so did the others.

A duck. It was a duck.

Everyone around the Elementalist froze.

Brendel and his subordinates had years of experience, even centuries worth, that included an Elven princess and a wizard from Black Tower, but it was the first time they saw a magic user with a duck as a familiar.

Brendel looked at the duck with a pair of crossed eyes for a while, before he woke from his stupor and nodded: "Very good, you're stylish. Instead of picking a fairy-type creature like most Elementalist, you picked a duck."

"My lord," the Elementalist made a sorrowful face, "that's not my choice. I originally did not use a familiar. This thing... this thing is given to me by Grandmaster Ciel... He said that using a duck as a familiar would bring luck."

"Indeed, much luck," Brendel put his palm to his face and shook his head when he thought about his bizarre squire, as Medissa tried to stifle her laughter, "what's your name?"

He finally paid attention to the person in front of him; the latter was about as old as Brendel was, and his features were quite attractive. But after he pulled out his duck, Brendel found it hard to hold in his laughter. Ciel must have pranked this person.

If the Elementalist did not become a comedy actor back in his world, it would be a waste of his appearance.

"They call me Red Boar, my lord." The Elementalist said.

"...Right, and where did that name come from?" Brendel asked.

"It's the name of a monster in my hometown."

[Huh. Named after that level 30+ violent creature. Not many would want to hunt it.]

Brendel looked at the duck again and coughed. His voice had a tinge of laughter in it: "Well, how about this. Follow me around. I happen to need an apprentice."

“My lord, you need an apprentice? Are you a wizard?” The Elementalist was surprised.

“No, I’m an Elementalist. Anyway, cut the crap, just follow me.”

The messenger looked at him a little blankly. A high-ranking Elementalist could give off a feeling of intimidation to someone weaker, but he did not feel anything from his young lord. There were two possibilities; his lord was weaker or was around the same level like he was.

[But this is the legendary lord who’s capable of doing anything! I can only see him from afar several times and only heard about how he defeated Graudin, made the Subterrane Dwellers submit, and captured Schafflund’s mine with only thirty people!... But isn’t he a Gold-ranked swordsman? When did he become an Elementalist?]

The messenger became more and more puzzled.

Brendel waved him off. He needed an apprentice in order to prepare for another plan and it was a good time to start it right away. The appearance of the Highlanders made him feel pressured.

“In any case, I’ll give you a proper name. From now onwards, follow me, and your name is Mordenkainen.” *(TL: DnD reference. Human wizard.)*

“Morden... kainen?”

Chapter 105

Trentheim and the young lord (5)

Brendel opened the letter. The contents in it were empty save for a darkened spot on the corner. He immediately understood what it was. He crumbled the letter and burned its corner with a spark of fire that came from his hand.

He then tossed it away as it turned into ashes.

The druids had replied to him. This bit of good news made him feel relieved, but he did not immediately make plans to meet them and instead spoke to his new assistant:

“Mordenkainen.”

“Huh? Y-yes, my lord, what is it that you need?” It took a moment before that young man realized Brendel was calling for him.

“Find Tagiv and bring him to me.”

“Who is Tagiv?”

“Chieftain of the Subterrane Dwellers. He’s staying inside the inner city.” After the battle of Lord Macsen, Brendel had it stay in Firburh.

Tagiv was quite happy about the youth’s action; Graudin was not as respectful.

Other humans would have thought that Brendel was holding it as a hostage, but Tagiv did not even consider that possibility. It was pointless for the youth to do so since it swore an oath to its gods.

“Make sure he puts on a robe and minimize his exposure to the citizens,” Brendel said.

“Understood, my lord. But where would you like to meet up with him?” Mordenkainen hurriedly nodded.

Brendel got closer and whispered into Mordenkainen’s ears, who then nodded and

looked at his lord to make sure that there were no further instructions, before running off into the distance and disappeared into the falling snow.

“Well, let’s move off to another place.” Brendel turned around to the girls and said with a genuine smile.

Scarlett found herself staring at Brendel’s smile, and suddenly realized that she was comparing him and Eke. She felt the blood rushing to her ears and shook her head to clear it.

“Where are we going... My lord?” She asked in a quiet voice.

Medissa glanced at her, feeling another bout of laughter within her.

“A wonderful place,” Brendel said.

The snowfall became bigger, and soon there was a faint sheet of white that covered the streets. There were not many people walking about. Instead, there were rows of houses that leaked out with warm orange light.

The sight of the scenery around them made them feel calm.

It was the first time that Scarlett left the manor ever since she was sick. Coming back to life and starting what she was doing before made her look at things with a lost look, and she trailed behind Medissa while clutching her halberd tightly.

Medissa, on the other hand, was interested in the scenery before her. It was the first time that she had been in a human city in winter, and she would occasionally ask Brendel the things that she could not identify.

The three continued to walk till they heard a series of hammering against metal in front of them.

Medissa was the first to pick up the noise with her long ears, and after a momentary pause, recognized the area to be Bosley’s workshop.

The workshop finally started operating after Brendel brought back Cold Iron and magic gemstones from the mines a few weeks ago. This was originally Graudin’s private property, and Bosley bought the two rows of houses beside it and expanded the workshop.

But having the workshop did not mean that it was operating smoothly. Brendel put up a notice to recruit workers, and Bosley found the people who applied were a mixture of good and bad. The latter grumbled several times, telling Brendel that he was not being supportive of his work because he did not care about the quality of his men.

Fortunately, Gaspard relayed the youth's instructions to Leto, who sent the blacksmiths and anyone who was talented to Firburh. Certainly, it was beneficial to Leto in the long run since his mercenaries would also be armed, but it was also a show of loyalty to Brendel.

When Brendel and the girls reached the workshop, they found fiery flames greeting them which contrasted sharply against the morning darkness. A golden-red fire was stoked in the forge and covered the whole place with warmth. It was as though there was a line separating the cold and warmth, and Brendel could feel that difference even when he stood outside.

"My lord?" A voice came from the workshop.

Bosley was thinking about the numerous issues in the workshop; teaching the idiots was much harder than keeping track of the materials or making an armor. He was taking a break outside the building when he spotted three familiar people.

"Grandmaster Bosley." Brendel gave a smile when he saw him.

Naturally, he did not come to take a stroll and admire the scenery in Firburh. The news of Lord Palas's armies had spurred him to speed up his plans.

"What is it? Are you trying to check up on this old man's progress, my lord?" Bosley asked in his gruff voice.

"I wouldn't dare," Brendel shook his head before he grinned, "it's just that I thought of an idea."

"An idea?" Bosley looked curiously at him, but he quickly remembered the four people in front of him were still waiting patiently: "Regardless of what idea you have, my lord, if you don't mind the noise and dirt in this place, you can come in."

Brendel led his subordinates into the workshop. The first batch of armor was being produced. The youth watched the blacksmiths and apprentices walking to and fro with sleeveless shirts. Since there was no one wearing robes, it meant that Ciel's men were

not here.

[It seems like the first batch of armor produced isn't the White Lion Armor.]

“The work on the Magic Armor hasn't started yet?” He asked.

“My lord, didn't you just say that you are not here to check up on our work?” Bosley looked back at him with disapproval with a wry smile: “Years of inactivity have caused my skill to be rusty. The magic gemstones that you brought back are too expensive to be used as practice. I intend to make an armor for practice first.”

Bosley's eyes darted around the workers before sighing: “Besides, these workers also need to practice. They are very far away from being capable of making one.”

“That's because you're too demanding,” Brendel said.

Bosley was the royal blacksmith and known publicly as the best grandmaster. Even his assistants were well-known. It was no wonder that these people were unable to get his attention.

The best blacksmiths amongst them were just ordinary blacksmiths working in this area. Some of them even lack the experience in crafting weapons, not to mention making a suit of armor, which was even more complicated.

Tanners and tailors were also added to the workshop, and they were in charge of connecting the armor pieces together to form a suit of armor.

The whole process was very slow, and each suit of armor required several days of man-hours.

In order to craft a suit of magic armor, the chest and the back of the armor were first drawn with Magic Emblems with crushed Magicite, then placed into the forge where Magicite was added into the fuel. By repeating the process of hammering and adding crushed Magicite repeatedly, the armor would finally be completed.

Unfortunately, the forges were fitted with unstable old machines that frequently had problems.

“The machines that I used back then were still better than these two here. Their conditions are even worse than the ailments of an old man like me.” Bosley said.

He had never felt such a challenging work in his life. There was almost nothing that Trenheim could offer, and he did not think that Aouine had such a rural area that appeared like it was centuries ago.

The forges hardly converted Magicite to fuel. The city was like a rubbish dump rather than a place fit for living. Outside the city walls was the Wilderness, and the agriculture produced here was stuck with primitive techniques.

The era that the old blacksmith worked in was approximately ten years ago, and he stayed in one of the richest city in Aouine. At that time, the land was aided with the assistance of magic. Apprenticing Elementalists that studied in the nearby magic academy arranged the Elements in the air and changed the climate in a small area, allowing something like a greenhouse effect and kept it from flooding.

But there was nothing here.

Machinery that ran on Magicite were used to speed up various tasks in agriculture and was considered to be an industrial revolution. Kirrlutz stole the technology from the Hazell kingdom, and Aouine later got to learn from it. *(TL: Hazell is that country next to Kirrlutz with advanced machinery technology.)*

This revolution in technology affected the November War and brought the second Holy War to the world, which again advanced the research of Magicite as well as the techniques to utilize it. *(TL: Somewhere in the story it was mentioned that the second holy war lasted for decades, and I think it takes place after the November War.)*

Bosley looked at the two gigantic forges in the center with a deep frown. The machines attached to them were old technology built decades ago. This workshop was the most advanced area in the entire city. It was as if the owner of the entire region was owned by someone who disliked magic and allowed the area to remain outside of civilization.

But that was just Bosley's biased outlook. Aouine's southern borders were impoverished due to many reasons, and it was not only Trenheim that was poor. The Grinoires region and the south of Karsuk's area were just as poor.

Aouine's southern borders were next to the Wilderness, and thus they were at the edge of civilization. Poor geographic locations and having monsters attacking all the time were the real reasons that Bucces and Trenheim were poor areas. Even Bruglas was also affected because it had to supply Fortress Riedon and Bucces with resources.

“You have to try and accept it, Grandmaster Bosley. Even though these two Magicite converters are considered trash anywhere else, they are valuable treasure here.” Brendel said.

Amandina wanted to break them apart in order to study the internal components the first time the two crumbling machines were found, but Bosley refused to let her do so with all his might.

His decision was considered wise since the two machines still aided his work greatly. No matter how outdated they were, the production they had was still faster and better than the primitive usage of just human hands.

Brendel did not want to think about the fact that Firburh was stuck in an era where it was the equivalent of Earth’s medieval period. His plans needed a long adjustment time before they were fulfilled if it were so.

Chapter 106

Trentheim and the young lord (6)

“Well then, my lord, you said you had a new idea?” Bosley took out a pipe and was about to light it when he recalled that Brendel disliked the smell. He put it back after a moment of hesitation.

“Ah, you will see what I mean in a moment. What about that matter that I requested?” Brendel asked.

Bosley took a moment to think what the youth was talking about.

“You mean the suits of armor? We’ve crafted two hundred sets, and the workshop is going full-time on them. However, our workers and the workshop’s size are still insufficient. I believe we need to have at least a hundred men and above before fulfilling your demands on time.”

[Two hundred suits of armor, that’s slightly below my expectations. But finding additional experienced workers and adding Magicite machines are impossible tasks right now.]

“I can try solving other problems if you have them, like the lack of certain materials, but Firburh is unable to sustain a big workshop. Even if we have the Macsen region it’s still insufficient. There are not enough machines—” Brendel said.

Another idea came into his mind. “If only we can make our own Elemental Forge.”

“Elemental Forge?” Bosley’s head snapped to Brendel’s direction.

He had used all kinds of furnaces in his work, and while he had not heard of that term before, he could roughly guess what it was.

“An Elemental Forge can directly absorb the Elements in the air and add to the smelting process,” Brendel explained.

It was a revolution in terms of forging techniques, but that was invented

approximately twenty years later by an Elementalist born in a noble family. In that generation, there was a strong outburst of Mana throughout the continent, causing countless heroes and heroines to be born. There were numerous inventions to utilize the Mana as well.

[Unfortunately, I'm not the type of player to create inventions in the game. If my senior was here, she would be able to create one... She's an expert in this. Hmm. Was that inventor from Arreck or Vieiro? Maybe I can get that person like Amandina.]

"My lord, what exactly does it use for fuel? Charcoal? Or other types of specialized fuel like Magicite? By infusing the Fire Element, would it mean that the fire produced will be very clean? It's not just an improvement by removing impurities in the flames because there's an infusion of elements into the metal?" Bosley's eyes lit up and his face flushed red.

He could almost imagine what it meant just from the name.

"...Yes, I saw it from an ancient book. I believe it's a lost technique made by Galbu Wizards." Brendel lied through his teeth.

"Galbu's techniques? My lord, but Galbu's wizards use Mana Enchantment to forge items. They shouldn't be using forges. Did they change their methods in the past few eras?" Medissa frowned slightly and raised an objection with her soft voice.

Brendel was momentarily stunned and realized that he made a mistake. He could craft random lies he wanted in the past when Medissa was not around, but now that she was sticking to him closely as a bodyguard, she saw through his lies easily since she was part of the Silver Alliance, just like the Galbu Wizards.

He took a while to think about the history of the Silver Alliance before finding a lame excuse with much difficulty:

"Oh. Then I'm not sure where it came from. I mean, I'm just someone who learned from the Black Tower's wizards."

Medissa nodded and looked at Brendel curiously: "Since my lord brought this up, I did think of one possibility. This sounds like what the Miirnas would do. The technique of Elemental Forging was lost long ago before the War of the Holy Saints. I believe that the book you saw was Galbu Wizards' record about their old enemy's techniques."

Brendel's lips jerked a few times when he heard his own lie getting fixed by Medissa. He nodded a few times to acknowledge her words. Bosley said a little emotionally:

"My lord, do you know how to construct it?"

"...I understand the principals behind it but constructing it might be difficult."

"Perhaps we can try building one?" Bosley immediately brought out papers and writing tools.

The idea of a new furnace was too much of a lure for him. He patted his chest with excitement:

"These old bones don't have any other skills other than building things. I dare say that I'm unmatched in the whole of Aouine. Please go ahead and tell me about it, perhaps we can really recreate it!"

"It's not that simple. The concept is easy enough, but there are a few major obstacles. First, we need a Mana Core and Mana Conductor to provide power. Second, we need to find a method to gather the Elements in the air and separate the Fire Element. Third, conversion of the Fire Element into flames.

The first obstacle requires the technology of utilizing Magicite. The second obstacle requires an Elementalist to research on the Magic Formations or handle it directly. The third obstacle requires an alchemist to design it.

I believe you can resolve the design of the furnace, but are you able to resolve these three obstacles?"

Bosley opened his mouth but no words came out.

"The collection of the Elements in the air. It's not a difficult problem." Medissa said.

"What? You know how to solve it?" Bosley blurted in a loud voice and even gave a little jump. His voice attracted the gazes of the blacksmiths and apprentices; he was slightly embarrassed but he could not hold back his enthusiasm: "Quickly tell us, girl, this thing is too important to us—"

Brendel secretly disagreed.

[It's just a furnace. Sure, it solves the problem of our lack of fuel, and it can smelt metal better, but Trenheim doesn't really produce any workable metal. How much can Cold Iron be gotten from Schafflund before it runs out? The fastest I can expand the workshop is after I make a trip to Ampere Seale.] *(TL: Ampere Seale is the place with lots of markets in the north, if anyone can't remember.)*

But Brendel apparently did not expect his subtle dismissive expression to be caught by Bosley, and the grandmaster chastised him gravely:

"My lord, do you really understand the worth of this furnace? Based on your explanation, it sounds like the flames reach a higher temperature. Just based on this alone, I will be to remove more impurities. I don't know if you can imbue the weapons and armors with Elements, but the equipment we created can be sold for more because of its quality. You can even sell a lesser version of the furnaces to the nobles, and I can assure you that they will be bought even if you quote them a high amount, which you can recruit more men into your army with the money gotten. Without a proper army, how can you protect yourself, and how would you be able to help the princess when your own life is suspect? The tension in the north is getting increasing every day. I don't think Her Highness would be able to wait for you to get ready."

Brendel felt a headache coming on when he heard Bosley's nagging, but he immediately realized that the grandmaster blacksmith was right. He was still debating over what goods he should bring to Ampere Seale and it seemed like there was a good choice in front of him. He nodded and said:

"Please go ahead and tell your ideas to Grandmaster Bosley, Medissa."

Medissa smiled and said: "The method is resolved through Magic Formations."

"Magic Formations? But you can't absorb the Elements and release only the Fire Element because the related Magic Formations don't stack. Bridging them together with the Fortification Magic Formation won't work because the Absorption Magic Formation is too restrictive in its conditions. Dividing the Magic Formations also won't work because you need to separate the Elements so that the Fire Element can be released. Absorb, separate, release. You can only have two Magic Formations working at any given time here."

This time it was Brendel who brought up his questions. Even in the past, he had not heard of a method to separate the Elements properly. The only exception was an

Elementalist manually separating the Fire Element. If a single furnace needed to be used for twenty-four hours to make something, then one would need six or seven Elementalists, and these Elementalists had to be Iron-ranked and above. It made him wonder how the Elemental Forge worked in the game.

In any case, this investment was a little too much if the forge needed Elementalists.

“My lord, you forget that I’m a silver Elf.” Medissa’s voice was very quiet.

Brendel looked at her with crooked lips. What did the Magic Formations have to do with a Silver Elf?

“Boy, I wanted to ask you for the longest time, is that little Silver Elf girl who’s always following you a member of the royal family?” Orthlyss’s voice suddenly came up.

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“Yes, she’s considered royalty, what of it, Ser Orthlyss?” Brendel said in his mind.

“Nothing, it’s just that she appears familiar to my eyes. Hmm, indeed, she’s very familiar to someone I know but it shouldn’t be her. Perhaps her descendant. But if she’s royalty, then your problem is as good as solved.” Orthlyss said.

“But— How?”

“One of the Legacies that the Silver Elves provide is the technique of conducting Elements. The royal members definitely know this technique.” Orthlyss said, and she became silent.

“...I see,” Brendel nodded and looked at Medissa, “you mean to say that you possess the technique to control the Elements?”

She nodded.

“Very well, this matter is solved. That’s one obstacle down. Let’s move on to the question of conversion of Fire Element to flames. The majority of the alchemist’s Magic Formations formulas are instantaneous, but the Fire Element needs to be released in a continuous, steady pulse. I’m not sure if the existing formulas will be sufficient for what we need.” Brendel said.

“Is there no other way besides using an alchemist?” Bosley’s excited brows quickly sank down and said with a little anguish: “But it doesn’t sound like it’s very difficult.”

“Of course it’s difficult. The level of stability required for the Magic Formation is extremely high. But it’s not as if there are no alternate methods. The first is Fortification Magic Formation to stabilize and convert it, but that will limit the output. The second method is finding a better material and combine it with an alchemist’s Magic Formation. However, it will be expensive.”

Brendel thought for a while.

[A smaller furnace with Fortification Magic. A bigger furnace with a better material spent on it. That's an acceptable sacrifice.]

"Well, it's fine. A substitute is better than none. I'll have my alchemist, Tamar, research on the magic formations and see if he comes up with a better alternative. Let's move on to the final problem. A Mana Core and Mana Conductor."

"I can do something... about the Mana Core," Bosley glanced at Brendel, and for the first time in the discussion, he stuttered: "I have some contacts that I know in Seifer, Corvado, and Ampere Seale. I can ask them to get a few Mana Cores for me, but Capital-sized cores will not be possible."

"It's enough if we can get some medium-sized ones!" Brendel answered.

Amandina had a few designs on machines that harnessed Magicite. It should be possible for her machines to use Mana Cores. Mana Conductors were much rarer as they are controlled by the Royal Family and powerful nobles.

But he was a little surprised at Bosley's initiative. This was the first time the latter used his network, which meant that this furnace toy was really tempting to him. What really delighted Brendel was the Bosley's revelation of such a wide network. If he could utilize it...

"Grandmaster Bosley, why don't you ask your friends to bring over some people over? Are you not lacking with manpower?" He tested the water.

The old man glared at him: "You want to drag more people on your sinking pirate ship? I don't care about other people, but stop thinking I will help you get my students or the Royal Faction's members!"

"No, no, no, you're wrong," Brendel was not discouraged at all, and moved to persuade him: "The Royal Faction or us, are we not on the same? We're all trying to help the princess right?"

Bosley scoffed loudly. He did not trust the youth, but once he thought about the Lionheart resonating to Brendel's presence, he started to loosen up: "I've agreed to work for you, young man, but I have no power to interfere with my students' lives. It is especially more so for the Royal Faction."

"But I'm not asking you to interfere with their decisions. You can invite them over and

I'm not asking you to force them too; they are just here to help us and they can leave whenever they like. We all need to be flexible!" Brendel sighed with a little exaggeratedly and shook his head.

Brendel put his arm around Bosley and drew a wonderful image for him:

"This isn't very different from the fact that we're smuggling silver, right? We're trying to restore Aouine to its former glory, and I'll definitely be paying them for their service. None of your students will suffer. This is a win-win trade for both us and the princess—"

[Phew. A few years as a commander in the game and experience in a working industry really helped out here. Really, if those godly CEOs come over, they might be able to create scams that would break a kingdom, ah, no, a multi-national company? Hmm, maybe they could set up a religion that permeates every kingdom!]

Brendel could not help but think they would be able to match the religions in this world.

This action made the girls giggle when they saw Brendel's expressions. He resembled a devil from hell, persuading Bosley with his honeyed tongue and mischevious eyes.

Bosley finally looked as though he was convinced. He hesitated before speaking: "Very well, what does my lord needs exactly?"

"What I need exactly? People! As many as you can get! Any race will do! Even young children are fine!" Brendel blurted.

"What!? Young children? Y-you, want me to do human trafficking? Are you mad? Aouine outlaws human trafficking—"

Bosley's voice faltered off at the end. Aouine had plenty of black markets, and nobles were always doing this dirty act. It was an open secret.

The Brendel that he knew was not someone like that. Even though he openly mocked the youth for being idealistic, he did admire his character for staying on that path. It was befitting for his age, after all.

"What are you talking about, what do you mean by 'human trafficking'? These two words sound so nasty. Grandmaster Bosley, please don't bring the horrendous habits

of those old nobles to my land—” Brendel showed an overly offended expression and shook his head with disapproval at Bosley.

Bosley nearly choked. He glared exasperatedly at Brendel.

[You are the one who said you wanted people. You even want young children! What other reasons do you have if you want them!]

“Then what do you mean exactly, my lord?” Bosley looked at him with narrowed eyes.

“Let me give you an example. Do you know about the War of the Black Rose?”

“What’s that?”

“Hmm...?”

Brendel suddenly blinked a few times. He suddenly realized that the kingdom had not given a name to Madara’s invasion yet. The War of the Black Rose did not exist. He coughed and smoothly changed his contents.

“I’m referring to Madara’s invasion a few months ago.”

“...But what does a black rose have to do with Madara?”

Brendel had black lines on his head. Would the old man stop going off-topic?

“I heard that Madara is also called as the Black Rose of Brumand. Perhaps my lord is talking about this?” Scarlett said.

Comprehension dawned on the old man and he nodded: “That makes sense. I believe the people who write Aouine’s history would give that name as well. And what of it?”

Brendel coughed lightly:

“Ahem. The War of the Black Rose will appear to be the biggest war after the second Holy War, but that isn’t true. Very soon, the Royal Crown will lose their power to rein in the nobles, and these nobles will eventually go to war with each other. In fact, for the past twenty years there have been constant skirmishes, and one day, a civil war will eventually happen...”

The young lord took a momentary pause and asked: “Do you know where the refugees are right now in the Macsen region?”

“Hmm? I do know some of the refugees are working for me—” Bosley suddenly realized what Brendel meant and he looked at him in surprise: “My lord, do you mean refugees?”

“Yes. The constant skirmishes between the nobles have caused a considerable amount of people to lose their homes. These refugees had to become farmers or even fall into servitude. They have hardly any clothes, no homes, no food, and no hope. Although I don’t have a clear number of the kingdom’s refugees, I’m sure there are many people who are troubled with their current lives. Attracting them would be simple. Sufficient meals and the direction to a better life would be able to get them to migrate to Trentheim. All we need to do is to provide a safe passage.”

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Bosley's initial surprise quickly abated.

"My lord, perhaps these refugees do exist, but the majority of them are sick and old. The strong workforce that you want to have are of value to the nobles too, so you wouldn't be able to get them. I'm afraid these refugees would not be of much use to you."

"Accepting and spending money on the sick and elderly proves that we are sincere in accepting everyone. It also doesn't mean there are no able people amongst the refugees. Some of the youths would want to stay together with their families, and most of the nobles would not accept them because they have to feed every mouth. The women are capable of farmwork, sewing, and many other things, while the young are the future of this territory."

Brendel had already made long-term plans for Aouine's future. Not many people did so in this generation because of the civil war.

"In any case, I have considered these issues before and it's not a big problem. The people we have will be the future of this region. I'll even give these foolish nobles a free lesson who can't see this point. Therefore, I'm requesting that you get as many people as you can to come to this region."

"Fine, you have the population, but what about the food?"

Bosley was still not fully convinced, though he had to admit that Brendel's methods captured the populace's heart very well as he continued to stay in Firburh.

Regardless of whether it was his own personal selfish reasons or for righteousness, he did not wish to see the youth's efforts come to a blinding halt. In his heart, he had often wondered when it was deep in the night, was the youth really chosen by the Lionheart?

The latter's actions caused everyone to support him, and at times he felt as though he

saw a mythical figure of the past.

The kind king who raised his sword to swear an oath under the flags and banners.

Indeed, Bosley could not believe that it was true.

“The food is a problem, but Grandmaster Bosley, when did you become so concerned about this issue?” Brendel nodded and quickly eyed Bosley with a strange look.

“I’m just asking out of curiosity.” The old blacksmith felt embarrassed.

“I see. Well, the plan, hmmm. It’s a really big problem, but when I think about the refugees losing their homes, I really do feel pained, and it’s difficult for me to sleep and no matter hard it is, I have to keep on persisting, right, Grandmaster Bosley?”

Brendel’s words were solemn and dignified, but his eyes were laughing like a little fox, teasing the old man.

“You...” The old man became angry: “Cut the crap, you damn scoundrel! Tell me your plan!”

The girls giggled again.

“Since we have the support of Schafflund’s silver mines, we won’t really have a problem for the time being.”

“You can’t rely on buying the food supplies. Are you not afraid of the northern dukes’ embargo?”

“One, the merchants in Ampere Seale are all ‘merchants.’” Brendel put one finger up, and shot up another: “Two, the northern fleet is still in the princess’s hands. Certainly, there’s a worst-case scenario, but Trentheim isn’t really a barren land.”

Brendel had the druids in his hands, so why would he worry about farming? They were even better than the Elementalist when it came to agriculture.

Even though it might be a little difficult to convince the druids who believe in being neutral, he had already set up a trap for them to jump into. The contract that they signed earlier would mean that the druids had to protect Firburh against all wars, and that included a war concerning the city’s food.

Brendel's smile was really wide and twisted when he thought about it.

"I really don't understand why you need so many people. Trentheim already has a strong population. If you conquer this place, creating an army wouldn't be difficult."

Brendel merely rubbed his forehead.

Bosley would not understand that his ultimate end goal would be conquering the endless Wilderness. It was not limited to just the kingdom's area, or stopping at Valhalla, but to lead an army towards the Wilderness and expand Aouine till it became a powerful empire.

This opportunity could only be found in the Wilderness.

[Perhaps one day everyone would understand my reasons for doing this if I'm still alive.]

"Grandmaster Bosley, when have you become so interested in my territory? Are you interested in joining my banner wholeheartedly?"

Bosley choked on his saliva and started coughing loudly. When he finally got his breath back, he hurriedly spoke: "What are you thinking about, you rascal? I'm only worried that you're going to lose everything in this investment and drag my career— No, I mean you're going to block the princess's efforts from making this kingdom strong again."

"Why, that would be strange indeed. But if you're not interested in joining me, why are you the one who keeps on talking about unrelated topics?" Brendel found it a little amusing and asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Are we not focusing on how to get the refugees over to this land? Why are we talking about food now? Would you like to exchange jobs with Amandina?"

Bosley obviously knew that Brendel was making fun of him. Even though he had a good personality amongst all the nobles in this generation, he was clearly lacking in respecting his elders, and he did not seem like he would stop anytime soon.

"I'm not as shameless as my lord. For me to try and steal the little girl's job. We're

talking about the Elemental Forge and you were the one who... Forget it, I'm not going to explain myself anymore!" Bosley suddenly realized if he continued to explain himself he was setting himself up instead.

He quickly sought to speak of something else: "Alright. I'll get your request done. Let's get back to the issues at hand. The suits of armor you requested me to make, would you like to inspect them?"

"It would be good if we can," Brendel nodded; he was interested to see the completed product, "but not here. Is there a hidden room in this workshop? Or is there a place that would allow us to talk privately?"

"There is a place that's closed off," Bosley glared at him, "but what's with all the secrecy? Are you up to no good?"

Brendel snorted.

If the old man was honest, why would he have a secret room? He did not recall that he instructed him to make such a place. But he did not dare to speak about it, lest the stubborn old man got angry and chased all of them out. That would be a loss for him.

Bosley led the three of them across the sweltering workshop despite the snow and pushed open a door in the south building.

But Brendel quickly realized that he had mistaken Bosley's words. The secret room was just as the latter described. It was more like a warehouse or resting room for Bosley to use privately.

The room was not very big, approximately ten square meters in size with many boxes and barrels in it. Bosley counted the boxes from the left, before getting a crowbar to open one of them and took out a strange armor.

It could hardly be seen as an armor because it looked more like a failed product of an apprentice.

"Just look at this. Can anyone wear this? The metal extends all the way to the head. There's no opening to let the head come out, not even a neckline. The torso and backplate are sewn together too tightly. The holes to let the arms and legs come out are different from a normal human being. And it's heavy as well." Bosley nearly had to exert his entire body strength to bring the armor out. "I'm even willing to bet that the

knights would not be able to wear this armor even if it's made normally. This is just too heavy!"

Bosley threw the armor onto the table while panting hard. The armor crashed onto the table with a tremendous thud and he continued:

"Look at it. I assure you that I have followed your design completely without a single change. And I can assure you that no normal person would be able to wear this. Really, I have no idea what you want to do with this. And it's not just one set. There are two hundred sets of this armor!"

Brendel grinned with delight as he studied the armor. He poked it several times and felt greatly satisfied. Bosley's craft was truly the best blacksmith in Aouine; indeed, the only person who was recognized as a legendary blacksmith in the second War of the Black Rose.

Based on the armor's craft, it had to be crafted by at least a level 60 Blacksmith. Ordinary NPC blacksmiths were people who did not even exist in the eyes of the gamers who chose to get into non-combat professions, but Bosley was an exception and was treated like a national treasure even twenty years into the future from now.

It was no wonder Brendel was grinning from ear to ear when he looked at him.

"Are you even listening to me, you damned rascal?" Bosley scowled, his fury reaching new heights.

"Of course I am. I'm completely satisfied." Brendel nodded.

"I can see you're satisfied, but I'm asking you what this is for." Bosley felt exhausted. He found that it was an exhausting task to speak to Brendel; it was as if the youth was always thinking of something else.

"Don't worry, you will get to know what it's for in a few moments. I just don't think that it's better that I'm not the one to tell you about it—"

"What do you—?" Bosley was confused.

But someone knocked on the door right at that moment. The old man was rarely disturbed when he entered this room to rest. His eyebrows bunched up together and he roared: "Who?"

“It’s me, Grandmaster Bosley.” The voice outside the door sounded as though the person shrank back.

“How the blazes would I know who you are, you fool!” Bosley became angrier when he saw the youth in front of him looking like he was half-smiling: “Spit it out, what do you want, you better find a good reason to convince me or I’ll be tossing you out of the workshop!”

“Erm... I’m looking for Lord Brendel...”

The old man blinked a few times and cast a doubtful look at Brendel, who nodded.

“Come in!” Bosley then replied.

The door opened with Bosley’s reply. The person who was standing outside was indeed the youth Mordenkainen. His duck familiar was not with him, but there was a strange looking person beside him.

A short body entirely covered by a long robe.

“A Dwarf?” Bosley muttered to himself.

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“No, you guessed wrong, Grandmaster Bosley,” Brendel said.

Mordenkainen closed the door behind him, while the mysterious guest tugged off its robe to revealed a feather dress covering over its wrinkled skin.

Tagiv bowed deeply to Brendel.

“A Subterrane Dweller?” Bosley was stunned for a moment before he spoke with a shocked voice: “Wait, my lord, do you mean—”

His mind spun quickly. Humans would not be able to use the armor at all, but it was a perfect fit for these underground creatures.

“When did you enter into an alliance with the Subterrane Dwellers?”

“Didn’t we fight alongside with them against Lord Macsen a while ago?”

“But... Just, how exactly did...” The old blacksmith was utterly confused.

Brendel locked down information concerning Lord Macsen, and the latter’s men were either captured or killed in that battle. The information of the Subterrane Dwellers participation in that battle was not revealed.

Since Bosley did not care about Brendel’s military affairs and put all his efforts into his workshop, he did not know that there was a large army of Subterrane Dwellers under Brendel.

“My lord... powerful.” Tagiv maintained its respectful attitude and answered in weak Kirrlutz.

“In other words, they have submitted to you?” Bosley turned to Brendel and asked.

Brendel nodded.

“Marsha above. How many of them submitted to you?” Bosley exclaimed. He stared at Brendel with a shaken expression as the thought of a possibility surfaced. A palm with five fingers was raised: “...Five hundred?”

That was the number of armors that Brendel wanted.

Brendel shook his head with a smile.

“My, my. Your thoughts are too simple like the others, Grandmaster Bosley. How would it be possible for every member of the Subterrane Dwellers to use this armor? Surely they have the old and young with them. The figure is much higher—”

[Even though Tagiv is respectful to me, he would never place his whole tribe in my hands.]

He eyed Tagiv: “At least three thousand.”

Bosley stumbled, and hurriedly leaned against the table’s corner: “...I see. It seems that these old bones of mine cannot keep up with you youths any longer.”

Three thousand. How exactly did the young man in front of him defeat the Subterrane Dwellers? Not to mention getting them to submit.

It was no wonder the younger mercenaries idolized him. Bosley originally sneered at them a little, but now it looked like they were not doing it blindly.

“I got it. It appears that Lord Palas will be in big trouble.”

“Unfortunately, it’s not that simple. Count Randner is going to be the one behind the next attack. That cunning bastard will be more careful with us because of Lord Macsen’s failure.”

“You mean that Lord Palas will have reinforcements?”

“Isn’t that a guaranteed thing...?”

Bosley rubbed his chin: “So this is why you want to arm the Subterrane Dwellers.”

“Indeed,” Brendel patted the armor and turned towards the Subterrane Dweller, “Tagiv, come over and test this out.”

“My lord, what is... this?” Tagiv could not see the armor, but it could hear that the thing Brendel was holding was something metallic.

“Wear this and you will know.”

“But, I’m a... witch doctor, my lord!” Tagiv’s hands went over the armor and exclaimed.

“It’s fine, I’m just letting you test it out. This is the gift that I’m giving to you. Are you going to refuse it?”

“Gift?” Tagiv answered with a pause.

“Your tribe isn’t particularly strong in the Underworld right?”

Tagiv became silent. If they were strong enough, they would not be chased up to the surface. Compared to living on the surface, they would very much prefer to go back where they come from. The numbers of their tribe were considerably big, but they were still unable to find an Underworld Lord to protect them. Rather, they were considered cannon fodder for others. Its ancestors had left the old and weak to its command, and the genuine fighters that it had that were considered strong in the Underworld were few.

It nodded.

“There’s no problem at all. I always tell my subordinates this, if you can’t improve your personal skills and techniques, then you can raise the equipment’s level that you wear.”

“Raising the level... on equipment?” Tagiv repeated this sentence with some doubt.

“I intend to send five hundred suits of heavy armor to the Subterrane Dwellers. They are specially designed for your race to wear.”

Tagiv was evidently surprised by the number as both its hands trembled and rattled the armor. Five hundred suits of armor were also considered an enormous amount of wealth. An Underworld Lord would not spend metal to equip a group of Subterrane Dwellers which were considered as cannon fodder.

“But... the Subterrane Dwellers... don’t wear armor!”

[What the hell? What do you mean you don't wear armor! Didn't your future lord and city-invader expert Aila lead all of you wearing these suits of armor as the vanguard? The armor in your hands was designed by your own darn race!]

It was indeed the original prototype that Aila designed. It was also ahead of its time by five years. Brendel, unfortunately, did not get the recipes of the future variations. In the end, the youth said a little irritably:

“Do you want to be treated as cannon fodder all the time? These suits of armor are specially designed for you and once you wear them, history will be made—”

“Hold on!” Bosley suddenly interrupted: “My lord, what exactly did you say? Do you mean that this armor has never existed before?”

“Yes?”

Bosley looked at the youth in disbelief and appeared to be a little angry: “A new suit of armor that has never been tested or even worn by these damned creatures, and you got me to make two hundred of them!?”

It was almost at a bellow at the end of his words. He felt like Brendel was playing a joke on him.

Who had done this before in history? A new set of armor that had not even been tested and instead of went into production? Did this idiot lord think that it was a toy?

If Brendel was rich enough to rival the entire kingdom's revenue, he could still understand his action as a wasteful noble's behavior, but it was clear that he was just a new lord who had trouble maintaining his own territory.

“The amount of metal spent to make these armor is almost all the available metal ores that Firburh has. I even refused to let my workers go out and assist in the city repairs because of this project. Even that little girl Amandina came to grumble about this issue more to me a few times !”

The more Bosley thought about it, the angrier he became. When he thought back at that moment when Brendel said he was supporting the princess... he wanted to smash the armor on his head. If everyone around the princess was the same as this youth, then he suddenly doubted the future of this damned kingdom.

[Marsha above. A royal blacksmith getting fooled by an idiot! No, this will not do. If he doesn't give me an explanation, I'll show him my temper. And my temper is very bad!]

The old man glared at Brendel.

The youth did not change his expression, not even a little, though he was a little surprised at Bosley's anger. However, he could not help but snicker at his last sentence.

"Really, Grandmaster Bosley, is there a need to be so angry?" He shook his head.

"You can even laugh at this point?! You better give me an explanation, damn it! Otherwise, I'll definitely threaten you!"

"What sort of threat?" Brendel's smile was befitting of his age. Innocent and sweet.

"I, I'll go a strike!" Bosley stomped his foot.

"Okay, yes, please calm down a little. Grandmaster Bosley, you're the head of the royal blacksmiths, can't you tell if this suit of armor works on Tagiv?"

"It's exactly because I'm the head blacksmith that I'm telling you this is an irresponsible act!" Bosley roared, but his eyes went to the armor on Tagiv's body. He was quite familiar with the suits of armor because he made them with his own hands. Even with the first glance, he knew that Brendel's design did not have any problems.

It only looked like the size was a little too big on the Subterrane Dweller.

But Tagiv did mention he was a Witch Doctor, which meant that the warriors of the Subterrane Dwellers would be bigger and stronger in size. The suits of armor should be a good fit for them. If there were Subterrane Dwellers with burlier sizes, he could simply craft a few sets suited for them.

Bosley's fury was quickly replaced with surprise. Based on the designs that Brendel gave, it appeared like it had gone through at least several rounds of tests to make sure that the armor fit the Subterrane Dwellers' physiology. Even he would not be able to make a suit of armor perfectly for them the first time.

Was this youth a genius blacksmith?

But he could not believe this notion, and instead asked with a huff: "You're not the one

who came up with this thing, right?"

Brendel nodded. He was not shameless enough to steal someone else's work: "It's a friend of mine. He had studied the Subterrane Dwellers quite well."

Aila somehow became his friend at that moment and it sneezed in the Underworld.

"At least that makes more sense. You better stop giving me this kind of surprises in the future. Leave your stunts to people of your age instead. My old heart can't take this sort of torture." Bosley stopped pursuing this issue when Brendel satisfied his suspicions.

"Really, you're exaggerating, why would I do this on purpose? You're my greatest asset in this territory." Brendel said with a grin.

"I'm just working for you temporarily." The old blacksmith reminded him with a mutter, but Brendel's pandering made him feel pleased.

Brendel merely rubbed his forehead at his response: "Well, how about it Tagiv, are you willing to accept this gift?"

Tagiv hesitated. Its hands were going through every nook and cranny of the armor as Brendel and Bosley spoke to each other. It had practically confirmed that the armor was indeed made for them.

It was quite tempting, but there were no free meals in this world after all. Tagiv finally asked: "What are... the conditions?"

Brendel nodded as he was greatly satisfied with Tagiv's answer. It was obvious that he could not just give away five hundred suits of armor. While they were considered to be allies, this 'gift' was not really a gift.

"The conditions are simple," Brendel said, then went beside Tagiv and whispered into its ears.

Tagiv paused momentarily and went into another bout of hesitation, but it finally nodded.

"It's a... deal."

Chapter 110

Trentheim and the young lord (10)

===== Gryphine's POV =====

The seventh day of December—

It was just after the first snowfall.

The harsh winter had sealed off the access from Arreck's mountains to Ampere Seale's countryside paths. Each faction wasted two months of talks in the Port of Freedom without any success. The cold winter ultimately caused the northern waters and the restless factions to be frozen. The fierce rumors of the civil wars happening disappeared one by one.

But to the people who could see through everything, they understood that it was a false peace. The blades of steel underneath this ethereal frozen world, were thirsting for blood and waiting patiently to erupt.

Gryphine knew clearly that once winter ended, it would not be water from the melted snow seeping into the spring's ground, but blood.

A hidden force was on the verge of breaking out under the snow-covered ground elsewhere.

Countless riders made their way through the forest.

Lord Palas led his knights through Macsen's hills for the first time to make battle, but he did not know that spies had delivered the reports of Lord Macsen's defeat in Firburh to the various Counts and Dukes, and they were watching Trentheim closely.

Every noble thought that the princess was taking a huge risk to usurp Firburh during such a sensitive time, where even a spark would cause the civil war to break out. In truth, there was nothing that Gryphine could do other than accept Brendel's 'kind' intentions.

They felt intrigued by the situation and wondered what Count Randner's next action would be, though no one really cared or paid attention to the leader of Firburh's rebels.

Gryphine could not help but shake the parchment in her hand with her fingers. The report stated that Lord Palas's army was moving towards Firburh.

"Ser Oberbeck, who do you think would win this battle?" She asked the Wolf Lord with a faint smile.

Oberbeck bowed slightly: "Logic tells me that Count Randner will be victorious in this war, but my intuition tells me otherwise."

"What's going to happen if Brendel wins?"

"Count Randner will not dare to move easily if his army is defeated."

"What happens if he loses?"

"Duke Arreck would want to make Count Randner keep his neutral position, which suits the latter just fine—"

"In other words, it will end up as an advantage for us no matter what?"

"Only if Your Highness recognize that Count Randner will never join hands with us!"

"Unfortunately, Makarov and my teacher Fleetwood are unable to see this point." The girl with silver hair used one hand to support her pale chin and sighed.

Oberbeck did not answer. In his eyes, Makarov and Fleetwood probably understood this point, but they had their own considerations; a strange youth with an unknown background was less trustworthy than Count Randner. Makarov also wanted Gryphine to be less involved with that youth.

These words could not be said openly, otherwise, doubt would grow in the Royal Faction's people, but Oberbeck believed that the princess would see this point sooner or later.

"What do you think?" Gryphine's thin eyebrows lifted slightly as she peered at her retainer: "Why is he doing something so risky? Is it really because he holds goodwill towards the royal family?"

“That would be unlikely. My guess is that he’s an ambitious adventurer.”

Because of her birth, Gryphine did not trust a relationship if both parties did not profit from a beneficial relationship with each other. She pondered on Oberbeck’s answer: “Ambition, you say...”

Her eyes went back to the numbers in the parchment. There was one thing that was clear, Count Randner had a massive army marching towards Firburh.

===== Lord Palas’s POV =====

Lord Palas used a wrinkled hand that was full of calluses to lift up his mask. He expelled a breath of condensed vapor as he looked at the faraway mountains shrouded in mist.

The camps in the valley had been attacked yet again—

It was the sixth raid from the start of the week.

The elderly man’s eyebrows nearly met each other. His wrinkled face resembled a tree’s bark as he frowned deeply. The figures of the knights behind him continued to walk out in turn, and their expressions were just as grave as their commander.

They thought that the Macsen’s mountains would not compare against Mountain Graham’s treacherous environment where they constantly fought in terms of danger.

— Surely, the rebels would not be as good as the Highlanders in their ambushes, and this war would allow them to be more relaxed.

Such was their thoughts.

But before they encountered the rebels, they met even tougher foes.

“These damned Subterrane Dwellers!” One of the knights cursed.

The creatures’ targets were many. They did not just attack their army, but also their food supply and non-combat workers. The mysterious attacks they received already made Lord Palas’s men anxious before Count Randner’s army could join up with them. The attacks had extended to the Highlanders’ camps as well, and it was the second time too.

The damage was not big, but Lord Palas was worried that his army's destination was going to be delayed.

The Subterrane Dwellers' speed in the forest was extraordinarily quick. They attacked from the flanks and disappeared into the northern forest after causing a considerable amount of casualties.

The layout of these forests was unfamiliar and complex, and the cavalry could not be deployed easily as sharp rocks seemed to be scattered in advance. There was also the snow which covered the ground and made it look like it was the same everywhere.

It was impossible to pursue them.

"How many did we lose this time?"

"Not many, approximately a dozen or so, but there are many who are injured."

"And how many dead for this week?"

"Nearly a hundred soldiers from their attacks, but there's a battle that happened and there were significant casualties."

"Why was there a battle?" Lord Palas turned around to his adjutant and asked.

A real battle against Firburh was still far away. Food supplies or other materials like ammunition and sleeping tents supplied by transport workers were slower than expected. Even the Highlanders' speed was slow, and there was only about a tenth of the expected Highlanders who joined up with them.

But what surprised him was the battle that happened. He had never given the order to attack.

"It's because of a private group of Highlanders who wanted to get revenge. They were ambushed after entering Macsen, and there was only a handful that returned."

"Those bloody fools. Just how many did we lose exactly?"

"...Over three hundred." The adjutant finally said.

"In merely two weeks—" Lord Palas shook his head, though the loss of these men was

still acceptable to him.

These creatures were a nuisance to him and were difficult to remove if they did not take the initiative to attack them.

But it was clear that the rebels were making their last struggle after all.

Lord Palas had been gathering information for the past two months. The scouts managed to discover a few private soldiers who worked for Graudin during the night of the rebellion, and they brought back information of the mercenaries in Firburh. The private soldiers also provided some information about the Subterrane Dwellers that appeared a few months ago.

Lord Palas believed they had a role in ambushing Lord Macsen.

[Given that it has been months after Graudin's defeat, the number of mercenaries might have increased. Perhaps more than a thousand mercenaries, and a few hundred Subterrane Dwellers. If I make progress steadily, it's a guaranteed victory.]

He would not allow himself to commit the mistake that Lord Macsen made. Although, given his cautious nature, he probably would not have made this mistake if he was leading the first assault against Firburh.

His hand gripped his sword's golden hilt.

Rumors of Carglise being captured by the rebels came back a few days ago, and Lord Palas was worried about his student.

The original plan of attacking Macsen's fortress still needed approximately fifteen days of travel time. Even if there was a thousand casualties or even a third of his army injured, it would not matter to him.

However, what worried him was not the number of casualties, but the morale of the army. Sometimes a battle was decided by something else. Having the Highlanders devolve into a state of confusion would mean that they would be completely out of his control.

It was definitely the enemy leader's scheme to pressure him into an early battle.

And there were definitely traps waiting for him if he did so. The ambushed

Highlanders were a good example. He understood that he could not be impulsive here, but the various leaders of the Highlanders were constantly badgering him about getting the Subterrane Dwellers gave him a headache.

These leaders were not exactly wrong either. The Subterrane Dwellers went deep into their camps and burned part of their food supply. Lord Palas even wondered if Schafflund had a security problem. The route that the Subterrane Dwellers took could only come from that region.

But the scouts who met up with Perkins reported everything was fine. Even the second batch of scouts that he sent out came back with the message that Schafflund did not discover any oddities.

[This damned Perkins... It's as if the town is a giant sieve that allows anyone to go through.]

But he did not know that the scouts also used this town's poor security to access the routes to Firburh.

"Let's go back." In the end, Lord Palas pushed down his aching desire to chop the Subterrane Dwellers to pieces.

"My lord, what we are going to do with the Subterrane Dwellers if we go back?"

"Get the Highlanders to tighten their defensive lines, change the food supply routes and plan a different camping spot for our warehouses. The enemies are lurking in the dark while we are out in the open. The only option is to raise our guard."

"But surely this is a waste of time? Why don't we lead our current army and kill the creatures?"

"If you really think this way, then our enemies will be delighted." Lord Palas's voice turned cold: "Madara's undead, the Highlanders, Count Randner's reinforcements, our weapons, and even our food are all not here yet! If we lose this region, what do you think Count Randner will do to you and your family?"

"But my lord, we currently have a total of five thousand men. Even if the rebels came out to fight alongside with the Subterrane Dwellers, they would not be our match." His adjutant bowed respectfully.

“The stupid Lord Macsen had the same idea. Have you given a thought to how he ended up?”

“Still, Count Randner expects us to show results as soon as possible. The fact that we have lost men even before we fought and we did nothing about it would not be pleasing news to him.”

“...No. It’s best that we delay fighting until March and beyond. It wouldn’t matter as much if we gain a complete victory.” Palas shook his head adamantly.

Even though it was a slap to his face as well, it would not be a wise move to go after this minor harassment. He was a cautious person, and the enemy leader seemed to have noticed this point as well and thus harassed him with the Subterrane Dwellers to no end in sight.

Though the Subterrane Dwellers were brazenly attacking his men, he was confident that he would not be lured out to attack in anger.

[The enemy leader is leading an army that’s like a trapped beast. As long as I continued to tie up his options, there will not be a chance for him to win this. And this humiliation can be returned to him.]

“Three months? Marsha above, how much food would we need? My lord, Count Randner might punish us for that!” His adjutant exclaimed.

“My lord, we will be flogged to death for wasting his food!” Another knight also chimed in, and a few others agreed.

“It’s the opposite,” Lord Palas looked at his old subordinates, “the battlefield is not limited to Trenheim. In any case, Count Randner would not interfere with us before this war ends. There are things that cannot be gotten with just money. As long as we score a perfect victory at the end, Count Randner will be able to sleep soundly at night and forgive us.”

Even though Lord Palas was a pure soldier, his experience in life enabled him to see the undercurrents of Aouine’s politics.

“...Understood, my lord.” The knights around him answered.

Chapter 111

Trentheim and the young lord (11)

[I'm sure that old knight is thinking that he has seen through my goals. How unfortunate for him.]

Indeed, the old knight did not know what sort of existence was he was facing.

Perhaps it was due to Brendel's system or his eidetic memory in his past life, but he was could remember almost every lord in the past and future, and it did not matter whether they were insignificant or not.

He was familiar with them just like how he was familiar with his swordsmanship. From the start of Madara's war to the second era of the game, he had done enough quests to meet up with almost every lord who had some kind of territory.

Lord Palas would definitely think over his strategies again if he knew Brendel was capable of reciting his nickname when he was a child. But unlike the youth, there was no second chance for him.

Brendel was grinning broadly; the old knight actually retreated back into his lands instead of continuing to advance to Macsen. After he finished reading the report from 'Raven', he tossed it back to the table.

Raven was the name given to the scouting wizards by him. It was quite fitting since most of them used ravens as their familiars to send back the reports.

"That's a pity." Raban had also read the report and sighed with a little disappointment: "The old knight is really cautious. We would have won half the victory if he tried attacking us—"

"Putting your hope on our enemies? This isn't a good habit, commander Raban." Amandina eyed from Brendel's side, her voice chilly.

The lead advisor under Brendel was increasing her authority with each passing day. Even though she was saying it in a reproachful manner, Raban did not feel anything

out of place, and she was even right to do so.

Raban simply laughed for a few moments: “I only feel that it’s a little regrettable. We will face a difficult battle in the next battle.”

“Not necessarily.” Brendel refuted.

Lord Palas might be cautious, but his very bones were steeped with an unyielding personality. Since Brendel knew what sort of strategies the old knight loved employing, he could logically guess what moves the latter would make next.

This information was merely the confirmation of his traps working. No matter what decision Lord Palas made, it would not go beyond his predictions.

On the other hand, Amandina looked at Brendel with astonishment, to the point where she was a little lost.

Brendel had called her in to inform her of his plan before Tagiv left the city. The traps that Lord Palas thought were everywhere, were actually located just around his army. If Lord Palas actually went out in full force to chase Tagiv or attack Macsen, Brendel might actually find himself at a disadvantage.

But it proved that his ‘strategies’ were more like a prediction.

“But why would that be?” Raban did not understand.

“Lord Palas is someone who graduated from a royal academy which specializes in grooming commanders. He also participated in the November War. Thus, he is one of the most orthodox commanders trained in an orthodox academy. Do you know that this academy has a few lines written in Kirrlutz in their entrance?”

‘The objectives of a war are to attain your objectives and prevent your enemies from reaching their objectives.’

This is the core directive of Aouine’s military strategies. All commanders who come from a military school treat this sentence as their dictionary.”

Raban nodded first, with Cornelius and Medissa agreeing moments after they thought about it.

Since Raban came from a military background, he was familiar with this sentence. Cornelius had a few decades in battlefields and he could understand the verity of this sentence. Medissa also had her own understanding of the Silver Elves' wisdom and agreed with it.

"The Subterrane Dwellers are moving out in full force to harass Lord Palas. It's like telling him that we're like a trapped beast, so we want to seek a chance to defeat the enemies here before Count Randner's grand army arrives, right?" Amandina woke up from her stupor and asked.

"But isn't that exactly the situation we are in right now?" Raban asked.

"Certainly," Brendel nodded, "but are we going to be so foolish to tell their commander our situation and let them deal a 'crit' on us?"

He was sitting lazily in his chair and placed both his legs on the table, completely acting like a ruffian rather than a lord. Amandina's eyebrows were twitching badly, and Felaern's scowl was even more pronounced.

But the youth put on a smug look and added a certain jargon.

"Crit?"

"Well," Brendel's expression did not even change as he lied, "it's an abbreviation for a critical hit. I found it in an ancient journal which contains strategies about battlefields."

Raban nodded with comprehension. Brendel continued speaking:

"But our strategy is still working. Our 'supposed' objective is to have a battle right now, but Lord Palas naturally would not let us have our way due to Aouine's military directive. However, I find it hard to believe that he would just retreat without doing anything else. If he retreats so openly, he might be trying to hide his real goal..."

"Or it could be a trap for us, if we carelessly chase his army, he might be able to get us instead," Raban said.

"But what is his end goal?" Cornelius interrupted.

"He obviously wants Count Randner's entire army to gather in his territory before

launching an all-out assault.” Raban had completely gone into Lord Palas’s perspective and answered again.

“So we should still send out troops to break them?”

“His retreat might be a cover to hide his intention to attack Macsen secretly—”

Different voices came quickly and overlapped each other.

“Regardless of whatever is lying in wait, there are only two choices,” Amandina spoke calmly and came to a conclusion, “either we wait for their army to finish gathering, or we attack them right away without hesitation.”

But Medissa immediately interrupted.

“The way how we deduce a military outcome isn’t so simple. This isn’t a game of rock-paper-scissors. We need to understand what the military officer is thinking. Some things cannot be gauged easily. The strength of the opponent’s army, their resources, their morale, even the weather and geographical locations. Even having reinforcements coming to their aid is something to consider.”

“Two choices, with so many factors; any variations on the two choices feel like it wouldn’t be easy to deal with.”

Brendel listened to every opinion and finally spoke: “You forgot the most important thing, Lord Palas’s personality.”

“But what exactly is your plan, my lord?” Raban asked the youth.

Based on Medissa’s explanation, was it not easy for Lord Palas’s scheme to work with all these factors? And it seemed like the latter had made the best decision without them knowing.

They were already at a disadvantage and needed to resolve things before Count Randner’s army arrive. Even if Lord Palas did not plan any schemes and merely retreated to his territory, they would still lose once Count Randner’s army arrived.

But Brendel looked at them in utter disbelief: “Isn’t my plan working already? Each of you is beside me and you don’t understand what I’m doing?”

“What?”

Everyone was shocked.

The youth’s smile was almost mischevious and he pointed his finger to the side of his head:

“Your thinking is limited. If I’m the one who tells you there are only two options, are you going to be stuck with these two options?”

I’m the one who’s surprised, since two of my commanders here have been through at least a few decades of battles. Was there really no battle that took you by surprise and had a different outcome than what you had expected? If you don’t think outside the box, you won’t be able to see any other options, let alone the third option—”

Everyone was silenced, but Raban quickly asked with a frown:

“What is the third option?”

“Let’s talk about the first and second option. Since Lord Palas already retreated instead of meeting us head-on with his entire army, his first option would be sending in a separate army to march to either Firburh or Macsen, but we will be able to directly break our current problem if he tries this move. Of course, I doubt he’s that foolish, and I think even Graudin wouldn’t make this silly mistake.

The second option, if he chooses to shut himself up in his territory, we do nothing and wait for his army and we fight Count Randner’s full army. That would be quite dangerous for us.

However, we can directly move to the third option that I want instead of waiting if he retreats—”

Brendel showed his palms: “What exactly do we lack? Time.”

“But what does time do for us, my lord?” Amandina had been frowning nearly all the time from the start of the month.

Brendel reminded her in a serious tone when he spotted her furrowed brows: “Frowning all the time will cause wrinkles, my lady.”

“I’ll get you to pay it back sooner or later, my lord.” Amandina rolled her eyes and glowered at him.

Brendel laughed heartily, as though it was a great accomplishment to get his advisor to relax even a little, and explained:

“Don’t worry, time will eventually show you that it’s our ally. The third option... is securing my inherited land, and from there, our options will expand again.”

He was not exaggerating.

Since the druids had sent him a message, he knew that they most likely had Valhalla’s news. It was going according to the history he knew of, and thus he made a number of arrangements, including Tagiv’s harassment to delay the old knight from attacking the Macsen region.

The meaning of Valhalla was important to him, and he needed to ensure that he got that legendary land before the Count Randner’s army arrived. As long as he got it, everything would not be a problem any longer.

He could either retreat there if his army was defeated at Firburh, though he did not expect to lose as there were the addition of the Druids in the upcoming battle too.

Everyone looked at him doubtfully, but they at least knew that their young lord did not boast.

But Raban still felt that it was still a little strange and asked: “But would that old knight discover signs that he has fallen into your scheme?”

“And did any of you discover what exactly I’m planning?” Brendel asked him instead.

“B-but what happens if he tries to pick the first option again, and attack with his entire army?”

“Sometimes a decision decides everything. The outcome of a battle can turn with just a subtle detail,” Brendel wagged his finger from side to side, “one of the worst trait a commander could have is to be indecisive, and to change a decision repeatedly is even worse.

In any case, Lord Palas has already retreated instead of attacking. Tagiv will constantly

harass him all the way. When he finally tries to pick the option of attacking us with his full army, he would have to deal with the army's sagging morale because he fled from a harassment instead of fighting. It's too late for regrets at this point in time."

"Do you mean that he's going to lose in either choice of attacking now or waiting for his reinforcements?"

"Just like you're stuck with the two options that all of you are discussing, I'm also giving him the same question supplied with the answers that you came up with. Why wouldn't he lose? Sometimes you need to think outside the box instead of trying to react to what your opponents' goals are..."

Brendel's words trailed off. Everyone was looking at him with an odd expression as though he was a devil. The youth rubbed his nose and felt embarrassed. This was not his strategy, but Incirsta's during the second War of the Black Rose. The Black Lord humiliated the old knight with the same strategy, and he merely copied it.

"So what exactly should we do now?" Raban asked again.

"Just do your current tasks well," Brendel answered, "and there's a second issue that I want to talk to all of you about. I'm going to leave Firburh for a trip that will last around a month or more."

He leaned in with all his fingers crossed together like he was praying: "I don't hope to return to this territory with everything messed up."

"My lord, you're leaving again?" Amandina's frown returned: "To Schafflund, or...?"

"It's a secret."

The youth raised a finger and placed on his lips.

Chapter 112

Trentheim and the young lord (12)

After informing his subordinates the details of his journey as well as other plans against Lord Palas, Brendel started preparing for his plans to go into the Dark Forest.

But he did not immediately leave and instead waited for several days. When he was certain that Lord Palas had withdrawn into his territory and tightened his defenses, he finally felt at ease to execute his plans.

He went to the courtyard in his manor on the day he was supposed to leave—

“Your swordsmanship has improved yet again.”

Kodan picked up his sword that was on the ground and placed it back on the weapon rack in the corner. Brendel was not certain whether the emotions in his eyes were envy, helplessness, or vulnerability, but there was some kind of expectation in them.

Brendel did not act humbly but displayed a youth’s bashful smile.

Ever since the previous discussion, everyone immediately rushed out to prepare for his departure, but he was apparently quite idle.

The duel he had against Kodan lasted for ten minutes and ended in his victory. The youth was not surprised. After the duels in the silver mines, he raised Aouine’s Military swordsmanship to level 16 which was now greyed out. The maximum level that could be gotten from the system was 15, but Orthlyss’s teachings had caused the system to give out a confirmation window to appear and allowed him to raise it as an exception.

The total amount of TP spent was 11000, 2000 points each for raising from level 12 to 15, and 5000 points for going to 16.

[I can defeat Kodan because I’m seeing shared patterns in his moves gained from the level increase on my Aouine’s swordsmanship, but—]

He did not manage to see anything that gave an insight into his grandfather's skillset from the Military swordsmanship, but there he felt like he was at the edge of grasping something new.

How was his grandfather able to see through the gamers' techniques on Aouine's swordsmanship or the Kingdom of Knights' swordsmanship? When he asked Orthlyss about it, she said she was not certain about it unless she fought against him directly, and merely taught things that were similar to what the system gave.

[The level of my swordsmanship is 16+2. Does this '+2' refer to attaining a Grandmaster swordsman's traits instead of increasing the swordsmanship directly?]

In any case, Brendel understood that he had reached the limits of what the system could offer for Aouine's Military Swordsmanship. If he wanted to go any further than level 16, he would have to train every day and get a breakthrough by himself.

He went back and changed into a Kirrlutz traveler's clothes which were black in color. They were derived from the Tower clan's warriors, and the clothes were made from some type of fur. It consisted of a thin long-sleeved shirt, but it was puffed up like a gambeson at the arms, while the ends of the sleeves were woven in a way that tapers at the wrist and made them fit tightly. The trousers were also loose at the legs.

The youth then wore a pair of wrist-guards and tall equestrian riding boots. He also carried a specially made sword sheath that had double straps on them which allowed the sheath to be attached to the belt; the blade of Halran Gaia was wide enough to look like a greatsword, but the length still adhered to a longsword.

His meeting with the Druids recently was considered peaceful. Andellu, whom Brendel met during the battle against Graudin had set out to the Loop of Trade Winds.

Instead, the elder that Brendel met was called Grey Raven.

The Grey Raven bird was the symbol of a tempest, and the name was likely to represent the druid's abilities. It at least insinuated that Grey Raven was good at the Druid's wind magic spells. A druid who possessed aerial magic was usually someone who enjoyed a high ranking position amongst the druids.

(TL: The term – Loop of 之环, Trade Winds 信风, is a direct translation here. Trade Winds is a specific term, which you can find in wikipedia. This term 信风之环 only appears from

this chapter onwards, while the previous term way back was just 风之环. My translation on this was "That place you mentioned, is it the pathway that faces the seasonal winds and loop around the Karanjar mountains?", so I avoided giving a name till now. This term is probably going to appear a lot.)

Thus Brendel believed that Grey Raven was a Druid of the Inner Circle.

There was a secretive group was known simply as the Druids' Gathering who served as the communicators of other Druids. This particular group's symbol was a loop, and their Inner Circle was called the House of Aerial Lords. Each member of the Inner Circle was a Grand Druid who could communicate with other members through the seasonal winds from thousands of miles away.

The only exception was during the spring, which was the Goddess Nia's season. Each Druid would close off all their communication magic, ensuring the Goddess would not be disturbed from blessing the lands.

The Grand Druid, Grey Raven, had indeed brought an unexpected news to him. The Druids had most likely found Valhalla, but they had encountered into a small problem.

The Loop of Trade Winds seemed to have undergone a strange change, and the Laws within the Dark Forest were altered. The Druids encountered fogs and violent gales, and even their proud magic and techniques to navigate through the forest had lost their use.

"The trees within that area seemed to be rejecting us. If it were not for the fact that we did not have any evil intentions, we might not even be able to walk out from that area."

Brendel only needed to think for a while before he knew what trouble the druids encountered. The Month of Mana was becoming stronger as the Great Wave approached; The Chaos within the Darkness was becoming more restless, and the Dark Forest was being affected by all kinds of signs appearing. *(TL: Great Wave of [monsters].)*

It was a difficult problem, and there were no particular tricks to solve it. The only solution was to force their way in, and power was needed. Even though the Grand Druid also had the abilities of a Gold-ranker, he and the other Druids knew too little about Valhalla. He had no choice but make a trip himself.

But it was also what he wanted.

[Half a month should do the trick, and I have a month's worth of preparations]

"It looks like I'm old. I'm not your match anymore." Kodan said when he saw Brendel reappear in the courtyard.

"Times have changed, Ser Kodan, the student has become the master. But how about it, why not—" Brendel said as he approached Kodan who was wiping his sword and sheathed it after.

But voices suddenly interrupted them.

"Stop!"

"I want to see your commander, I know that he's already back for several days!"

"Cut the crap, a prisoner should act like a prisoner, why the hell do you have so many demands!"

Brendel looked over to the direction to the voices and realized they came from the direction of the guest rooms.

"Would you noisy bunch of liars just shut up!? The bastard that I defeated the previous time promised that I can meet up with your leader if I won! If you're upset then get that fellow over here and I'll defeat him again!"

"Hah!" One of the soldiers yelled out: "Can't you see that commander Cornelius went easy on you? If his sword did not break during the duel, he would have defeated you."

"Oh, then why not let him get a better sword and try fighting against me again?" The youthful voice retorted with a sneering voice.

"You damned brat, you really need to be taught a lesson!" The soldiers were irritated.

But there were several howls of pain followed by a young man who wore a white shirt running out of the bushes. His light golden hair was slightly disheveled, appearing to be flustered, and he held a sword commonly used by a mercenary.

Brendel quickly studied him.

[Hmm. There's no blood on the blade, so he didn't hurt them too badly?]

The youth who appeared from the bushes blanked out when he saw Kodan and Brendel. However, he noticed that Brendel had a sword on him and appeared to be the weaker fighter, so he subconsciously treated him as one of the guards and rushed towards him without even speaking.

Brendel's eyebrows went up a little, wondering why the guards allowed Carglise to leave his room, but his thoughts were quickly stopped as the latter lunged at him with a readied sword.

Carglise's target was his right arm, and it was apparent that he did not wish to hurt him.

[Fast! And his technique isn't half-assed!]

Carglise's sword arm did not even shake a little, proving that he showed a considerable amount of training into his basic strikes.

Brendel originally planned to disarm him, but he changed his mind and wanted to test the full extent of the opponent before him. He easily parried the incoming blow downwards and knocked his opponent's center of gravity off. Carglise staggered a little, but he recovered quickly and attacked by swinging his blade up again.

Brendel's eyes glinted.

[Oh? That's a pretty good recovery and attack. So this is the skill that broke Cornelius's blade and forced three mercenary commanders to a draw.]

He did not parry Carglise's blade and instead swung his blade to meet Carglise's blade at the same time with an equivalent force.

Each attack was resolved as though Carglise had told Brendel in advance where he was going to attack, and his eyes bulged a little when he realized the guard wearing an ordinary set of clothes was starting to appear like he was a Grandmaster Swordsman.

[Impossible!]

The youth started to sacrifice his accuracy and instead went for speed, trying to stop

his opponent from meeting his blade. However, the supposed guard in front of him merely looked at him in amusement and started striking at precise points against his blade, causing it to swing back at odd angles. Realizing that his flow of attacks was being cut off on purpose, he quickly went into a wide stance with the aim of swinging his blade with all the power he could muster.

Brendel kicked Carglise hard in his right knee, causing the latter to yelp and fall down in pain.

[Well, the basics are all there and there were pretty good moves, but there were a lot of openings too. At least level 8 of Aouine's Military Swordsmanship, if I go by the standards of the system? The attacks are better than his defenses though, hmm.]

"I give up!" Carglise tossed his sword to the side and raised his arms while looking like a deflated balloon.

He completely recognized that the person in front of him was a master in the sword, and there was no chance for him to win. Frustration crept over him and he regretted not escaping to a different direction. His eyes went to the old man in the corner, wondering if he should rush over there instead. Out of curiosity, he glanced at the old man's hands and immediately shuddered; they were clearly full of calluses and belonged to a swordsman. He recognized the fact that his defeat was inevitable.

"Who are you?" He looked at Brendel again and allowed the soldiers who finally caught up from behind.

They were particularly displeased with their prisoner for injuring them, and they were naturally not gentle at all, causing him to bare his teeth in pain as they mishandled him.

It was fortunate he did not kill anyone, as the soldiers might have beaten him up even if Brendel was there.

"Are you not afraid that you will be killed?" Brendel asked and peered at him with interest. He suddenly had a new thought.

"Why would you kill me?" Carglise was not afraid at all and merely answered with a question: "There's no advantage in doing so anyway."

"Hmmm... How about doing it as a warning to others?"

“Then go ahead and do it. If I blink I’m not a man of the Bantry family.” The youth puffed up his chest.

“So you’re not going to care about your father? That’s what a man should do?”

“What does being a man have anything to do with my father?” Carglise asked incredulously.

Brendel looked back speechlessly as he realized that the customs of this world were different, looked at his soldiers and asked:

“So why didn’t you kill them?”

“Why is that each time you speak you need to bring out the word killing? I’m obviously much better than them, and there’s no need to kill them so that I can escape. But if I meet someone of my skill, I’ll have to put my life on the line to bring him down.” Carglise spoke honestly.

“But they are your enemy after all.”

“And I can’t kill them all?” Carglise rolled his eyes and shrugged to show that he did not care: “Plus if I killed someone and get caught, the person who will be unlucky is still myself. Just look at me right now!”

Brendel found the fellow to be a little interesting: “You thought out things quite well. Very well, do you still want to know who I am?”

“Didn’t I just ask who you are earlier?”

Brendel tilted his head and looked at the soldiers: “So, what should all of you call me?”

The soldiers immediately bowed their heads, placed one hand on their chest and bowed: “My lord—”

Carglise’s jaw dropped and his eyes widened comically. One could fit a few eggs in his mouth: “Y-you’re...”

Brendel nodded with the most dignified expression he could muster, but he was laughing inside so hard at Carglise’s looks that he could imagine himself smacking on a table:

“Yes, I’m that person you’ve been wanting to look for.”

Chapter 113

Trentheim and the young lord (13)

The soldiers hurriedly forced Carglise down when he tried to stand up, and their eyes looked at their lord with words written in them:

“My lord, should we bring him away?”

[The second son of Lord Macsen. That stubborn old man has such an interesting boy.]

Brendel studied the youth in front of him and shook his head, changing his mind: “Release him.”

The soldiers were taken aback and they glanced at each other, chewing on the meaning of his command.

“Go on, release him,” Brendel repeated himself and nudged the soldiers.

The soldiers then released the thick ropes on Carglise’s wrists. The youth exposed his teeth in discomfort and rubbed the area where the ropes bound him, frowning. Even though the soldiers did not beat him up, they certainly were not gentle with him.

He glanced at the red impressions on his pale skin and made a sulky face. But he was more interested in Brendel’s intentions and stood up to look at him with a pair of light grey eyes. After a moment of staring, he asked: “Are you really..”

“Ah, you mean to say, the leader of the rebels?”

“I hope I didn’t offend you.” Carglise laughed awkwardly as the pitch of his voice went a few octaves higher.

In truth, there was a series of explosions setting off in his mind. The person in front of him looked like he was no older than him; not only did he defeat him soundly in swordsmanship, he was also in command of an army that was bigger than his father’s.

The more Carglise looked at Brendel, the more he felt that the past ten years he had

been living was wasted. Lord Palas had told him more than once with a grave tone that staying in a small place like Trentheim would ultimately limit his growth.

“I’m curious,” Carglise asked as he rubbed his wrists, “why are you releasing me?”

“Well,” Brendel put on a bright smile and turned into a salesman, “if I say I want you to work for me, would you believe me?”

“I don’t believe you. Why should I work for you?” Carglise’s head immediately shook left and right.

“Well now. How about if I tell you this? I’m the secret agent of the princess Gryphine Corvado Ordellis, and my mission is to build a covert operational base to curb Count Randner. Do you believe me?”

This time it was not just Carglise’s eyes which threatened to pop out of their sockets, even Kodan lost his footing and stared at Brendel.

Carglise’s next expression was one of complete disbelief and even looked at Brendel as though he was insane.

But the old man’s eyes appeared as though he had come to some form of revelation. There was a certain relationship between Brendel’s grandfather and the Corvados, and Brendel’s actions from the very beginning he appeared in Trentheim seemed to have a grain of truth.

At least part of his words had no lie in them.

“This joke isn’t funny at all. But seeing you’re the lord here, I’ll reluctantly force myself to say that it’s a passable joke.” Carglise said.

Brendel took out a silver brooch with a grin: “This is called the Silver Emblem. It happens to be the symbol of the royal family’s knights.”

“...How do I know you’re not lying?”

Kodan was somewhat skeptical as well. He had naturally heard of the Silver Emblem, but it was another matter whether the thing in the youth’s hand was the real deal. Yet the more he thought about it, the more he felt that Brendel had some kind of link to the Royal Faction.

The brooch was indeed real.

It was delivered together with the princess's reply. The contents of the letter were quite simple; it mainly described how the royal family admired a talented youth like him, but there was no other mention of any requests or hints.

The letter was merely a proper, courteous diplomatic reply, and the entire letter had nothing useful in it. Even if Brendel claimed that this letter that was written back to him by the princess, it had no material use. But the youth treated it like a great treasure and kept it away carefully.

Amandina was incredibly confused, mumbled to herself about how stingy the royal family was, and only an idiot like Brendel was unable to see how awful he was treated.

Brendel obviously understood this point, but there was a great amount of regret in him for being helpless in the princess's final moments in the game. Each failure in the War of the Black Rose only led to the next failure, and there was no one more bitter than the princess herself.

When this letter was presented to him on his table, it would be a lie if he said he did not feel anything.

"Fine. Let's put aside the matter of the brooch's authenticity and talk about something else. I heard that you intend to bring a few of your servants to go to the north and answer the princess's call to revive the power of the Corvados?" Brendel said.

"It seems like you know much."

"You're much better than most of the youths that I see around here. Trentheim wouldn't be able to contain your potential," Bendel said as he tried to recall the name of Carglise in the other world's history, but it was a blank.

Still, it was not a strange thing, there were quite a number of youths who did not shine in the end. Perhaps it was because there was someone who was more talented than them, or they were simply unlucky and died on their way to Vlada.

Bandits, monsters, evil disciples of cults, or even evil human lords who were like Graudin. The current era in Aouine was a little dangerous.

"Why does it sound like that I'm being mocked when the words come from your lips?"

Carglise frowned.

Brendel shook his head vigorously to deny it: “No, of course not. I’m serious. So, how about it? Do you want to?”

“Want to what?” Carglise was perplexed.

“I’m lacking an adjutant.”

“Are you pulling my leg?”

“I already said I’m serious. I think you’re skilled enough to take up this position. The most important thing is whether you have this wish—”

“Hold on,” Carglise interrupted, “I never said I’m interested in joining you.”

“Then are you going to stay in Trentheim forever and miss out on the opportunity where heroes rise up in this era? In the end, you are satisfied to become a small lord in a backward territory with balding hair?”

“You sound like you’re insulting my father on purpose.” Carglise frowned again. He felt like he was becoming more of a guest rather than a prisoner: “But why should I trust you?”

“You can leave anytime if you don’t like it.”

“But I know that once I help you it wouldn’t be that easy to get off this pirate ship. Even if you want to convince me, you should at least do so with a better reason. If you turn out to be a shyster, and you’re not working for the crown, wouldn’t it be too stupid of me?”

And Brendel’s eyes were gleaming when he heard the reply.

[Ho ho ho, you’re asking me to give you a better reason? Sounds like there’s room for negotiations.]

Carglise sounded like he was guarded but was already starting to be persuaded. He was never one to be stuck with rules, he did not want to live an ordinary life like his father did, even if he had to follow the leader of the rebels and not the princess. There was also the fact that Brendel seemed like he could succeed with his confidence and

skill too.

“Well, if I say I want to grab Duke Arreck by the beard and beat him up violently on the ground, then get revenge for Madara’s invasion, would these reasons be enough—”

Everyone froze. Even Kodan felt this answer came out from nowhere.

“W-who are you exactly? What did you say you want to do?” Carglise stuttered and tested to see if he heard wrong.

“What do you mean? I already told you who I’m working for and what I want to do.” Brendel looked back with a subtle expression.

Carglise blanked out for a long while before a fire started blazing in his eyes, and nodded vigorously: “Your ideas are wonderful!”

Kodan’s eyes twitched a little as he stared at the two insane youths in front of him.

He felt that he was getting old.

He momentarily reminisced about the past when he was working with Torbus and other knights, also unafraid of the world around him. They were even recognized as demons in the November War where every enemy was afraid of their group.

But the era was different from the past.

The old swordsman glanced at Carglise who seemed to be completely convinced and ready to try it out.

He hurriedly dragged Brendel over to the sides, and spoke to him in a hushed voice:

“Are you crazy, Brendel? Have you thought it through at all? That stubborn old fool Samuel will risk his life if you kidnap his son.”

“Risk his life?” Brendel looked back with an incredulous expression and laughed: “That can only happen if he escapes from the house arrest.”

“You don’t intend to let him out?” Kodan suddenly felt that this youth was a little insidious.

Stealing away Samuel's son that he raised for decades, and imprisoning him? This was a little too much.

"Well, I'm open to the idea of letting him out as long as that person over there agrees to it." Brendel pointed at Carglise.

Kodan met Carglise's eyes and immediately shook his head. If Samuel knew that his son joined hands with a rebel, he might just beat him to death instead. His son obviously knew it as well, and he would certainly agree with Brendel to delay the release of his father.

[The youths these days...]

"Really, there's no need to worry. Lord Macsen will definitely be treated well. I look forward to Carglise's future; he's going to be someone who achieves much."

"...The things that you said earlier, are they true?"

"What things?"

"Stop pretending," the old man's voice was harsh, "I'm talking about the princess."

"False."

"Oh fuck off!" Kodan sent a foot at Brendel, but the latter was ready for it.

"Ha ha ha, Grandmaster Kodan, even if this matter is real, it's supposed to be a secret. How can I claim it as true...?"

Kodan's mouth was agape. It was true that it would not be good for someone under the princess to admit killing a noble who was appointed by the crown, but Brendel seemed like he did many dubious things as well.

He should not believe everything the youth said.

Brendel nodded as he continued speaking: "In any case, Ser Kodan, are you interested in going on an adventure?"

"What?" Kodan looked at Brendel with strange eyes. What was the devious youth trying to do now?

Chapter 114

At the edge of the Dark Forest

Amandina and Scarlett traveled to an abandoned orchard near Firburh.

The abandoned orchard was renovated several months ago, with the crumbling walls fixed with wooden logs made into an enclosed wall and extended the area of the original orchard's size, making it bigger than before. Trees were planted around the area, making it enough to hinder visibility to what was inside the orchard.

In addition, there were hidden scouts placed at specific points. The corners of the wooden walls were made into watchtowers, allowing quick access to alert the makeshift training camp of any situation.

This was the place Brendel chose to train the future White Lion Infantry secretly.

The orchard was divided into two sections. The south-eastern corner took a quarter of the orchard, and provided the mercenaries and adventurers a place to sleep in. These men were specially chosen to protect the first batch of White Lion Infantry, as well as maintaining order.

Brendel had considered adding them to form a new army, but it largely depended on whether Cornelius was vested enough in training them.

The latter was currently in charge of training the White Lion Infantry.

Originally, he was a little displeased that Brendel transferred him out from the city, but after arriving to the orchard and seeing what the new army meant, he realized that Brendel regarded him highly, and he was not being shunned.

He immediately became enthusiastic about his task and arranged the army's affairs orderly. Even though his abilities to command on a battlefield was middling, he was talented in handling internal affairs few could match due to his meticulous personality.

Amandina and Scarlett's carriage went deep into the area and they found several

mercenaries waiting for them. When the girls descended from their carriage, they saw youths waiting and chattering amongst themselves in the open ground near them.

Amandina walked quietly towards the shade of a nearby cedar tree. Scarlett, who was in charge of her safety, stood silently beside her. Most of the trees around them were evergreens found in Trenheim, and even in winter there would be dark green leaves that were covered in snow.

Sixty youths were specially chosen from the natives in Firburh, and the mercenaries had them gather in orderly rows on an empty plot of land.

Some of the youths had not seen much of the outside world because they were formerly craftsmen and farmers. A few of them were descendents of the gentry in Firburh, while the rest were made up from young adventurers and mercenaries. When the youths spotted the girls, they realized there was a young noblewoman who had come to the orchard, and it caused a commotion to happen.

“Look, it’s the female aristocrat who repaired the walls!”

“Why is she here?”

“She’s the daughter of the lord, right?”

“What are you talking about, the lord is as young as she is!”

“Isn’t the lord who took over a middle-aged man?”

“No, that’s the lord’s commander.”

“I see, then she’s the lord’s fiancée?”

“That’s a logical deduction.”

The loud voices wormed into Amandina’s ears, and she was forced to listen quietly. Her eyes went to Scarlett for a moment.

“...What is it?” Scarlett returned her glance, her ponytail whirling behind her as her head moved quickly...

“Nothing,” Amandina said, and averted her gaze.

The White Lion Infantry was one of her lord's plans, which was started ever since Firburh was taken over. However, creating a powerful army was far more difficult than just pouring resources into it. Brendel intended to train this batch of youths to become the backbone of the White Lion Army, and eventually allow them to reach the level of commanders.

They were going to be his personal knights.

All of them had one common point, they were no older than twenty, and some were only thirteen. They were like blank pieces of paper, full of potential.

They were highly curious and restless about their future. It had been only three days since they entered the orchard and had only received simple training. The mercenaries had already roughed them up a little to remind them of discipline.

The majority of them were still rash and naive, save for the few descendants of the gentry and the young mercenaries who had been trained well. These exceptions stood there motionlessly, but they were alert to their surroundings and did not get involved with the chatter.

Thus they easily entered Amandina's eyes.

"Some of these young men seemed like they are trained. Who are they?" She asked.

"A few are descendants from the owners of the nearby lands. The others are young mercenaries."

"The gentry? But why would their descendants come here?" Amandina thought it was strange.

"It seems like they snuck out of their homes."

[Ah. So they are seeking excitement? I wonder if the mercenaries checked up on their background.]

But it was unlikely for them to be spies. It was incredibly risky for them because they would be entering the Dark Forest, and there would be no way for them to report their activities.

As for those who joined Brendel's faction purely for excitement, she hoped they would

not regret their decisions.

She took out a pocket watch— It was something that Brendel used a few months back when he led the refugees out of Fortress Riedon. Even though it was not worth much, it was something that allowed him to time the enemy's movements accurately. She took great care of it and did not intend to change it.

She flipped open the cover.

[It's nearly eleven.]

When she raised her head, she indeed saw a mercenary running towards her; he stopped before her, placed a hand over his chest and bowed.

“The preparation is almost done, my lady.” He said.

Amandina nodded, and he bowed again and ran off. Her eyes shifted over to the four caravans that were a short distance away. These caravans certainly could not compare to the nobles' carriages. The latter were led by four horses and they were built to look like artworks rather than a mode of transport. The former was of much poorer quality and used by merchants or farmers to transport goods.

The mercenaries obviously did not care how good the carriages were, and busily handed out number tags to the youths.

It was a method that Brendel copied during his stint as a worker in Schafflund. These tags were also made of wood, but inside them were magic imprinted by Tamar. A Crimson Crystal imbued with detection magic would easily verify their authenticity.

In order to prevent tampering, these Crimson Crystals that the mercenaries had would lose their effectiveness after a while, and they must be replaced at fixed intervals. Brendel was the only person who had a crystal to detect the identification permanently.

The youths got onto the caravans after they received their tags, and soon enough the orchard was completely silent as though the noisy chattering was an illusion.

Amandina finally let out a relieved sigh.

“Alright, let's send Brendel off.” She said to Scarlett. “Tell the other drivers to move out

in separate directions. Our lord's movements are supposed to be a secret, so we should be careful as we possibly can."

The red-haired girl nodded, slightly impressed at the length to what Amandina was willing to do in order to meet up with Brendel.

"Do you want to go with him?"

"What?"

"To the Dark Forest."

Amandina jerked once, but she did not answer.

===== Brendel's POV =====

When Brendel left his horse carriage, he could feel the lazy sunlight on his back. The youth could not help but stretch out his back like a cat. He turned around and looked at the Dark Forest; the sunlight pierced through the black needle leaves and shone down in a dazzling manner to his eyes, and the grass received the remainder of the thin light rays.

"I knew this wouldn't be anything good, you little brat." Grumbling came behind Brendel's back.

Brendel turned around to see a gloomy Kodan jumping down from the carriage. The latter's attire had changed to a guard's uniform when he left the city. He carried a longsword, dagger, short bow, and a quiver filled with arrows. He looked more like an adventurer instead of a traveler enjoying a trip.

The old man took in a deep breath. Even though the Dark Forest was a dangerous place the air was unusually refreshing. The scent of the forest was invigorating despite the cold weather. Kodan looked at the ground and saw that his boots were standing on a thick carpet of grass. It was as though the snow had hardly affected the vitality of the vegetation.

He stomped the ground as hard as he could and the impact immediately caused creatures to scurry out.

"Centipedes, snakes, rats, and scorpions..." The old man shook his head as he spoke:

“This is truly a ghastly place.”

“I heard that you fought at the kingdom’s borders during the November War.”

“Don’t remind me of that experience.” Kodan glared ruefully at Brendel.

Kodan’s army were forced to retreat into the Dark Forest and fight there during the November War. That was the only time when the commanders did not care about strategies at all; both factions fell into bloodlust like two dying animals tearing at each other throat, but neither of them could deliver the finishing blow.

The savage war exceeded everyone’s imagination. Hundreds of men who went out as companies, ended up with only tens or even single-digit survivors. The battlefield covered over tens of miles, and corpses could be spotted everywhere in the wild.

The stench of rotten blood and meat made the borders a living hell, especially when one compared the small skirmishes that happened during that era.

Brendel understood and did not talk about it anymore.

Carglise was the third person who jumped down. He pulled Mordenkainen out from the carriage and dragged him about.

“Let go of me!” The Elementalist yelled, and his duck familiar also quacked in protest, but there was no way for him to oppose a swordsman with his strength, especially when it came to Carglise who’s also a Silver-ranker.

Carglise ignored his yells, looked around with interest and breathed in deeply: “So this is the Dark Forest?”

“Why, does the place disappoint you?” Kodan snapped.

“It resembles the forest in Mount Graham, yes.” Carglise looked curiously into the deeper sections of the forest. The poor lighting made the area look like it was a dark oil painting.

“Hmph, I hope you don’t regret what you said.”

“Regret? Well, at first I was regretting it a little, but now I’m not,” he shook his head before grinning at Kodan, “entering the Dark Forest and treating it like an adventure,

why didn't I think about it before?"

[That's because you're just a little crazy brat, and you haven't met this utterly insane brat who's standing next to you.]

Even though the old swordsman grumbled in his mind, he regarded Brendel carefully from the corner of his eyes.

Brendel smirked a little when he caught Kodan's admonishing stare. The reason why he sought Kodan was quite simple. He wanted to use this opportunity on his adventure to train the youths. The Dark Forest was filled with danger at every corner and it was the best place to train.

There was also the fact where it would be easier to impart his ideals to them by having the youths around him.

The problem with this strategy was the unpredictable dangers within the Dark Forest. It was a difficult task to protect these youths alone, and he could not spend all his time to do just that, so he needed more people to help him.

Ciel, Medissa, and Scarlett were powerful Gold-rankers, while the Mercenaries of Lopes were Silver-rankers. However, the current Firburh could hardly allow Brendel to bring out too many of his forces. If it were not for the fact that Scarlett still could not leave his side for too long, he was not even willing to choose to bring her along.

Therefore Brendel claimed that it was a short trip and used it as an excuse to bring Kodan along to help him. Even though the latter grumbled about it, Brendel believed that he would still lend a hand in the end.

[Well, it looks like he only hesitated for a moment before he agreed. As long as I didn't get him to openly fight against Count Randner or become my subordinate, he's quite willing to go on an adventure. Still, if looks could kill...]

"Very well, where are the whelps that you needed to take care of?" Kodan said in a gruff voice.

"They are going to reach here soon enough," Brendel replied.

He looked out to the Wilderness outside the Dark Forest, and soon spotted a black dot which rapidly became bigger. The four carriages soon reached to where they were and

stopped one by one.

The mercenaries hurriedly descended from the carriages when they recognized Brendel's figure, bending their bodies slightly as they greeted him:

"My lord!"

"Is everyone here?" Brendel asked.

"Yes, my lord."

"How about Scarlett?"

"Miss Scarlett is here along with Lady Amandina."

Brendel looked up and his eyes landed on the final carriage that was black in color. Amandina and Scarlett alighted from the carriage, but what surprised him was the two Wild Elf sisters in the carriage.

The younger sister Dia even waved at him.

"My lord!" She called out.

The Mercenaries of Lopes were busy with their missions for an extended period of time, and she had not seen Brendel for a while. She seemed particularly excited.

"Why are they here?" Brendel walked over and nodded at the little girl, but his eyes went to Amandina with this question.

Amandina seemed to have predicted Brendel's question, but she suddenly glanced at the four carriages as if to confirm something subconsciously, before she spoke: "Miss Felaern is here to take care of your needs."

[A maid serving at my side with all these people around me!?!]

Brendel nearly choked on his saliva and looked at her in shock: "...I don't need a maid."

The older Wild Elf sister's face twitched several times, and the shadows around her eyes seemed to darken. She glared at him and the meaning of her eyes could not be any clearer: "You're being disrespectful, my lord!"

“I...” Brendel opened and closed his mouth several times like a fish. He really did not think about that Felaern was a maid, but the way how she conducted herself truly overlapped the duties of that job. He thought for a moment, but had no choice but change his words: “I mean, I don’t need someone to take care of me. I’m not like a kid who needs to be spoon-fed or be dressed up—”

“But you’re the lord of Trentheim,” Amandina said in an earnest expression.

“But that’s a fake title, just like how I’m a fake noble in the past.”

“The past is certainly in the past,” Amandina raised an eyebrow, and her voice was a little reproachful, “but now you’re the fake lord of Trentheim, every single fake word or deed has to be filled with the fake acts of a noble. How can you not have a fake maid?”

She turned her head away slightly to look at him in a meaningful way: “Or perhaps you prefer Lord Ciel to take care of your daily life, my lord?”

Brendel was finally at a loss for words and trembled when he imagined that situation. He glanced at Felaern. In truth, he had gotten used to Felaern back at Firburh who had been tasked by Amandina.

In the end, he raised both his hands to show that he submitted.

“This little girl isn’t bad,” Kodan observed Amandina from head to toe as he came up and spoke to Brendel, “an aristocrat’s daughter who’s pretty and has decorum. That’s hard to come by. Your grandfather would be satisfied.”

“What are you talking about?” Brendel said with a huff.

Sometimes an old man just wanted to see the world burn.

“What?” Kodan realized something and spoke with a beaming smile: “Are you dissatisfied? Then I’ll introduce her to Carglise. Since he’s your adjutant and has the same kind of personality as you—”

Brendel coughed once and looked at Amandina: “Stop talking nonsense.”

“You’re a flirt but you don’t follow it through. You lose out to your grandfather on this point, boy.”

This time Kodan did not get angry at Brendel's disrespect and patted his shoulders instead, looked like he was triumphant and left his side as though there were springs in his boots. It was rare to find a weakness in Brendel, and he showed off smugly.

Brendel rolled his eyes and looked back at Amandina, whose face took on a rare blush. She lowered her head and said quietly: "Please prepare now, my lord, your time is limited."

"Do you not intend to join us?" Brendel suddenly realized there was a second meaning in her choice of words, but Kodan's words suddenly made him conscious of Amandina and how she appeared to be a little cute when she went against most of the time.

The girl nodded.

"It's too dangerous for you to go back alone—"

"But Scarlett said she wants to go along with you, so she can't escort me back..." Amandina thought it would be fine since the road between the Dark Forest and Firburh was not too far, and since the city's surroundings were controlled tightly by the mercenaries, she would be fine.

"What I mean is for you to come with us," Brendel said.

"What?" Amandina blurted.

Brendel rarely brought her out because she had hardly any physical abilities to speak off. Even though she felt it was a tiny regret, she knew where her abilities should be used in and did not think much of it.

Now that Brendel suddenly brought up this request, it had gone out of her plans. She knew what kind of place the Dark Forest was, and if she went along she would just be a burden.

"I... It's not a good thing, right?" Even though she refused, but there was a small voice that told her to accept it. When she thought that she could go on an adventure with her lord just like the past days, the girl who was usually calm hesitated.

But Brendel was not asking her out based on a whim. He got Scarlett to bring Amandina out safely because he wanted Amandina to take over Valhalla's administration. She would be his first adjutant in the future, and maintaining a normal

operation was integral to his plans. He needed her to be familiar with this sleeping land.

Valhalla was an unusual land that would shock any mortals once it was awakened. The fastest way to get the person to accept it was to activate it themselves and let them experience the process of its awakening.

There were many things he had to do and could not possibly stay in his lands for long.

“It’s fine, this is certainly part of my plans, but it doesn’t mean they can’t be replaced. The Dark Forest is indeed a very dangerous place, so I’m leaving the choice to you.” Brendel said.

“But what about Miss Romaine?” Amandina frowned and hesitated once again: “If I’m not there, no one will be able to rein her in.”

“Don’t worry, she won’t do anything crazy.”

“But...” Amandina looked confused.

During the past few months in Firburh, there was hardly a day that went by without Romaine causing some kind of trouble. She wondered how the self-proclaimed merchant girl survived her past life, and even respected the latter’s aunt greatly for being able to keep her in check.

Her aunt must have been an extraordinary lady.

But Brendel believed differently. If he was missing in Romaine’s life, she would be more docile than anyone else. The reason why she got trouble all the time was to attract his attention. Even though she was airheaded at times, she was naturally wily like a fox, which made him feel that she was adorable.

“So how about it?” He asked.

“Of course I do,” Amandina gushed after an afterthought, but she quickly recovered herself with a cough, “What I mean is, I’m not afraid of danger if it’s for you, my lord.”

“Thank you,” Brendel replied with a small smile, but he immediately pointed at Dia who was curiously studying the forest’s plants: “I can understand Felaern, but what is with the situation with her?”

[I can understand the choice with the older sister, but why the younger sister? Though it might be a good thing if a second lucky babe searches the loot. I approve of this transaction!]

“She’s here upon Sir Tamar’s request,” Amandina said.

[Oh, come to think of it, the younger sister had been acting as an assistant to Tamar, but what request—]

“Ah, she’s here to collect materials for him?”

Amandina nodded: “But I’m not sure what kind of materials can be gotten in this place.”

Brendel understood Tamar’s thoughts.

The Dark Forest was part of the Wilderness that had never been claimed. People hardly entered the place, and the Laws within this area were affected by Chaos and would be reset at a fixed interval. Mysterious things of shapes and sizes could be found in the forest, and the treasure beneath the earth’s surface was unimaginable.

However, due to the increasing Mana within the forest, various creatures mutated and increased their activities, and even the vegetation spouted with full of life. There were pockets of Mana that gathered in great intensity; crystal quarries could be found near small streams of water, fountains that spouted small flecks of gold ore.

Even though bards sang about such stories all the time, the Dark Forest made it likely for them to become true. Brendel nodded and said:

“I see. It’s true that the Dark Forest is a place where civilization bans people from going there, but it’s also a treasure vault in their eyes. After the second Holy War, many Houses had their powers greatly reduced and they were no longer capable of funding the pioneering knights who entered the forest in great numbers.

But the legends depicted in history is ultimately left behind. There are tales about how the river water which had been basked in the moonlight was able to bring the dead back to life, or that the crimson soil contains the blood of a Sage and made it possible for steel to become gold. There are rumors of a gigantic dragon graveyard where the bones of the dragons could be found which are more precious than diamonds. There are even hallucinogens of burning rare leaves that could bring about illusions of a

paradise.

Indeed, it's definitely the biggest kind of treasure for an Alchemist. If they get any one of these materials, they could make a legendary artifact— though most of these daring Alchemists who ventured into this forest usually ended up as meals for the beasts around here.

This is another truth; the Dark Forest is also a place where monsters dwell in the highest concentrations.”

Brendel explained to Amandina in detail, then rubbed his chin thoughtfully: “Grandmaster Tamar can actually request me to get the materials directly instead of going through Dia. Though it's also my mistake for forgetting that the Dark Forest is a great treasure vault for any Alchemist.”

Amandina suddenly chuckled: “I suddenly understand why Grandmaster Tamar has his own thoughts about this matter.”

“What does that mean?”

“Perhaps you should ask Dia.”

Felaern turned her head expressionlessly and called out to her sister: “Dia—”

“Yes?” The younger sister trotted over, but she kept her distance cautiously and meekly when she saw Felaern's disapproving eyes: “Is there something that needs to be done?”

“Our lord has questions for you.”

“My lord?” Dia looked at Brendel with puppy eyes. Compared to Felaern, she was much more willing to approach him because he frequently told her interesting stories.

From this viewpoint, Felaern was quite a failure as an older sister.

“Dia, why did Grandmaster Tamar tell you to come along?” Brendel asked.

“To collect materials, my lord!”

[Isn't this normal?]

Brendel glanced at Amandina, but the latter pointed her chin back at Dia as if to tell him to ask for the details.

“What kind of materials?”

“Grandmaster Tamar said—” Dia tried to mimic Tamar’s personality, but after Felaern sent a murderous glare at her, her behavior instantly turned respectful, though she spoke through pouted lips: “There are Mana Crystals in the Dark Forest that are just below high-grade, so if it’s possible I should gather more of it.

This includes Moon Crystals and Gold crystals... Mana plants like Blood-spotted roses, Whipvine-tail flowers...

As for metal mines, it would be best if there are Adamantine mines, though Mithril would be just as good, still, the best metal would be Orichalcum. Of course, It would be fine if it’s a lesser metal like Cold Iron...

Legends state there’s a fountain of youth, Wings of an Archangel, the Poem of Dragons, the Heart of Gold...”

“S-stop, stop, time out!” Brendel hastily stopped her when he found that she had no intention of stopping.

At first, the list sounded like it was reasonable, but the list was becoming more and more absurd. The Fountain of youth was already a Legendary item. The last three items that Dia said even reached God-tier rarity.

[This Tamar is really treating the Dark Forest like a Dwarven Treasure Vault. Do you really think you can get these treasures once you enter the place? If it’s so easy, everyone would have rushed in here. Also, do you really think these items won’t be protected by some crazy high-level mythical monsters? I can kind of understand his thoughts, but even protecting ourselves in this place is kind of a luxury for us already, let alone bringing out these items.]

Most areas of the Dark Forest were less dangerous and not as mysterious as the legends described, and it was rare to find precious metals or unique plants. Tamar’s list was more of a dream.

Even if a powerful lord sent in their Gold-ranked fighters to the Dark Forest, they might not necessarily return and instead get turned into a monster’s meal.

Brendel dared to venture into the Dark Forest only because he knew the place well. After all, he had an endless supply of lives in his past world as a gamer to explore the place, and even had the compilation of information gotten from other gamers.

Since he had Tamar's requested list, he rearranged his thoughts.

[I was wondering how I should train this bunch of newbies, but Tamar's list has given me a clear direction. We will spend a greater half of the day to move towards the druids, then explore the vicinity with the remaining time. Then we can split up into three groups, myself, Kodan, and Scarlett. Each group will be rewarded based on their performance and the things they find. That way we would have competition and allow them to bond with each other. A good plan, if I say so myself.]

Brendel made a rough plan and inspected the rowdy group of youths. A few moments later he heard someone shouting in the group:

"Merial!"

Brendel recognized Carglise's voice, and he spotted the young man dragging Mordenkainen across the ground with incredible speed.

"Carglise? W-why are you here?" Merial appeared a little confused and blinked several times blankly to look at Carglise.

Merial had a rarely seen golden hair, long enough to go past his shoulders. His eyes were as blue as the ocean and appeared to be someone from the north, but his attire was similar to Brendel— A suit of male Kirrlutz traveling clothes. His body was lithe and his face soft, appearing to be an androgynous person.

His actions and response were so elegant that Brendel thought he was actually a noble's daughter at the first glance.

"I think I understand. You were defeated along with your father." Merial took a moment to gather his thoughts before he parted his lips slightly and spoke.

"Haha." Carglise merely laughed as he looked at his old friend.

"I thought you didn't come, but to think that Lord Macsen was defeated even with you around," Merial's eyes were fretful and his brows were slightly pinched: "did you join them?"

“Yes,” Carglise nodded as though he did not care that he joined the rebels, “but what are you doing here?”

He was surprised to find his friend in this place.

“My squire and I were passing through the lands when we saw the four carriages, and the mercenaries captured us because of that. We had to lie.” Merial’s face turned slightly red.

“More like you ran out secretly?” Carglise saw through his friend’s lie immediately.

“N-no.”

“Fine, fine, I know your secret so you can stop pretending. Don’t worry, I will protect you. But I must say you’re in considerable danger,” Carglise pulled in close to him and whispered so that no one else could hear him, “my lady, you’re entering the Dark Forest, are you prepared?”

Carglise’s expression was one of mischief.

“Don’t call me that!” Merial immediately glared back at him, before her eyes widened: “I’m entering the Dark Forest?”

“Why else would do you think you would be here?” Carglise raised his head up to look at the forest before looking back at her: “It seems like you don’t know this, and I also forgot to tell you, this is the edge of the Dark Forest—”

Merial paled and her body shook but Carglise supported her by grabbing her up: “What are you doing? Isn’t it just a forest? Besides, I’m also here to protect you!”

He warned her and cast his eyes towards the mercenaries around them. Her actions might cause them to realize that she was masquerading as a man.

“H-how can I enter the Dark Forest. You must help me, Carglise!” Merial was a little delirious.

“Well, I actually think that this is a chance.” Carglise disagreed.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Didn’t you say that you always wanted to escape from that damned father of yours? This is a chance! Based on my judgment, my new lord isn’t likely to care what your father says—” Carglise’s evil laughter came out as he felt his idea was pretty good.

“But what I can do in this place? The monsters within the Dark Forest are terrifying enough that even the lords avoid it! We will perish if we enter!”

Carglise held his forehead and continued to speak in a low voice: “My lady, you’re the next stand-in bishop, how can you be so timid—”

He suddenly looked around vigilantly and whispered next to Merial’s ear. At first, she appeared puzzled, but her eyes quickly lit up and she nodded.

Brendel saw that Carglise and the boy next to him pull away from the crowd, and their voices became smaller and smaller. He did not try to listen to their conversation as a courteous gesture. Even if the two were to scheme something they would not be able to cause any huge trouble when they were in the Dark Forest. Furthermore, he had the time to observe that person’s details all he wanted later.

[Given how familiar Carglise is with that boy, he must also be from a noble family. I am a little curious as to how the mercenaries managed to recruit the gentry’s offspring though.]

Brendel was not arrogant enough to think that families of higher social status in Firburh would support him, unless they were not interested in keeping their heads. Count Randner’s revenge would be more than enough to keep them in check.

“Are they...” He turned around and cast a questioning look at Amandina.

“The scions from the noble families. I heard that their families live in the upper-class districts within Firburh.”

“You mean there are more than a few who joined us?” Brendel felt that the situation was becoming bizarre.

Amandina nodded.

He did not want to have any people joining his group of knights with an unclear background. These youths had a clean background, and perhaps the higher ranking people in Firburh would support him eventually, but it was still something odd.

“How did they come to join us?” He asked.

“The mercenaries said they secretly came to join us because of your fame.”

“That’s interesting,” Brendel rubbed his cheeks and was unashamed of his brazen acts, “have I become so famous?”

Amandina merely looked back with considerable disapproval.

Chapter 115

The treasure vault of alchemy (1)

The journey seemed to begin with expectations and unease, and the youths felt like they were unprepared, but they could not run away any more.

The Tower Clan from Kirrlutz had an adage: 'The difficulty of a long journey can extinguish one's strong willpower'. These nomadic merchants who loved to travel with their vast products had a deep understanding towards adventure.

On the very first day, Kodan recommended that Brendel camp outside the forest and set off after a night's rest.

However, Brendel thought that he needed to finish his goal quickly, and since he was more experienced than the old swordsman, there was no need to waste.

In the blink of an eye, Brendel and his crew had already entered the Dark Forest for a week.

As they traveled deeper into the Dark Forest, they found it was like peering into of unlit layers of emerald gems, covered under branches that appeared to be black in color. The density of the verdant leaves was thick, and they leaked out sunlight which in turn made the environment appear shadowy-green. Speckles of light would flutter in and out against the wind, making the leaves undulate. Occasional spiders would dart across their webs when it happened.

Light intermixed with darkness, causing the area to feel like it was a surreal world of silence, save for the shuffling boots across the ground, and the occasional rustling of leaves. It was almost evening, but everyone found it nearly impossible to tell the time in this forest.

Brendel was holding on to a book; on it were words written with illuminating ink:

– Black Magician, Moonlit Grass, four-leaves Hop Clover, Witch's Agony...

The Black Magician symbolized 'mystery' in the Witch's secret language, and it was

used to bring forth a mediative mentality. A person with 3 levels in Alchemy would be able to make Breath of Serenity, and it was the main ingredient for an Incense of Mediation.

The Incense of Mediation was highly popular in the game, and the related professions would achieve faster results. They would be able to experience the 'truth' more easily if they were in a closed room filled with the incense.

It allowed a better performance in incantations.

If one was to express it in game terms, it was a 5% increase in XP.

With 7 levels in Alchemy, one would be able to gain access to the lowest tier 2 material called Mysterious Extract from the Black Magician. This could be eaten directly and one could gain a permanent health increase, but it would only work once.

The Moonlit Grass was also called Wizard's flower. It was used to cultivate Mana. Eating it directly could increase the Mana regen by 1 point. With a Level 5 Alchemist, one could extract it to attain pure Liquid Mana and make a simple Mana Potion.

The four-leaves Hop Clover represented luck. It was quite rare to see it in Aouine's territory but rather common in the Dark Forest. There was a unique method amongst the gamers to extract Luck Essence from the clover, but it needed 8 levels in alchemy. It could be used in almost any potions to raise the chance of success, and even be used in all types of Alchemy needs, blacksmithing, and the creation of Magic Formations.

The final item, Witch's Agony, was a poison reagent. Nobles viewed it as an obvious type of poison because of its smell, and it was worthless to them. However, this was not the proper usage. The evil cults utilized the characteristics of this reagent, the Agony and Poison Elements, to summon creatures from the underworld.

The Lord of Agony, or the Queen of Poison.

The Holy Cathedral of Fire strictly prohibited anyone from carrying it, but this did not prevent the evil cults from attaining them. They would gladly purchase them at a high price, or even murder an owner in order to possess this.

Brendel merely chucked all these materials away without a second thought or fear.

He had gotten all these items due to the efforts of the youths training under him. The

first three days were actually fruitless, and they constantly complained bitterly for wasting their time. Naturally, he did not allow them to idle— As soon as someone was lazy or becoming incredibly negative, one of the mercenaries would rough them up and mercilessly drive them forward.

Every day, the youths would be woken up by the mercenaries at the crack of dawn. A few of them were unused to the cold and wet conditions of the forest and had difficulty in sleeping. But the training schedule was still adhered to, and they had to drag their tired bodies to complete every day's 'homework'.

The contents of the training were not complicated. They had to march a certain distance every day, then group themselves and face each other in combat. Swordsmanship and brawling techniques were taught to them as well. The final task was to gather materials for Tamar, though it was disguised under the topic of 'survival training'. Still, this was a core training for them.

With a week's progress, the materials noted in Brendel's book were becoming longer and longer. The rarity of the discovered materials was also going up. This proved they were leaving outer areas of the Dark Forest and was approaching nearer to its deeper sections.

He finished logging in the second team's acquisition and logged in notes at the paper's side with a quill. Sixty youths were grouped into six groups, with each team assigned to a leader. The second group's leader was led by a youth called Mars. He was from Raban's mercenary group and had the abilities of a low Iron-ranked fighter. His attitude was serious and his organization skills were strong as well.

Though he was a little rigid in his thoughts.

[But it's not exactly a flaw.]

Brendel then glanced at Carglise who was not far away. The latter was leaning against a tree wiping his sword, a commander's weapon in the Year 377. The sword was somewhat like a flamberge and was more appropriate for a user with a dexterous style.

Brendel was very fond of this design, so he gave a sword to each member of the White Lion Infantry.

Grandmaster Bosley was the person who crafted the swords, so there was no need to

worry about the quality. The design was apparently successful; everyone who received it could not let the sword out of their sight, even if they did not use swords before.

Brendel was surprised, but his reactions were very quick to act upon this situation. He raised the value of these swords to a badge of honor. They became the symbol of the White Lion Infantry, and as long as each man was in this army, the sword would accompany him for his lifetime and represent his belief in the unit.

The youths once asked what belief it was, and Brendel answered them after a moment of thinking.

“Bravery, determination, and one who paves the way, symbolizing the sword of justice.”

This was widely accepted by the idealistic youths who were keen to become knights.

Brendel came back to his senses after thinking about the past events for a while. He flipped open to a new page and wrote on the top right-hand corner as his quill moved lightly:

‘December 16th, clear weather

The Dark Forest is even denser than before. Some of the areas that we passed by earlier did not even have a ray of light in them. There are huge spiderwebs at the tree crowns, as well as flying insects the sizes of our fists that are packed everywhere.

There are increasing discoveries of strange brambles found on different trees, like the Witch’s Agony. This means that we’re nearly reaching the inner sections. We also discovered the presence of strong creatures affected by Mana. Based on the tracks, they are most likely Black Wolves.

Perhaps one can call them as monsters. These monsters can be classified under several archetypes. Violence, Shadow, Corruption, Malediction, Evil, Dream, Demigod.

The Black Wolves are classified under the Shadow Archetype.’

He stopped for a moment and the quill left the paper slightly.

[A level 25 creature—]

‘They are considered as a lesser monster amongst the various existences, possessing ink-black fur and blood-red eyes, and their fangs are shaped like daggers. They are resistant to physical weapons because Shadow-type creatures heal very quickly from their wounds. Conversely, their fangs can easily puncture most armors, except for plate armor.

– Brendel, 7th day of the Dark Forest expedition’

He did not release this information to the youths, and the experienced mercenaries also had a tacit understanding and chose to keep silent.

They wanted to see what the youths’ reactions were after a week’s worth of training upon encountering these monsters, especially in regards to their combat training. There was no need to worry about danger, since a Gold-ranked fighter would make these wolves appear like they are no different from an obedient puppy.

After Brendel finished writing his journal entry, he observed his surroundings.

It was not a peaceful environment.

The six groups of youths were fighting against the Rock Panthers summoned by Halran Gaia, and there were another six Obsidian Panthers lying down lazily on their paws nearby watching them. These creatures seemed to be uninterested in their battle and even showed incomprehension. The humans appeared as though they were having fun battling despite the fact that their own kind was holding back. Their eyes followed them left and right, thinking that they would easily be able to bite off any of their throats if they went to fight instead.

The youths did not realize that these seemingly obedient large cats were interested in their necks, or they might shake uncontrollably. But the current danger they felt were actually from Kodan and Scarlett.

Gaspard was also there as the leader of the mercenaries training them. The mercenaries actually had the most hectic mission, as they had to command and protect the youths at the same time.

It was not the first occasion where the mercenaries discovered the youths choosing to set their sleeping bags on damp ground. They waited till the latter slept before kicking them awake with their boots, then lifted up their bags to show them the centipedes and snakes that were the sizes of their arms.

One would have to say that it was an effective move. Many were frightened and listened closely to the mercenaries.

Gaspard was currently grading the groups of youths. The group with the lowest marks had to run three miles in the Dark Forest. If they had to run on flat ground it might not mean much, but it was impossible to run in the Dark Forest because of its dangers. Rather, they had to march out in the Dark Forest, but it might take them the whole evening to finish traversing the distance. There was no way to count on their companions to leave any food behind.

The three judges were a little distracted. Gaspard and Scarlett could see that the youths were performing badly.

[A complete lack of strategy and a terrible mess of positioning themselves. They are far from ready.]

Kodan thought they were no better than children fighting with sticks.

Brendel also shook his head, but he knew that things required time. In fact, these newbies were much better than the first time they fought the creatures because they did not even dare to fight. The mercenaries back then had to kick them with their boots and forced them to advance. They eventually became brave enough to hold against them, and this current battle had been going on for ten minutes.

The improvement was very fast. The Dark Forest was indeed a good place to train someone.

He watched the battle a while longer before his head turned to the other direction; the Druids' camp was there. The Druids who were supposed to meet up with Brendel only joined him on the second day due to their independent nature.

There were seven of them, including Grey Raven.

[Even though they are strange people, they are worthy of respect. They brought out a hundred veteran Druids and ten Elder Druids to help with my city's defense and also promised to help out with Trentheim's farm work.]

Although he did not know how many Druids lived in the forest, at least three hundred Druids were promised to permanently reside in Firburh, which meant there was a considerable number of Druids. This race was of an immense help to him as they aided

greatly in defense. They planted thorny brambles that solidified the walls and even carried a type of fruit that acted like grenades.

One could say that a hundred Druids were more effective than an entire army in a defense.

[But they are still wary of me. The Druids went to the city are all nature-based, probably from the Circle of Brambles, which is an outer Circle. There's not even one Druid from the Circle of Beasts—]

Brendel smiled a little when he thought of that. Most would not be able to tell the differences. The Circle of Flames, Circle of Tempest, and Circle of Beasts were the strongest offensive groups amongst the Druids, but the Circles of Brambles were considerably effective in defense.

The Druids' intentions were clear as day.

[Well, there's no need to rush. Relationship points can be earned in the future.]

He packed away his journal and quill, then took out pale yellow leaves from the bag around his waist.

Moonlit Grass.

These were low-level materials within the Dark Forest but were appropriate for Brendel to train his side-profession. When he received the letter from the Regent Princess, the system acknowledged him as a Noble Lord instead of a commoner. He could not but help grumble in his mind about this fact when he looked at the materials.

[A worthless title, unfortunately. It allows me to raise up my Alchemy to level 8, but my Elementalist profession supersedes it and allows me to go up to level 10.]

The grade of the Moonlit Grass was perfect. The shape and luster of it were far beyond the same type from other areas. Even though the Dark Forest was dangerous, it was indeed a treasure vault for an Alchemist.

He concentrated slightly and a Magic Formation was formed with a color that was violently red. After spending several days and hundreds of tries, wasting countless materials in his attempts, Brendel was finally proficient in Blood Refinement Magic. It was a method that extracted the essence from a material and even formed a few

Alchemy items. He did not need to waste time drawing up a Magic Formation and was simply required to let out a few drops of blood from his hand.

It was simple and convenient, and saved much time.

Though he was probably the only person who did this forbidden magic so openly, with the exception of the great Evils who hid in the shadows.

The Blood Magic showed itself visibly and the Moonlit Grass started to smoke. It was slowly converted into a transparent crystal orb.

Mana Essence.

Putting ten of these orbs into water would make a Mana Potion. This refinement appeared like a simple task, but it needed at least level 5 in Alchemy. Most commoners would never be able to cross this level. If a commoner was able to surpass their limits, then their title would be changed to 'Alchemist's Disciple,' allowing them to reach level 8. A true Alchemist would be able to reach level 15.

And if they were able to surpass level 15, then they would be recognized as a Grandmaster.

In the game, level 15 was also the limits where the game's system allowed the use of TP. Once a gamer reached level 15, they would find the buttons to be greyed out.

The hurdle with each increasing level was an exponential increase. The gamers had an analogy where each increase from level 1 to 5 was 1 point of effectiveness, and crossing level 5 to 10 gave 2-3 points of effectiveness. From level 10 to 15, one could be considered as a 'Master', and each level gave 5 points of effectiveness. However, the difficulty at this stage was ten times harder compared to the levels before.

One could only imagine the difficulty of an NPC attaining a Grandmaster's level. It was at the stage where miracles could be created, and their names would be forever left in history. Gamers often joked that reaching level thirty would be close to the existences of gods.

After Brendel was done with the extraction of the Moonlit Grass, he moved on to the four-leaved Hop Clover to extract Luck Essence. But the extraction was of a higher difficulty, and he barely succeeded once after failing six times, but he tutted after reading the words on his retina.

[...Incomplete Luck Extract. It's not even a complete success.]

Brendel forced the gaseous extract into an empty bottle. Suddenly he felt his hair standing up behind on his back, and he turned around to see Felaern. She had been staring at him since his first attempt. Each Luck Essence required ten four-leaved Hop Clovers, and searching for them required a considerable amount of effort, even if they were quite common in the Dark Forest.

The Wild Elf was nearly unable to keep watching Brendel waste them.

“My lord, we have a saying, ‘We must learn to walk before we can run’—”

[Haha... What a coincidence, we humans on Earth have the same saying. But I really can't wait to raise my levels and pour TP into it. I just spent everything on swordsmanship.]

Brendel could only sigh when he looked at his empty TP bar. He had no choice but to choose such a silly method.

When Brendel received the ‘Incomplete Luck Essence’, he immediately saw his level bar increase immediately and reached level 7. Since the materials in the Dark Forest were abundant, the method to raise his Alchemist level was effective by using materials that surpassed his levels.

With level 7 Alchemy, he was able to create higher level Mana potions and Magic formations. The potions were naturally more effective, but the materials required were also more unique.

[There are a few recipes to improve the youths' stats with the recipes I know. It's even effective for me since I can create a potion that adds 5 Fire Max EP.]

“If only I have the Dragon Blood Moss. It's a pity I'm lacking this main ingredient.” He muttered to himself.

“What is that?” Felaern asked.

“They are legends stating that places where a large dragon is felled, would have its blood flow into ancient lakes. Bright red moss would grow in abundance beside the lake, and they are known as Dragon Blood Moss. This material can be used to make Potion of Dragon Strength.”

The Wild Elf understood. The Potion of Dragon Strength was as famous as a dragon's notoriety. There was a definite increase of power for a warrior. Giving a normal person this potion was the rough equivalent of him training for two or three years.

In Brendel's words, the potion permanently added 5 OZ worth of strength and physique, allowing a normal person to reach an Iron-ranked fighter's strength immediately.

This potion was exclusively reserved for raising an army, and the nobles fought to obtain this potion whenever it appeared. Its price in the black market was very high, and each potion was about ten thousand Tor coins.

[Ten thousand coins to make an iron-ranked soldier. It's a waste of money, but considering the time limit, it's worth the price.]

Brendel did not intend to rely on this item to get rich. The Dragon Blood Moss did not grow abundantly in Aouine and the Dark Forest. The Mana Wave was also about to happen. All potions and magical artifacts were going to drop drastically in value. Meddling with the related transactions was purely causing trouble for himself in the future.

He warned Romaine not to pay attention to the materials related to Magic, but it surprised him to know that she had known about the Mana Wave. Still, she did not know anything about the upcoming Mana Wave that was called as the 'Waves of Calamity', which was something that Aouine had never seen before. If she did, then he really needed to ponder about her aunt's identity.

"My lord, do you know how to create that potion?"

"I do. And I just reached level 7 in alchemy, otherwise, the rate of success would probably be low—" Brendel finally turned back to the youths.

The latter had successfully fought back twelve Rock Panthers and were awarded a temporary respite. But Scarlett and Kodan would be teaching them new things in a short while.

Kodan was in charge of teaching the crucial points of Aouine's Military Swordsmanship, while Scarlett was more direct. She beat everyone in the two groups she was in charge and left them to experience where they were lacking.

“Level 7 alchemy?” Felaern frowned, wondering if the students taught by wizards talk strangely, but she refrained from expressing her opinions since he was her lord.

“I mean I have attained the required skills to create the potion.” Brendel corrected himself without skipping a heartbeat.

“In my memories, there were not many who were capable enough to make the Potion of Dragon Strength in Port Lopes. It even sells for three thousand coins of our currency. Mercenaries like us could only view it from afar.”

Three thousand Lopes coins could exchange up to fifteen thousand Tor coins. Brendel marveled at the amount.

“The adventures you had must be interesting.”

“Forgive me, my lord. I’m afraid that you might be disappointed to know that we are not exactly the true entities that you’re looking for. Our bodies and memories are created by the Laws of the Planeswalker.”

Brendel looked back at the expressionless maid: “But your memories existed in the past, right? I don’t think Medissa as a fake entity. You are just as real in my heart like your past.”

“I thank you for your words, my lord. Our adventures are not exactly interesting because our goal was to earn money. While it is true we spend it to improve ourselves, what little money we earn is unable to buy such extravagant items.”

“But the Potion of Dragon Strength isn’t really a rare potion,” Brendel said, though he understood that what she said was true. The recipe of the Potion of Dragon Strength was worth at least three million Tor coins.

The current era was actually a generation where Mana had dried up, but the time where it returned would be soon.

“We had to buy weapons and sharpen it repeatedly to prevent them from wearing out. Our armor was sewn back repeatedly. The lives of a mercenary are very hard, and we faced blood and death constantly as though we were going through a surreal dream.”

Brendel was momentarily silent as he reflected on the events in his past life, both in the game and reality: “Life isn’t easy for others as well. Whether they are born as a

noble, a king, a merchant, just because they lived in status or wealth doesn't mean they are satisfied with their lives. Happiness is fleeting. There is no one would who would feel satisfied their whole life. Pain and worry will always be around."

The two reflected on their endings and they had their own answers. No further words were exchanged.

Lumbering footsteps could be heard and Brendel turned to the source. The gigantic figure of the Fire Claw Lizardman, Ropar, appeared in and out of the dense vegetation. The dark red skin had patches of black mixed into it, appearing no different to the red tree bark around the area. It was a natural camouflage.

When it finally appeared before Brendel, the youth was startled to find a wary expression intermixed with a hint of inquiry: "Is there something, Ropar?"

Brendel summoned the Lizardman Lord on the second day. He had briefly thought about using it on the city's defenses, but it was hard to explain to the citizens, so he thought it was better to have it on his side.

He also summoned the Fire Claw Lancemen. It was the size of a medium platoon, a total of thirty Lancemen. There were peak Iron-rankers, but Ropar provided the unique ability where all Fire Claw tribe members have a +1 in command, turning them into Fire Claw Assault Lancemen.

The Fire Claw Lancemen were turned into level 32 creatures, entering the classification of a Silver-ranker, getting close to the levels of the Mercenaries of Lopes who were attached with the Dwarven Treasure Card.

These Lizardmen were in charge of outer security. Brendel had told them to let a beast or two to slip past their defenses in order to test the youths.

The results were considered good thus far.

Ropar did not answer and looked at the young lord. It bent down at its waist and placed a cold rock into Brendel's hand. The creature was nearly two meters and a half tall, with its body's width two-thirds of its height. He could feel a pressure as though the Lizardman was going to pounce on him when it bent its waist.

But the youth ignored it and stared at the flat sheet of rock instead.

It was almost like a crystal; the body was clear but there were grains across the rock which glowed dimly. It seemed like it was absorbing light and became an impure black.

“Where did you discover this?” Brendel felt a jolt to his spine. This was not a crystal but a hydra’s scale—

‘In a lake.’ Ropar did not speak but drew on the ground with three fingers to let Brendel understand what he meant. Amandina and Dia discovered the lake, and they were the ones who discovered the scale.

[The scale is evidence of a hydra nearby us.]

The history of hydras was that they descended from a gargantuan sea monster, evolved to have legs and bred greatly on land before they were chased off to the Wilderness. There were many hydra variations, for example, the Dark Elves reared a Nine-headed Shadow Hydra as their Warbeast. In Karanjar’s mountains and its nearby islands, the barbaric tribes that lived there worshipped the Five-headed Ancient Hydra as a divine spirit.

A common three-headed hydra was equivalent to a Gold-ranker. If there were five heads their scales had great toughness; nine heads would mean it had unsealed Element powers. The greatest number of heads were twelve, and its body would have shed its mortal self and shaped towards perfection, the Bronze Physique. *(TL: Bronze Physique = level 80+, also google images ‘mtg hydra’ without quotes.)*

Brendel immediately focused on the scale. The scales had the divine protection of its ancestor and was rated as a precious Alchemy material. Even though the blood of a Hydra could not compare to a dragon’s, but it was obviously much better than a moss. It could be used to make a Potion of Dragon Strength, and the effectiveness was much higher.

He made his decision and stood up, clapping loudly to draw the attention of the people around him.

“We have work to do!”

TL Note:

Jan, Month of Winter Strings	冬琴之月 魅力 Charm
Feb, Month of Breaking Dawn	春晓之月 记忆 Memory
Mar, Month of Revival	复苏之月 精神 Spirit
Apr, Month of Thunder	雷鸣之月 意志 Willpower
May, Month of Lunar Flowers	朔花之月 敏捷 Agility
Jun, Month of Hazy Summer	夏胧之月 通灵 Psychic
Jul, Month of Books	书卷之月 逻辑 Logic
Aug, Month of Running Fire	流火之月 力量 Power
Sep, Month of Harvest	丰收之月 体质 Physique
Oct, Month of Autumn Dusk	秋暮之月 魔力 Magic
Nov, Month of Frost	霜降之月 智力 Intelligence
Dec, Month of Slumber	沉眠之月 天赋 Talent

Chapter 116

Five-headed Hydra (1)

When Brendel tracked down the Hydra, he also discovered Amandina and Dia hiding in the bushes hundreds of meters away to spy on the mythical creature.

Amandina had originally gone out to find Dia, who was moving everywhere senselessly to gather materials for Tamar. She was guarded by the Fire Claw Lizardmen and they managed to find her near a lake looking at the scale that was eventually passed to Brendel.

Amandina recognized the scale as she had encountered the description in the books that she read, and a few of the books described the Hydras in great details.

She got the Fire Claw Lord, Ropar, to report to Brendel, while she got the others to track the serpent. Soon enough, they discovered the huge creature. It was a five-headed Hydra, its body was sleek and elegant against the areas of light and darkness. The detailed scales were ink-black, but there were several sections seemed to have a green glow.

It was a Poison Hydra.

Its defense and strength were not as strong as its other relatives; it could not become a fog-like existence like the Nine-headed Shadow Serpent, or manipulate Ice or Fire Elements like the other subspecies. However, they were the hardest to deal with because their corrosive poison could shoot a hundred meters in distance and melt Magic Alloy.

“All of you stay here and wait!” Brendel immediately ordered the excited youths who were ready to try their mettle. “Kodan, Scarlett, Ropar, attack it from the back while I attract its attention and force it to use its poison. The angle that it can attack from is only 180 degrees, so make sure you stay out of range.”

Brendel was the first to charge out.

“That’s too dangerous!” Kodan pulled out his sword and followed next. Brendel had

promised to give him a Potion of Dragon Strength for taking part in this battle.

“Leave it to me!” Brendel activated the specially crafted Wind Sigils by Tamar on his sword sheath, raising his Agility tremendously.

He entered the Hydra’s guarded range a few seconds after he spoke, and the gigantic creature that was tens of meters tall had its third head raised up. Its huge tapered mouth opened up and shot a geyser of black poison from nearly a hundred meters away, but the youth had not forgotten how to fight this creature.

He frowned and immediately veered towards the sides, allowing the poison to fire past him while he continued to advanced quickly. The hissing poison continued past him and splattered onto the ground.

Smoke immediately appeared as the poison corroded the foliage. The chemical reactions even caused the liquid to burst into flames, while the surrounding plants visibly wilted at the speed where the naked eye could even detect it.

The young men who were originally ignorant of the monster they were facing immediately paled and even a few yelled out.

“Marsha above!”

Mordenkainen stared at Brendel who was now dodging the Hydra’s projectiles from the five heads in disbelief. The latter’s movements were in a blur, but it was clear that he was avoiding the poison arrows with ease.

He had heard of Brendel’s legendary exploits that seemed almost exaggerated, but he discovered that the reality before him surpassed the stories. His jaw collapsed several times and went back up to clench his teeth when it appeared dangerous.

“I-Incredible. Didn’t our lord say that we can be as strong as him one day? Is this really true?” The person next to Mordenkainen suddenly spoke and jerked the nearest person’s sleeve, who happened to be Merial. She pulled back a little.

“Oh. It’s you Merial. Did I pull too hard?”

“N-nothing,” Merial shook her head vehemently and replied, “our lord seems like he’s a Gold-ranked swordsman, I think we would need decades of training to reach his level...”

“Decades, but our lord looks like he’s at most twenty years old!”

“Our lord is a genius, do you think you can compare to him?”

“Well that’s true, but isn’t it too long to train for decades?”

“You’re talking about a Gold-ranker.” One of the youths who was a former mercenary replied sarcastically at once: “Do you think it’s lettuce from a field and you can get a large number just by planting them? You have heard of the reserve knights from the Holy Cathedral, right? As long as you have the abilities of a Gold-ranker, you can enter the Holy Knights’ reserves—”

Many held their breaths when they heard him speak about that position. It was a legendary status where most would aspire to, and they were existences far beyond the likes of Graudin.

Someone else added to the discussion: “You don’t even need to reach the Gold-rank, as long as can become a Silver-rank, you can become knighted under any lord!”

Even if a knight was the lowest class of nobility, the title was full of enticement.

“Then is it possible for us to reach the Silver ranks?”

Carglise finally came back to his senses. He suddenly felt that Brendel must have been laughing maliciously inside when he rushed at him with a sword. He was merely an Iron-ranker and dared to challenge a grandmaster swordsman with the capabilities of a Gold-ranker.

Even though he was thick-skinned, he could not help but burn up a little. Still, he looked at the others and answered: “We will definitely be able to enter the realms of a Silver-rank.”

“Why are you sure, Carglise?” Merial asked curiously: “A common man would find it hard to reach that level, and you need a certain level of talent right?”

“Don’t you find that you’re improving really quickly?” Carglise asked.

Everyone stared at him. Did they really improve? Kodan called them fools where no man could hope to compare, and Scarlett shook her head every time she saw them. Even their lord who seemed friendly and approachable merely smiled at them without

saying anything. These actions made them feel like they were completely untalented.

But Carglise shook his head. He knew that they had no problems. In fact, he realized that his swordsmanship that had not improved for a long time was starting to become better. He was even surprised to find himself becoming stronger after entering the Dark Forest for a week. He was almost at the stage where he could be called a Silver-rank.

“Do you know what swordsmanship the lord is teaching you every day?” He said, and most of them shook their heads.

“Merial.”

Merial frowned: “It appears to be the Holy Cathedral of Fire’s swordsmanship.”

“Isn’t it forbidden to teach it outside the Holy Cathedral?” Someone called out, and suddenly there was silence amongst them. A few of them looked at each other; it was quite a severe crime to teach the techniques from the Holy Cathedral of Fire.

Carglise did not care the Holy Cathedral as they would not pick the youths here to train them. The latter could choose from a large number of talented youths who were blessed by the Gods.

He was a normal person at the end of the day.

He patted Merial lightly on her shoulders: “Do you understand why I feel like I have chosen the correct decision?”

Merial blushed a little.

The others started pondering when they heard Carglise’s words.

While the youths were lost in their thoughts, Brendel was not as relaxed as they thought. Even though there was no direct hit by the venom shot out from the five heads, there was a flashing warning in green color on his retina:

– Poisoned.

Brendel had gone past the fifth round of attacks by the Hydra, and the monster finally needed a little time to prepare for its next projectile. He quickly made a signal to

Kodan, Scarlett, and Ropar to make their moves while making a side turn in order to lure the monster, as well as staying away from the poisonous cloud.

He swiftly checked his Stats Window to confirm his vitality.

It was still green.

Even though he was poisoned, his Physique was high enough to resist the venom since it was past a hundred points. Any normal person would have died a hundred times if they passed through the poisonous cloud.

But once he inspected the details, he found that the Resistance Bar was yellow at 87%, and it was dropping. He calculated the time and estimated that he had less than ten minutes to resolve this issue, or he would die from the poison.

[As expected from a high-level Gold-ranked monster. It's not easy to deal with it.]

The time taken by the Hydra to spew its poison again was a minute and a half, and the attackers needed to close in the distance. However, the Poison Hydras were intelligent enough to retreat and shoot its projectiles while retreating.

Unfortunately, Brendel had drawn its attention long enough for his allies to sneak up behind it. When the Hydra finally discovered them, it could only hiss angrily as it did not understand strategies.

The time taken to get close to the huge monster only took thirty seconds. Brendel activated his Charge skill, leaping to avoid the Hydra's tail swipe that was like a steel whip. It was a classic move for dragons and its subspecies. The tail had scales harder than metal and easily broke the ancient trees apart, sending loud smashing sounds accompanied by tremors that could be felt miles away.

Brendel somersaulted and landed next to the Hydra's front right leg, raising Halran Gaia as he did so.

Brendel raised Halran Gaia with both hands and tried to cleave the Hydra's leg, which was more like a rock pillar. Surprisingly, the monster's dexterity was astonishingly fast despite its huge body. It drew in its foot so quickly that Brendel could only cut through the air.

However, the powerful strike destroyed the ground beneath the Hydra and caused

fissures to spring up everywhere. The sword's contact to the ground also caused a shockwave to spread out in a cone and the Hydra became unbalanced; its body slanted towards the side.

But Brendel could not find an opportunity to continue to attack because the five heads of the Hydra danced around the air like whips, trying to bite the youth, which forced him to retreat repeatedly, and he ended a distance that was ten meters away.

His allies approached the Hydra's back to find a chance to attack it, but Brendel immediately roared when he realized there was a ripple of energy emanating from the Hydra: "Be careful of its Venom Shield!"

The three was momentarily stunned as they found a wall of green liquid appearing out of thin air before them. Kodan and Scarlett had enough experience to stop themselves from advancing, but Kodan went one step further and hurled his dagger into the wall to strike the Hydra's body.

A soft hissing sound could be heard before the dagger even went through the liquid. It was quickly turned into white smoke.

"Marsha above!" Kodan felt relieved in his heart that the warning came in time, but he started to wonder how they could handle this damned creature.

However, Ropar did not seem to hear Brendel's words and rushed straight into the wall of venomous liquid, but it was not affected at all, though the dirt on its scales was burned away.

[Immunity to poison!]

Brendel's eyes widened in surprise.

[W-well, a four-legged Hydra is considered somewhat to be like a lizard. Ropar and Hydra can kind of be considered as the same type. It can be considered reasonable for some kind of suppression amongst the same type.]

Ropar had broken into the Hydra's defenses, surprising everyone. The huge monster was unable to turn its heads around in time and Ropar swung its greatsword on the Hydra's rear right leg. Flames wrapped around the greatsword as it severed the Hydra's scales and sinew. Before the blood could spew out, the heat turned it into gas and was spurted out in a red mist.

The Hydra raised all its heads and screamed at the same time. The deafening blast transmitted for miles, frightening the nearby birds into taking flight.

The wall of venom rippled a few times and disappeared at the same time the Hydra got injured.

[[Now!]]

Kodan and Scarlett thought at the same time. They charged in together, but after taking a few steps they felt a sinking feeling beneath their feet and the ground collapsed.

“What are these?” Scarlett felt her heart skip a beat. She saw countless green thorny vines breaking through the ground as though they were alive, and they were darting towards her legs.

It was not just her. Kodan also faced the same situation.

Brendel’s reaction was to plant his sword into the ground to gain balance from the unsteady ground, while he raised the other hand towards the sky—

The youths who were watching from saw a small Magic Formation appearing above Brendel. A card was thrown into the air, causing tiny grains of green light to appear from the earth and rising up to rush into the Magic Formation.

Over a hundred golden Holy Swords poured out from thin air and surrounded the Hydra with the blades pointing at it.

The youths completely froze when they saw the scene. They had imagined the most beautiful swordsmanship and terrifying magic from the singing bards and legendary tales, but they did not expect to see such a sight coming from the young noble.

Carglise’s eyes appeared glazed as he stared dumbfoundedly at the majestic moment: “Merial, I feel like I’m an idiot.”

Merial lowered ahead and replied softly with a red face: “Yes, you always have been one.”

The Hydra also felt the threatening swords. The fifteen pairs of eyes across its five heads stared at the formation of swords. The vines swiftly changed directions and

formed into a dense towering shield that was ten meters long.

“Advance!” Brendel yelled at Kodan as he activated the card.

The golden swords of light fell like a meteor shower, drilling through the shield of vines and turning the outer layer into ashes. Very quickly, the shield was filled with holes as the swords rained into the shield. Light poured out from the shield in all directions, and the green poisonous vines gradually turned into a bubbling red liquid.

The Hydra’s poisoned vines created by its Element Power was pierced through by the swords, and the pillars of light came into contact with the Hydra’s chest. The leather protected by the crystal-like scales temporarily refracted the light, before it also turned red and the scales shattered into fragments. The blood beneath its hide was expelled in a red mist. and the immense pain caused the Hydra to writhe on the ground.

Kodan and the other two fighters did not stop to watch the scene. They avoided the hydra’s tail that was thrashing around like a whip and tried their best to wound the monster.

The Hydra was certainly not as agile and quick as a Wind Wyvern, but its defenses were far superior to the latter.

Scarlett used her full strength to create an Arc Lightning from her Element power, which traveled several tens of meters across the monster’s scales, but most of the energy did not go through its hide and only caused a small burn mark.

Kodan also tried using a shockwave to damage it, but the results were similar.

Ropar was unable to do a ranged attack and merely rushed in with its greatsword, but it became clear that each blow damaged the Hydra. Kodan and Scarlett promptly discovered this fact and started copy the Lizardman’s actions, stabbing and cutting the monster, instead of using their Element Powers or techniques.

Even though the Hydra had astonishing regenerative abilities, it did not mean its blood could be recovered as quickly. It started to become clumsy and the attacks from the five heads became slower after the increasing loss of blood.

Brendel, who was still attracting the bulk of the monster’s attention, found it easier and easier to avoid the attacks. Soon enough, he found an opportunity to get closer to

the monster's right chest.

A deep breath was taken in before the Halran Gaia was swung.

A combination of Power Break and White Rave Sword Arte.

Muscles worked under the direction of his level 16 Aouine's Military Swordsmanship, and a white maelstrom was formed from the shockwave—

One of the youths thought a huge dragon had smashed into the Hydra.

A vertical hurricane tore into the Hydra's already injured chest, dragging away flesh and blood into the air. It did not end there as Halran Gaia added on to the technique, turning the ground into mud that reached ten meters deep. The Hydra desperately tried to claw its way up, but it was dragged down by gravity.

When the technique was over, the landscape had changed entirely. The single slash made by Brendel caused layers of earth to shift as though there was a huge landslide. The dying Hydra was half buried under the soil as blood continued to spill from its wounds.

Brendel took a few more glances before he sheathed his sword.

The forest was silent.

Brendel went over to Dia and Felaern, instructing them to clear the poisonous air with wind magic as he imbibed an antidote potion. After it was done, he told the youths to investigate the surroundings for treasure.

They were quite reluctant to go near the Hydra. The monster's strength had surpassed their understanding, and they could not believe how big it was when they approached it. It was difficult to understand how a person could defeat this creature.

They debated amongst themselves fiercely, and there were those brave enough to poke the crystal-like scales. Everything was unfamiliar to them.

Kodan was eventually sent along with them to find the Hydra's nest. Monsters did not drop any equipment, but perhaps there were things that could be used in its nest.

The next thing that Brendel did was to get Felaern to pry the scales down from its

chest. The rule of having a lucky babe looting something must never be changed, despite the lack of equipment drops.

The scales of a Hydra's front chest were called Hydra's Blessing. They were green in color, unlike its back where the scales were as black as ink. Brendel knew that these unique scales could be used in many places, and they were important Alchemy materials.

[A shame that I have to use my full strength to damage the Hydra. Only thirty scales are pulled out. At most it's enough to make a magic armor.]

He made plans for the materials gained.

Chapter 117

The nest (1)

Brendel filled up several full bottles of the Hydra's blood.

As usual, Kodan split the youths up into six groups. The deeper they entered the Dark Forest, the more they found the place to be unaffected by winter. Trenheim was undergoing a harsh season where everything was barren because of the cold, yet the temperature in the Dark Forest was increasing the more they traveled south.

The group led by Carglise discovered a cave next to a steep slope covered with green moss, which was behind a hill approximately two miles away.

The group followed the slope all the way down to the valley, and discovered the cave under massive boulders that were hundreds of meters tall. After the youths parted the overgrown vines that hung down from the boulders, they discovered the putrid nest's entrance.

Carglise obeyed Brendel's orders not to search it; they reported back to him. The latter stopped tinkering with the Alchemy tools on his hands and sent out a signal into the air to get the others to gather.

Soon enough, he and his men went through the thick vegetation and went down to the valley. The formation of the land was indeed as reported by Carglise's messenger. It seemed like the boulders were actually sections of a cliff collapsing onto the ground, but that was probably at a few years ago. The white boulders were covered with green vegetation.

The number of leaves in the valley was as much as one would expect in the summer. Not far away from the cave was a waterfall going past the cliffs.

Brendel found Carglise and his men near the waterfall lake. Merial had twisted her leg when they entered the valley, and she was sitting down on the rocks with a few men caring for her.

Brendel knew that Merial was a bishop at the first glance, but when he saw that she

bared her lower leg, he found it to be elegantly shaped and surprisingly white, though her foot was slightly swollen.

He did a double take before he went to Carglise and tapped his pauldron, whispering: "Is your friend really a man?"

Carglise shook his head: "My lord, you should know that there is no gender amongst the chosen children of the gods in the Flame Scriptures. As long as one wears the robes, there is no difference if there are additional bumps anywhere."

Carglise gave a filthy smile, pointed at his chest and replied in a crude direct manner learned from the military school.

Brendel coughed once and asked: "So you mean your friend is a woman?"

Carglise shrugged: "I didn't say anything about gender, did I? The first time I saw Merial, well, she had already worn the robes. If she's not wearing her bishop uniform, then she would be wearing clothes for a male. I think only her parents and her nanny knows about this secret. Her father wanted her to become a member of the Church."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

Carglise laughed mysteriously before he replied: "My lord, let us search the cave."

Brendel nodded, glancing at Merial one more time as she got up to follow the crowd, before he brought his men into the valley and headed for the cave. He was at the forefront and parted the vines hanging below the massive boulders. Lizards scampered away in fright as he walked through the cave.

The ceiling was approximately seventeen meters high. The waterfall was close to the cave, and there was refracted light at the entrance, showing off the colors of a rainbow.

"It's quite pretty," Amandina could not help but utter a gasp when she saw the rainbow. She had one of her hands held by Brendel when they entered the cave. She felt at ease in her heart.

"Pretty is pretty, but the smell is a little awful." Carglise was pinching his nose awkwardly with his fingers through his gauntlets.

A horrible stench that could make someone sick to their stomach was wafting out

towards everyone's noses. Eyes stared into the cave, but only darkness came back. No one knew how deep the cave was.

Brendel pulled out Halran Gaia and his men did the same, causing a series of metallic clangs to ring out. Kodan moved towards the front as he lit up a torch instead of drawing up a sword. The ground was uneven and there were loose rocks which had long shadows because of the light, seemingly pointing towards the darkness.

"Look over there. Hmm, the geology of this place is really bizarre. It's amazing how the Hydra was able to find this place and build a nest." Kodan pointed to the largest opening.

The walls were cracked near where Kodan was pointing and there was a huge pit leading deeper into the earth.

[The entrance to the Hydra nest? It seems like it was here before the massive boulders crashed down. If I have to take a guess, this place was originally where the waterfall basin was. The water would have eroded this place to form a large hole. What are the chances for an entrance to be made like this?]

The cave's formation was indeed a little bizarre.

He raised his hand to get everyone to move over to the pit which was large enough for the Hydra to enter. The vile stench was indeed coming from it. There were green spots on the walls; they were possibly wilted moss which came about when water used to pour through the pit.

Though the group was standing beside the pit, they did not enter it immediately. Kodan brought the torch to the hole, but he could only see darkness. It was difficult to tell how deep it was. Scarlett silently tossed a large rock into the pit.

A large crashing sound echoed after several seconds.

The majority of the youths glanced at each other, wondering if they were going to be sent in.

Brendel tapped the pit's stony entrance with his sword before speaking he spoke to Amandina: "I'll go down to take a look, the rest of you wait for me here."

"My lord," Carglise stood in his way, "I think it is best for us to go first."

Brendel patted his shoulders and laughed: “When I’m going to use you as my runners I will definitely do so, but your experience in this place cannot compare to me.”

He turned to Felaern with a radiant smile: “Felaern, you’re with me.”

The older Wild Elf sister blinked several times before she placed her hand on her chest: “Me?”

Her face was suffused with displeasure: “I’m an Elementalist, my lord.”

“That’s not a problem. You forgot that your task is to clean up the battlefield. Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.”

“..”

Brendel had to agree that the lucky babe’s luck was still working as usual. The pit was over a hundred meters deep, but Brendel saw something wonderful as soon as he landed on the cave’s ground.

The depths of the pit was a vast space. It was clear that this was indeed the Hydra’s nest. There was a mountain of decaying meat and bones, and at the corner was a bunch of dried tree branches. In the gaps of the tree branches, he found a large quantity of armor and weapon fragments.

[Is that possibly—]

This ordinary metal was not of interest to him, but what truly drew his attention was a pair of metal gloves slotted with fiery-red gems.

Felaern came floating down with a pair of Wings of Wind. She flitted the giant pair of wings that were glowing green once before undoing her magic. She scanned her surroundings, but the pair of gloves also caught her eyes when Brendel rushed over to it.

However, she did not make any inquiries about it. Based on her knowledge of her lord, he would tell her if he wanted to.

Green words rolled out neatly in Brendel’s eyes the moment he picked up the golden metal gloves.

- Crimson blessing, Bahamut's grasp
- Gloves
- +2 Armor Defense
- +5 Fire Shield Defense
- 10% Fire additional damage with each attack
- Grants the ability [Advanced Magic Formation]

Brendel praised the gods loudly in his mind. This was indeed the legendary gloves of alchemy. Even though it's just a Fantasy rating, the gamers called it the 'The Godly Artifact of Fantasy'. It was a pun on how it was the best item amongst the Fantasy-rated items, and also stated that it was even rarer to find compared to a real Godly-rated item.

Obviously, it was just a pay-to-win item to certain gamers, but gaining this item legitimately was one out of a million. Brendel could never believe that he would be able to get one just by going on his first adventure. It was like picking up a million dollars lottery ticket that he had to fish out of a drain, at least in comparison to killing a Hydra and gaining this item for his troubles.

He was about to wear the gloves when she heard Felaern whisper: "My lord, look over there."

Felaern was pointing at a bunch of pearly-white balls which the size of a coconut. Brendel could hardly believe his eyes when he saw twenty to thirty just at the tip of the nest. There had to be more inside.

[Holy shit! I'm rich! Hydra eggs! Over a hundred!]

The value of the eggs could buy the entire Trentheim. Brendel's heart started beating loudly. These eggs were the rough equivalent of a treasure vault containing priceless treasures in his eyes. He stared blankly at them before turning around to Felaern, took in a deep breath and spoke:

"Quick, get everyone down here. We need to get these eggs out of here!"

The youths who entered the pit by descending down the rope immediately shrieked:

“Urgh, this smell...”

“I’m dying!”

“Gods above, this is really poison!”

“Silence!” Scarlett bellowed in an authoritative manner, but she frowned as well. The stench was overwhelming.

If the Hydra they faced earlier was a person, it must be the most disgusting and laziest person. The nest seemed like it was a giant pit of feces that would induce anyone to puke out their guts. It was not wrong to say it was poison; Amandina who had the weakest constitution vomited a few times. If Merial did not cast a purification spell on her, she would have fainted.

Kodan was the last person to descend to the pit. Since Brendel was wearing a pair of glowing gauntlets, Kodan’s eyes went over to it, immediately discovering the crimson rubies slotted on them. The shape of each individual link to the metal gauntlets could only be described as dignified.

“Is this the legendary Bahamut’s Grasp...?”

Brendel was incredibly pleased and put on a beaming smile: “You guessed correctly, grandmaster Kodan.”

“Are these truly the legendary gauntlets which the hero, Sutherland, used before?” Kodan stared at the gloves with all his attention drawn to them, repeating his question: “Not a fake or replica?”

Sutherland was one of the most famous Alchemists in history. However, that was not the reason why he was well-known. It was because he was also a Dragon Knight. He was cherished by the Fire Dragon King, Bahamut, and the songs about him and his dragon’s travels were still sung by bards even in this era.

But the most famous aspect about Sutherland was not his identity as a Dragon Knight or an Alchemist, it was his gauntlets.

These gauntlets were blessed by Bahamut and given to Sutherland as a symbol of their

friendship. It was also why they were called Bahamut's Grasp.

"They are real." Brendel clenched and unclenched his right fist, allowing the rivets to make a slightly grating noise as the metal bits rubbed against each other.

"How do you know that it's the real thing?" Kodan looked suspiciously at the gauntlets. He could not believe that Brendel's luck would be able to bend fate. Just randomly entering a cave would allow him to obtain a legendary equipment that was used by a hero?

The legends about Sutherland were nearly three hundred years ago, and the gauntlets disappeared after that. Did it disappear along with the hero, or had it been passed down to others? It was a question that no one could answer.

It was impossible to find out how it ended here.

Everyone's attention was on Brendel when they heard Kodan's words, but the youth did not explain any further. He merely grasped his sword's hilt firmly before pulling it out.

Flames poured out from the gauntlets, covering his right hand and Halran Gaia. He raised his sword above his head, illuminating the entire pit.

The youths stared at Brendel with slack jaws. Kodan's eyes were also widened but he tried forcefully to hold on to his viewpoint despite losing track of time for a while:

"There are many different types of enchantment that are similar to it... Flame Favor, Fiery Grasp, it's not necessarily blessed by a dragon."

Brendel swung his sword. The flames vibrated and created a sound that was like a dragon's roar. At the end of his swing, they turned into a Dragon which rushed towards the wall. An explosion rang out, and the walls shook as dust and sand rain down for a moment.

Kodan was completely convinced that it was the Crimson Favor after seeing the might of the flames. Only the Favor of a dragon would create such firepower and shape.

Brendel extinguished the flames on his hand and returned Halran Gaia to his sheath: "But the dragon's flames are not the strongest feature of the Crimson Favor. Do you know what other identity Sutherland has?"

“Of course,” Kodan’s mind was not composed yet when he realized that the legendary gauntlets were before him, and he calmed himself before answering, “he’s an alchemist.”

“Indeed. The symbol of their friendship, the Crimson Favor, is said to be the perfect equipment for him. However, the strongest spell in this gauntlets is not the flames, but something else—”

Brendel took out a Hydra’s Blessed Scale. He turned over his hand to allow his palm to face up, and a Magic Formation immediately lit up above it.

Every ruby on the gauntlets dazzled with light and the scale that was placed on his palm started to float. In an instant the scale seemed to receive thousands of degrees in heat, softening in mid-air to become a liquid before separating turning into drops of crystal that were green and red.

He continued to manipulate the Magic Formation and the crystal drops started to converge together to slowly form into a crimson dagger.

The surface of the dagger started to cool down visibly with the naked eye. Ripples ran across it as it gradually hardened, as though someone was hammering on its surface and causing it to vibrate. Finally, the dagger was completely cooled down and the red metal turned into a black-green color.

Brendel grabbed the dagger’s hilt as it dropped neatly into his palm.

“See that?” The youth smiled and asked as though he did something praiseworthy.

Kodan could not help but draw in a deep breath despite the awful stench. He knew that it was Alchemy, but the Alchemy that he knew was certainly not as miraculous as what Brendel did. In the continent, Alchemy was a secret art circulated amongst the upper-class nobles, witches, and related professions.

Perhaps commoners might view it as a mysterious magic that could do anything, but in truth, Alchemy was a strict technique that combined Mana and unique materials.

Witches could create different types of potions in a bubbling pot of green liquid, while Galbu’s wizard craftsmen would use their knowledge to carve sigils on their weapons and armors, allowing their equipment to take on powerful magic.

But each creation took time and detailed work, with the exception of simple materials that required proprietary magic. The majority of the work done from Alchemy required a quiet location with a complete set of tools.

Brendel had skipped every single step, even the need for a blacksmith, and created a dagger with his materials.

“W-what is this...” Kodan stared blankly at the dagger.

“An Advanced Magic Formation. To tell the truth, the Blood Magic Formation which is currently banned, was actually researched from this technique. Galbu’s wizards have a complete set of data on it, but they won’t be able to compare the Gauntlet’s Magic Formation— Hmm, with the Dragon’s divine blessing added into this, the Advanced Magic Formation’s quality is actually increased.

Usually, a typical Advanced Magic Formation can only create level 10 items and lower, and there’s also a limit in producing magical artifacts because one can only enchant it on the surface. But these gauntlets is capable of reproducing items to level 13 and below, and enchant the material’s body.”

Kodan did not understand what the levels meant, but he did understand the rules behind it. Brendel was able to manipulate the material that was limited by the normal Advanced Magic Formation.

The old swordsman heard of the term ‘Magic Formation’ before, thus the mysterious aspect about Brendel was greatly reduced.

“I understand the process roughly, but I actually think that the Dragon’s flames are more useful than this Alchemy thing.”

[...This old fool. What is the use of your eyes if you can’t see the value. This Alchemy thing is the equivalent to Aouine’s revenue for an entire year. It costs seven billion Tor coins in the game!]

Brendel’s eyes of delight turned to annoyance. An NPC certainly had a different line of thinking compared to a gamer. Which gamer would want to be stuck in a laboratory all day? This item was naturally a godly artifact for them.

He briefly considered telling Kodan how much it really cost. The youth could not but feel a little pity for his gauntlets and patted it, but his thoughts were pulled away from

one of the youth's voice.

"My lord, are these the monster's eggs?"

Kodan felt like he had been struck by lightning. After entering the Dark Forest, he thought he would not be able to be surprised any longer after killing off a Hydra and finding the Crimson Blessing, but to find Poison Hydra's eggs?

[Marsha Above, is this young man going to gain one of the strongest War Beasts around? Once they mature, they would be standing on the top of a Gold-ranked class!]

He immediately turned around to search for them, "Eggs? Whe—"

He stopped speaking and clutched his forehead, wondering if he was dreaming. He could see a great number of eggs placed into the Hydra's nest, possibly more than a hundred.

"Eggs... from that five-headed Hydra?" He asked Brendel to confirm it.

Brendel nodded. His reaction was just like Kodan's when he saw them for the first time too. The value of the eggs had more practical use to him right now compared to the gauntlets.

"You... What do you intend to do with all these eggs?" Kodan turned his head back stiffly to Brendel.

"How should I handle them?" Brendel repeated the question to himself.

This was indeed a question. The sudden wealth made him feel that it was unsafe no matter where they were put. He had to lead his men further into to the forest to find Valhalla, but it was unsafe to leave the eggs here.

"Boy, I suggest for you to send these eggs back to Firburh," Kodan said with a slow and grave voice.

"No, I can't do that." Brendel considered carefully. Valhalla's worth could not be gauged and was worth more than the eggs.

Kodan stared incredulously at him: "Is there something else in the Dark Forest that has more value than these eggs?"

“I thought about this for a while. It’s best to leave some men behind.”

“Leave people behind?” The old swordsman shook his head repeatedly: “Who? This is the Dark Forest.”

“It’s precisely because it’s the Dark Forest that no outsiders would come here. Weaker monsters won’t approach this place because the Hydra’s nest foul smell makes it seem like the Hydra’s still here. The strong monsters have their own territory and would not easily change their locations. Furthermore, this is still the outer section of the Dark Forest. The Hydra is standing at the top of the food chain here.”

Kodan suddenly became alert: “Why are you explaining so much to me? Are you planning something?”

Brendel grinned.

Kodan said exasperatedly: “I have never recognized myself to be part of your group. Are you not afraid that I would run away with these eggs? Certainly bringing all of them away isn’t possible, but I can simply take one or two away.”

“Well now, Grandmaster Kodan, this is the Dark Forest. Is it possible for you to find your way out without the Druids?” Brendel coughed.

The old man was immediately at a loss for words, and his eyebrows were raised: “What, are you threatening me again?”

Brendel hurriedly shook his head: “Of course not, it’s just a joke. I actually plan to leave a group of Fire Claw Lizardmen here. They should be sufficient to handle any beasts that come in by accident. Having them stay here is just a precaution.”

“Hmph. That sounds much better. Don’t joke with me if you have nothing better to do, boy!” Kodan said.

However, he found himself slightly disappointed when Brendel said that. It proved that the youth did not trust him.

The two of them continued to talk until a commotion stopped their conversation. Brendel found one of the youths rushing to him in a panic.

[This person is under Carglise’s group? Did they find something?]

Brendel had sent the youths to inspect the tunnels within the pit during his conversation with Kodan. Since this pit was the former waterfall basin, the tunnels were originally rivers. He sent them out to investigate if there were any other materials. If it was Firelight Moss, it might explain the scout's astonishment, since they could grow as far as a football field.

"M-my lord... C-captain Carglise, wants you to take a look for yourself..." The person who reported to Brendel said breathlessly.

Brendel and Kodan exchanged glances. What could that fellow Carglise be up to?

But Brendel nodded and gestured for the youth to bring them over.

The tunnel they entered was long and narrow, and one could see that the walls were smooth, proving that water had once flowed through here.

He studied the walls carefully to ensure that there were no other signs of creatures living here. They did not have any spider webs. While there were rodents and small creatures scuttering, they were not a threat to them.

It would be quite dangerous if a Tentacle Horror suddenly attacked them in this enclosed area.

After walking through the tunnel for several minutes, a light appeared in front of him. There were only four youths resting, and Brendel remembered that half of Carglise's men were left behind to take care of Merial.

When these youths saw Brendel, they stood up immediately to greet him:

"My lord!" Lord Macsen's lawless son rubbed his hands, as though he found a difficult problem. "We discovered something that we can't handle."

"Can't handle? What's the situation?"

"How should I explain it..." Carglise's expression was incredibly odd: "I can't explain it with words."

Brendel wondered what this fearless youth had seen to make him look like the sky had crashed to the earth.

[If he's pulling my leg and there's nothing here... Ha ha ha... I wonder what I should do with you.]

Though he secretly wondered if there was a football field of Firelight Moss.

"In any case, my lord, let us go and have a look." Carglise coughed and answered, moving to the side and having his hand pointing towards the darkness.

Brendel nodded and headed for the tunnel's exit. There was glowing light and he became slightly mystified. Did the material he was thinking about really grow here?

When he finally left the exit and came to a larger opening, he opened his mouth slightly and was instantly spellbound. Or perhaps it would be more appropriate to describe him as being struck by a petrification spell.

Dazzling glowing lights filled his eyes. It was a crystal mine.

And it was a crystal mine that he could not see an end to.

===== Ciel's POV =====

It seemed like Brendel accurately predicted his enemy's actions. The south of Trenheim was completely peaceful ever since he left for the Dark Forest for a week, and there were no signs of a future battle happening.

However, the north of Trenheim was experiencing things differently. Tagiv and his clan members seemed like they had become addicted to their raids, and harassed Lord Palas's men even more than before. Even though they were sometimes ambushed by the latter, the armies of Lord Palas were incredibly worn out by them.

While these men were busy dealing with Tagiv's tribe, Firburh was considerably free of such hassles.

Romaine checked the accounts one more time before she became bored. Just like how Brendel had predicted, she was remarkably disciplined and subdued, except that she went to a certain bar and sat in there in the afternoon till it was sunset. Based on her explanation, it was a place where Brendel often went and she wanted to take his place.

Everyone closed an eye when she did that; it was good enough as long as she did not

break the city down.

Bosley did not care if she tore the city apart as long as his workshop was safe. He sat on the balcony of a building near it and was taking out his pipe to smoke. However, no matter how much he tried to light it up, none of the sparks went into the pipe.

When two or three sparks finally landed in the pipe, they went out. It was an unnatural event—

He raised his head and indeed discovered Ciel wearing a light purple robe and grinning from a short distance away. He grumbled and complained under his breath:

“This damned wizard!”

But he did not dare to utter his words out loud. He could argue with Brendel, but wizards were mysterious people. Who knew if they cursed people in their sleep if they got insulted?

Bosley raised his head up and sighed: “Very well, Lord Ciel, what matter do you have to come and look for these old bones? Or did you come here to make fun of a pitiful man like me?”

“No, no, of course not, I’m here to discuss something with you,” Ciel shook his head hastily.

“What matter is it?”

“My lord has given me an order.”

“Hmm?” Bosley knew that the young wizard might have a way to contact the young lord.

“I am talking about—” Ciel thought for a while, before deciding on a gentler tone to describe the chain of events, otherwise the old man might be shocked to his death: “Grandmaster Bosley, what do you think of the possibility of creating a path to the Dark Forest?”

“Opening a path?” Bosley looked puzzled at him for a while: “Ah, I understand, you want to get some resources from the Dark Forest, right? That’s a little troublesome. Even if you invest in it there might not be an income, there’s nothing good in the Dark

Forest, and maintaining such a road would cost a lot... I'm afraid that even Trenheim cannot afford it."

"If it's an order that must be accomplished even with deaths?"

"Has he gone crazy!" Bosley suddenly paused as he realized the Grandmaster Wizard in front of him was Brendel's squire and he quickly changed his tone: "That would depend on how deep the road is. I believe a day or two's journey should not be a big problem."

"My lord says that he needs a safe path up to the distance of a week's journey."

"Impossible!" Bosley nearly jumped up.

Chapter 118

The end of the flourishing flowers

Even though Bosley claimed that the materials in the Dark were not useful, he knew it was simply untrue. He did not have much knowledge in paving a road, but he understood the Dark Forest very well and knew that it was too dangerous, despite the materials' usefulness to his work.

"That would certainly be quite troubling." Ciel shook his head as he spoke.

"What are you not saying?" Bosley suddenly felt the wizard was insinuating something.

"My lord... He found a Greater Mana crystal mine in a tunnel that used to be a river... But based on your words, Grandmaster Bosley, it's impossible to make it ours."

"A Mana Crystal Mine!" The old man really jumped up this time: "Are you serious!"

"No, I mean to say it's a Greater Mana crystal mine," Ciel hurriedly corrected him: "But based on my lord's observation, there might be Starmetal and Cold Iron, with the possibility of other types of minerals."

"An iron mine..." Bosley's voice was cracking.

"Yes, iron too, I suppose, but you're forgetting the Star Metal and Cold Iron."

"H-how big is it?"

"My lord isn't sure. They spend two days searching through the mines, but they are still unable to reach the end. Since there isn't much time to spare, he could only map how big the area is in the future."

"Two days, and they still could not reach the end?" Bosley felt it was difficult to breathe. There were three Gold-ranked fighters in his group, and they still could not reach the end? Just how big were the mines?

He suddenly thought of another thing, and he paled: "Is it an open quarry?"

"No, it's underground."

Bosley sighed with relief and felt it was a slight pity: "I thought you meant that they explored out in the open for two days and could not reach the end of the mining area. Mining is a professional job. You mean to say that our lord is mining in the place for two days and could not reach the end of the mining area?"

"No, no, no," Ciel shook his head: "it's difficult to describe it, but it's not wrong to describe it as a quarry. The underground cave they are exploring right now used to be a river, and the area is completely filled with minerals."

"Is that truly so!"

Bosley's hand opened up and the pipe that had accompanied him for years dropped off from the balcony, shattering into pieces.

But he did not mind it at all and grabbed Ciel's collar without caring that he was a wizard, shouting: "You're saying there's a mining area that no one knows how big it is, has a Greater Mana Crystal mine, as well as large quantities of rare metal for us to mine?"

"Shhhh, lower your voice, lower it." Ciel hurriedly put a finger up his lips: "Surely you don't want this secret to be leaked out to Count Randner right?"

Bosley felt a cold dread and looked at his surroundings cautiously, but he immediately turned back at Ciel: "Are you serious? That's wonderful, the White Lion Armor won't be a problem anymore!"

"Hold on," Ciel pretended to look like he did not understand: "Grandmaster Bosley, the place is quite the far distance away from Firburh. Based on your words, I'm afraid it's going to take a long while before we can mine that area."

"Bullshit!" Bosley patted his chest with bloodshot eyes, gritting his teeth: "Leave it to me, even if these old bones fall apart on this matter, I will make it a success! Marsha above, a mining area that's already open for us!"

"That won't do at all, Grandmaster Bosley, if anything happens to you Lord Brendel would have my head, especially if he knows I agreed."

Bosley stared at him with a scoff: “Hmph, don’t worry about it. I won’t do it alone and I can’t do it alone too. I’ll get my students to help me out, but this will take time.”

He apparently put in a great amount of determination to make use of his connections. The mining area was certainly a fatal attraction to a master blacksmith like him.

“We can start by getting people to harvest some Mana crystals first. These things are worth much more compared to silver. It would be easy if we have money.”

Grandmaster Bosley suddenly glared at Ciel from the corner of his eyes: “Hold on, did you set me up from the start?”

“What!” Ciel feigned surprise and had an innocent voice: “Of course not. I think that it’s a good idea but if you didn’t agree, I was thinking of getting the Subterrane Dwellers to help out, it’s just that I’m not sure if Tagiv is willing to help out.”

Bosley looked suspiciously at the fellow before him, increasingly believing that the damned wizard had dug a trap and let him jump into it all by himself. The fact that he would get his students involved now made him feel like he was going to faint, because he recalled to a certain moment where he refused to get them involved to help Brendel,

Ciel did not notice Bosley’s regretful looks. He was busy thinking about how he could get Tagiv to hand over more of his men to handle this task. It was not going to be easy to fulfill this order that his lord gave him.

Creating a road to the Dark Forest.

It was a major effort which Aouine had not done for centuries.

===== Brendel’s POV =====

While Bosley and Ciel were determined to carve a road by first getting the Subterrane Dwellers to reach the Dark Forest, Brendel and his men continued their adventure without stopping.

Based on the calendar, December was the month that represented potential. Astrologists believed that babies born in this month would possess great potential, but in the witches’ ancient prophecies, the word ‘potential’ referred to powers that were asleep.

The final month of the year was also the definition of waking up; It was lighting up the Fire of wisdom in the darkness and an allusion to the civilization's flames. It was the month that bid farewell to the year.

In most of the historic doctrines of the various religious groups, this was the largest festival for the next year. The people would celebrate it, and the duration would last for seven days. However, for a flourishing city like Ampere Seale, the celebration would extend for two months.

Brendel and his group certainly did not have much of a festive mood within the dark Wilderness, but Felaern who went on adventures most of her life, acted as the leader behind the scenes and distributed a small ginger biscuit to everyone every day, including Ropar and his men to celebrate the final month.

The journey to reach the Loop of Trade Winds's outer area finally ended during midnight. The youths gathered around the campfire and sang their hometown folksongs, and their lyrics described the yearning for past memories, as well as moving forward towards the future.

The songs reached everyone's hearts, and the difficulty of traveling in the Dark Forest was turned into memories as the campfire's smoke rose up to the black skies.

The youths felt themselves maturing in this journey.

The ginger biscuits were distributed to everyone again, and Brendel passed his own to Dia. The younger Wild Elf sister seemed very fond of it. It was not a local delicacy in the Lopes region, and she ate it with relish with crumbs still sticking to her lips. She smiled sweetly at Brendel as she held on to his biscuit in her other hand.

"It seems like Dia is more fond of me," Brendel said to Felaern who was standing behind him, who merely looked at her younger sister without responding.

She also reserved her own ginger biscuit to give it to her younger sister. Even though she was strict, she did look out for her.

"Felaern wouldn't care to pick a fight with you." Amandina also handed her biscuit over to Dia, smiling while she spoke. They were in a clearing where they could see the sky, and she felt her relaxed, which was a rare occasion. It was the last day of the year, and the events that happened were so numerous that she could not remember all of them.

This was the Year of the Bustling Flowers and Summer Leaves.

Dia kept her biscuits in a pouch. There was already a small bundle, and she looked at them with shiny eyes.

Scarlett who was leaning against a tree branch looked at the biscuit in her hand, thought for a moment, and went over to place it in Dia's hands.

"Thank you, Scarlett." Dia said sweetly.

The red-haired girl patted her head in response.

Brendel did not reply to Amandina, or mind Felaern's taciturn attitude and simply smiled. He looked up at the night sky for a moment. There was no wind and the leaves did not rustle. The environment was completely quiet save for the singing.

The brightest star was said to be Marsha's, and he looked at it as the year passed by. He would always remember how he came to this world in April and saw the same starry sky in Bucce. The events that happened made him recall all the people that he encountered. They came and went in his mind, but the people of Bucce stayed in his mind.

[The next year will be the Year of the Swords. The upcoming bloody civil war will soon feel the effects of the Great Mana Wave. It's not as chaotic as the future wars or the cause of Aouine's demise, but this kingdom's foundations will start to shake.]

The path of the stars changed and showed signs of swords. Thus the astrologists named the year as Year of the Swords, and heroes were born as if to answer this destiny.

Swords represented conquest.

They were murderous weapons that caused people to bleed.

It was the year where Aouine's tumultuous civil war started, and the year where gamers wrote their own legends.

[This is the year that decides the future of Aouine. The time is near. Aouine either regains its former glory or continue down its original path to the abyss.]

The young lord stood up and went over to look at the Loop of Trade Winds beneath him.

The landscape caused the circulation of the winds to form a massive loop, entering from the southern forest of Mountain Karanjar, then passing through the islands until it went up to build a wall of clouds. It was as if an ancient beast was lying right before him.

Chapter 119

Loop of Trade Wind (1)

===== Aouine Military officer Nordas's POV =====

Nordas had a dream. He was surrounded by waves of undead in the endless Wilderness. The skeletons were dark yellow in color, with fiery eyes burning in their sockets, charging straight at him from the darkness.

His allies fell one by one, his camp struck full of arrows, and there were corpses everywhere when he looked around. Aouine's battle flag was split in the middle as though it bowed in defeat, not even moving a little.

Heaven and Earth seemed to swallow him whole till the last moment—

And he woke up from his dream. He yelled loudly and sat upright on a soft reed bed. The early morning within the Dark Forest brought about a hint of coldness, but when he felt his back he realized it was full of perspiration and his pallid forehead was full of thin sweat beads.

He gasped for a while before he finally gained his composure and raised his head to find a ray of morning light streaming through the small room's window—

No, the room was the hollow interior of a giant tree, and the window was carved out by removing its bark.

The room's furniture was very simple and mostly made out of wood. In fact, several of them were carved out of the tree with several vines hanging down above.

Nordas clutched his forehead, realizing that he was no longer on that battlefield. He was rescued by strange men and sent to this place. It had been several months, but he still had these nightmares.

He took in a deep breath and stood up shakily, before realizing there were boisterous noises outside the room. He was puzzled as the village had always been quiet.

[Did something happen? Or has the Festival of Revival started?]

Nordas walked towards the window and cast a curious gaze outside—

===== Brendel's POV =====

The Druids built a settlement outside the Loop of Trade Winds called The Green Tower. It was somewhat of a city as there were thousands of people. There was a large amount of Centaurs and Tree Elves, and a small number of Senia.

The Druids spent a long time living with other races. They had planted a type of ancient tree that grew exceedingly quick, and resided within the branches of magical giant trees.

The settlement was built upon these gigantic trees some thirty meters above the ground, and it was connected by countless vine bridges reinforced by Mana. They were interwoven together to make them sturdier than stone bridges, and wooden planks were placed on top to make them flat.

The druids lived a simple life despite the creation of the unique city, but the centaurs loved a vibrant city, and decorated the bridges with lamps and crystal lights, causing it to seem like it was ablaze even in the night.

The settlement also had different levels, a place to allow the Druids to gather, as well as nests for the Giant Eagles.

The Druids and the Giant Eagles had been allies for centuries and treated each other as partners.

Brendel followed the Grand Druid Grey Raven and slowly went up the Vine bridges. It was at that moment where he saw the large flying beasts dancing in the air. The crowns of the giant trees were like their clouds as the eagles passed through the green canopies.

The centaurs that passed by Brendel wore shiny armor and Sentinel Helmets. They had lived together with the Druids for a considerably long time too. They were a race that lived for combat, and their physical feats were even stronger than the Subterrane Dwellers.

But in the Dark Forest, they had to rely on the Druids to survive.

Drayds, Senians, Furbolg, Pegasi, and Unicorns also lived within the settlement. As long as they worshipped the Goddess Nia, they would be the Druids' guests. *(TL: Senia = lycanthropes, Furborg = bear monster)*

But the Druids were not in charge of the city's daily operations. The leader of the centaurs, Zegnar, was in charge of the Green Tower's defenses, while the daily operations were managed by a council consisting of a Tree Elf, Senian, and Furbolg.

The Druids lived in the upper level, and they had their own council, Blackthorn, to handle their internal affairs. Their main task was to observe the Loop of Trade Winds, as well as the Dark Forest's movements.

The Druids' residence was much simpler compared to the town area. The Grand Druids created a courtyard where it was centered around six different trees, and there were six different branches leading out to six different halls. The center of the courtyard had a statue of the Goddess Nia, while the west hall from the courtyard was the location of Blackthorn.

Two Elder Treants, the size of approximately six meters tall, held up their upper bodies with their hands while sleeping. They seemed to be the hall's guards, but they did not fulfill their responsibilities. However, when Brendel approached them, the left Treant opened an eye to peek at the Grand Druid Grey Raven, before closing it again.

The other Treant snored, its voice long and rustling as though it was a song from the ancient forest.

Grey Raven nodded at the Treants before he turned back and spoke to Brendel and his followers: "Please follow me into the hall."

The youths under Brendel had been allocated in the settlement, and there were Tree Elves who were fond of guests to entertain them. Kodan and Ropar were there to keep these energetic men in check.

The people behind Brendel currently were Amandina and Scarlett. They had never seen such a unique place, and even Amandina who controlled her emotions well glanced around curiously.

The Blackthorn's hall did not have any difference with their normal architecture. It was simple and crafted from nature. Other than a few statues of the Ancestral Druids and Divine Beasts, there was no additional decoration.

The pillars looked exposed in the strong winds as the gigantic tree branches had been hollowed out and its bark removed, but the Ancient Trees' vitality was very robust and their growth was not affected; the pillars extended upwards to grow into new tree branches and leaves.

Brendel looked at the people standing in a circle in the great hall waiting for him.

Andellu was the first Elder Druid that he saw. There was a total of seventeen Druids, including a few elderly men. However, Brendel sensed two Druids who were like the Grey Raven.

[Three Grand Druids, including Andellu. They certainly think highly of me.]

He could not help but think that when he realized this fact, but his thoughts were quickly interrupted by a small figure rushing out from the side room, her long green hair swaying behind her as she jumped straight into his arms.

"Brother Brendel!" Sifrid buried her head against his chest and called his name in delight.

As the person chosen by the Goddess Nia, she had foreseen that he was going to leave Firburh to reach this place one day. After a month's worth of waiting, she finally got to meet him.

Brendel had to take a moment before he recognized the little girl. Sifrid had grown a little taller and the color of her face had become rosy.

[The Druids must have treated her well.]

Unfortunately, that was a misunderstanding. The Druids did not know how to take care of people, and they left Sifrid's livelihood to be taken care of by the Tree Elves. Since it was the request of the Grand Druids, the Tree Elves who were friendly by nature made doubly sure that her needs were taken care of.

"I like people who keep their promises. I'm satisfied that you didn't lie to me." Brendel patted Sifrid's head and nodded to the Druids.

Sifrid understood that Brendel was here for official business, so she received her head pats and stood to one side. Amandina took Sifrid's hand and smiled at her, and she received a sweet smile in return.

“Lord Brendel,” One of the Grand Druids spoke; he was the eldest amongst all the seventeen Druids.

He was leaning on a staff and wore a robe that was woven from long tree leaves. His hair and eyebrows were greyish-white, and the severe wrinkles cut deeply on his face, but there was a pair of sharp eyes that were full of spirit.

“Great Elder,” Brendel interrupted him politely, “although I’m a noble of Aouine, there is no meaning to that title once I leave the humans. There is no need to call me lord. You are the elder here and I’m much younger, so please call me Brendel.”

The Great Elder paused momentarily and his expressions softened as he nodded. But Andellu stood out after observing for a while.

“Lord Brendel, I think it’s best that I relay the questions.”

Brendel nodded as he knew that the Druids wanted to return the respect, and did not object.

“The Great Elder wants to know how much truth there is when you claim that you know the Druids’ ancient Magic, as well as the secrets in the Dark Forest.”

[My, my, these Druids really don’t know how to interact with the guests. Instead of welcoming us and letting us have seats with some refreshments, you’re going straight to business? It feels like you don’t care about the guests at all. Though it’s not to say I dislike this style. Having to stay here for three days and only discussing things after banquets, I probably won’t be able to enter the Loop of Trade Winds if I don’t spend half a month on pleasantries.]

He did not have time to waste.

“...I know a little about your Ancient Magic, but that doesn’t mean that I understand it, let alone be familiar with it. As for the Dark Forest, I do know a fair number of secrets.”

“Then are the ruins in the Dark Forest truly Valhalla?” A tall Druid asked.

“No,” Brendel glanced at him, recognizing him as a Druid from the Circle of Beasts: “I said that Valhalla is in the Loop of Trade Winds. I am not certain if the ruins that you found are truly one and the same. Perhaps the ruins are merely ruins that are close to Valhalla.”

The Great Elder nodded. Brendel did not exaggerate or make a conclusion easily. This made him feel that the youth could be believed a little. But he did not speak and only exchanged glances with the other Druids.

The Great Elder weighed Brendel's words without speaking. Valhalla was an ancient legend in the Loop of Trade Winds where warriors spent their eternal rest. It also contained one of the primeval Fire Seeds. As long as the Fire Seed was lit up, the Laws of the Karanjar's landscape would be rebuilt, and become a blessed land that was likely to be as wide as the Kirrlutz empire.

The Blackthorn's Druids guarded this secret for generations. They also wanted to enter the Loop of Trade Winds to discover the truth behind the strange wind currents.

Valhalla was like a legend, there were signs of it appearing and disappearing, but the countless Druids that went into the Karanjar mountains was unable to find anything. The only thing that they found thus far was the ruins located in the center of the Loop of Trade Winds.

However, the Great Elder knew clearly that Andellu and the other Druids discovered only the outer sections of the ruins. Entering the center of the ruins meant that they had to brave the violent tempest.

No one was able to enter it.

"Brendel, I believe that Grey Raven has already informed you of the changes in the Loop of Trade Winds?"

The youth nodded. The change in the Loop of Trade Winds came from the Mana Wave's ebbing flow. It had possibly gone longer than just a few days.

"He has downplayed the truth; the troubles that we encountered are far greater than we told you." The Grand Elder explained.

Brendel observed the eighteen Druids in the hall silently. All the high ranking Druids in this region were present. If they had to seek an outsider for help, their troubles were certainly much bigger than he thought.

However, he did not take advantage of the situation and quietly waited with a nod. His humble attitude made the Great Elder believe he could be trusted.

“The Loop of Trade Winds originates from the Karanjar’s eastern peninsula, loops around the mountain, and is the most spectacular natural sight. The white clouds would form a wall that extends to the southern Aouine. Even Trenheim and Vlaada would be able to witness it.”

“<The geology of Lantonrand>, Grandmaster Tulman’s work—” Brendel was slightly surprised upon hearing that excerpt.

He had the impression that the Druids did not know about the worldly affairs, but they were knowledgeable about them after all. People merely did not know about this fact.

The Great Elder nodded: “You are well read. The Circle of Skies is a loose group and the Druids in it act on various tasks. They have observed the Dark Forest for a very long time. As for us, the council of Blackthorn, we have guarded the secret of the Loop of Trade Winds for generations.”

He looked past the trees’ crowns and stared at the wall of white clouds that reached tens of thousands meters long. It extended endlessly while birds flew below it like black dots.

“The patch of Dark Forest located in Trenheim’s south has always been touted as ‘The Wilderness closest to civilization’. Trenheim rarely receives the invasion of monsters, and it is equally rare to see a monster straying at the forest’s edge.”

Brendel agreed with the assessment. The gamers would not enter the Dark Forest if it was overly aggressive and excessively difficult. They would not have been able to enter the heart of the Karanjar mountains as well.

“The reason for that stability is due to the Laws of the Loop of Trade Winds, isn’t it?”

The Druids were shocked when Brendel stated his conclusion.

“How did you know?”

Brendel ignored their shock: “It’s been a month since we entered the Dark Forest. There were two lightning storms, a day of snow, elven sunny days, three days of extreme heat, and the rest were cloudy days. There was a week where there were less than six hours of sun, while there was a day with no night. These supernatural events happen more when one goes further into the Dark Forest... And yet in this illogical Wilderness, there’s a wind that’s unchanging and reaches the Karanjar Peninsula the

entire year, bringing along sufficient rainwater as well. Doesn't it mean there are hidden Laws?"

The Great Elder's staff dropped onto the ground with a clatter, but he did not bend his waist to pick it up and merely stared at Brendel with a complicated expression: "...You, do understand this place very well."

"Indeed, as you have guessed," the Elder stopped for a moment before he continued: "We discovered that the Laws from the Loop of Trade Winds stabilizes the Dark Forest, but the situation has changed recently."

"What exactly are the changes?"

"We used to be able to enter the Loop of Trade Winds, but it has become dangerous. There is strong activity of monsters lurking everywhere in the forest, and the Ancient Trees are not giving us any directions... And in that location... that location..."

The Grand Elder was struggling to find an appropriate description:

"Seems to be shrouded in a huge fog. One cannot see or hear anything. The people who went outside the settlement were attacked and became injured, but fortunately, there are no deaths."

"I see, so this is why you are afraid that it's a sign. The Laws around the Loop of Trade Winds are weakening slowly, and once that happens, the stability of the Karanjar Peninsula would be gone. The rampaging mana from the Mana Waves would sweep across the entire area, and even Trenheim would be affected. The Druids' work throughout the ages would be destroyed."

Brendel's words went straight to the point. The Great Elder's expression was grave and he nodded.

The current Aouine had no ability to handle the creatures in the south. Once the change happens to the Karanjar Peninsula, the entire Trenheim, and perhaps even the Randner region would be turned into Wilderness.

Brendel compared the possibility against his memories in the game: "Indeed, your hypothesis isn't wrong. But this problem isn't without a solution."

"There's a solution?" Andellu blurted. The Elders tried coming up with solutions for

half a month without success, and the youth had one when the information was just relayed to him?

[I-Is he lying?]

“I’m the one who finds it strange. If you know about the Mana Wave, why wouldn’t you know about the link between the two?”

The Great Elder was surprised: “You mean to say that the Laws of the Loop of the Trade Winds are weakened by the Mana Wave?”

“Isn’t it obvious that there’s a pattern where the Laws weaken when the Mana Waves come?”

“Hold on! The Mana Waves only happened in the last century, and even during the Month of the Demonic Moon where the Mana is strongest, there has never been an event like this!”

Brendel finally realized what the problem was: “Ah, I take it that you don’t know what the Waves of Calamity are?”

“What is that?”

“Multiple Mana Waves that happen approximately every thousand years. The previous Waves of Calamity happened in the Era of Chaos, and it’s going to happen again soon. The Loop of Trade Winds is currently affected by it.”

The Druids’ expressions changed. Monsters became more aggressive during heightened concentrations of Mana. What would happen if an incredible burst of Mana surged over the region?

“Did you say multiple?! I remembered that you have spoken of that term before, but we equated it with a single Mana Wave. Is it possible that the term is chosen because of multiple Mana Waves happening all at once? What a blunder, I didn’t think that it would be so serious!”

[This is indeed serious. There are no gamers here to handle this event.]

Brendel glanced at Andellu: “Have you not contacted the other members of your Circle? I’m sure there is a headquarters located in your Holy Land. Wouldn’t they keep

the doctrines of the past centuries? Is there truly no one who knew about the Waves of Calamity?"

The Great Elder wondered if the youth had some kind of ties with the Druids; the latter knew too much about the Druids:

"Allow me to explain. For the Druids to communicate with each other, we would rely on the wind to pass on messages. We would require at least a season to send and receive a reply. Furthermore, the next season is Spring, the season of the Goddess Nia. When we receive our reply, it would be summer."

"I see," Brendel nodded, "then let us get back to the topic of solving this issue. I'm afraid that I can't wait until summer."

"Do you have a solution, Lord Brendel?" The Great Elder changed his tone, causing the youth to scratch his head when he heard the usage of his title again.

"The single solution that I know of, is to ensure the Laws don't change even if the Waves of Calamity happen."

"You mean...?"

"Valhalla."

Chapter 120

The Green Tower's market

===== Nordas's POV =====

The Tree Elves chanced upon the pale human who rarely left his abode come outside, and they greeted him warmly and curiously:

“A good day to you, Nordas.”

“Today's weather is quite good, you should take a walk!”

The women chattered next to his ears, causing him to feel a little overwhelmed. If it were in the past, he would have felt overjoyed when these many pretty Elven girls surrounded him and spoke him with a smile, but now he only felt that everything was unfamiliar to him.

The rays from the sun that pierced through the shade seemed to be especially glaring, and the young officer could not help but raise his hand to block them. Locking himself up in his house for a long duration had seemed to cause him to be unable to adjust to the outside environment.

“What is it, do you feel unwell?” A young female Tree Elf girl with concern.

“No,” he shook his head and forced a smile.

He looked at the settlement below him. The Tree Elves had allocated him an area that was in the north-eastern direction. There was a flat platform which had several rooms built and the elves resided in there too. It was in between three Ancient Trees, and the environment was quite pleasing.

Everyone was friendly with him, but Nordas always felt distant from them and felt that he did not belong there.

“What's going on?” He stared at the settlement below for a while. “Why is it so noisy?”

“I heard there are many outsiders who had come in.”

“Outsiders?”

“Humans, like you.”

“Oh, but there are also Lizardmen.” The Tree Elves chatted amongst themselves again.

“Do you want to come along with us, Nordas?” Someone suggested.

The youth was a little interested, but one of the Elven guards came down and saw the youth. Her alluring voice came after a slight pause: “Nordas, you finally came out?”

“Lady Calina,” Nordas recognized her as she was the one who showed him his room: “I heard that there are outsiders who came in?”

“Yes, quite a few. Why, do you still want to leave? But there usually isn’t anyone who would leave the Green Tower. The Druid Elders do occasionally go out to the outside world, but they won’t bring y—”

She suddenly realized something: “I understand, you want to see if those outsiders are your companions, right?”

Nordas nodded.

“I heard it’s a human lord.”

“A human lord?” Nordas felt it was strange and asked: “Why would he come here? Don’t the Druids avoid contact with the humans?”

“I don’t know,” Calina shook her head: “but it seems they are the Elders’ guests. There are a few kingdoms. Kirrlutz, Galbu, oh, and your fellow countrymen from Aouine.”

“Aouine?” Nordas’s eyes widened in shock, and he was suddenly excited: “Calina, is it possible for you to help me with a favor?”

“I know, you want me to bring you to them, right?”

The youth smiled with embarrassment.

“But what’s so good about the outside world,” the Elven guard shook her head and sighed: “very well, come with me.”

“Nordas, are you leaving?” One of the Tree Elves asked.

He nodded as he could only think about his wife who might be waiting for him.

===== Brendel’s POV =====

Brendel had just finished discussing with the Elder Druids. In order to resolve the troubles of the Loop of Trade Winds, the best way would be to find where the Fire Seed was kept in Valhalla. According to legend, once the Fire Seed was lit, the Dark Forest would gradually become a protected land, and everything would be solved.

However, he still needed to wait for three more days, due to a need to investigate the area again as the earlier scouts had been attacked. According to the descriptions from the Druids, he suspected that it was a rare monster that attacked the Druids.

Even though he had fought against it a few times, he remembered the unique attacking patterns.

His thoughts were suddenly broken by Amandina’s sigh:

“That’s beautiful.”

Brendel turned around and saw her looking at an Elf playing a flute near a bridge. The music rhythm was elegant and beautiful, easily drawing one in, and it made them wonder if the tune was about a tale or a location.

The Green Tower in the game was known for its beautiful environments. The wall of clouds served as their background, build in the middle of the sky. The settlement was a city built on trees, linked by vine bridges and suffused with a taste of fantasy.

Ever since Brendel left the meeting in the Blackthorn’s hall, he promised Amandina and Scarlett to take a stroll in this strange city. Amandina was incredibly excited on this day, and he rarely saw her so happy.

The three had come to a market called ‘The Centaur’s hooves’ in the city. The market was suspended in mid-air. It was a structure completely made out of wood and there were three sections.

The four corners of the market were linked by vine bridges, but the market itself was suspended in the air by magic.

There were quite a number of Tree Elves, but the main occupants were still centaurs. There were various clothes, accessories, strange plants and fruits, magic materials, unique minerals, and a few artifacts containing magic.

The Dark Forest had an abundance of materials, which was why there were many varied goods in the market. The currency was not limited to gold and silver, but also an exchange of goods.

In truth, Gold and silver were also considered as a type of material.

Brendel, Amandina, Sifrid, and Scarlett gathered at the third level. There was an ongoing fight— The centaurs were hotheaded and frequently fought with each other, but there were a dedicated dueling grounds to allow them to vent their anger. The Tree Elves occasionally had an archery competition, but Brendel and the others did not have the luck to witness one.

After watching the centaurs' duel, they went to a bar that was run by a Tree Elf and sampled a special wine made from flower nectar. It tasted like a flower wine, but the aftereffects were powerful, and Brendel realized he made a mistake. Amandina and Scarlett were not great at drinking, and their cheeks were red after drinking a small mouthful.

Brendel hurriedly stopped them. There would be trouble if they get drunk in the bar because they could not hold their liquor.

But Amandina looked like she still wanted to stay in the bar. She got to hear about a tree that produced gems which looked like emeralds, but the transparency was greater. The best part about it was that it was inexpensive.

She was moved in an instant, and she started to pester Brendel to bring them over to the shops with the aid of the alcohol.

The youth shook his head when he saw her make a tantrum with a red face. The calm and intelligent noble girl had such a terrible resistance to alcohol. But the suggestion had also made him feel like he had been persuaded to check it out, and he knew that he could not resist it.

[It seems like the women in this world also have no resistant towards shiny things. I'm sure people in this world said that they resemble dragons in this aspect.]

It was wise of him to bring out a few Mana Crystals out from the mine. Although these crystals were considered not the best crystals out there, they were easily able to exchange for a large number of accessories made with the trees' gems.

When he presented a small piece of Mana Flame Agate before the centaur shopkeeper, the latter knew that there was a big spender in front of him.

The tree gems would not sell for much, so the Centaur tried to inquire subtly whether the human lord needed magical artifacts, while presenting the accessories that he made on his own.

Brendel found it a little hilarious. While he did know that he could buy many genuine magical materials in the shop, it was rare to find anything worthwhile. Beguiling a bunch of newbies would be possible for the shopkeeper, but a veteran like him would never fall for his tricks.

"Brendel, just let him take them out," Amandina squinted with a red face and said in a small voice: "a-and let us take a look whether he makes them better than you."

Brendel found she was quite adorable acting this way, so he nodded: "Alright, let us take a look."

The white centaur immediately showed a delighted expression, if he was able to sell one or two magic items, then there would be no need to sell anything else for the whole month.

He took out a pair of rings in a mystifying manner and said to Brendel: "My good man, these are rings I bought from a witch. The rumor has it that they are imbued with the magic of love. If your two companions wear them, they would love you for all eternity without changing their hearts."

"W-what rubbish is this!" Amandina cupped Sifrid's both ears, and spoke to the centaur in an upset tone: "Take them away, he wouldn't buy these despicable objects!"

Brendel shook his head with a smile.

[These rings are merely imbued with the 'charm' magic. If these rings were claimed to

be imbued with the magic of love, wouldn't it mean that my ring is the divine artifact of the Wind E— Huh. The Ring of the Wind Empress on my hand is the real deal. Though there are multiple copies of it.]

He coughed once and shook his head: "If you only have these things, I think it will be fine if we just buy a few accessories with the tree gems."

"Ahh, please wait," the centaur immediately tried to halt them: "I do have something good right now, I'm sure you would be pleased, human lord, you wouldn't be able to buy it anywhere else."

Brendel was slightly surprised: "Do you know me?"

The centaur gave a mysterious laugh: "Respectfully, human lord, I've conducted business for decades. I do believe I know most of the people in the Green Tower, and I've seen quite a few human lords too."

"I see, business must be difficult."

The centaur immediately had the word awkward written on his face. He knew the truth about the rings was definitely seen through by him. He could only smile bravely: "I promise you, human lord, that it wouldn't be of terrible quality this time."

"Oh?"

"I truly bought this thing from a witch and she was an outsider, just like you who have come here." The centaur said as he brought out a box.

There was a rock fragment in the shape of a shield in the box, and Brendel's heart skipped a beat when he saw it.

[The Rock Key!]

The Rock Key.

Legend stated that it opened the doors between the continent and another dimension filled with the Earth Element.

In the game, its other use was to activate a city that was built in the Wilderness. It was similar to a Fire Seed. The Fire Seed represented the Laws of Order, while the Rock

Key created the fundamental Elements.

This was how Mother Marsha formed the world and gave birth to its shape. The Laws bound the Mana, while the Elements established the structure.

It was quite valuable in the game, and there were times where there simply were no stock to meet the demand. It was also a core item used in a high-level quest that involved any Earth Element powers.

For example, the Sword of Earth, Halran Gaia, had such a quest to upgrade it.

[Even if one tried searching for it, their shoes would be torn to shreds without ever catching a glimpse of it. Obtaining this item is based on ridiculous luck, not effort.]

The corner of Brendel's eyes jolted once when he the shield-like rock piece.

"Boy, your luck is pretty good—" Orthlyss seemed to have felt Brendel's rush of emotions and woke up from her slumber.

He nodded, but there was no change in his expression, asking: "What is this?"

"The Rock Key. Legend states that it can connect our world to another world's tunnel—" The centaur shopkeeper replied.

Brendel interrupted him with feigned irritation: "Another world? What does that world have?"

"Erm..." The centaur was immediately at a loss for words. He had accepted the transaction when the witch told this rumor to him. That damned old woman even took away one of the best tree gems that he had.

"I think it leads to a Plane where it's related to the Earth Element?" He considered the terms that can be used to explain another world.

"A Plane of the Earth Element?" Brendel acted like he did not understand and his face was completely innocent: "Why would I want to go there?"

"Boy," Orthlyss could not help but shake her head: "Your ability to bluff is as good as Eirelannt. She would be very fond of you if she were to meet you."

“Eirelannt, you say?” Brendel asked inwardly.

“Yes, we...” Orthlyss suddenly coughed and corrected herself: “Gatel, Farnezain, and Sanorso, as well as Eirelannt who was the oldest, well, they went on adventures when they were young, and it was also mostly her who was the point of contact with the Lords and merchants.”

“So you mean she’s the commander?”

“Something like that.”

While Brendel and Orthlyss were conversing with each other, the centaur seemed to be stuck in a rut. Brendel did not seem as interested as the rings presented earlier to him, and it made him a little depressed.

“If you please, Human lord, that witch had also told me that it is tremendously useful to an Elementalist.”

[That’s true. Using the Rock Key would open a path to a different world filled with the Earth Element. Just opening the tunnel for twenty seconds would allow the Elementalist’s Earth Elemental Pool to expand by a hundred times. It’s even possible to sustain twenty to thirty spells. Under the circumstances, if the Elementalist can manage their Mana, they would become a superman.]

Still, Brendel had never seen anyone use this core item that was worth millions of Tor coins as a one-time usage item in the game with his own eyes. It was a pay-to-win measure that was beyond common sense.

The centaur seemed to think that this statement was enough to make it work. Brendel secretly laughed as he observed him, and pretended to be slightly persuaded: “Is that so, then how much is this thing worth?”

The centaur considered raising it to a sky-high price and have that Flame Agate in Brendel’s handed over to him. His Flame Agate crystal was almost half the value of his entire store, but stating such a price might incur the human’s wrath and get him to leave in a huff.

Just as he was hesitating, a hand that appeared out of nowhere threw out a similar Flame Agate crystal, and reached out for the box of the Rock Key like a snake going for its prey.

“Shopkeeper, I want this.” The owner of the voice was crisp and quick.

But Brendel’s reactions were almost instantaneous, just as the hand managed to touch the box, Brendel had already invoked his Elementalist’s powers and shot out a bolt of lightning to strike the Rock Key, and he reached out for the Rock Key.

The owner of the voice was apparently not one to be taken lightly either.

“Damn it, an Elementalist!” The person scoffed lightly and drew out her sword to strike the Rock Key away.

The Rock Key smashed into a wooden pillar before it bounced back towards the two people. The woman tried to snatch it away, but the Rock Key suddenly stopped in mid-air slightly out of reach, before it flew towards Brendel like a ball of cotton swept away by a wind.

“A Wind Binding spell? An Elementalist specializing in two Elements!” The woman stomped her foot and gave up directly on snatching away the Rock Key, and thrust her sword towards Brendel.

The youth was delighted to see the attack instead of being surprised. Before she could even reach him, vines came from everywhere and bound her up tightly.

It was the Druids’ barrier magic—

A clattering sound happened. The sword of the woman who looked like a young noble dropped to the ground.

“I-It hurts...” Her eyes narrowed in pain.

Brendel finally had the time to observe his opponent. He was slightly taken aback. She was not a Senian or Tree Elf, but a full-blooded Kirrlutz citizen.

The golden hair coupled with a pair of cold emerald eyes made him certain that they were definitely the traits of the Kirrlutz Empire’s royal blood. Surely, her ancestors were amongst the King of Fire’s first followers, the Eagle Knights.

The possible princess wore a white dress and long black leather boots, with her wavy hair bundled into two luscious groups of ponytails. She struggled against the vines and glared hatefully at Brendel.

[Wow, golden twintails! But to act violently in the Druids' base, how bold!]

"Y-you scoundrel! How dare you steal from a lady!" The corners of her eyes were raised high enough till they became sharp as she glared at him.

"Hold on, when did this become yours?" Brendel hurriedly interrupted her.

"I, I paid, didn't I!" The girl stuttered once, but she immediately spoke as though she was in the right: "Return it to me, you evil country bumpkin!"

Brendel glanced at the Flame Agate: "My Lady, you threw down a Flame Agate, but did you see the shopkeeper accept it? He has not even stated the price of the Rock Key. A forced transaction is certainly what a brute would do."

"You!"

The young woman was so angry that her chest was going up and down, but she could not hit him because her limbs were restrained. She turned her head back, and her green eyes immediately brightened.

"Faena, what happened?" It was a male teenager with black hair.

He wore a black robe that was unique to the Kirrlutz's royal Alchemists, and it caused Brendel to stare blankly at the young boy who looked no older than fifteen.

Kirrlutz's royal Alchemists had to be at least level ten in Alchemy before they could meet the qualifications to enter the ranks. There had to be some kind of line drawn for being so talented, right?

But he certainly did not expect the young boy to inspect his companion for a moment before raising his head at him with a yell: "You hurt my companion. I request for a duel with you!"

The young boy looked up at the Ancient Treants and shouted: "Venerable spirits, I promise I won't hurt this man's life and I just want to teach him a lesson. This is a quarrel between our race and I hope no one else interferes!"

When he was done with his words, there was a green flash in the trees' crowns.

"The promise has been accepted."

[Oh for crying out loud. The barrier won't work anymore on him, though the girl is still stuck. It looks like there's a veteran who understands the Druids here, but you've got to be kidding me if I have to fight him. He's just a kid!]

But before he could respond, Scarlett had struck her lightning spear against her palm which caused an audible smack. She glared coldly at the two opponents in front of her and said: "My lord, allow me to represent you."

"A Highlander?" The young boy was slightly surprised at Scarlett's flaming red hair: "You're not locals?"

"They are Aouine's citizens!" Faena sneered at them and continued to struggle: "A bunch of rogues and thieves!"

But the more she resisted against the vines, the tighter they became.

"Urgh, it hurts so much—"

"Faena, stop moving. It's useless to struggle and it would be undone after a while!" The young boy sighed at his companion. It seemed like the haughty noble girl was also quite troubling for him: "This is one of the Druids' spell, Barrier of Peace. You were told not to be violent in this place!"

"It's all because of these barbarians!" Faena said with wet eyes: "You have to teach them a lesson, Rono! The dignity of the Kirrlutz Empire cannot be blemished!"

Amandina frowned when she heard the last sentence.

Brendel secretly gritted his teeth when the words, 'country bumpkin', 'knaves', 'scoundrels', continued to come out from her lips. He was never very receptive to the Kirrlutz Empire in the game, and when he heard that particular sentence from Faena, it finally went past his point of tolerance.

"Well said," His eyebrow went up and he had a chilling smile that showed his teeth, "the Kirrlutz Empire's dignity cannot be blemished—"

The young boy looked back at Brendel and Scarlett who stood in front of him, then spoke scornfully: "A man who needs to have a woman to fight for him doesn't have the right to speak to me in that tone!"

Brendel felt a vein popping up over his forehead.

“Scarlett, step aside, I want to see how unbeatable the so-called Kirrlutz Empire is.”

Chapter 121

Furious duel

The concerned parties moved to an open area that was next to the shop, but Brendel suddenly raised his head and saw many knights rushing over to their location. Apparently, the barrier's activation had alerted them.

All of them had Kirrlutz's uniforms.

[But it is strange. Why are these people here?]

The knights were still quite a distance away from them.

When Brendel returned his gaze to the young boy to indicate that he was ready for the duel, the latter had already thrown two bottles of explosives made from Alchemy.

He frowned slightly and took a step back. Even though the young boy said he would not injure him, he did not hold back at all. He did not indicate for the duel to start too.

If these two bottles were thrown onto a normal person, they would definitely be crippled and possibly die.

The bottles exploded in mid-air. The boiling acid and glass fragments flew in every direction, but before they reached him, a wall of blinding flames was raised in front of him.

The Fire Shield spell on the Crimson Blessing had activated automatically.

When the flames and white smoke disappeared, Brendel found two bizarre humanoid creatures the size of a human adult lumbering towards him, and their twisted and ugly bodies had Magic Formations crawling all over them. They looked like a pile of rotting meat, but one would realize they were no weaker than gargoyles after looking at them closely.

The name was simply called Mutant in the game. It was a level 25 Alchemical Creature. One could call it as living creature, but it had no feelings, emotions, or intelligence.

This was why it did not go against the teachings of the Holy Cathedral of Fire.

Brendel immediately understood the young boy's intentions when he saw twelve metallic orbs hovering behind the latter.

Rono wanted to use the Alchemical Creatures and other defensive tools to gain more time.

[This boy is trying to prepare an Advanced Magic Formation. He's really quite experienced in battles. Does he belong to some special department? Perhaps a Battle Alchemist?]

He was slightly surprised. Kirrlutz's royal Alchemists had a special group that was focused on combat. They wore blood-red emblems of eagles and were called Battle Alchemists.

[A Battle Alchemist is indeed one of the sub-professions for an Alchemist to advance in the direction of combat, but it's rare to find one. And this boy is really a little too young if he's one. Quite the talented individual.]

However, he mocked the boy while shaking his head: "Your abilities only go this far?"

The young lord did not even pull his sword against the Mutants. His right hand sliced through the air, and he invoked the White Raven Sword Arte's wind pressure against the two Mutants in front of him. The stats of a Gold-ranker could hardly be imagined. The two mutants did not even have the chance to resist the vertical hurricane and were hurled back.

The girl trapped by the vines shrieked as one of the Mutants went past her, causing her long golden hair to dance in the wind. The other Mutant was thrown upwards towards the knights, but their reactions were swift and split apart in both directions to avoid it.

One crashed against the ground, another was flung over the fence and dropped hundreds of meters like a stone.

"It seems that the Kirrlutz Empire doesn't amount to much," Brendel said as he raised his hand again.

The wind started up yet again. The boy was astounded. He had never expected his

opponent from Aouine to be so difficult. Two superior Iron-ranked monsters did not even delay him for a second. Even the strongest opponents he had faced in the past would take a moment to deal with the Mutants.

“The Shield of Tyr!” He shouted. The metallic magical artifacts immediately formed a circle around him, and twelve transparent shields blocked off the hurricane that Brendel conjured easily.

Tyr was a famous Magic Artificer who was good at defensive magic. He invented numerous defensive magic spells and artifacts.

The boy inhaled deeply after defending against Brendel’s conjured wind and was prepared to counter-attack, but a burly hand pressed down on his shoulder.

The knights had arrived.

“Rono, you’re not his match! Fall back, and support us with Alchemy. Leave this bastard to us!”

The knight who stopped the boy was covered in full armor and wore a purple-green helmet that covered most of his face. His voice echoed within the metal plates, and Brendel quickly recognized him as a Centurion.

“Captain?” Rono was surprised to hear that assessment; he initially thought the opponent in front of him was a second-rate Elementalist, but it appeared that the youth angered by Faena was a difficult foe and required the entire squadron to fight against him.

“Leave it to us.”

“Where’s Grandmaster Cullens?”

“He will be arriving shortly.”

The captain of the knights turned to look at Brendel, and the green eyes under the helmet were full of cautiousness: “Ser, did you say that the Kirrlutz Empire amounts to nothing much? You seemed to be confident in yourself! Allow us to show you what we’re capable of, citizen of Aouine—”

He raised his sword, and twenty knights rushed out from both sides.

The boy did not waste time too. The metallic orbs spread out started firing lasers vertically onto the ground to draw a Magic Formation. Each laser created a node, and the boy threw down a Mana Crystal in the center of each node. The Magic Formation was divided into three layers, and had twenty-two nodes to form a tapered formation.

The Magic Formation was swiftly created and its speed could be compared to Blood Magic. However, these metallic orbs were expensive to use because they required extremely pure Amber Gemstones as fuel. The creation of these orbs was also costly, and only a few people knew how to make them.

[Indeed, only the Kirrlutz Empire can afford to let their Alchemists use these luxury items. But these people make me fucking laugh. Do they really think the Kirrlutz Empire is the human race's pride?]

The tragic ending of the Princess Regent was linked to this 'prestigious empire'. Duke Arreck was unable to give an answer to where her assassins came from, but the gamers were everywhere on the continent.

The truth was eventually revealed.

[I haven't even thought of going after you bastards, and you dare to reveal yourself in front of me? Good. It's time to let these arrogant idiots understand that the world doesn't revolve around Kirrlutz. You're just the favorite kingdom of the Holy Cathedral of Fire.]

He glanced at the ground Rono was at. It was a Magic Formation to invoke the Wind Fog spell. It greatly aided an Alchemist in close combat, and he naturally could not let his opponent finish it. Even though the latter's speed was indeed an envy for most Alchemists, it did not matter to Brendel at all.

The young lord reached out for a Flame Agate in his bag. The Mana that it contained was more than ten times the amount the boy's Mana Crystal had. Brendel invoked an advanced Magic Formation with the Crimson Blessing which immediately shattered his Flame Agate.

The centaur shopkeeper howled silently in distress when he saw that sudden scene. That was a Flame Agate Mana Crystal of the highest quality!

The Mana that gushed out from the broken fragments appeared like it had a physical form. Because of the purity, there was a sky blue mist that wrapped around Brendel's

hand. Three Magic Formations formed on his arm and condensed the Mana into several balls. The blue Mana spheres were vibrating slightly as though they were about to burst out into an explosion.

Brendel then lifted his hand, fired the projectiles past three incoming knights as they left a trail of blue light. They shot into the boy's Magic Formations and his expression immediately changed. The Magic Formation that was drawn nearly to completion was destroyed instantly.

[Counter Magic specifically to disrupt an Alchemist's Magic Formations! He's also an Alchemist who's experienced in combat!]

The boy staggered backward a few steps and coughed out blood. He quickly covered his mouth, but the blood leaked out from his fingers.

[How is it possible for him to form a Magic Formation so quickly? That Counter Magic Formation is at least a Seventh-Circle Magic Formation. It's even greater than my own by two Circles! Blood Magic? That's not right either, it can't be used in Advanced Magic Formations. Even if there is one, a Blood Magic Formation is red, and that Magic Formation of his is clearly white.]

The boy was completely stunned as he collapsed to the ground. The feedback from the Counter Magic had greatly damaged his organs in an instant.

"Rono!" The lady who was still tied up by the vines gasped.

The knights were also shocked. They did not expect the greatest genius amongst the current Empire's youths was gravely injured in just a single move. What was even more stunning was that his opponent used Alchemy as well, and he was not much older than the boy was.

But the commander of the knights had his shock quickly turned into anger. He could not imagine what fury the emperor would have if he knew the genius under his protection got injured, as well as what kind of fate would befall on his head.

"Kill him!" The centurion roared, but he suddenly realized that this was still the territory of the Druids, and he quickly changed his words: "No, capture that Aouine man!"

"Catch me?" Brendel's laughter was cold: "What qualifications do you have to do so?"

He glanced at his surroundings. The twenty-odd knights had the strength of an upper-tier Silver-ranker. On one hand, it was clear that Kirrlutz had strong military power, and the other was that the boy and the lady's identities were not simple.

Still, it was just a mere twenty-odd Silver-rankers to him.

[I shouldn't waste any more time. They probably have strong reinforcements.]

He took a single step forward.

And an aura exploded from the youth. Under the combined might of his Gold-ranker's strength and level 16 Aouine Military Swordsmanship, the aura took on a visible form of a white mist.

Even though he did not take his sword, the knights felt like there were countless blades pointing at them.

The centurion could not have imagined the youth had reached the standards of a Gold-ranker, and that he was already a grandmaster swordsman—

"A grandmaster swordsman!" The knights shouted as their formation was quickly broken.

The overwhelming, physical pressure from the youth could not be withstood. In just a single heartbeat, the twenty knights were completely downed.

Brendel expected this outcome. If he were to engage these knights before the events in Schafflund, it would have taken him considerable trouble to deal with them. But they were pretty much harmless to him. He spun round to look at the female aristocrat from Kirrlutz.

"D-don't come any closer..."

Chapter 122

Veronica

“Faena, what’s going on?”

Before Brendel could respond to the girl’s words, another man wearing a black formal attire for nobles walked out from the crowd of centaurs and spoke to her. He looked at the bound girl before his eyes moved to the coughing Rono, then at the sprawling knights on the ground, his facial expressions gradually turning to shock.

Finally, when he raised his head, he discovered Brendel with his hand still raised. Scarlett and Amandina were a short distance behind him. Without a second word, he drew out his sword and charged towards the youth with a scowl.

Brendel felt a burning sensation from that man’s sword.

[A passive Element? He’s also a Gold-ranker!]

Brendel and Scarlett’s eyebrows twitched. Their Element Powers reacted at the same time, and the air between the three people stagnated— The temperature of the air suddenly dropped, while Scarlett’s halberd had lightning dancing all over it, with the people around feeling their hair raised.

The middle-aged man’s sword did not meet any blades, but a wall of flames that appeared in front of Brendel. He frowned and retreated instead, cautiously assessing the two youths in front of him.

“Who are you?” His heart was secretly racing.

[Two Gold-rankers at such a young age? Why have I not heard anything about them?]

He easily understood that Brendel and Scarlett could not be Senians or Tree Elves. In fact, Scarlett’s vibrant red hair allowed him to identify her as a Highlander.

Faena would have patted her chest in relief if she could when she saw the middle-aged man appear. “Count Cullens, these people are from Aouine! They were the ones who

hurt Rono and the others, and that... that... young man, he said... the Empire isn't worth much."

"The Empire isn't worth much? Hmph!" Cullens repeated her words with a heavy scoff.

The Empire's glory was the pride of any citizen of the Eagles. Aouine was made up of nothing more than a bunch of rebels in his mind, and if it was not for the Wind Elves interfering behind the scenes in that fateful year, the Empire would have vanquished them.

Even though Aouine gained the recognition of the Holy Cathedral of Fire, the proud Kirrlutz Empire did not wish to admit this fact. In his mind, these Aouine citizens were nothing more than a bunch of uneducated people, and their nobles could not be considered as nobles.

Though it was true that their Ancestral King Erik's lineage could be traced back to a family with a long history in Kirrlutz.

He stared at Brendel darkly: "Boy, did you say these words?"

Brendel was studying Cullens intently, trying to figure out what sort of background the latter had. However, there were simply far too many nobles in the Kirrlutz Empire, and the number of people who managed to become a Gold-ranker was as numerous as the stars. He simply could not figure out the identity of the middle-aged man.

"I'm simply stating the truth." He answered flippantly.

Count Cullens gnashed his teeth, but he had a smile on his pale face: "What an astute observation. I too have observed something. It seems that your kingdom is going through many difficulties recently. Oberg the Seventh was defeated by a single army from Madara, and he had to send his messengers to our emperor and beg for reinforcements with tears and snot. Ah, that old fool must be on his deathbed by now."

He pretended to think for a moment and sighed: "And there's a civil war that's about to happen. It seems like your kingdom is in great trouble, young man. I'm not sure if your princess is interested in our Emperor's ninth son, perhaps His Highness could lend a helping hand if she agrees to marry him. Even though our Empire that isn't worth much, solving the insignificant troubles of Aouine is really as easy as lifting a hand."

Cullens's words were full of ridicule and any Aouine citizen would be offended by it. Amandina gritted her teeth and forced her anger down in order to not fight back with ugly words.

Scarlett frowned as well. No matter how despicable and deplorable Aouine was, she was still a citizen of this kingdom. Having an outsider ridicule the kingdom made her feel uncomfortable.

It was Brendel who let rage take him. A mocking grin spread across his face, but it was clear that only darkness remained in his expression.

His hand reached Halran Gaia's hilt for the first time.

He did not easily take out his sword because he did not wish to kill. But since the person in front of him wanted to die, he did not mind granting his wish.

[You're not even close to Kodan's skill, and I have already bested him. I haven't even brought out my Planeswalker abilities. Ten strikes, and I'll be able to shut you up even without Scarlett's interference.]

Sifrid was still holding on to Amandina's hands. She did not feel much for Aouine, but she had never seen the youth so furious before. But most of all, there was an unnerving feeling that something would happen to him. She felt she needed to stop the situation from becoming worse.

"This place doesn't welcome you! You should leave!" She spoke in a crisp voice as she looked up at the Count.

Cullens was momentarily taken aback. He did not expect a Senian child to have the audacity to order him. He failed to speak for a few seconds, but he quickly came up with an insult: "As expected from savages, you can't even educate a chil—"

He ceased speaking. It was not just him, the nosy centaurs who were watching the scene suddenly became silent. The dueling grounds they were familiar were starting to be covered with a layer of frost that was visible to the eyes. The temperature dropped to the point where they started shivering a little.

Creaking sounds could be heard as the white frost forced the wooden planks on the floor to change their shape. It seemed like they were wailing before they shattered.

This snaking frost extended swiftly towards Cullens, and he showed a startled appearance.

[An Element Power of this magnitude? This Ice Element is exceedingly potent—]

He wanted to lift his own sword and fight back with his own Element Power, but someone bellowed:

“Halt!”

Cullens was distracted by the voice, but Brendel acted as though he did not hear it. Halran Gaia was already out of its sheath, and his Element Power was pushed to the limits as it mixed in with his fury. The scene where the heads of Graudin’s knights were lopped off was about to reappear again.

The terrifying power charged towards Cullens, but an even greater force severed it.

It was as though a wall had been erected all around Brendel and caused him to lose his connection to his Element Power.

The youth was naturally shocked, and he turned to the source of power. The centaurs who had gathered together were starting to part. A woman with long flowing green hair like a waterfall; along with a red cape covering one side of her shiny armor that covered her entire body.

The woman was very beautiful and appeared to be approximately forty years old. The only sign that gave her age away was the slight wrinkles around her eyes. She glared at Brendel’s direction, but it was meant to be meaningful because she was restraining the youth’s movements with her Element Power.

[You have got to be kidding me. Commander of the Azure Skies, Veronica? What kind of gaming script is this!]

Brendel suddenly felt his life was in danger as soon as he saw the unique pair of green eagle earrings.

She was one of the rare female commanders in the Kirrlutz Empire and a participant in the November War. She was also the highest commanding officer of the Alliance in the Eastern Battle Lines during the Second Holy War of this era.

She unsealed her Element Power fully a hundred years ago. She already had the titles of Great Sword Saint, Dragon Knight, The War Sage, and the Azure General for the past thirty years. No one knew how powerful she was right now. If one were to gather the strongest fighters in Kirrlutz, she would definitely be one of them.

She even had a relationship with Freya in the game, and one could say she was the latter's teacher.

[Even if Freya was at her peak strength in the game, she wouldn't be a match for Veronica. Shit, I don't want to meet this person here. The fact that I tried to kill Cullens— Although Kirrlutz is the cause of this incident, she's definitely going to side with the Empire.]

"You look down on the Empire?" Veronica's tone was completely void of warmth and she went right to the point.

And with her words, her aura changed and reached the youth like a blade pointing towards him. The latter flinched a little, but his eyes glared right back.

"It seems like Kirrlutz's citizens have gotten used to using suppression and conquest to solve problems, and thus they have forgotten the word 'chivalry'. It also seems like you're not just violent in your own kingdom, you do the same thing even when you're in foreign lands."

His heart was beating loudly but he did not show his anxiety in the slightest. This was the Druids' territory, and at least in this place, they would not dare to act rashly.

His words also struck directly at their sore point. Kirrlutz's cruelty and indifference were why they were harshly criticized amongst the other alliances in the Holy Cathedral of Fire. However, the Kirrlutz Empire held at least half of the Holy Cathedral of Fire's seven Cardinals' positions throughout the ages and thus held on tightly to their power.

Veronica scoffed coldly once before speaking again: "Having a sharp mouth wouldn't bring you any advantages. Cullens, teach this person from Aouine a lesson!"

Cullens sensed that Brendel was affected by Veronica's aura, and he gave a sinister smile. While he could not kill the youth in the Druids' territory, it would be fine to leave behind hidden injuries to make him permanently wounded. In fact, he was very willing to destroy not just one, but two talented youths from Aouine.

He bowed respectfully to Veronica and pulled out his sword to cut off the tendons in Brendel's wrists. Scarlett raised her halberd in response to block off the attacking point, but Veronica swept a glance at her, and the red-haired girl felt as though she was bitten by a venomous snake, and the halberd in her hands fell onto the ground with a clatter.

"You shouldn't have incurred our wrath!" Cullens smiled coldly, his blade nearing Brendel's hands.

Chapter 123

Two against One

Brendel looked at Cullens regretfully.

It was true that he was completely suppressed by Veronica's aura to the point where he could not move, but as Cullens approached him with each step, the Stats Windows on his retina were shuffling at a high speed.

- Character Stats.
- Planeswalker Card.
- Elemental Pool.
- Type.

He stopped at a certain card, then smiled at Cullens. The latter looked puzzled as to why the youth still had the guts to smile, but Veronica immediately sensed something was off:

"What, this boy is— Cullens, retreat!"

She tried to warn him but she was a second too late. A white-golden flaming blade appeared out of thin air and floated in front of Brendel. This was the first time Brendel had ever activated this card.

The unfortunate Cullens who had the misfortune to face the card stared fearfully at the sudden burst of Elemental power. He was unable to react in time because he never expected that Brendel was able to fight back under Veronica's suppression.

The blade made from pure flames struck Cullens's body directly, and he was flung back with such force that he spun in mid-air a dozen times before crashing heavily onto the wooden planks.

"Count Cullens!" The girl with twin golden ponytails exclaimed in astonishment.

Veronica's beautiful eyebrows lifted slightly as she did not expect Brendel's counterattack. She had initially been greatly displeased by Brendel's temerity to wound her men and instantly sought to quash him.

When her hand reached out for her blade, the Azure Green, to draw it out, she faltered at the last moment as she realized what she had done.

She carried the title of Illustrious Sword Saint and was a commander of an army who participated in countless battles. On top of that, she was over a hundred years old. Bullying a youth who looked no older than twenty would hurt the dignity of the Kirrlutz Empire.

[But I cannot allow the Empire to be insulted—]

She raised her hand and spoke in an icy tone: "Capture this man!"

Veronica glared at Brendel emotionlessly and swung down her hand. The latter's pressure lifted instantly as she spoke, while thirty-odd Imperial Knights who had followed her from behind rushed out.

[Even though a few of these Imperial Knights are not exactly worthy of the title, they should be able to defeat him even if he's a Gold-ranker. The typical Aouine swordsmen are nothing more than rabble. I just need to suppress his Element power and any other tricks that he has if he tries to use them again.]

Brendel thought he was being underestimated when the pressure on him lifted. He took a step back to fall into a stance and pulled out his sword fully for the first time. The heavy ink-light blade glinted against the sunlight.

"T-that... sword..." Faena rasped in surprise.

But Rono's yell drowned Faena's voice: "Be careful, he has the Crimson Blessing!"

The young boy crawled up slowly and wiped away the blood from his lips. One of his hands was planted firmly on his chest as he felt pain creeping all over his organs. Still, that agony was dulled from his surprise— Brendel's metallic gauntlets confirmed his earlier suspicion.

They were definitely the Crimson Blessing, or Bahamut's Grasp, the divine artifact that any Alchemist would crave for in their heart.

Flames had already enveloped Brendel's hands and they sped upwards to swallow Halran Gaia. The youth blazed across the field as he wielded in a horizontal position. At that moment, he appeared like he was a devil that came out from hell leaving behind a trail of flames.

Veronica's eyes widened upon seeing that sight.

[That's not a mere swordsman, even calling him a grandmaster swordsman isn't sufficient! This boy has reached the level of a sword saint! And that sword and magical gauntlets—]

She realized she made a huge blunder and immediately drew out her own weapon, but Brendel had already rushed into the midst of the Imperial Knights.

Orthlyss had woken up quite a while ago when Brendel invoked his Element Power. Her thoughts were calculated and calm as she delivered them to the latter.

“Attack from the left—”

“Take this opportunity to retreat—”

“Advan—”

“Counter and p—”

“...Boy, how are you doing this?” She suddenly stopped speaking. Brendel seemed like he was predicting the enemies' movements even better than she did. She had centuries of fighting experience, but what the youth possess?

[Even Gatel wouldn't be able to read better than this youth!]

Explaining the current situation seemed a little far-fetched with just the word 'talent'.

However, Brendel was seeing layers and layers of golden lines in his eyes to form a complex drawing.

The intentions of the knights were displayed fully before him. Attacking, defending, attempts to surround him; as long as they changed their thoughts, the lines would switch and point to the areas where they were aiming for.

It was the skill 'Evaluation' received from the Silver Elves, and he leveled it up for it with what little points he had.

Brendel realized that the skill was exceptionally compatible with Aouine's swordsmanship. The kingdom's clean and efficient style allowed him to proceed naturally from offense and defense like running water. It was truly a shocking display of martial feats as he combined multiple traits from the swordsmanship of Kodan, his grandfather, and the gamers. He even included a few points from Orthlyss's instructions.

The Imperial Knights' attacks were stopped even before they could attack. They felt completely stifled and soon realized what was wrong.

The youth seemed to know what they were doing, even when they tried to attack randomly or retreat subconsciously. No matter what they tried, a single move from the youth shut them down.

However, Brendel stopped his fatal attacks at the very last moment. The Imperial Knights were greatly surprised, as they knew he could easily kill them if he had the intention to do so. Still, they felt like they were being toyed with like how a cat would toy with a mouse, and it made them feel like they should just abandon their swords and run away as quickly as possible.

Did he spare them on purpose?

But he did not seem like he had the intention to do so.

In truth, he was analyzing the Kirrlutz Empire's swordsmanship closely, while half of his attention was placed on Veronica. When she finally started walking forward, Orthlyss reminded him:

"She's moving in."

"I'm curious," Brendel deflected one of the incoming swords and kicked his current opponent to make him off-balanced, "Ser Orthlyss. at the height of your power, are you stronger than that lady?"

"She's just a little girl," Orthlyss scoffed and replied with confidence: "I don't even need to use a weapon."

“What?” Brendel was shocked.

[Is your level that high?]

“Pay attention, she’s coming!”

Veronica indeed appeared right before his eyes, and her sword aimed for his throat. Electricity ran across his nerves as he frantically rolled backward to avoid her blade.

[How surprising. He actually seems to know where I’m going to attack, and his reactions are quick as well.]

But Brendel was getting scolded by Orthlyss.

“Why are you running away? Go and have a proper fight.” Orthlyss was greatly dissatisfied.

“Ser Orthlyss, I don’t mind fighting it out if we’re restricted to our swordsmanship, but the control of her Element Power is far superior compared to mine!” Brendel retreated repeatedly as consecutive thrusts went his way.

“Silly fool, if she tries to use her Element power, just fight back with everything you have. She will have to destroy the entire market first in order to suppress your full strength!”

Brendel blinked a few times.

[Of course! Even though the market has a barrier, it can only hold back two Gold-rankers’ Element powers. The barrier would be destroyed if it goes beyond that.]

That momentary pause nearly caused him to be struck in the face, but the youth managed to recover his senses at the last moment and tilt his head at the last moment. Veronica’s sword missed his cheek.

But the Azure Green that was clad in her aura caused a wound to open up.

Brendel felt a slight wetness spread and his eyes twitched a little along with a nervous smile. Veronica was half amused and exasperated when she saw his cramped expressions. This youth actually dared to lose his concentration right in front of her. Even accomplished sword saints at her level would not be so bold!

Yet this boy still managed to avoid her attack entirely!

Brendel did not know what his opponent was thinking about, but he decided to face Veronica properly after Orthlyss's reminder.

Chapter 124

Standing at the edge

Brendel took several steps back and readied himself into a defensive stance, and Veronica allowed him to do so. Her earlier attacks were nothing more than attempts to gauge his strength.

They took a pronounced pause as they sought for weakness in each other's stance. Brendel found hundreds of lines prodding at his body, and he shifted ever so subtly to react to any changes. It caused Veronica to knit her brows slightly.

[This level of raw talent... It's such a pity that he's not a Kirrlutz citizen, or I will definitely get him to be my disciple and inherit my swordsmanship.]

Silence filled the area and the tension rose to the point where everyone was holding their breaths. One could almost hear every subtle movement from both Brendel and Veronica.

The female commander was the first to attack. The Evaluation skill reduced the number of lines pointing to his body, but there was still a dazzling number that pointed all over his body. It was proof that the skill had its limits in predicting someone of her skill. In the end, Brendel turned it off and relied on his experience to defend against it.

Their blades met in screaming union, and a flash of green and black blinded the crowd. The youth gritted his teeth when he felt the immense impact. Veronica's blade had incredible speed and power which caused him to nearly shift out of a defensive position, but he planted his feet firmly on the ground to resist her.

Her blade drew back and she flicked it to his. He pulled his body back a little while rotating his sword so that its large flat blade guarded against her needle-like thrust.

As soon as the blades met again, her sword was drawn back like a bowstring and shot out towards its next target at his thigh. Brendel took a single step back while his sword swung down to sweep the incoming blade away.

Veronica utilized his momentum and allowed her blade to go up before she went for

an overhead sweep. The youth kicked off from the ground to the sides to avoid her sword, but there was almost no pause of the exchange of swords crashing into each other.

Both duelists changed the directions of their swords midway before their weapons clashed again. The female sword saint tried to disarm him by dragging his weapon upwards into the air. Brendel felt a force sticking onto his weapon like glue and hurriedly leaped into the air to avoid being disarmed, somersaulting once before retreating yet again.

Veronica's eyes widened a little when she saw his move, and she changed into another style again. Her arrangement of attacks started to grow in complexity and speed. A song of metallic rings echoed throughout the market. Even without the Analyze skill, Brendel felt he could see afterimages of the lines happening because Veronica was thrusting her sword at an astonishing speed.

However, it was not the speed of her sword but the intricate designs of her attacks that were causing him to break out in cold sweat. In order to defend against her swordsmanship, he had to find the best moment to block or deflect her attacks.

It was as though he had to get the thread into the eye of a needle, and he had to do it every single time on the first try.

On the other hand, Veronica was feeling a little baffled. The level of his swordsmanship had exceeded the depths of what Aouine's swordsmanship should be. No matter how many times she changed her patterns, he was able to fight against them as though he had been dueling against her for years, no, perhaps even decades against the different styles of the Kirrlutz Empire's swordsmanships.

Brendel continued to guard himself tightly while he clad his aura around Halran Gaia. Every time she attacked, he could sense the subtle changes of her form and reacted accordingly to it, improving little by little. Each parry and deflection took even less stamina than the previous ones.

[...I think I finally understand my grandfather's swordsmanship. It's not just having precise movements or fundamentals. It's about reading the enemy and finding the best moment to counter it.]

Veronica was an opponent that forced him to use everything he knew about Aouine's

swordsmanship. The memories of the old Brendel surfaced; his grandfather was strict about calculating the range of attacks when he trained as a child.

He parried Veronica's thrust and launched his own riposte for the first time. She easily knocked it away, but the knights around them gasped in utter amazement.

Was the youth actually holding his own against their commander?

Murmurs started to worm into Veronica's ears, and she gradually raised her power in order to calm them.

The barrier implemented in place started to flicker and distort as invisible blades ran across the ground and buildings. Finally, the spirits ignored the request made by Rono and started to go after her. However, the Sword Aura that she invoked instantly sliced them to pieces without even putting her mind into it. They were unable to enter within ten feet around her.

But Halran Gaia was able to suppress it by having a defensive barrier that formed tightly around Brendel like a cloak. Although the Azure Green was a Fantasy-ranked weapon, it had a Wind Element power and was countered by Halran Gaia's Earth Element power. This was the reason why he could avoid being cut by her weapon.

Veronica started to feel impatient.

The Kirrlutz Empire had sent them out as messengers in the name of improving the relationship with the Druids, but its real goal was to investigate the reason for the powerful Mana Resonance a few months ago. The wizards were certain that it was a Divine Resonance and it was likely to indicate the location of the Empire's long-lost weapon, Lionheart.

The court's Star Seers studied the stars for several months and had the same conclusion as the wizards. The Lionheart was incredibly important to the Empire. Even though Aouine's Ancestral King, Erik, stole it from the Empire several centuries ago, they had never stopped their desire of getting back the weapon.

Since this city was not governed by the Empire, it was necessary to keep a low profile. It was a mistake for Veronica to take her eyes off Faena, and it was another mistake to overwhelm the youth with everything she had at the first opportunity.

[The boy's concentration is at his sharpest and he's pushing his skills to his limits.

Even if I unleash the full extent of my techniques on him, I might not be able to overwhelm him given how good his reactions are right now. Controlling him with my aura wouldn't work as well because he's utilizing his sword's power.]

Veronica was feeling a little awestruck.

When did Aouine produced such a gifted swordsman? She was born in a family of swordsmen and was the most talented star in her generation, but she did not think that she could be compared to youth in front of him at his age.

Every once in a while when he surprised her with an unexpected move, she wanted to put down her sword and ask him if he was willing to go to Kirrlutz with her and become her student. His talent was truly out of this world.

As time continued to pass, Brendel finally discovered a certain pattern amidst her varied attacks that occurred.

[There's a very slight pause every time I make an unexpected move that counters her. Perhaps she's trying to read my attacks? If I can exploit that... Kirrlutz's swordsmanship has a strong focus on consecutive flash strikes, but using it against her—]

Brendel was currently able to use various swordsmanships he learned in the game to an extent. He was certain it was because of the basic fundamentals of Aouine's swordsmanship, and he started to wonder if the person who founded the swordsmanship was an incredible genius.

At the very first glance, it seemed like the various guards and attacks were restrictive and clumsy, but the way how each move can flow to another was almost effortless when he combined them.

[Given the history between Aouine and the Kirrlutz Empire... Isn't it possible that the Aouine's swordsmanship is actually derived from the latter?... But it's pointless to use the Kirrlutz swordsmanship against a grandmaster. Wait— if we're talking about history, then the King of Fire, Gatel. There's a considerable amount of differences between the polished Kirrlutz swordsmanship and Gatel's swordsmanship...]

Brendel started to change his state of mind. Fury and tranquility merged to form a ferocious whirlpool of emotions. Burning flames that would spill forth in a concentrated and relentless assault until nothing was left.

A barrage of murderous and unpredictable strikes sought to unbalance Veronica. The sudden tempest forced her to go on the defensive as each motion tried to eviscerate her. With each passing blow, it became harder and harder for her to react it in time as Brendel seemed to borrow from the momentum of her defenses and launch a new attack.

Veronica snarled and fought aggressively as well, seeking to dominate her opponent as she continued to pour more power and speed into her sword, but she was just slightly behind as Brendel was able to make the first move every time. The two duelists gnashed their teeth as the exchange intensified.

Both took risks to end the exchange. Brendel leaped into the air slightly and swung his sword downwards with all his might, while Veronica rotated her body to send a spinning kick to her opponent.

His sword missed its target by several centimeters while it caused a huge fissure to break out across the ground; her kick had smashed into his ribs from the side first.

The youth rolled several times on the ground, but he quickly got up and was ready for another round.

Several long hair strands could be seen flying against the wind.

[This bloody brat!]

Veronica roared as fury claimed her. She made up her mind to go all out. Green light particles gathered onto her blade and Orthlyss immediately warned Brendel:

“Watch out!”

He felt the hair on his skin stand. If Veronica unleashed her full power, she might split the market into half. It was not as if the Druids could do anything to stop her. At most, they would throw her and her men out of the city, but that was it.

The youth glanced at his back to see if there was any natives behind him, and he was shocked to see Amandina and Scarlett carrying Sifrid from a distance.

[This crazy bitch!]

“Invoke Holy Swords!” Brendel was just as angry.

Wings of light appeared behind his back as he raised his left hand. They quickly faded as hundreds of swords made from light floated in the air, pointing at Veronica and the crew behind her.

The female commander faltered when she saw this scene.

It was not just her, everyone had their eyes on Brendel when they saw the white glowing wings behind him, then stared at the hundreds of swords above him in astonishment.

“Just try it.” Brendel pointed Halran Gaia at her and said calmly.

“Are you threatening a general of the Kirrlutz Empire?” Veronica’s eyebrow lifted slightly: “Do you think these things can harm me?”

“Harm you? No. But these two hundred-odd projectiles have the force of a Silver-ranker and all of them can rain down in an instant. Commander Veronica, do you have the capability to protect every one of your men?”

The youth’s tone was light, but she frowned.

Rono was an Alchemist and a knight. He was one of the most gifted youths in the Empire and even received an audience with the Emperor. Faena’s status was even more unique.

Nothing must happen to these two.

She actually stood there blankly for a while, unable to think of a response.

“You’re despicable for trying to hold a lady as your hostage!”

Faena saw that her idol being caught in a bad position and the reason was her. She glared angrily at Brendel. If looks could kill, then she would have stabbed him a hundred times.

“And you are honorable for using numbers against us? Or to bully us with experienced fighters?” Amandina immediately retorted.

The two aristocrats did not allow each other to gain the upper hand.

Amandina continued to speak: “Commander Veronica, does the Empire’s honor come in this form?”

The Azure Green easily allowed her to identify Veronica, even if she did not recognize the latter’s face.

Veronica scoffed and did not answer Amandina’s question: “Elementalist, Alchemist, a Sword Saint and even bringing out the Equipment of Gods? When did Aouine have a genius like you? Speak truthfully, which faction is interfering with Aouine’s politics? Is it the Divine Pantheon of Wind, or the Sacred Church of Light?”

There was a slight pause before she added sarcastically: “I didn’t expect that Aouine is capable of drawing the attention of so many factions.”

Brendel wanted to cough out blood as he listened to Veronica’s words.

[What does the Holy Swords have anything to do with the Equipment of G—?]

He suddenly whipped his head and stared at the swords, and the urge to spit out blood came again. Why did he not realize that this Cleric skill somehow resembled the projectiles from the Equipment of Gods?

[But they are two different spells, right?... Damn it.]

The Equipment of Gods was one of the signature spells of the Sacred Church of Light. Only a ranked personnel who was a Bishop and above would be capable of casting it. The Sacred Church of Light was also enemies with the Holy Cathedral of Fire, and they were rivals who fought bitterly with each other.

Brendel had no doubt that any Bishop belonging to the Holy Cathedral of Fire in the kingdom would invite him for tea, if they heard rumors about him casting the Equipment of Gods.

While he dared to go against Aouine’s nobles, he definitely did not dare to go against the Holy Cathedral of Fire.

[For crying out loud, they are comprised of two Empires and twelve kingdoms. If any of the seven Cardinals say something like “Destroy Aouine!”, the kingdom will be wiped off from the map. In fact, the reason why Aouine is safe from Kirrlutz is that they recognize the kingdom. Otherwise, Kirrlutz would never tolerate their presence.

Shit, how am I going to explain this?]

“Hey, you know what? I’m a Planeswalker! What is a Planeswalker? Well, they are professional card players!”

Brendel could imagine Veronica slapping his face and making it kiss the ground. The youth felt a sense of dread and could only hope that this crazy woman was not one who gossiped. It was fortunate that the game’s Veronica was known for being a taciturn person in front of outsiders and was not fond of people who blackmailed others.

But Veronica did not continue to harp on this topic. She raised her sword coldly and arrogantly continued: “But do you really believe I wouldn’t attack, young man?”

Brendel knitted his eyebrows. He could sense overwhelming pressure all around him.

“She’s determined to attack,” Orthlyss warned him.

[Is she insane!] Brendel cursed inwardly and was frantically finding a way to stop her attack.

But a dignified voice came from above and interrupted both of them.

“Just try it, woman from Kirrlutz.”

The deafening voice reverberated in the air and thundered in everyone’s ears. The green barrier around the market shimmered as Druids started entering it. They stopped in front of Brendel and stood completely in the path of Veronica’s attack.

A moment of silence covered the market.

Veronica frowned inwardly and she lowered her sword.

The Druids finally appeared. No matter how prideful she was, she would not break the Druids’ rules in front of them. If she accidentally hurt any Druid, the Empire would have to give an explanation even with her status.

Even though these Druids seemed like they do not concerned themselves with the mortals, the fury from the Circle of Skies was not something to joke about.

There were thousands of Dark Forests in the whole continent, and each of them had Druids guarding in them. Only Mother Marsha knew how many Druids there were.

There was also the fact the Kingdom of Forests, Eirlann, was also their allies.

“Lady Veronica, your messengers promised not to cause trouble when they entered the city. You should understand your Empire’s strength has nothing to do with the Druids.” Andellu spoke somberly.

His forceful tone made Brendel stick out his tongue. That man was not giving Kirrlutz any respect. It was also clear that the Druids were siding with him by accusing Veronica first.

[It seems like the Druids are pleased with my suggestion.]

Meanwhile, Veronica’s expression was turning dark. She naturally felt the unfriendly tone from them. She originally hoped that her status as Kirrlutz’s messenger would be enough for these grass manipulators to arrest Brendel.

She thought that Brendel had come to the city in the guise of an adventurer, and the political clout she had would make the Druids think twice. She truly did not expect the Druids to shield him to this degree.

Thus she widened her eyes and observed Brendel and the Druids. Was it because the youth had some kind of connection to the Druids, or did they think that she was the one who was completely at fault?

But what did a noble from Aouine have anything to do with the Druids?

Chapter 125

Galbu

Veronica was unable to think of a reason and shook her head before she answered in an icy tone: “This is a private feud between Kirrlutz and Aouine. I request that the Druids not interfere with this matter.”

The temperature seemed to drop with the female commander’s reply.

“A private feud?” Andellu shook his head with furrowed brows: “Regardless of any feuds or whatever reasons that you have, we will not allow any of you to lay a hand on him in this city.”

There was a slight pause. The people from Kirrlutz was looking at him in disbelief.

“On account of the friendship from the King of Fire, Gatel, we would not pursue the earlier events. However, if the Kirrlutz Empire is arrogant enough to cause trouble in this city, then don’t blame us for being impolite.”

“Our arrogance?” Veronica scoffed: “And how do you intend to be impolite if we insist on being arrogant?”

Even if the three Elders in the city fought against her at the same time, they might not be a match.

“Commander Veronica, do you insist on having a war with us?”

Rono jumped a little when he heard the word ‘war’. A war with the Druids could easily end up as a Holy War.

Faena looked at Andellu in disbelief: “You intend to have a war with the Kirrlutz Empire over a citizen of Aouine?”

“No,” he shook his head, “it’s not because of his status as a citizen of Aouine. It is because he is our most revered guest.”

[The most revered guest of the Druids? What kind of term is this?]

The Druids had never addressed anyone in that manner before, right? When did they become so close with an outsider? The majority of the people in the market looked at each other before each curious gaze landed on Brendel.

Veronica was silent when she heard Andellu's words. It seemed like the Druids were completely serious about this matter. She had no choice but to compromise: "Very well, I will not seek to capture him. However, what about the matter of this little boy hurting my men?"

"Would you kindly explain?" Andellu turned to Brendel and asked.

"I think you should allow her to speak up." Brendel pointed at Faena who was bound into a bundle and said graciously.

But his actions were not truly gracious. When the Druids saw the vines around the young girl, they roughly understood what had happened.

If someone tried to attack someone without seeking permission, they would be restrained by the barrier's defensive system. There were certainly a few people who could resist it easily, like Veronica, but the majority would not be able to defend themselves against the vines.

[This cunning little fox. If he's a citizen of Kirrlutz...]

Veronica cursed the youth silently, but she also praised him. He remained cool-headed when she accused him of starting the chain of events, and he was also smart enough to deflect it without appearing overbearing. But the most important point was how talented he was.

"Faena, explain." She said softly as she glanced at the bound girl.

Since the events had come so far, there's no need to cover up them up. She knew that the fault most likely was on their side, but she had to protect the Empire's dignity when she discovered that Brendel had attacked her men.

Brendel actually thought the vile aristocrat girl would exaggerate the events and gather sympathy for herself. If that were to happen, she would have fallen into his trap, but contrary to his expectations and shock, she did not lie at all and simply stated the

events with a huff.

She even glared at him while she spoke, as though she was saying 'I have no reason to lie, commoner!'

Naturally, she called Brendel names whenever she got the chance. Country bumpkin, mannerless bastard, wretched male scum who took girls as hostages. He was so annoyed that a vein actually popped out from his forehead.

The Druids made their judgment when they understood the chain of events.

The Kirrlutz Empire was originally in the wrong, but since there were no major issues other than some broken items from the centaur's shop, they were to pay him for the damages. They then carried the gravely injured Count Cullens from the ground and left with their heads hanging dejectedly.

The feeling they had was similar to the proud knights of Kirrlutz who was completely defeated by the Hazell kingdom a hundred years ago.

The defeated knights had to lower their heads and retreat from that fateful land. The white tassel on their helmets was mostly broken and laid lifelessly over their shoulders.

The Empire had never suffered such a defeat again until this moment. Even when their general was here to fight for them, they still did not manage to salvage their pride. The knights glared hatefully at the young lord from Aouine, who in turn returned a disdainful look as though they were crazy.

"I will remember your face, boy." Veronica was staring at Brendel.

"You mean the Empire remembers me," Brendel said with ease as he sheathed back his sword and glanced at the female commander.

"Are you a noble?" She suddenly asked.

Brendel nodded.

"A lord?"

Even though this woman was overbearing, she was still considered as a hero because

of her deeds. She was also half a teacher to Freya, so he replied properly: “A Pioneer Knight.”

There was a moment of silence.

“It seems like Aouine will have a new legend appearing.” She finally said.

Brendel did not reply.

“Young man, I ask you this,” Veronica’s tone suddenly softened a little, “Are you willing to be our citizen and become a knight of the Kirrlutz Empire? I can give you anything that you want—”

Brendel’s eyes widened. This legendary figure thought so highly of him?

“Thank you,” he smiled before answering, “but I will remain as a citizen of Aouine.”

Veronica looked at him a final time before she nodded and went over to Faena. She patted the girl’s shoulders after she was released from the vines with the Druids’ aid:

“Let’s go.”

“H-hold on,” the young girl’s thin eyebrows looked back at Brendel in shock, “t-the Rock Key, are you going to give it away to that rude man?”

Veronica glared at her and raised her voice: “Do you feel you haven’t thrown enough dignity away for the day?”

“B-but...” The young girl jumped and muttered with a lowered head: “That’s a necessary item in order to pass my test.”

“You’re leaving right now. When we get back I’ll have to discuss thoroughly with your grandmother about your discipline.” Veronica sighed and shook her head.

“What!” Faena’s face paled and she immediately lifted her dress up a little to catch up with her, begging: “Commander, t-this matter isn’t my fault, it’s all because of that human scum who has no sense of decency...”

Brendel stared at that girl’s back in disgust while he released the Holy Swords. His entire party was nearly killed because of an insane female aristocrat who was just as

bad as Graudin.

He heard Amandina and Scarlett approached him.

“My lord, it seems that we have offended the Kirrlutz Empire,” Amandina said weakly with a sigh.

“It’s all worth it,” Brendel took out the Rock Key with his left hand and studied it.

“Worth it? My lord, do you not know who that woman is?”

“Veronica,” he nodded, “I recognize her.”

“And yet you still dared to fight with her!” Amandina raised her voice with great exasperation, even becoming a little angry: “My lord, when will you stop doing things that make people worry?”

Brendel was a little stunned and he looked back to find Amandina’s worried expression.

“...I was utterly terrified.” She stared at him for a long time before she spoke again, and closed her eyes to heave a sigh.

“I’m sorry.” Brendel felt his body become warm and he answered sincerely.

“Please stop saying sorry all the time after doing something like this every time,” Amandina said with a huff.

“I apologize?” He said with a laugh.

He was also relieved when the people from Kirrlutz left. If that Faena girl forcefully stayed behind and started a bidding war over the item, given how rich Kirrlutz was, he might not be able to succeed in getting it.

The Rock Key might be important to him, but paying an excessive amount of wealth was undesirable. He was still not rich and Trenheim was still a poor place.

With the lack of a competitor, Brendel finally purchased it with two Fire Agate crystals. The centaur thought that he profited greatly on this transaction, and he even thought that the Kirrlutz people brought him luck, otherwise the young lord in front of him

would not pay so much.

Brendel believed that he also made a great deal, if he discounted the fact that he offended the Kirrlutz Empire.

It was a happy ending for everyone in the market too; they got to see a fantastic duel. The only exception was the people from Kirrlutz, of course.

===== ??? POV =====

No one noticed the two pairs of eyes that had observed the events in the market from a short distance away.

The two pair of silver eyes that were filled with age and wisdom.

The Silver Bar was located between two trees called Odela and Dasarla. They were Tree Elven words for 'Aged one' and 'Evergreen'. Tree branches that formed something like a bird's nest were beneath the bar. Even though the outer appearance was strange, the interior design made people feel warm and fuzzy.

The bar was in the shape of a circle and the ground was paved with sturdy wooden planks. Green vines hung loosely from the ceiling. The bar was also suspended in mid-air, just like the 'Centaur's Hoof Market'.

While the centaurs built their market in a wild and unbridled manner because of their fiery character, the owner of this bar was a Tree Elf, and thus they had the typical elegant Elven designs.

The seats near the western section of the bar had a large circular window which overlooked the market. The man sitting on the left was one of the twelve Archmagi from Galbu, the Silver Leader and also known as the Recorder of Ten Thousand Spells, returned his gaze back into the bar. He wore a long silver robe and his snowy beard nearly reached the ground.

"That little girl seems like she has the features of a Kirrlutz citizen," he said.

"Veronica, commander of the Azure Skies." The old man sitting opposite of him replied.

"I suppose that's understandable. The Lionheart is their legacy. It's no wonder they would send out their men out in such a hurry. But the descendants of Gatel are

certainly getting worse with each generation.”

“What are your thoughts about the sword, William?”

“Mine? Erik was my good friend in the past. If his sword appears, I would naturally want to see the successor that he chose—”

“Rumors have it that the wizards from Galbu are cold and friendless. It looks like they are not true.” The other old man said with a laugh.

“I wish that is the case. Unfortunately, most of us have no desires other than time and knowledge. But no one can surpass the limits of their flesh, not even the races with the Silver Bloodline in them.”

“Hmm. What is the Madara’s undead up to recently?”

“The bunch of skeletons isn’t capable of stirring up any huge trouble, though their movements are a little strange recently.”

“Oh?”

“The Silver Candle Association’s monitoring on their borders seems to be interrupted by something. There’s some kind of change in that dark kingdom of theirs, and the Star Seers stated prophecies that an emerging power was rising from the east. I’m not sure if it’s about them.”

“You mean that a new kingdom is about to be born?”

“Perhaps it’s not just one. Though I must say if it’s someone who caught my eyes... That young boy, isn’t he one of your Aouine citizens? He’s a little interesting.”

“Yes, he is, but I feel like I have seen from somewhere.”

“Oh?”

“I discovered there’s a magical seal on him, but it seems like he doesn’t even know about it. However, that magical seal has a mana signature that I’m somewhat familiar with.”

“Whose?”

“A particular girl who’s not obedient at all.” The old man’s face had a strange expression.

Chapter 126

The scheme in the dark

“I’m so angry that I’m at a loss for words!” Faena kicked the wall of the Ember Tulips Inn, but her thin pointed eyebrows that were like thin sword blades immediately went up with regret: “O-ouch!”

She turned her head back to find Rono and another handsome youth. The latter wore a black uniform that was tailor-made to bring out his figure, along with a pair of comfortable gloves made from the hide of a mink. There was an eye-catching silver flower embroidered on the chest area of his shirt.

“Rono, Viscount Elman, what did the Lord Commander say?” She asked.

The young boy shook his head: “She warned us to keep a low profile.”

“That’s wonderful news,” she clapped her hands lightly once and looked relieved, “so she won’t be pursuing this matter?”

The slightly androgynous man listened to the contents of their conversation, and he looked at the boy next who was half a head shorter with a seemingly curious expression.

“Lady Faena, may I know what happened exactly?”

The Duchess was in a rare moment of fury and she rebuked the captains of the knights from the head to the bottom. It had to be related to the events of this afternoon, and the source was certainly from the lady in front of him.

He earlier suggested to Faena to tag along secretly when the Kirrlutz Empire sent the messengers to the Druids.

When it was discovered, Veronica did not openly oppose Faena’s presence because of the empress. Now that an incident had happened, Elman received the largest share of blame from Veronica because he did not meet his responsibilities as a guardian.

But he waited patiently and looked at Faena with a smile.

“Hmph, it’s all because of that country bumpkin,” she became angry and described the events while fuming.

“That man is incredibly accomplished in dueling. Count Cullens was defeated by him at the very first direct exchange. All the empire knights added together were also not his match.” Rono added to her story but he did not really dwell on their defeat.

After all, that man was someone from Aouine and unrelated to them. However, he was interested in the Crimson Blessing that the youth possessed.

“That’s because Count Cullens underestimated his enemy. Furthermore, the knights that came along with us are actually a bunch of coddled children because of their noble lineage. I even think they lose out to the knights stationed at our borders.” Faena disagreed with a ridiculing laugh.

Although Elman was also part of the ‘noble’ knights, he did not get angry and merely smiled in response to her sarcastic remark: “Aouine has a genius amongst them as well?”

“He has the capabilities to fight against our Knight Commander,” Rono said.

“That’s because the Knight Commander is unable to use the full extent of her abilities in this place. Also, the sword that man has is Halran Gaia. He’s cheating!” She was still unconvinced.

Rono nodded a few times: “Well, you might be right, but if you pick any of us, well, even standing up against the Knight Commander’s aura would be considered a good result.”

Faena whipped her head to the black-haired boy and glared at him: “Rono, why are you going against me every time!”

The boy’s eyes widened for a moment and blinked a few times. He thought about her question before he answered her: “I’m just stating the truth.”

She wanted to tear her hair out upon hearing his reply. She stomped her foot on the ground heavily and ceased speaking.

“I remember that Aouine in recent times isn’t faring too well,” Elman nodded with a faint smile with narrowed eyes with a light voice, as though the smile extended to his eyes, “but it seems like they haven’t received enough of a lesson.”

“Elman?” The boy turned his attention to his companion with a frown.

“There’s nothing to worry about, Rono. However, I won’t let this incident slide when Lady Faena has been insulted.” Elman said elegantly.

Faena’s heart skipped a beat upon the chance of hearing his words. Even though no one dared to go against the duchess, Viscount Elman was a rising star amongst the Empire’s political forum. He was even called ‘one of the new Eagles of Kirrlutz’.

Her father had praised Elman more than once about his intelligence and cautious nature, as well as his self-awareness in the political arena. He certainly thought him as one of the most talented youths in Kirrlutz.

It was rare for her father to praise someone this much, and it let her think that Elman might really have a way.

Regardless of what plan Elman had, the fact that he was willing to extend a helping hand at this moment made her feel very pleased. She took a longer look at him with admiration and expectation.

“What can we do without going against Lady Veronica’s orders. Even if it’s you, Viscount Elman, you can’t go against her, right?”

“Naturally. But there’s no need to report to Lady Veronica about every little thing that we do. The suggestion that I have shouldn’t be a problem as well.”

“But that man has the abilities of a Gold-ranked grandmaster swordsman, and possibly beyond that. None of us would be a match for him,” Rono frowned, “and even if we go against him with numbers, the Druids will interfere with this matter. They seem to treat him with great importance...”

Rono did not finish his words, but they knew what kind of grave consequences there would be if this matter reached Veronica’s ears again.

“It’s nothing as troublesome as that. Did you forget that Aouine’s ambassadors are here as well? Since that youth’s a member of Aouine’s nobles, then he’s probably part

of their ambassadors. And even if he's not, this matter should still be resolved amongst themselves."

Faena's eyes brightened slightly.

"Of course!" She agreed with Elman: "Why didn't I think of that? Those cowardly appointed officials from Aouine will submit to the Empire if we launch a formal complaint."

She scoffed lightly: "We have to get them to educate their men properly!... But who among us should go?"

Elman shrugged. Although he was a viscount, he was officially the commander of the Imperial Knights. His position was not appropriate to allow him to meet up with other ambassadors from other kingdoms.

"I can't do it either. The Royal Alchemists can't be in contact with foreign ambassadors." Rono shook his head as well.

"Y-you can't possibly have me go personally, right? I-I don't have the experience in this area." Faena's eyes widened as she placed a hand on her chest.

"Let me go," a soft voice suddenly came from behind the three.

Faena turned to find a young woman wearing a purple dress walking out from the hall. The latter came up to them and did not speak any further, standing tall like a Moon Flower in the Darkness, and the air about her seemed mysterious and quiet.

That woman smiled pleasantly and glanced at Viscount Elman for a moment.

"Sister Delphine! Are you willing to help out? That's wonderful! Do you have a way too?" Faena shouted in delight.

"Viscount Elman's method is excellent. Didn't you agree to it?"

"But you're the prime minister's daughter, the Empire's Flower of Wisdom. I rather believe in you if I have to choose. Besides, everyone knows that you're fond of him, who knows if you're staying on the sidelines just to help him stand out. I can't be sure if you don't have a better method!"

Elman laughed lightly in response and looked at the woman next to him in a playful manner. Delphine shook her head in response with a laugh as well.

“Very well, perhaps we can get the Holy Cathedral of Fire to put pressure on Aouine too.”

“Oh?” Elman lifted an eyebrow. Delphine noticed his gaze and returned with a faint smile.

“The Holy Cathedral of Fire? Would they even hear us out?”

“I’ve heard that the Aouine man cast a spell that resembles the Sacred Church of Light’s Equipment of Gods. But the truth doesn’t really matter here, what matters is how we describe it.” Delphine brushed her fringe back past her shoulders.

Elman nodded with a smile: “A wonderful suggestion. I heard that the appointed leader from the Holy Cathedral of Fire coming to the Dark Forest is called Amman, who is known as the Bishop of Greed. If that youth encounters him, he would at least get his skin torn off even if he escapes death... Indeed, we can even stir things further since there are other forces here, it wouldn’t be surprising if conflicts happen.”

Delphine concurred.

“Good!” Faena excitedly shook her fists as she imagined Brendel’s impending doom. She looked like she had vented her anger: “Then let’s get to it right away!”

But Rono was paid attention to the real reason why they came here when he listened in to the suggestions: “Come to think of it, there are more forces appearing in the Dark Forest than expected. Galbu’s wizards, the Cathedral of Fire, Aouine, and even Beastmen. The Lionheart is obviously our Empire’s sacred sword.”

Faena’s passion was suddenly cut in half when the pessimistic boy spoke up, and she sighed: “Why are you worrying so much? There’s nothing to worry about the Beastmen with Lady Veronica around. Galbu’s wizards are merely here to take part in the excitement. As for the Holy Cathedral of Fire, one can say that it has close connections to the King of Fire, and therefore close ties to us. As for the Aouine Kingdom, do we really need to care about these traitors who stole our legacy have to say?”

Rono nodded in regards to this assessment, but he spoke again:

“Hmmm, but does the Lionheart really have anything to do with the strange changes in the Loop of Trade Winds? Our Star Seers detected the Divine Resonance to be somewhere to Randner’s south and somewhere near Chablis instead.”

“It’s normal that we couldn’t find anything. The Divine Resonance’s impact is too powerful for one to find its exact location. We already searched Chablis and moved all the way to the Dark Forest.” Elman said.

“Is it possible that the bunch of undead took it away?” Faena recalled the undead army that they encountered along the way.

“The Holy Swords have divinity in them. The Lionheart, the Blade of Flames, or any weapons related to the Light would instantly reduce the undead to ashes upon contact. They will never be interested in these weapons.” Rono explained.

“Which is why the only place left is the Loop of Trade Winds,” Delphine added.

The topic changed from Brendel’s punishment to their real goal. As they discussed the finer points, a squadron of knights hurriedly entered from the outside.

They first saw Viscount Elman and immediately saluted him: “Captain!”

“What is it? What matter is so urgent?” Elman turned towards them and asked.

“T-there’s something of great urgency, captain! The Loop of Trade Winds has a sudden change!” The knight who replied was out of breath.

Chapter 127

Change of the Loop of Trade Winds (1)

The presence of soldiers from the Kirrlutz empire more or less made Brendel wary, but he did not want to deal with them, at least not right now. He was quite certain that Veronica would not pick a fight for him later on just to get revenge for this incident.

The duel in the market did not diminish the interest of the girls accompanying him, and with Amandina's suggestion, they continued to survey the streets that overlooked the Loop of Trade Winds.

Indeed, the grand scenery that was displayed in between the ancient trees could make one forget their troubles—

Brendel kept an eye out for any interesting items in the small shops that appeared inconspicuous after purchasing the Rock Key.

[I must say that the Dark Forest is indeed filled with materials. I actually managed to get good stuff just from walking around. Most of the materials I got are valuable. Wyvern's blood, Ancient Wood Branch, and Sealed Element of Wind, all of them are Brass-rated. I thought I was lucky enough to get the Five-headed Hydra's blood and twenty of its blessed scales, but I did not expect the Green Tower to continue giving me advantages.]

Most materials were different from equipment. If the materials did not undergo refinement or reforging, they would usually be classified as unranked. Even after a single bout of refinement, they would be rated as Iron-ranked. Crystals with raw Mana in them were considered scarce.

The Ancient Wood Branch was a good medium to make a Mystic staff. While Brendel had no real use for it, he could sell it to others or exchange it for other things in Ampere Seale. It was even possible for him to train Merial and let her use it, making her a great asset in the future.

The only thing holding him back was whether she could be trusted. A good healer in any game was always sought after, and even more so in real life. If she proved loyal to

his cause, then he would immediately consider getting her the best equipment he could possibly get.

The Wyvern's Blood was also a substitute material for the Potion of Dragon Strength. Brendel had already turned his Hydra's Blood into a large batch of potions and they were ready to be distributed to his rowdy batch of youths at any given time.

Finally, the Sealed Element of Wind was a core material in strengthening crystals, or it could be used to let someone learn a related technique to Wind Magic.

[Back then in the game, the shopkeepers are more cunning... They always set prices that are more or less similar to the Auction Houses. These rare materials were never on sale too. Then again, I wasn't one of the players who played on the first day of the game's release. I started later and was always slower by a step. The players before me must have made the shopkeepers realize the demand for their materials. I'm sure there are even more useful things to be found.]

The youth could not help but break into a grin. He realized that the city he was in was still in a state where everyone was like country bumpkins who did not realize the worth of their materials. There were still many stores to be seen and he wanted to get to all of them in a day.

A traveling Senian Magician was selling a strange card to people who passed him. Brendel thought he saw wrongly when he looked at the card which no one was interested in,

But it was indeed a Card of Fate.

[Delar Wilderness. Hmm... This is a pretty good land card. Tapping it gives 2 Earth EP and 1 Light EP.]

After a short negotiation, Brendel agreed to use a Mana Crystal in exchange for the card. The traveling Magician was overjoyed when he heard that, and he eagerly told Brendel that the card had to have some kind of secret to it, despite the fact that he could not detect any kind of magic reaction to it.

He even brought up a small flame on his finger over the card as though he was afraid that the youth would regret his purchase.

"Look at this, mister," he exaggerated and treated Brendel like he was a mark being

conned: “any normal paper would turn into ashes, but there’s not even a sign of this card being damaged. It means that there’s something to it. Even though you and I can’t determine what it is exactly, but for the price of a Mana Crystal, it’s nothing more than a small gamble. What if this was a legendary artifact?”

Brendel nodded as he received the card. He did not realize that it was actually resistant to fire and cast his own flames to test it for himself.

The traveling magician was shocked to see Brendel’s actions. Even though creating Starfire was nothing but a trick for an Elementalist, a third-rate magician like himself was unable to do the same thing. It meant that Brendel was a not just an apprentice but a full-fledged Elementalist.

[Judging from the speed, he’s at least a 2nd circle!]

While the magician was more like a sham magician, he had enough insight about magic.

“So you’re a master Elementalist. Would you be interested in more of these cards?”

“Hmm? You expect me to buy more of this rubbish? It’s nothing more than a passing interest.” Brendel kept the card away while unsealing it at the same time.

Scarlett watched at her lord putting on a thug-like expression that had disinterest written all over it, and she could not help but purse her lips. Amandina secretly pulled the red-haired girl’s hand from behind and cautioned her to pay attention to her actions, or the other party might discover something wrong.

The traveling magician had analyzed the card for quite some time. He first discovered it in an old building, but he was not really a scholar after all and lost patience after studying it for a while: “I understand. But I can sell them cheaper if you’re interested.”

Brendel pretended to hesitate for a while before replying: “Very well, how much cheaper?”

“I have five more cards, how about four Mana Crystals?”

“...Four?”

“Alright, alright, three Mana Crystals!” The traveling magician felt that he still earned

a profit with three crystals. If he tried to maintain the price stubbornly, the youth might just leave while rolling his eyes. He tried selling these cards in many other places, but there was no one who wanted it.

The young human in front of him was a silly fool who was unlikely to be encountered again.

But Brendel did not bother to press him and nodded immediately. The earlier incident at the centaur's shop made him reluctant to waste time to drive the prices low.

"Very well, bring them out and let me have a look first." Brendel eyed the Senian who nodded vigorously.

"Would you mind waiting for a little while? I left the cards in the place that I'm currently staying in. It's not too far away and I'll be back really soon."

"I'll give you thirty minutes."

It was unlikely for the Senian magician to be subservient to Brendel if he was just a noble, but it was a different story since he was a formal Elementalist as well. Amandina watched the Senian magician disappear in the alleys in a hurry before she finally sighed: "I finally understand why Miss Romaine is together with you, my lord."

"No, these things are quite worthless to him or even to others," Brendel shook his head and disagreed.

The Rock Key was worth its value to many people, but these cards were only useful to Planeswalkers and it was unlikely for the entire Aouine kingdom to have even one Planeswalker. Even the Kirrlutz kingdom might not have one. It was impossible for the Senian magician to sell the card, and even if a scholar was interested they would not pay for such a high price for it.

Strictly speaking, Brendel did not think it was a worthy transaction.

The Cards of Fate in this world appeared to be of abundance, though the rare cards were certainly rare.

"The next transaction is the important one." He suddenly smiled as he planned his next move.

“The next transaction?” Amandina did not understand.

“I want to buy that fellow.”

“What?” She was shocked. When did her young lord become a slaver?

“That Senian is an Elementalist and he seems to have a pretty good foundation. I plan to have a group of young mages splintered from my future knights. Merial and Mordenkainen are only two people, after all. Real wizards wouldn’t be interested in a small-time noble like myself, and I won’t be able to control them even if they join me. But a third-rate magician is much easier.”

Amandina appeared worried when she listened to his plan. It sounded like he was trying to pick up junk. There might be severe disadvantages down the road too.

But she did not know that Brendel was capable of turning a normal person into a magician, let alone those who have innate talent in them.

“Most importantly, the Senian might not be willing to work for you, right?” She said.

Brendel merely laughed at her response. She did not understand magic very well, and no caster would be unwilling to remove the word ‘apprentice’ in their reputation. There were ‘apprentices’ everywhere in the continent, and true wizards were uncommon. The latter was recognized to be of a high social order, and every apprentice wanted to become one.

“I’m a true Elementalist. If I give that Senian a chance, he won’t refuse me and would even be delighted about it.”

Amandina stared blankly, but Scarlett finally burst into laughter as she glanced at Brendel: “One has to be careful when doing business with our lord. It seems like they might sell themselves if they are not careful.”

“True.” Amandina nodded as she looked at Scarlett.

Brendel shrugged his shoulders. He knew they were making fun of him, but he did not mind enjoying this relaxing moment.

Thirty minutes was not a long time, but it was boring to wait for someone.

Brendel started to practice casting his fire-related spells out of boredom. The flame danced around his fingers as though it was a living creature, and very soon his performance attracted a large group of Tree Elves and Senian children. They crowded around him and stared without blinking at Brendel's act.

The children pestered him to perform even more magic acts and Amandina was worried that Brendel would be annoyed instead. But the youth put on a grin and made his magic even flashier. This act quickly won their hearts and they were completely enthralled by him.

Amandina watched the youth and the children play together, and she felt somewhat moved. She opened and closed her lips several times, but no words came out.

"Our lord is a kind man. I did not think that the nobles would be so approachable." Scarlett remarked softly.

The wind stirred her fiery hair while she replaced her ponytail ribbons with a silver hairclip that was bought earlier. It glinted from time to time, which was oddly suiting for her.

"Mmm."

"He's your friend?" A low, deep voice suddenly asked.

The two ladies jumped a little and looked back. There was a young man who had long green hair adorned with a crown of interlocking small branches and leaves. His ears were equally long, proving that he was a Tree Elf. But what surprised them was his height and exposed muscular chest which even seemed to gleam against the light, while his back was covered with a cape. It seemed like he was a Druid as well.

The nearly half-naked youth was just standing behind them, looking at Brendel with interest.

"Yes." Amandina's face turned red, and she took a step back subconsciously.

"Are you the guests from Firburh?"

"Yes."

"I have heard rumors about the human nobles looking down on us and the Senians by

regarding us as barbaric people, but it seems like this noble's actions are saying otherwise. Are we mistaken about the humans?"

"I can't speak for the other nobles, but our lord would never look down on you. In truth, he has protected many Senians."

"I see." The Tree Elf nodded as he continued to watch Brendel.

Brendel was engrossed in fulfilling the children's requests. He came up with more and more tricks he learned in the game that made them cheer each time. Even though the city was grand and filled with beauty, it was rare to see a performing wizard. It was not just the children who gathered around Brendel, but the natives who joined in, making it look like a festival was going on.

Sifrid was standing next to Brendel. She was immensely satisfied to see that people of her age watching her brother Brendel with idolizing eyes. She occasionally looked at Brendel with dazzled eyes as well, feeling for the first time that there was someone who was just as great as her father.

Despite the excessive amount of fireworks, Brendel was actually practicing his magic spells without spending too many Elemental Points. As a Planeswalker, he had to use up his reserves to use a card, but as an Elementalist, he could simply gather the Elements in his surroundings. The stronger his affinity he had as an Elementalist, the more spells he could cast.

If he made ten Flame Arrows and fired them at his enemies, he could drain the surrounding Fire Element and use it to make the arrows, and the price for that could be draining 1 Fire EP in his reserves to rearrange the surroundings Elements, provided that the land was rich in the Fire Element.

However, if he cast grand magic spells that required a significant amount of EP, he would either have to use up his reserves or instead extend the range of draining and rearranging the environment's Elements.

Before one became an Elementalist, the amount of EP gained every day was insignificant, and even if they did become an Elementalist, the amount recovered was not impressive either. In the game, many Elementalists had to use Element Crystals in the later part of the game and consuming their EP reserves to create a powerful magic spell that seemingly shook heaven and earth. Some of the best Elementalists were able

to rearrange the Elements to activate three or four huge AOE magic spells at the same time.

But for a Planeswalker, unsealing a new card meant that it could only take place in its own realm. This meant that his EP pool functioned like how a wizard's MP did.

Brendel glanced at his remaining Fire EP pool as he continued his magic tricks. He could only use 38 Fire EP at any given time, and unsealing the Fire Djinn was still quite a long time away. This made him feel a little depressed. *(TL: Constant usage of Elements increases EP pool.)*

But suddenly a flash of lightning streaked across his mind as he watched the flames on his hand formed a circle.

He extinguished the flames in the hands and suddenly went through his bag hanging from his belt, finally taking out a necklace:

- The Star of Flames [Magic artifact]

- Equipping this item will increase Fire EP pool by 50%, Fire Element's power increased by 10 points.

[I completely forgot about this item when I killed the Acolyte of Earth, Ekman. Since I didn't have any fire-related cards back then, I forgot about it completely. If I didn't perform for the kids I wouldn't have remembered it at all.]

He immediately took down the Ghoul Necklace and replaced it with the Star of Flames. He immediately saw that his 38 EP increased to 57 EP, which was more than enough to unseal the Fire Djinn. He suppressed his urge to laugh like a crazed madman since there was a crowd, and he hurriedly searched for his album of cards to unlock it.

- 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 Fire Djinn is on the battlefield.
- ‘The Fire Djinn always terrifies its enemies on the scorching lands.’
- Unlocking this card requires 50 Fire Elemental Points.

Brendel did not spend time on admiring his new card because he suddenly heard someone calling his name. He raised his head up and saw a familiar figure.

Kodan was signaling to him.

The youth was not surprised to see him. When Veronica and the others left, he summoned the Fireclaw Lizardman chieftain, Ropar, to bring the old swordsman over. He then tasked the latter to investigate why the Kirrlutz Empire sent out their men to this city.

[Oh. That’s surprisingly quick. Obviously, it’s less suspicious compared to sending a Lizardman to investigate, but this old man works quickly too It hasn’t been more than a couple hours since that incident.]

He turned his head towards the children around him and explained that he had to go on official business. Still, he had already gained a strong reputation amongst the natives. Even though the children were reluctant to see him go, they parted to allow him to walk towards Kodan.

“How did the investigation go?” Brendel got straight to the point.

Kodan first sat down on a wooden bench before he looked at Brendel: “How about taking a guess, boy?”

Brendel sighed with exasperation: “What kind of guess can I make? They are definitely not here because of the sudden changes to the Loop of Trade Winds. If I’m to think about the timeline, these people set out from Kirrlutz much earlier than we did. Even if the Druids requested their help early on, the Empire would never bother about this place, unless there’s some kind of Divine Artifact here—” Brendel suddenly felt a chill down his spine.

Did news about Valhalla leak out?

“Stop beating around the bush and tell me what you found out.” Brendel frowned and said.

“Divine Artifact?” Kodan paused for a moment: “Your guess is actually pretty accurate. They are here for the Lionheart.”

“Lionheart!” Brendel nearly choked on his saliva. How did the Lionheart end up in this place?

“Well, yes. I’m sure you know about the strange event in Chablis approximately half a year ago?”

Brendel’s facial muscles twitched repeatedly. Of course, he knew about it, the cause of the Divine Resonance was due to him after all. He suppressed his puzzled thoughts and asked: “But that reaction happened in Chablis and not the Dark Forest, right?”

“Yes, and that reaction seems like it’s a Divine Resonance, and the rumors about it seemed to be related to the Lionheart. Hmm, but isn’t the Lionheart in the Royal Family’s hands?” Kodan’s brows were pinched together as though he did not understand: “In any case, I heard that they started searching from the south of Chablis and entered the Dark Forest from there. It seemed like they did not get any results about it and continued to search until they reached this place.”

Brendel immediately understood.

These bastards did not manage to get any clues at all and gathered here because they heard the rumors of the change to the Loop of Trade Winds from travelers.

[Shit. This is a nasty coincidence. The Lionheart has a complicated relationship with the Kirrlutz Empire, and for them to send out a general to handle this issue... It goes to show how important the sword is to them. The only thing in the Dark Forest is the sleeping Valhalla, but these people won’t back off unless they investigate the area for themselves. Things have become complicated.]

“It’s not just people from Kirrlutz, right?” He suddenly asked. The Divine Resonance was an event that was plainly visible for miles. The Kirrlutz Empire would certainly not be the only investigating party.

Kodan nodded with praise in his eyes.

“Right again. It’s not only the Kirrlutz Empire, even our kingdom has sent her men to investigate. Naturally, the order came from the Royal Faction. But this particular group has been cut off from the outside ever since they entered the Dark Forest, and I think they don’t know anything about Trenthem’s recent events.”

“Even if they knew there wouldn’t be much of a difference. Who else is here?”

“Galbu’s wizards, the Holy Cathedral of Fire, and a few other rubbish factions— Most of the men from these factions aren’t allowed to enter the city, but the Druids allowed the people from Aouine, Kirrlutz, Galbu, and the Holy Cathedral of Fire to enter the city. Though I heard that the number of wizards from Galbu can be counted on one hand.”

“That’s a pretty detailed investigation.”

“If there are adventurers and a pub, the news about them can’t be kept a secret.”

Brendel nodded. The crowd was getting big. Even the adventurers in the pub were likely to be involved in this mess. But he remained calm because he at least had several advantages.

First, a working relationship with the Druids. Second, Sifrid. The third was his familiarity about the Dark Forest.

Especially the third point. No one else could do the same thing.

Their conversation was cut short when a scream interrupted them. People started to panic as though there was some unbelievable event happening. Brendel was looking for the source of troubles, but Kodan nudged him and pointed upwards.

“Boy, look at the sky!”

“What is it?” Brendel looked up puzzledly before his jaw dropped in amazement.

The seemingly unending wall of clouds in the Loop of Trade Winds was moving away in two directions, as though it was two doors opening up at the same time. The sense of time seemed to slow and accelerate at the same time. In just a split second, a visible fracture happened to the wall of white clouds.

And for one to see it happen in real time across the endless clouds— One could only

imagine how fast the change was.

“W-wind Scar!” Brendel stuttered as he gazed at the clouds in shock.

Chapter 128

Waves

The tremendous change to the Loop of Trade Winds had shaken the entire city.

And such a change might not be for the better—

The Druids quickly became anxious, while the various factions started to act quietly in the city. That night, the messengers from the Kirrlutz Empire visited the members from the Aouine Kingdom and the Holy Cathedral of Fire privately. New rumors started circulating at the same time.

The first rumor was about the awakening of a Holy Sword that existed in legends, King Erik's Lionheart, which was also the cause of the Divine Resonance half a year ago. The Lionheart was now rumored to be in the Loop of Trade Winds, and someone from Aouine had already grasped the means to enter the place and take the sword.

The second rumor was that the powerful Kirrlutz Empire was actually forced to be at a disadvantage by the Druids over someone from Aouine. This 'news' alone made interested people go wild with their guesses.

The Lionmane Beastmen mercenaries from the barbaric regions also received the rumors of Halran Gaia appearing in the continent. Their ancient history included this fabled sword, which was fought over between the Lionmane Empire and the dwarves.

Witnesses' accounts stated the sword was currently wielded by a young human male who was in the Green Tower. Some even claimed that the Kirrlutz Empire tried to take the sword by force and cause an incident.

Even more absurd rumors spread throughout the various taverns, like how the Aouine Kingdom was under the protection of the Sacred Church of Light. Various truths and lies were mixed together, making them hard to believe.

However, rumors did not require one to believe in them to propagate, because people would just volunteer to spread them freely.

Brendel did not know schemes were brewing behind his back. The first moment he saw the change in the clouds, he immediately left the market and entered Blackthorn along with two Grand Druids after a few instructions to his companions.

The Blackthorn committee received a report—

The clouds over the Loop of Trade Winds had split into half and had a clear path that lasted for ten miles. However, no one knew exactly what was happening in the area. Once the clouds cleared, the mountains became dangerous because the monsters in the foggy areas became active.

It was for this reason that the Druids lost several of their observation points. The frontline was crumbling. Things were becoming tense.

In the courtyard where the Goddess Nia was worshiped stood hundreds of Elder Druids. Even the nearby branches were filled with members of the outer circle. The place was filled with tension.

[It seems all their elites have gathered here.]

Brendel glanced at his surroundings before looking up. The evening sky was dark red in color, and countless birds were flying around the six ancient trees in great density, which nearly covered half the sky. And when he looked down—

[Wow. It looks like a green dragon is climbing up the paths. Hmm, the Druids are prepared for an all-out war.]

There were tens of thousands of druids moving out from the Dark Forest to the Green Tower. Be it victory or defeat, this would be the turning point of history. After more than a century, all the Druids in Trenheim gathered in one place once again.

“Everyone!” A Druid Elder roared, his voice which was amplified by magic, echoed through the entire courtyard, almost like the thunder in a tempest: “Our brothers and sisters are unable to stop the monsters’ attacks at the frontlines, and they are being pushed back as I speak.”

A grey raven flew in and turned into a human form, shouting:

“I have scouted from the sky, and the monsters in the Dark Forest is like an ocean of black water, pouring through the forest and drowning the Circle of Thorns, the Wall of

Flowers, and the Loop of Gales, as well as many other areas.”

And the Druids in the courtyard bellowed in response:

“We need to launch a counterattack!”

“Stop these monsters right now!”

“Our work in the Dark Forest that has persisted for more than a century will be ruined if they destroy all the observation posts!”

The Great Elder smashed his staff onto the ground, and a violent rumbling spread throughout the branches, causing the slightly chaotic atmosphere to fall into silence.

“Just exactly how many monsters are we dealing with?” He asked.

“I see no end to their numbers.” Came the reply.

Brendel was standing behind a gigantic Druid, and for a while, no one noticed this outsider.

[No end to their numbers... That’s certainly a memory that I can’t forget.]

A gust of wind caused the dead leaves from the trees to fly across his vision. He stared at them until they disappeared into the darkness. They reminded him how the players threw themselves against the unending numbers of the monsters.

“—rd Brendel, Lord Brendel!” Andellu was a little dissatisfied with Brendel’s distracted look: “What do you think of the change in the Loop of Trade Winds?”

“Am I allowed to participate?” Brendel spoke to the Great Elder.

The Great Elder thought for a moment, shook his sleeves and took a step back with his staff. He nodded slightly: “Please go ahead—”

Sudden murmurs broke the silence as the Druids finally noticed there was a human amongst them.

“Who is that youth?”

“Probably a guest of the Blackthorn Council.”

“A male human?”

“Wait, I’ve seen him going around with the Favored Sifrid. He’s probably someone close to her.”

“I see, but what is he doing here?”

Brendel did not shy away when the Great Elder gave him the entire stage. He instead took a step forward and asked the Druid who flew in as a raven: “Where are the monsters coming from?”

The Druid took a moment to think before he answered: “They appeared out of nowhere from the fogs.”

“And they poured out of the fog even though it doesn’t seem likely that the monsters were there in the first place?”

“Yes.”

“...The Waves of Calamity has started.” Brendel answered with certainty. His memories matched the report.

“As the moon rises, the first Wave of Calamity will last for seven days. The wolves will howl and run under the moon as the plants wither. They are the civilization’s first calamity— The Calamity of Wolves. The monsters that you saw are Black Wolves.”

The Great Elder’s eyes widened in shock, and so did the other druids. The Calamity of Wolves was a prophecy that stated civilization was coming to an end. Brendel never said that the Waves of Calamity had anything to do with this prophecy at all!

The other Druids who did not participate in the meeting between the Blackthorn Council and Brendel, could not understand why the change in the Loop of trade Winds had anything to do with this prophecy.

“The change in the Loop of Trade Winds is related to the upcoming Mana Wave, and the Calamity of Wolves is only the beginning of the chain of events. And this beginning is just as fatal as the other calamities that will soon follow. The monsters are running amok in the entire Loop of Trade Winds and they will reach here very soon. These

wolves will destroy the Green Tower and then hide until the final moment of the Mana Wave before appearing once again, bringing destruction to the world.”

Brendel’s thoughts wandered back to the era where the invasion of the monsters signified the start of the kingdom’s downfall. The flames of civilization were like a candle in the wind about to be extinguished.

The core of the game’s second chapter: Chaos and Wars.

Numerous heroes would start to appear like the stars in the sky, and each star would light up the continents. The Goddess of War Freya, would carry her flag and march forward in difficulty. Duke Aranjar, the Dashing Wolf Walter, and the King of Rage Conan would later bring the gamers and refugees out of the darkness after Aouine was felled.

Swords caused the ground to be stained with blood, flames burned down buildings, and hot-blooded wars were fought one after another until the passion was nearly gone. But as long as there was still hope, civilization did not crumble.

Brendel pondered on the past events for a moment. Though he did not join in on the first calamity, he had walked through the remnants of the destruction and watched the recorded videos.

“In any case, do you know where the monsters are heading to currently?” Brendel asked.

“Unfortunately, I don’t.” Came the reply.

“Does anyone?” Brendel threw the question to the other Druids.

There was a moment of silence, but a raven soon flew down onto the center of the courtyard. It turned into a young male Druid and regarded everyone with a solemn expression.

“Now that you mentioned it, after the monsters swept past the Wall of Flowers, its direction seemed to be heading straight towards the Green Tower.”

Murmurs started again as everyone realized the severity of the situation they were in.

“Do you have a solution?” The Great Elder asked.

“The Fire in the Green Tower must not be extinguished. While you defend the city, I will enter the Loop of Trade Winds.” Brendel said.

“At this moment?” Andellu stared at him.

“Seven long nights. You will face the darkest moment against the power of Chaos. The sun will not rise in this period and it is known as the Eternal Night in the prophecy. Do you think the Green Tower can stand against an endless onslaught of monsters until the seven nights are over? The only way to resolve this is to light up the Holy Fire within Valhalla.”

The murmurs faltered slightly.

“Can you do it?” The Great Elder asked.

“I need your Druids to aid me.”

Chapter 129

The Dark Forest's frontlines

It was dawn.

But the forest was still shrouded in darkness.

A long line of flaming torches shimmered in the bone-chilling mist that filled the forest. Different groups of Druids shuffled across the ground and broke the dead silence as they tread on the fallen tree leaves.

Someone coughed.

There was a strong stench of blood in the air that easily made one gag. The Druids in this area had organized a counter-attack, taking back part of the Wall of Flowers.

The corpses of black wolves could be seen not far away in a nearby clearing filled with dull-yellow grass. These dead creatures would shrink in a couple of days and become pure Mana Crystals.

The bodies of the dead Druids were claimed by their own and buried, directly going back to nature. It had been an intense fight throughout the night which could not be described by words. The waves of black wolves ultimately retreated, but it seemed like they were going to the north instead, the Valley of Vines.

They were slowly surrounding the Green Tower.

Still, the Druids managed to take back a small patch of forest and avoided fighting the bulk of the enemies. Many Druids believed the monsters were about to launch a new wave of attack again.

Brendel frowned when he reached this place.

Various factions had also come along. The Kirrlutz Empire, wizards from Galbu, the Holy Cathedral of Fire, and groups of adventurers.

[I thought most of these people would seek to leave the Dark Forest. It seems like I'm completely wrong. The rumors of a Divine Artifact triumphs the dangers of the creatures and the strange changes within the Loop of Trade Winds. Well, that's fine. They are going to relieve my pressure when I enter Valhalla... But there might be unavoidable battles before entering it.]

The wizards from Galbu were more dangerous than the people from the Kirrlutz Empire, but it seemed like they did not understand the changes of the Loop of Trade Winds. It was his greatest advantage.

[Seven long nights. The sun won't rise again. In the game, there were at least three thousand gamers helping out against the endless waves of monsters, and now I'm the only one here. One person to repeat the events in the game... Hmm, but I did cause the Divine Resonance half a year ago and it brought more people here. Though it's still a question whether I can really succeed.]

Scarlett and Amandina were sitting beside Brendel. The latter seemingly stared into the darkness as he listened to Amandina's report on the various factions' movements, while in truth he was fiddling with his Stats Window, making a final preparation.

The Calamity of Wolves was a World Event in the game that was designed for thousands of players. It was literally impossible for him to complete it alone, but as a true gamer, he believed in his own abilities more than any outside factors.

[There isn't much XP gained from the past month. 57000 XP. I can't even raise my current mercenary level. But one level from this system won't really make a difference in this quest. The Planeswalker system...]

Brendel checked his resources.

[The Silver Swallow-tailed Flag was redeemed three months ago— Now I have 2220 Wealth and 330 Reputation. I was actually trying to redeem another land card, but it seems like I need to change my plans.]

Brendel tapped the system's icon, scrolling through the album of cards.

[Vampire Baron, Ancestral Vampire, and Night Lord.]

Even though he believed the white-colored cards were better, he simply did not have enough Plains to maintain them after summoning. These vampire cards were

different. The owner of these cards merely needed to maintain them by paying with their HP.

For a spellcaster, that would be unthinkable, but it was not a problem for a Warrior class. He even had the Unyielding talent, making his recover faster by three times. He paid 400, 600, and 800 Wealth respectively for the three cards, then shuffled them into his deck.

Vampire Baron

- (Night Shadow XI)
- Costs 10 Dark EP
- [Undead Creature/Vampire, level 28 creature]
- Feeds on blood
- When Vampire Baron is on the battlefield, all lower-class Vampires gain 1 Command Point
- Pay 2 HP every day when Vampire Baron in on the battlefield
- ‘The elegance in the darkness is a type of fatal art.’

Ancestral Vampire

- Costs 15 Dark EP
- [Undead Creature/Vampire, level 30 Elite creature]
- Feeds on blood
- Sacrifice 1 non-black creature, Ancestral Vampire gains 3 Command Points (until Ending Phase)
- Pay 5 HP every day when Vampire Baron in on the battlefield
- ‘The lower caste often forgets they are not guests or servants, but property.’

Night Lord

- (Night Shadow III)
- Costs 15 Dark EP
- [Undead Creature/Vampire, level 30 Elite creature]
- Feeds on Bloodline
- Pay 5 Dark EP, place a team of Black Creatures (Vampire Progeny) into the battlefield
- Pay 10 HP every day when Night Lord is on the battlefield.
- ‘Blood is dripping.’

These three cards could be seen as a combination. Even though the Vampire Baron was only an Iron-ranked creature, it could add to lower-class Vampires. The Ancestral Vampire’s strength was no weaker than Medissa, and sacrificing a non-black card could even have its strength rise up to the peak of a Gold-ranked class. It was literally his strongest card at this current point.

As for the Night Lord, its strength was somewhere in the middle of a Gold-ranked class. It could also create an endless supply of vampires which was aided by the Vampire Baron’s ability.

[It’s definitely another core combination just like the Holy Swords and the Wind Spirit Spiders. I would have seven Gold-rankers in total. That’s considerable strength in Aouine.]

He spent his remaining wealth on two more cards.

Sea Gem

- (Visionary Artifact V)
- Costs 10 Will
- [Artifact/Magic]

- Gain 1 reputation when Sea Gem is on the battlefield.
- Gain 2 Wealth when the card is tapped.
- Sacrifice this card and choose any card in hand and place it on the battlefield.
- ‘Unstoppable temptation.’

Grey Harbor Tax Officer

- (The Alliance of City-states XXI)
- Costs 5 Light EP
- [Human creature, level 5 Creature]
- When Grey Harbor Tax Officer is on the battlefield, gain 1 Reputation.
- If you own a city or a land card with buildings (barrier), gain 2 Wealth when this card is tapped.
- ‘Tax is the core of a city-state.’

[These two cards are now my long-term investment to regain my Wealth. The level 60 Elite Platinum Angel card is going to have to wait until later.]

Brendel then spent 325 Reputation to unseal a card.

Graveyard Revival

- (Whispers from the Grave II)
- Costs 20 Dark EP
- [Magic Barrier]
- Summon a creature card in your graveyard and put it into play, or pick a dead creature on the battlefield and put it into play. Target creature is Black and classified as [Ghoul] while this card is attached to it.

– ‘Death is not an excuse to refuse orders.’

Brendel was certain that he would encounter a creature that would be worthwhile to reanimate it, thus he redeemed this card. Finally, he scrolled to the recent cards he obtained recently.

Kodan was instructed yesterday to wait for the Senian magician with Mana Crystals. A total of five cards were purchased for three Mana Crystals. There were three Land Cards and two Creature Cards.

The two Creature Cards were Fireclaw Buglers and Rune Summoner. The three Land Cards were Phantom Labyrinth of Water, Death Forest, and Anjou Mountains.

[The Fireclaw Buglers are Iron-rankers, but the most interesting thing about it is how they are able to boost a related card. If the Fireclaw Buglers are in play, the Fireclaw Lancer card will have twice the effectiveness. Two lancers are summoned instead of one. If I obtain more cards and build around it, the card combination would be as effective as the Holy Swords and the Wind Spirit Spiders.]

He studied the description of the Rune Summoner. It also had the same abilities as the Night Lord, with the difference that 10 MP was required, and the Rune Summoner would be able to bring in creatures equivalent to the number of Land Cards he owned. The Rune Summoner was also a weak card in the early stages, but its potential in the future was nearly unlimited.

Although there was an increase to fifteen usable cards, it also meant that the cards that he could draw to his hand would be limited.

[It’s a new problem. The cards I get every day are random. Is it possible for me to get the cards I want? It’s nearly a new day, so...]

After a few minutes, he checked the new cards he received for the day.

[Ancestral Vampire, Wind Spirit Spiders, Holy Sword, Fire Djinn, Mana Control, Fireclaw Buglers, Sprint Drive... Should I summon them now?]

Amandina poked the inattentive Brendel who turned around. His eyes followed her fingers and saw that a group of people was walking towards them not far away.

“They are wearing uniforms from Aouine.” She whispered.

Chapter 130

The group of ambassadors from Aouine

[What are they doing here?]

Brendel watched the nobles from Aouine slow down as they approached his camp. It appeared like they were studying him as well. The leader amongst them was a middle-aged man. His face was gaunt and he had a gait with an unsteady limp.

[If I recall correctly, that's Count Austin, a high-ranking military officer in the north. The six men and two women behind him... I don't recall their names, but they should be members of the royal family, except they don't wield any real power.]

They were members of the Royal Faction or at least from a neutral party.

[But I feel something is odd here... Ah, I see. Members of the Royal Faction appearing in Randner's territory. Isn't that strange? I should be seeing Randner's men here instead.]

Brendel did not realize his actions had been recorded by Lord Oberbeck ever since the siege on Fortress Riedon. Oberbeck directly observed the battle between Ebdon and the youth, and he had been tracking the movements of the latter closely ever since.

But the nobles sent to the Dark Forest did not know who Brendel was, because they were tasked to search for the Lionheart.

Count Austin was certain that Brendel was a noble. His confident and elegant demeanor was not something that could be faked, and Amandina was even more striking, with every move graceful and assured. If the youth was partnered with such a lady of high pedigree, there was no mistaking his identity.

He glanced at the youths resting in the forest, secretly believing they were Brendel's squires, before his eyes moved over to the Lizardmen and Elves. It was a messy composition.

He approached Brendel and said: "A citizen of Aouine?"

Brendel nodded, but he knew that these people were not here to have a friendly chat over their citizenship.

As expected, the short and plump noble who was beside Austin immediately interrupted them: “You’re that supposed noble?”

“Are you a supposed noble from Aouine?” Brendel raised his eyebrow upon hearing the rude tone.

The raspy voice from the short man allowed the youth to recall who he was. He was a famous conservative noble called Dolant, a seventy-odd-year-old man who had aged well. The humans in this world lived a long lifespan, and Dolant looked like he was still a middle-aged man, though part of his fetching curly hair that was combed to perfection had a layer of snow on it.

He was easily recognizable through his official silver uniform. His hat was adorned with three golden leaves — An ordinary Count from Aouine should be wearing three silver leaves, and it was evident that the golden leaves were a special honor.

Dolant was stunned to have his identity questioned, and he bellowed in rage: “I have no need to prove my nobility here, you mewling churl! Answer me, did you offend the Kirrlutz Empire and bring trouble for the kingdom!”

Brendel’s eyes turned into an icy glare. These bastards were indeed here to point fingers at him. He shook his head inwardly; these foolish officers from the kingdom truly made him at a loss for words.

“...If you’re asking whether I taught a bunch of arrogant cretins yesterday, that would be me,” Brendel glared back at him with slight ridicule, “but questioning me here, I wonder who exactly is the one bringing trouble for the kingdom.”

“Good! You admit it,” Dolant ignored Brendel’s reaction and continued: “the ambassadors from the Kirrlutz Empire expressed their discontent. It will be war if you’re not handed over to them within a certain period of time. I don’t think you need me to tell you what to do!”

Brendel almost laughed when he heard that: “You want me to hand myself over to them? Do you even think that is possible?”

“It’s an order.” This time it was a middle-aged female noble who answered, wearing

the administrative officer's uniform in the capital with a scholar's emblem. Brendel guessed she was amongst the Lantonrand's scholars.

"Orders? Based on whose orders, exactly?"

"We order you in the name of the king. We are the tasked directly by His Majesty to act as ambassadors in this territory and represent the kingdom's dignity. You're hereby ordered to lay down your weapons and come with us."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then it's treason. Your actions are suspected to get the kingdom involved in a war, and we will have reason to denounce your actions and exile you from the kingdom. Aouine has no involvement of your actions."

Brendel had to take in a deep breath.

He was able to endure this affront because he witnessed the nobles' filth within the game and this world, otherwise he might have fainted from his rage. He glanced at Count Austin. The latter was a fervent supporter of the Regent Princess and a high-ranking general of one of the northern armies.

"As a military officer, does Count Austin think the same way?" He asked.

Austin did not answer, but there was a small frown on his forehead. He was annoyed over Dolant's interruption, but it was true that Brendel's rumored actions were an unfavorable act. He was not afraid of Kirrlutz's threat of war, but the kingdom's unrest and ambitious nobles were growing because of the king's waning health, and also due to Madara's recent invasion. He had no choice but to acquiesce to Kirrlutz's demands.

[How disappointing. I thought the future reformist would at least have something to say in my favor. But using the idea of exiling me? It sounds like these nobles don't know the exact events that happened yesterday. Handing me over to Kirrlutz would likely mean a death sentence for me, so why would I surrender myself? Is this Veronica's idea? No. That's unlikely, because... In any case, this event must be caused by some high-ranking bastard from Kirrlutz. I won't be surprised if they are watching this show right now.]

Brendel finally realized that the nobles in Aouine were beyond saving. Creating his own force was indeed the right move. He quelled his anger with much difficulty before

he looked back at the female noble with a faint smile:

“You want to exile me?”

“That would depend on your decision.”

Brendel’s laughter was full of incredulous mockery as he surveyed the nobles around him. For a moment, he thought of pulling out his sword and bashing the idiots with the hilt.

“Very well, then go ahead and tell the people from Kirrlutz that I have been exiled. Perhaps they would accept this answer.”

The nobles appeared stunned.

They thought the threat of exile would make Brendel submit. The ambassadors from Kirrlutz would never accept this outcome. They clearly stated that Brendel had forced a transaction from a shop merchant and snatched an item that their royal family member needed.

“You’re clearly asking to be arrested!” Count Dolant roared angrily.

He raised his hand, prepared to let the ambassadors’ guards take down the youth in front of him. The guards were actual knights in the capital, elites of the Corvado family. Forcing a small noble youth to submit would not be a problem.

In addition, he had observed Brendel’s squires sufficiently. Most of them were as young as the latter, and even if this motley crew was a bunch of promising talents, they would not be a match for the veterans in the capital.

There appeared to be a few Elves amongst Brendel’s forces, but that was not enough to deter Dolant from executing his order. Although it was dangerous to start a fight when the monsters were nearby them, he felt there was no choice because the Kirrlutz Empire might really start a war because of a whim.

Brendel confirmed his theory as he studied the expressions of the people in front of him. The ambassadors from Kirrlutz did not disclose the full events to them. None of them wanted to stop Dolant.

“It seems like everyone intends to hand me over, even if you have to use force.” He

interrupted Dolant with a laugh.

“Naturally.”

“It’s clear that none of you don’t know the exact details of what happened yesterday, otherwise your actions would be very different.”

“Stop your pretense.”

“Pretense?” Brendel shrugged and rolled his eyes: “Very well, the people from Kirrlutz probably didn’t tell you I offended the only child of the Duke of Mottled Leaves. I caused her to be disgraced in front of everyone in the market after she got tied up by the Druids’ spell.”

Count Austin’s eyes widened as the words registered in his mind. He felt that things had become complicated. Based on rumors on that duke’s temper, a war might really happen. However, Brendel was not done with his words.

“They probably failed to mention that I single-handedly beat up their entire group of knights to the point where they can’t get up.”

The female noble originally intended to speak, but her expression turned into one of disbelief and she stared at him instead. Surely there was a limit to exaggeration.

“Ah, I even offended the Knight of Flowers, Count Cullens. That man had the reputation of becoming a master swordsman of his generation. It is most unfortunate that I smashed his face in with a magic spell. I’m not sure if he’s awake from his injuries,” Brendel paused for a moment before laughing good-naturedly, “I hope there’s no permanent scar on his face.”

Brendel brought his hands together as he tilted his head and closed his eyes, fiddling with his thumbs.

“Ahh, there’s another batch of knights that came after Count Cullens. My goodness, these people are the elite Imperial Knights in the capital. I think they won’t forget the beating I gave them. Oh dear, I think this naughty pair of hands of mine, I slipped up and nearly killed their Battle Alchemist. That poor fifteen-year-old genius... I heard that the Kirrlutz emperor regards him favorably.”

Then he nodded: “But the worst thing that I probably did was to go against a lady

called Veronica. My, my, my. The commander of the Azure Skies, you might have heard of her? It's one thing to have a duel with her, but for me to threaten the life of the Duke of Mottled Leaves' daughter to force her to back off... That might have been a mistake."

He gave the nobles a pleasant smile: "If the ambassadors from Kirrlutz told you all these things, are you still going to tell your guards to arrest me by force? Oh, if you do succeed in capturing me, who amongst the people I offended are you going to hand me over to?"

Chapter 131

Golden Lionmane from Toquinin

The ambassadors were frozen in place by Brendel's words. Count Dolant's plump hand trembled once or twice, but he did not swing it down.

Brendel could see the disbelief in all the nobles' eyes, no, they were looking at him as though he was a madman. He sighed as his anger leaked out from him:

"Well then, what is going to happen now?"

The nobles' lips quivered.

===== Faena's POV =====

"What the hell is happening? Why are they not moving? Urgh, this bunch of useless fools." Faena was hiding behind a boulder, staring at the clearing where Brendel was facing off against Aouine's Ambassadors: "We can't achieve our goals if this stalemate continues."

She could not help but turn back to viscount Elman with a hint of complaint.

The young viscount was not annoyed and merely smiled back with confidence: "Don't worry, the best part is yet to come."

As if to prove Elman's words, Brendel suddenly turned his head towards the forest and bellowed:

"Who?!"

===== Brendel's POV =====

Halran Gaia slashed through the air in a black blur, knocking away a metallic bolt that shot out from the forest with a clink. The first target was the female noble. If Brendel did not act to save her, she would have been killed. But he was able to protect only one person.

Count Dolant was struck by another arrow. The plump noble was trained in swordsmanship, and even though he had neglected it long ago, he was still able to move at the last moment, allowing the arrow to pierce his shoulder instead of his vitals. However, he was a privileged noble who had never been in real battles and immediately let out a wail like a pig being slaughtered.

“Who dares!” Count Austin’s reaction was only slower by a beat. Ambushing while the threat of the monstrous wolves was near them made him angry and shocked, and he immediately pulled out his sword and headed for the direction where the arrows were shot from.

Brendel did not immediately move and instead studied the arrow that he cut down.

[It’s not just a heavy crossbow bolt. The force comes from an equipment reinforced by alchemical means. The soldiers from Aouine don’t carry Magic Crossbows. Furthermore, the attacks seem like they are meant for the ambassadors.]

Shadows quickly appeared in the forest and moved rapidly across it. When the figures finally appeared, they were already starting to surround Brendel and the others. There was no less than a hundred from Brendel’s initial estimation, but it was the identity of the invaders who stunned him.

The bodies of the figures were humanoid and almost herculean, but every single head on them belonged to a lion. The dull golden fur seemed like they were long mangy beards hanging across their brigandines. Their hands were almost paw-like, but they were longer and more elegant than their animal counterparts. Their boots were also bigger than a normal human, and each of them carried different sets of weapons.

“Toquinin’s Golden Lionmane Beastmen!” Count Austin yelled out their identities.

The hundred-odd Golden Lionmane Beastmen stopped moving in an orderly fashion, and two of them walked out from the group; they were nearly a head taller than the other Beastmen.

The Beastman who was in front had a long scar that ran across his face, as if to divide his eyes into two different territories. The other Beastman behind him seemed to be his adjutant and stopped a step behind him.

“Greetings, everyone, my name is Rovak, I have to interrupt your discussion for a little while,” the leader of the Beastmen smiled, causing his scar that appeared like a raw

wound to twist horribly.

“The Lion Beastmen from Toquinin, what are you trying to do? Are you trying to start a war?” Count Austin said with a dark expression.

But Rovak’s pretense of a gentleman quickly disappeared. He ignored the general and raised his sword, pointing it at Brendel: “Little boy, hand over your sword.”

This act instantly made the nobles’ faces suffuse with rage. Even though this demand was made to Brendel, Rovak was definitely looking down on them by not even explaining his actions.

The ambassadors from Aouine could make demands from Brendel because they were nobles tasked by the royal crown. They tolerated the ambassadors from Kirrlutz because the Eagle Empire was powerful.

But what about these barbaric creatures in front of them?

These Golden Lionmane Beastmen were from a small tribe located in the kingdom’s northern borders. They fought against Aouine many times but suffered many losses, and were ultimately driven up to the mountains. Although the kingdom’s power was weakening for the last century, none of the nobles expected the Lionmane Beastmen to be so brazen.

Surrounding and attacking Aouine’s ambassadors without any fear of repercussions.

Austin wondered if these creatures that had not evolved fully found allies, but he was only able to think of Kirrlutz. Yet it was highly unlikely. In Kirrlutz’s eyes, these barbarians were more like beasts and they would never support them in a war against Aouine. Ultimately, the kingdom was still supported by the Holy Cathedral of Fire, and it would go against their teachings if the Kirrlutz Empire did so.

[I truly have no idea why they are so bold, but a hundred-odd men against Brendel’s motley crew and our guards we brought along. We are at a disadvantage.]

He exchanged secret glances with Dolant. Even though both of them felt that the beasts needed to be taught a lesson, it was not a good time to deal with them. They had to find a way back to their camps and discuss their options.

“Rovak, are you not worried about the consequences? Do you truly believe the number

of men brought by us only amount to this much?" He asked gravely with an icy expression.

Rovak narrowed his eyes and finally looked at Austin. He licked his claws as he regarded him with his unique almond-shaped eyes that only a cat would have.

It was true that he did not have the audacity to do so.

However, the people from Kirrlutz leaked news about Aouine's current political status. Their king seemed to have passed away and the people were divided into two camps. A civil war was going to happen soon. There was no way that the kingdom could fund a war against Toquinin right now.

Rovak found it funny that these ambassadors were still pretending like their country was still fine. Toquinin had been eyeing Aouine's rich lands for some time, and it was a great opportunity if the civil war started.

And since a war between them was going to happen anyway, it would not make a difference if it was today or tomorrow.

What was more important was how Halran Gaia ended up in the hands of one of the nobles from Aouine. It was a divine weapon discovered in the Wilderness, and legends stated that whoever possessed the sword would be able to unite nature's citizens. The Golden Lionmane Beastmen believed that it was lost within the deep mountains, and they had repeatedly fought the dwarves for more than a century to contest the territory.

Rovak initially came for the Lionheart but there was no additional news about it. When the news of Halran Gaia surfaced, he was naturally more interested in it.

"...Consequences?" He finally spoke to the ambassadors for the first time: "Perhaps a decade ago your words might work on me, but do you really not know the state of your kingdom is right now?"

Austin froze for a moment but his recovery was swift:

"What do you mean?"

"I must say it's quite impressive for your kingdom to withhold information for as long as it is, but the nobles and lords in your kingdom's northern regions are on the brink

of a civil war, and you ambassadors have the time to go on an adventure to search for treasure?”

The nobles paled immediately. They obviously knew the situation was worsening within the kingdom. However, the Lionheart was important enough for the Royal Faction to go after it as the sword was tied deeply to the kingdom’s fate. It seemed like it was going to be impossible; the civil war would happen before they could find the sword.

Perhaps it was Mother Marsha’s will.

But Brendel interrupted the conversation with a refreshing laugh, his voice cheerful: “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch what you said to me earlier, can you repeat yourself again?”

His hand pushed down on his sword a little.

The flames within the youth’s heart were so high that he felt they could burn down the entire forest. He had realized Aouine’s ambassadors were used by the Kirrlutz Empire and was greatly displeased. *They should be taught a lesson on behalf of the Regent Princess; the fools who could not understand the situation.* This thought was initially stuck in his mind.

But he did not expect this situation.

A big furry Beastman pointing his sword at him, using a tone of arrogance to demand him to hand over Halran Gaia. Rovak even had the audacity to mock Aouine’s situation after attacking them.

[Holy fucking shit. Your ability to taunt must be at a Grandmaster rank! Congratulations, it worked and you have my full attention now.]

Brendel held his smile as he took a deep breath.

“I told you, little boy.” Rovak did not realize death was lurking in the corner.

How strong could this youth be when he looked like he was not even twenty?

The Beastman became a Gold-ranker decades ago and was one of Toquinin’s veteran warriors, or he would not have been tasked to search for the Lionheart. Brendel’s threat was answered with the same sarcastic smile he displayed.

“Hand over your sword t—”

Brendel pulled out his sword and swung it.

There was no semblance of Aouine’s swordsmanship, or even any swordsmanship. But it contained all of Brendel’s experience and knowledge to unleash all his strength.

A meteor exploded.

Chapter 132

Brendel's reply

Brendel combined several techniques and unleashed them onto his foe.

It was an altered Power Break enhanced by his grandfather's unique technique and combined with his own Frontal Assault. In that single moment, Brendel's strength rose more than three times and broke through the limits of what a Gold-ranker could achieve.

The air distorted as though refraction had occurred.

Rovak was dumbfounded but he reacted in time by pulling out his own sword to defend himself.

An ear-splitting metallic shrill caused everyone to flinch—

Rovak's pupils narrowed even further as he watched the broadsword bend his sword to the limits. Cracks appeared across his blade, and when the blade could not be bent any further, it turned into metallic shards that fired into the Beastman with incredible velocity.

Such blunt fragments were unlikely to harm a Gold-ranker's body, but there was so much force behind them that they simply sank into his body like it was made out of paper.

A loud shriek of pain filled the clearing.

But it only lasted for an instant, stopping abruptly just as it started.

Even before Halran Gaia reached the Beastman, the compressed shockwave forced his body to bend backward. Bones shattered audibly, while his skin and muscles were torn away. Very quickly, the entire upper body was forcibly removed from its lower half, and both sections shot out backward like arrows with a stream of blood following closely.

An explosion sounded off a moment after Brendel's blade completed its path, and a cone of destruction laid waste to the forest.

Most of the Beastmen were stunned, but there were a few veteran fighters who reacted and rushed towards Brendel.

"Mother Earth, bestow blades to me!" Brendel roared as he swung his sword again.

The earth moved like it had been turned into liquid, before countless spears made out of rocks shot out from the earth like upturned rain. Each needle-like projectile was approximately three meters long and the size of a human arm, and it pierced the approaching Beastmen from below.

The stalagmites quickly changed the forest landscape over a few hundred meters.

The twenty-odd beastmen in front of Brendel were turned into porcupines in an instant.

Glass vials fell onto the ground as Rono stood up and stared at the event in shock, not even noticing that he knocked over his bag. Faena was trembling out of fear. There were blood flecks on her face, left behind by Rovak's body parts as they flew past her. She would have screamed in disgust if she were normal self, but she did not even dare to leak out a sound and even forgot to blink.

Elman was the only one who still had his senses, but his heart was racing when he saw Brendel's first slash.

Even though Veronica's swordsmanship could render people ineffective because of her control over her Element power, there was something terrifying about Brendel's swing. It was as though the latter was swinging his sword in front of them, bringing along endless bloodshed—

[This level of bloodlust... It's a pressure that's similar to Lady Veronica's swordsmanship! It's fortunate that I did not suggest to pick a fight with him head-on—
]

"H-he's..." Rono stuttered with difficulty: "a Runic Swordsman!"

Elman's expression changed again as he thought about Brendel's second slash.

The nobles next to Brendel seemed like they were turned to stone. They initially believed that Brendel's earlier words were mere puffery. Dolant opened and closed his mouth several times like a fish as though he was trying to speak, but his words seemed like they were stuck in his throat and could not come out.

Austin was in a readied stance to pull out his sword ever since Rovak spoke to them. He intended to fight once things went awry, but he found his blade to weigh like a ton after Brendel pulled out his sword.

[This crazy bastard is Aouine's noble? When did our kingdom have someone like him?]

Brendel stayed in his pose for nearly two seconds before exhaling loudly. The first swing drained an incredible amount of stamina and made his Unyielding talent activate. The second swing even caused him to freeze for a moment.

But even so, none of the Beastmen dared to move after that display of prowess.

Rovak's death was understandable. The youth looked like he used an incredible technique, but his second attack was beyond common sense. Nearly a hundred meters of earth was turned into liquid and reformed to fire a torrent of projectiles that could not be defended against.

An Arcane Knight?

Or Runic Swordsman?

Brendel sheathed his sword, and the stalagmites formed crumbled and returned to soil. He glared coldly at the frightened Golden Lionmane Beastmen. They surrounded him like a crescent moon, but no one dared to advance a single step.

"I think King Erik could never have imagined there would be a day where his descendants would be mocked by a bunch of beasts." Brendel turned around and said as he looked at the ambassadors: "Aouine's flag of glory that has fallen onto the ground, do you think you're capable of carrying it up again?"

Brendel's voice was not loud and his tone was even.

Dolant glanced at the Lionmane Beastmen, then at Brendel. He was unwilling to acknowledge his words, but he was unable to refute him. The female scholar lowered her head. Austin was the only one who pulled out his sword in silence.

The Lionmane Beastman adjutant eventually regained his composure. Even though Brendel astounded everyone with his strength, he was still a Gold-ranker regardless of whatever techniques he possessed. It was clear that he would not be able to repeat the same feat many times. There were more than a hundred Silver-ranked warriors behind him. In addition, he and one other captain were also Gold-rankers.

The ambassadors were unlikely to be warriors, while their guards would have only one Gold-ranker at most. The motley crew of youths and mercenaries following Brendel could be completely disregarded.

The Lionmane Beastman adjutant quickly made his decision. He had to end things before the Druids came: “Kill them all! Get revenge for Captain Rovak!”

His roar woke all the Beastmen up. After a chaotic moment, they prepared to surround the humans completely and rush them.

Brendel’s army of youths and mercenaries were already alert when Aouine’s ambassadors appeared. When he raised his sword against Rovak, Carglise had already signaled them to prepare for a battle. A cacophony of weapons pulled out from their sheaths could be heard.

Count Austin walked to Brendel’s back and tossed his scabbard away.

“We only need to hold on for a while. The rest of our men would be coming very soon since a battle has broken out in your camp.”

“Hold on?” Brendel did not bother to turn back his head and answered in an icy tone, surprising Count Austin.

“Carglise, Kodan, Ropar, Scarlett,” he glared at the Beastman as he yelled, “lead the men and kill them all!”

“As you wish, my lord!” Carglise answered in excitement.

“Understood!” Scarlett replied as though she had been waiting for this order and rushed into the fray, with lightning dancing around her weapon.

[Another Gold-ranker with an unsealed Element Power?!]

The Lionmane Beastman adjutant felt his eyelids jerk.

But he quickly discovered there was another big threat in the battlefield. The Fireclaw Lizardman appeared from nowhere, dashing across the battlefield silently and knocked the Beastmen's left flank out of formation with a single swipe of its gigantic tail.

With a single horizontal slash of its two-handed Greatsword, a sea of fiery flames turned a row of Lionmane Beastmen into ashes. They lost a single squadron with a single blow. It was as though a wall had suddenly appeared on the battlefield. The Lionmane Beastmen quivered in front of the Lizardman Chieftain, but the latter was not yet done. It raised its three-fingered hand and pointed its thumb at them.

Ten-odd Fireclaw Lizardmen lancers emerged from nowhere and charged towards their enemies.

Kodan walked slowly to Brendel's side as he pulled out his sword: "I don't think I ever agreed to work for you, boy?"

"You didn't?" Brendel replied.

"At least I never agreed to accept your orders."

"But I'm not ordering you."

"What?"

Brendel glanced at Austin and asked: "Count Austin, was there ever a time where our ambassadors were insulted when King Erik was alive?"

Austin returned the youth's glance with a strange look and shook his head.

Flames covered Halran Gaia in an instant.

"Then, should we give Aouine's reply with our swords?"

Austin smiled wryly: "Understood."

Brendel's eyes returned to Kodan. The latter did not answer and merely tossed his sheath away. A whirlpool of green light revolved around his body.

Elman who watched the events unfold widened his eyes.

[Another Gold-ranker! No, even that ambassador is a Gold-ranker? When did Aouine gain so many of them?!]

Chapter 133

Forced retreat

Scarlett, Kodan, Ropar, and Austin were like four sharp weapons that stabbed into the Golden Lionmane Beastmen's formation. The latter fell into momentary confusion, but they quickly regained their composure, realizing there was still a chance for a hundred-odd Silver-ranked Beastmen to triumph over a few Gold-rankers.

The Beastman adjutant tried his best to lead his men against their foes, but he soon realized that it was folly to rely on numbers. He was also categorized as a 'Gold-ranker', but there was a great difference in the quality of the Element Powers between them, let alone skill.

Scarlett was still a novice when it came to using her Element Power, but she had eaten the Golden Apple which greatly strengthened the amount of electricity she could invoke. The lightning that surrounded her body was more like thick curtains of light.

Every time she swung her halberd, several lightning bolts discharged into the midst of the Beastmen that reach more than a hundred feet. The ones struck directly in their chests had smoldering cavities in them. The more she fought, the stronger she became, almost entering the state of a God Acolyte. Her eyes glowed as white lightning poured out from it, and she eventually reached a point where she merely pointed her finger to direct a lightning bolt into a Beastman, turning him into cinders.

Lightning flashed repeatedly in the forest, dazzling all those who watched her. Faena stared at the Beastmen hiding behind rocks and trees with an unhinged jaw, completely forgetting about the things that she came to do.

"Is she the daughter of the Wind Spirit King Casas, the Lady of Lightning?" She stammered.

"What a tremendous Element Power—" Rono's eyes glinted repeatedly as lightning streaked across the ground.

Elman's face was just as pale as the two. Even though the old swordsman near the red-haired girl controlled his Element Power far better she did, the latter appeared to be

more powerful than he was.

However, his attention was mostly on Brendel and Ropar. If Scarlett was like a Lightning Goddess, then the Lizardman Ropar was a Fire God. His Greatsword had flames dancing in the air as he dissected the Beastmen easily. Flames even covered his entire body and he did not even flinch from the heat.

Elman could not understand it.

In truth, while the Fireclaw Lizardmen appeared like they had a physical body, half of it was comprised of the Fire Element. These Element lifeforms had long lifespans, and those who became chieftains meant they had emerged victorious under countless battles. Ropar came from a world of burning plains and had considerable fighting skills. Each thrust of his greatsword ensured that at least one Beastman would be struck down.

The second Gold-ranked Lionmane Beastman rushed in to block Ropar's advance by lunging at him, but he did not think that the Lizardman simply allowed the sword to pierce through his chest. He looked up at Ropar's face in shock and confusion; why did the Lizardman allow the blade to run through his heart?

But the Lizardman only glared back with eyes lit ablaze by fire. It was the unique trait of the Fireclaw Lizardmen. They were Battle-thirsty, and their combat abilities rose if they received damage. Although the Beastman's attack was a critical blow to Ropar, the latter's strength rose tremendously.

Ropar's counterattack came swiftly as the Lionmane Beastman attempted pulled out his blade but it was all too late. The blazing greatsword cleaved the latter into two and set the remains on fire.

The Lizardman Chieftain pulled out the longsword on its body and threw it away in silence, bringing out a jet of flames as the blade was drawn out. He briefly checked on his subordinates. The thirty-odd Silver-ranked Fireclaw Lancers had become strong enough to reach the threshold of what a Silver-ranker could achieve.

Their charges on the battlefield were like an unstoppable flaming meteor that forced the enemies to scatter. The Lionmane Beastman were unable to defend against them, causing the left flank to lose its formation.

But the Lionmane Beastman adjutant did not notice the increasing number of

casualties, as he was busy staring at Brendel in cold sweat.

In his eyes, the youth before was a complete monster in human form. The usage of his Element Power clearly belonged to someone who had just become a Gold-ranker, but his combat prowess was even more terrifying than any Gold-rankers who mastered their Element Powers completely.

Brendel's broadsword looked like a dragon releasing its breath when he raised the weapon over his head. Flames spewed out from his silver gauntlets and spun around Halran Gaia like a hurricane. When he finally swung it towards the ground, the spiraling pillar of flames instantly engulfed the adjutant's squadron of Lionmane Beastman, turning them into ashes in mere seconds. A few managed to escape the attack, but rock needles suddenly thrust up into the air after a series of loud cracking noises, and they turned the hapless survivors into pincushions.

A single slash across the ground caused a large hole in the center of the Lionmane Beastman's formations.

Brendel took a single step forward, and the Lionmane Beastmen from Toquinin retreated in an uproar.

"Prepare your crossbows now! Hurry!" The adjutant screamed in terror.

The warriors from Toquinin sent to the Green Tower were elites. Even the crossbowmen were carrying Magic Crossbows. As soon as they heard their commander's order, they woke up from their daze and hurriedly prepared their projectiles. Yellow light glowed from their crossbows, and it was clear that the crossbows were imbued with Earth Magic.

"Fire!" The adjutant roared after a few seconds.

The taut strings sang as dozens of yellow lines trailed from the crossbows to Brendel's body, but before the projectiles could find their mark, a shield of red flames materialized out of thin air and turned them to ashes.

The Beastman adjutant stared at the flames and forgot to breathe as he realized the attacks failed completely. If there were gamers around Brendel, they would have yelled in frustration and envy instantly—

'Just how amazing is this bastard's equipment!'

Halran Gaia, Bahamut's Grasp, The Warrior's Ring are Fantasy-ranked artifacts, along with countless magic artifacts. His Defense and Physique stats surpassed a Guardian Knight class, while his damage output was even higher than a Berserker or other related DPS class. And even if Brendel's equipment was discounted, the number of techniques he had could only be compared to a pure pay-to-win player.

[What a sneaky cat. You ran away the moment I cut down your leader, but it's a mistake to think you're safe just because you're hiding in the back.]

Brendel quietly remarked to himself, after he heard the Beastman adjutant's commands and discovered his location. He reached for the Shale Longbow on his back and dismissed the shield of flames after the volley of crossbow bolts ended. He pulled the longbow's string fully and aimed:

"Earth to earth, dust to dust, Arrow of Stone!"

Brendel's shooting skills were derived from his experience as a level 130 warrior. With the addition of a Mercenary's proficiency, he was absolutely confident that he would hit him at this distance. He released his fingers, and the arrow flew like a comet towards the adjutant.

The latter was still a Gold-ranker and immediately deflected the arrow away, but the projectile's magic transferred itself across the blade and turned the Beastman's flesh into stone.

"Lonmmf, mff, mmmmf!" Rono jumped up and shouted as he mistakenly identified as the weapon in Brendel's hands to be a Longbow of Petrification, a weapon that was wielded by a legendary humanoid creature called Medusa.

The reason for Rono's garbled words was due to Elman. The viscount frantically covered the black-haired youth's lips when he realized Rono was about to make a mistake.

Brendel's hidden trump cards were starting to frighten them, and they felt a cold dread spreading all over their backs. The Lionmane Beastmen were pushed back completely.

Even though the Beastmen still had greater numbers, Kodan and Austin were veteran Gold-ranked swordsmen who were experienced in battles. They struck at the Lionmane Beastmen's formation and forced them to lump together. This made it

impossible for the Beastmen to surround their enemies and become ineffective instead.

With the death of their two commanding officers, they quickly lost their morale and their formation was broken. The Beastmen's left flank was the first group that ran away. They had the biggest number of casualties due to the Fireclaw Lizardmen's charges, and once the Beastman adjutant died, they ran away and disappeared in the Dark Forest.

The center formation immediately received pressure once the left flank disappeared. They also started to flee, but their retreat was disorderly and panicked as the right flank realized what was happening. Their numbers dwindled down quickly but Brendel did not allow his men to pursue them.

It was because the Druids had appeared.

The majority of the fleeing Beastmen were quickly taken as prisoners by the Druids who bound them up tightly, with only a handful escaping. This result was not surprising to Brendel, but Aouine's ambassadors were still reeling in shock. It was only after they returned to Brendel's camps to receive treatment, did they realize what kind of miracle had happened.

Dolant sat down silently with a dark expression as Merial treated his wounds, but the female aristocrat and Count Austin went over to thank Brendel for their treatments. Still, they felt a little uncomfortable. They originally intended to arrest the youth but ended up working with him to fight the Beastmen.

There was something that greatly puzzled them. How did the Lionmane Beastmen know that Aouine's civil war in the north was going to happen? Who leaked the kingdom's information to them? Then there was the fact that Kirrlutz threatened them without revealing the details about Brendel.

Was it even possible to arrest the young man, given how strong he was?

Austin suspected that the Kirrlutz's ambassadors perceived the youth as a threat and hoped that Aouine would somehow foolishly hand him over.

But Brendel did not stay and talk with the ambassadors. He was fiddling with his cards when he heard Carglise calling out to him. The latter briefly reported the results of the youths.

[Excellent. It seems like I really must raise him to become my adjutant.]

Brendel was pleased to find out that Carglise managed to defeat two Lionmane Beastman all by himself. Even though it could not compare to Scarlett, he was actually the only person amongst the youths to succeed alone.

“My lord, I feel like there’s something wrong.”

“Oh?” Brendel nodded in approval: “Go ahead and speak freely.”

Chapter 134

Brendel's advisors

The Druids were interrogating the Lionmane Beastmen prisoners. The attack from the Beastmen made them furious. The Blackthorn council members did not think that there would be anyone who dared to cause trouble in the frontlines, especially when Brendel was considered to be their ally.

The two-legged cats from Toquinin were wasting their time, and time was the rough equivalent of life at this critical juncture.

On the other hand, the Beastmen felt wronged. The scouts heard that Brendel had only brought a group of men who were not highly skilled, and the ambassadors from Aouine only brought a small number of Silver-ranked guards. Their dead commanders thought that it would not require much time to effort to steal Halran Gaia, or to kill them if it were necessary.

The people from Kirrlutz did not inform them of Brendel's true strength, and they caused them to get wiped out instead.

But the truth was the Kirrlutz Empire was unaware of how strong Brendel was. Even Rono and Faena were greatly shocked to find out Brendel's true strength. Just like the Beastmen, they did not think that a few Gold-rankers would be the match for the Beastmen's hundred-odd Silver-rankers.

Even though these Beastmen did not have any strong swordsmanship or similar techniques, they were able to enter a state of rage to boost their strength and were incredibly aggressive. A typical Silver-ranked human would not be a match for a Lionmane Beastman even when they are classified as the same rank.

While the Druids discussed amongst themselves what they should do with the Beastmen, Brendel summoned his Wind Spirit Spiders and secretly had them scout the area.

Carglise stretched and yawned as he sat down beside Brendel.

“I feel that someone made this event happen.” He said.

“Oh?” Brendel tilted his head.

“It can’t be a coincidence that the ambassadors and the Catmen from Toquinin picked a fight with us,” the youth lowered his voice, “if the ambassadors are pressured by the people from Kirrlutz, then it’s hard to say that the catmen are not influenced by Kirrlutz.”

“Toquinin belongs to the faction of the Hallowed Temple of Earth. It’s certainly a disaster for Aouine if the people from Kirrlutz worked with Toquinin to suppress Aouine, but the Holy Cathedral of Fire will never agree to this. While Kirrlutz holds a great number of seats in the Holy Cathedral of Fire, it is a violation of their teachings and Kirrlutz will pay a big price for helping Toquinin fight our kingdom.” Brendel rubbed his forehead.

“Although we have no direct proof of their involvement, it’s very likely that they leaked the information of the civil war to the Catmen. Do you remember what they said? The civil war in the northern regions. It’s too specific. Even our own ambassadors don’t seem to know where it’s going to happen. Do you think the Catmen’s magic is more advanced than Aouine’s?”

“True.” Brendel nodded. Only the Kirrlutz’s Empire could spend an enormous amount of resources to cast a long-range communication spell.

[Ah. Correction, the wizards from Galbu are capable of doing the same feat, but these people have the Silver Bloodline in them. They wouldn’t interfere with us. Even if these crafty old men wanted to cause trouble for Kirrlutz, they wouldn’t find a troubled kingdom. Wonderful, son of Macsen. It’s easy for me to guess that Kirrlutz has a hand in this shitty mess since I know how history is going to play out. But for you to make such a good analysis with a little bit of information so quickly, especially after having a ‘terrifying’ fight where the opponents supposedly outnumber us. It makes me wonder if you already formed an opinion the moment you saw the Beastmen appeared.]

Brendel believed it was a wise decision to recruit Carglise. Even though his father was an ordinary man, his son was certainly not.

[Hmm, how is it that you’re not famous in my past life? Someone like you should be

someone prominent. Or did you somehow get killed during your way to the princess? Hmm, hmm, I saved your life, young man. You should repay me.]

He patted Carglise's shoulders without saying anything. Revealing his thoughts carelessly would probably invite unwanted rumors. What if the Holy Cathedral of Fire sent a bunch of people to arrest and set him on fire?

"But why did the Catmen come all the way to pick a fight with us? Did they really come all the way to simply steal your sword? I understand that Halran Gaia is a legendary weapon, but those stupid cats are actual ambassadors, right? Ambassadors becoming bandits, this is such a loss of reputation." Carglise said a little puzzledly as he scratched his head: "Or did they have such a tradition from the ancient times? I can't understand their motive at all—"

Count Austin and the female scholar were eavesdropping on them, and both of them coughed with strange expressions on their faces. If the Lionmane Beastmen knew that this young man turned Toquinin into a kingdom of thieves with his remark, there might be a war for that insult.

But Amandina came over to answer the question: "Halran Gaia is considered as the holy relic of the Hallowed Temple of Earth. Its value is how a citizen of Aouine would regard the Lionheart. An example would be this, if our lord possesses one of Kirrlutz's national treasure, they would rush over to pry it from our lord's hands."

"I see. Then it's still likely to be Kirrlutz's handiwork. The people who witnessed the fight between our lord and the people from Kirrlutz are mostly natives, and they aren't likely to spread rumors about him having Halran Gaia."

[Backstab me after failing to win in a direct confrontation? This isn't Veronica's style.]

Brendel nodded again to agree with the assessment. He had already figured out the culprits behind the scene as soon as he saw the Lionmane Beastmen, but the people from Kirrlutz were indeed recurring villains who came back again and again.

Amandina pondered for a moment: "But it's strange. Why would the famous Veronica scheme behind our backs in this manner? We are no match for her."

"Perhaps she doesn't want to have a fall out with the Druids?" Carglise suggested.

"But the Druids are no fools."

Carglise laughed as he turned his head back: “Wait, I think I get it. Count Austin, out of curiosity, is there someone important amongst the ambassadors from Kirrlutz?”

As a high-ranking general and aristocrat, Austin did not have to answer the youth in front of him. However, he did cooperate with Brendel and was also dissatisfied with Kirrlutz’s actions to use them.

“Yes, and it’s someone I recognize. The daughter of Kirrlutz’s prime minister.”

“Ah. So it’s indeed the people from Kirrlutz, but Veronica has no idea about it.”

Brendel nodded. But he was unable to go to her and point fingers, because she might actually pretend that the order was from her to protect the empire’s dignity. Even if she were to teach her subordinates a lesson, it was unlikely that she would let the people from Aouine off since the move had already been made.

“In any case, the people from Kirrlutz don’t intend to let us off,” Brendel said in a flat tone. Dealing with the Calamity of Wolves and the schemes behind his back at the same time made him furious.

“My lord, we should act now,” Carglise suddenly came over to him and whispered: “I’m sure they are trying to look at our trump cards if they planned for the ambassadors and the Catmen to attack us.”

“Indeed, my lord,” Amandina was close enough to hear Carglise’s words and also agreed, “Carglise is saying that the people from Kirrlutz are watching us.”

But Brendel quickly replied: “Stop. Move back a little and continue to discuss what they are going to do next.”

Carglise was momentarily surprised, but he quickly understood that his lord had already made a move. His eyes were full of shadowy laughter as though he could not wait for the world to be engulfed in chaos, but he took a moment to think it through: “Well, in order to find out where our limits are, they have to raise the quality of their cards... Which means they are going to find a stronger force.”

“The Holy Cathedral of Fire,” Amandina continued, “because the Kirrlutz Empire wields the authority to speak for them. If they got our ambassadors and the Beastmen from Toquinin to come after us, they are likely to consider the Holy Cathedral of Fire in their plans.”

Count Austin and the female scholar paled. The latter was thankful for Brendel's assistance back then and joined in the discussion with a frown: "But even if the people from Kirrlutz made a request to them to get back at you, they would need a legitimate reason for the Bishops to act on this matter."

[Reason?]

Brendel felt his eyelids twitch as he thought about the Holy Swords magic that he displayed, which was similar to the Sacred Church of Light's magic. He could not help but took in a deep breath and prayed that his suspicions would not come true.

It would be a disaster if they did.

Chapter 135

Wolves' movements

===== Faena's POV =====

Faena watched the Lionmane Beastmen's interrogation by the Druids with a pair of glazed eyes. Both of her hands were clamped over her lips. Her throat moved several times, wanting to grumble about how these Beastmen were useless for not being able to defeat a group of men from Aouine with superior numbers, but there was no sound.

Brendel truly terrified her.

It was only at this moment that she realized the country bumpkin had held back that afternoon. There was no way she could have waited for Veronica or the others to come in time if he wanted to kill her.

The three nobles from Kirrlutz had to stay where they were in order to avoid encountering the Druids who were searching for any remaining Beastmen. Instead, they continued to watch Brendel and his group of men from afar, but that youth from Aouine was slowly walking over to them.

Even though it seemed like he was just taking a stroll, Faena felt her heart beat heavily like a stick hitting a drum. The icy expression around his eyes made her afraid of even leaking out the tiniest of breath.

"Elman, Elman... H-he hasn't discovered we're here, right?" She whispered in desperation.

"Don't worry." Elman frowned but he assured her, "it's unlikely that he discovered our ploy so quickly. Even if he did, he wouldn't know that we're hiding here."

There was nothing good about a gifted prodigy appearing in Aouine. He was even younger than him. Elman stared at Brendel, feeling a strange sense of enmity towards him.

"It's a good time to leave now." He patted Faena's shoulders as he was also worried.

Brendel's abilities were too frightening. There was no guarantee that he would fail to detect them if he came closer.

"Are we not going to wait and see if the people from the Holy Cathedral are going to come?" Rono whispered.

"The people from Holy Cathedral of Fire are not like these beasts who act on instinct. The bishop leading them is greedy, but he's not a fool." Elman shook his head. He suddenly saw Faena lift her finger up and hurriedly knocked her hand down.

"What are you doing!" He hissed loudly.

"H-he's looking in our direction..." Faena's eyes were wide.

Elman stiffened as he looked at Brendel. The youth's eyes were fixated in their direction, causing his scalp to feel numb.

[Impossible, this is a coincidence!]

"Lower your heads, both of you, don't let him spot you!" Elman whispered as a Wind Spirit Spider darted across the ground behind him silently.

Brendel tilted his head slightly as he pondered on what he should do. There was actually quite a fair distance between them because he did not walk for long. In fact, half his face was lit up with an orange glow because he was still near his camp's torches.

"He... discovered... us!" Faena stood up and tried to run away, but Elman pulled her down. She struggled in his arms.

"Don't p—" Elman's words suddenly stopped when he saw Brendel pulling out Halran Gaia. An outline of golden light covered the black broadsword.

Elman finally believed that Brendel had discovered them.

"Run!" He shouted with a panicked expression.

A hurricane of light started to gather around Halran Gaia as Brendel raised it over his head. The figures of the fleeing nobles from Kirrlutz could be seen in his eyes. He brought his senses to his limit and swung his sword.

A single slash.

Speed that was too fast for a normal human to even catch a glimpse.

White energy emerged from his blade, bringing along screaming gales as invisible blades of air sailed through the air, almost in the shape of a pair of majestic wings.

The wings chased the nobles.

The wind uprooted the trees behind them and they crashed onto the ground, as though a gigantic beast was rampaging in the forest, advancing quickly towards its prey.

And in that moment.

The adventurers, mercenaries, ambassadors, and Druids in the Dark Forest turned their heads towards the source of the noise. The tremendous energy could be felt even from a great distance—

===== Veronica's POV =====

Veronica was still discussing their plans with her subordinates when she heard the distant howls from the violent winds. She had a grave expression as she raised her head up away from the maps. The wizard next to her put down the crystal bowl in his hand and also turned to the source of the disturbance.

They were just in time to spot a blast of white energy lighting up the night in the northern direction. It finally disappeared after covering half the Dark Forest, leaving debris and dust across its wake.

“White Raven Sword Arte?! It’s from that boy, what is happening in that area!” Veronica’s eyes suddenly widened, and she turned to question her subordinates in a harsh tone: “Where’s Faena? Wait, where’s Rono and Elman!”

Delphine’s face had a deathly white pallor when she realized something was wrong.

“Delphine!” Veronica immediately noticed her reaction: “Did they go there?”

The long-haired girl shook her head subconsciously, but the furious glare from the female general stunned her, and she nodded with difficulty.

Veronica's face darkened. She advanced to the girl with large strides.

"Did you have something to do with this?"

A silent nod, again.

A slap resounded in the camp.

Veronica took a deep breath and stared at the girl who was knocked onto the ground and demanded an answer with a pause between each word:

"Why did you not tell me?"

Delphine had a hand clasped over her face as she lowered her head in silence. There was a stream of blood that flowed down her white wrist. The color of her blood was especially striking.

"I'll deal with you later." Veronica scoffed coldly at the girl's response.

She was worried that Brendel had killed Faena and the other two boys. Things would truly become out of hand. Even though she threatened Brendel, it was definitely not a good time for the Empire to be involved in a war now.

Especially if it concerned Aouine—

"Get your soldiers ready," Veronica's eyes made the people around her tremble as she looked at them, "and move out."

===== Brendel's POV =====

When Brendel raised his sword, the ambassadors were still confused over what the youth was doing. When the damage to the vicinity was over, they jumped up in fright. Three sets of Kirrlutz's uniforms bearing the symbols of important Houses. Three bodies lying on the ground.

The ambassadors were initially astonished at Brendel's overwhelming might, but now fear consumed them and they could feel no warmth in their bodies.

It was all over.

Austin only had one thought. A war was going to break out between Kirrlutz and Aouine. The Empire would unleash its fury to their kingdom. It happened all too easily. Brendel's subordinates thought the same as they watched him move slowly towards the corpses.

"You won't be so lucky the next time. If I see you again, I'm afraid your heads won't be attached to your necks again." Brendel said.

The three bodies flinched when he spoke to them. Indeed, they were spared. Faena got up slowly, but her legs acted more like a newborn deer's attempt to get up, and she fell onto the ground in a heap. The moment where the Sword Energy brushed past her head kept looping in her mind. She did not even have the energy to cry any longer.

Elman's initial reaction to Brendel's attack was much better than the other two. He instantly pushed Rono in front of him when he saw the attack and turned around to run. Unfortunately, he only took a single step before he crashed into a pine tree.

Rono stumbled from Elman's push and fell face-down in the mud.

The Sword Energy seemed like it had a mind of its own and merely danced around their skin. Elman's sword belt was cut off, Rono's robe was shredded into pieces, while Faena's pauldrons were split into half. They were then tossed up into the air by the shockwave of energy before they crashed onto the ground with a thud.

The trees around them were gone and not even grass was left intact. The Sword Energy snaked to a different path at a strange angle before it tore everything up in a straight line.

Brendel watched the Rono and Elman get up silently. They pulled up the shaking Faena and started to leave for their camps. However, they did not get far because they saw a colossal black wolf was in their path, motionless.

The boys sobered up and pulled out their swords but there was no reaction from the monster. They then noticed that it was in a strange pose. It looked as though it was charging towards something; its front paw was still lifted up. The two inched closer to the creature, their feet sweeping across fallen leaves and creating a rustling sound.

The wolf did not move but wobbled as though the minute vibrations had affected it.

Suddenly, its body split into half from head to tail, and a gush of blood and entrails

poured all over the ground, causing a foul stench to permeate the air.

Brendel observed the golden lights emerge from the wolf's body and flew towards him. Angry and annoyed as he was, he had no intention of getting Aouine in a war with Kirrlutz. As long as there were no deaths, these 'insults' to the people from Kirrlutz were unlikely to cause a war between them. Aouine had its troubles with Madara and the civil war, but the Kirrlutz Empire was not exactly in a healthy state right now.

The era of wars was still many years away.

It was not his personality to let these spoilt nobles get away with things. He chose the next best option. Threatening their lives in a show of power. It was the only way to make them feel fear from the bottom of their hearts.

But the true intention of his sword's swing was to rescue the three aristocrats. Frightening them was his secondary goal.

– Black Wolf (Lord) slain.

– 2300 XP gained.

[They can't die here even if it isn't my fault. But the wolf's appearance means that the event is starting.]

He sheathed his sword quickly and glanced at the other end of the forest where it led up to the black mountains.

A wolf's howl pierced through the silent night—

And more wolves far and near answered it. Moving shadows started appearing in the forest. Brendel observed that area for a moment as though he was confirming something, before he turned back to the youths with a raised hand:

'They're here—'

Chapter 136

Into battle

The trees within the Dark Forest were of varied height and appeared like waves of water in the night wind. It was impossible to find where they ended. Wolves started to howl within the forest, and more answered the call from near and far.

The succession of howls came nearer and nearer to the camp, and it sounded as though the beasts with bared fangs were growling next to everyone's ears. Black shadows darted across the ground, stopping occasionally as they sniffed the air, as though they were seeking their prey.

A single pair of red lights the size of dots suddenly appeared in mid-air. In a heartbeat, hundreds more emerged and left vanishing trails. And in a few seconds, the number was as many as the stars in the sky. White cold mist could be seen streaming from their steely snouts.

The youths gasped, while the ambassadors' muscles became taut.

"Prepare for battle!" Austin immediately judged they were unable to leave in this situation and ordered his knights.

Brendel's men also readied themselves into a defensive formation; those with armor and shields stood in front, while the archers were placed in the back.

"Stay in position!" A yell rang out.

Brendel glanced at them. The youths were split up into squadrons and each leader was making sure they were orderly.

[Most of them are shaken but the leaders are doing well. Even though they aren't confident, they are calm enough.]

"Lancers, lay down your lances, horizontally!" Kodan yelled at the youths' side: "Hurry up! And make the formation a little bigger!"

The blades glinted as they caught the light from the campfire's golden hue. The tips of the weapon seemed to increase in length. The wolves stopped moving and trotted uneasily. Red eyes moved back and forth slightly.

"They are going to test for weaknesses." Kodan inspected the youths' formations once more as he spoke.

Brendel nodded in agreement. He threw a vial of red liquid to Kodan and said: "Catch!"

Kodan subconsciously caught it. When he opened his palm, he discovered that the vial had Sealing Runes written all over it.

The contents looked like blood.

"Drink it," Brendel said

"What is this?" Kodan asked.

"Potion of Dragon Strength."

Kodan picked up the vial and shook it with his thumb and index finger. "I've drunk this stuff before. It only works once in a lifetime, right?"

"The garbage made out of Dragonblood Moss can be called a Potion of Dragon Strength? Potion of Cow Strength, perhaps. Drink it. You will get to feel the real thing." Brendel answered with disdain.

The Wyvern's blood bought from the Green Tower was made into a concoction and bottled in the vial. It was one rank below a dragon's and one rank above a five-headed Hydra's blood. A hundred vials were made in total and distributed to the youths when the camp was set up. There were still some left, simply because the Planeswalker's cards did not benefit from any potions or materials.

As for the five-headed Hydra's blood, Brendel had even more vials made. He planned to use it on his future White Lion Army and to give some to the Subterrane Dwellers. It would be good to bribe Tagiv and make them even more loyal.

Kodan took a final glimpse of the potion and drank it a little doubtfully. But his expression immediately changed and he stared at Brendel with disbelief.

“T... This is...”

Brendel only grinned a little in response and surveyed the defense line.

His group of youths formed a formation in the front, while the ambassadors' knights were placed on the left flank. Ropar led his Fireclaw Lizardmen to the right flank.

“My lord! Do we drink it now?” A young man with light golden hair asked.

Brendel recalled his name to be Janos, the leader of the first squadron. The latter was a shoemaker's son who had a somewhat scrawny body when he first joined, but now he looked a little more like a soldier.

The approval was given and Janos was about to instruct his men to drink the potion, when someone interrupted him with a mocking tone.

“My word, is a shoemaker's son going to fight against the big bad wolves?” A youth with silver-grey hair said.

He wore a simple suit of leather armor with his hand placed on his waist and wore a lopsided grin.

“Now it's not the time to throw your jeers, Roland.” Janos did not have the mood to argue with him. The monsters were approaching closer and he felt the tremors on the ground, causing him to grip his sword tightly.

Roland shrugged when he saw his taunt fail, but he suddenly froze.

A light gasp escaped his lips when he saw the black wolves suddenly rush out from the trees like a tidal wave. He wanted to seek excitement when he joined Brendel, and now it seemed like the situation was certainly too exciting.

“Take out your Potion of Dragonblood!” Carglise was the first to raise his hand and a vial was in it. Janos, Roland, and the other leaders in charge of their squadrons also shouted as they took out their vials: “Drink!”

The Potions of Dragonblood Strength had a stronger effect when it was consumed before a battle. The youths took out their vials from their pouches and drank them. Under the guidance of Brendel and the other Gold-rankers, they had just cleared the hurdle to be called Iron-rankers.

But drinking the high-quality potions at their levels had a violent effect on them. They felt like a dragon's flame was exploding within their chests.

"Shit, it's so hot!"

"My body feels like it's burning up..."

"Help, water, water!"

The youths' faces were flushed red from the heat. Carglise smacked one of the youth's head with his sword's scabbard: "Eyes on your enemies, fool!"

Yells from the other leaders could be heard as well.

"Focus and don't be distracted!"

"Pay attention to the enemies' movements!"

Brendel nodded inwardly when he watched them from behind. He turned his head to search for Austin, and he tossed a vial towards him: "Catch this, Count Austin!"

"You're giving me this?" Austin had been paying attention to the black wolves, but he also saw the youths drinking the contents in the vials. He looked a little blankly at Brendel. The latter's action surprised him, because the ambassadors were not allies with him.

But the youth's gaze had returned to the wolves.

"Do you still remember, that once upon a time in the ancient battlefields, the horns of the six dukes rang out loudly, while the swallow-tailed flags were flying against the wind?" His voice was loud enough to reach everyone.

"Do you still remember, the epics of our glorious knights who fought against their enemies and crushed them—"

Brendel gave a smile that bared his teeth as a sudden wolf howl could be heard: "In the name of Aouine, and the oath of the selfless lions—"

Austin was transfixed, but a single cry broke out behind him and answered Brendel: "I will uphold it with the sword in my hands!"

The knights behind Austin pulled out their swords and also repeated that cry as they faced the black wolves.

Brendel pulled out Halran Gaia: “Thus, descendants of the warriors who followed King Erik—”

The black wolves were finally moving.

“Slay the foes before us!”

A rolling carpet of black wolves rushed towards the camp. Red eyes flashed by as the wolves ran in the shape of a curve, heading towards the knights who formed a wall. Ten-odd wolves who were ahead of the pack leaped up to an area that oversaw the camp. They released a long howl that was high in tone before it fell in pitch, and the other wolves split into two forces, running past them.

The black monsters crashed into the humans wearing white armor. Lances impaled several bodies all at once, and black spurts of blood went in all directions. The lances creaked heavily as they withstood the immense pressure from the wolves, and the knights and youths were forced back with their feet dragging across the ground.

Finally, the lances snapped.

“Swords!”

The people who had their weapons broken threw them down and immediately pulled their longswords.

[A little longer. I need to wait a little longer.]

Brendel watched the wolves collide against the humans like they were cars that lost control in an accident. Golden lights appeared and flew straight at him. In an instant, more than two hundred XP were added to his total points.

He reached out for his own Potion of Dragonblood Strength and drank it. The viscous liquid went down his throat and he felt his body warm up. It was not painful, but it was an undeniable heat.

Green words appeared across his retina:

- Strength +25
- Agility +10
- Physique +20
- Potential +~10%

The effectiveness of the potion was diminished because of his high level. The youths under him would have benefitted far more in terms of additional stats. Kodan's true level was actually higher than Brendel, so the increase in stats would not be as high.

The increase of stats was temporary with the exception of the Potential stat. The Potential Stat will slowly temper the body as long as the 'drug' remained in the system. Most of it will be squandered, but intense battles would allow it to be spent at a faster rate.

[Time to grind XP. Wait, that isn't right. Time to have a workout.]

Brendel flexed his wrists with a few audible cracks.

[Holy Swords, open the path!]

A sudden pair of gigantic green wings appeared behind him and extended to each side—

Chapter 137

The Alliance in the forest

===== Elman's POV =====

“T-these are all Potion of Dragon Strength... And the quality of the potions!” Rono nearly bit his tongue in his shock.

The youths from Kirrlutz were unable to leave, and they had to move closer to Brendel's camp for protection.

“Rono, what's wrong?” Faena jumped a little.

The appearance of the wolves made her jittery, and she lowered her voice subconsciously, afraid of either attracting the monsters or Brendel.

“H-he's treating these potions like water...” Rono could not suppress his ire and said: “If they are instead used on knights who have more potential than this strange bunch— of people.”

“What is so surprising about these potions.” Elman regarded his companion a little coldly. He had pushed Rono down to cover himself when Brendel attacked them, and even though it was an instinctive action, he knew that this act would not be forgotten or forgiven.

Explaining was pointless and a waste of time. He even thought it would even be wise to consider ending this prodigy's future in this Dark Forest.

Rono glanced back at his ‘companion’. While Elman's expression was one of disinterest, Rono expressed his condescension openly because of the anger and injustice he felt.

“Ignorant fool. This is a true Potion of Dragon Strength made from a dragon's blood, or perhaps a grade that's close to it. The filth that you drank has nothing in comparison to the youths' potions.”

Elman secretly gritted his teeth, but he showed no changes in his expression and looked at Brendel's men one more time, before he spoke again:

"Fine, but it's about time we leave. There's an opening that we can take advantage of since the wolves' attention is on Aouine's men. We won't be able to escape if we waste any more time."

The trip was a mistake. But he could not openly blame it on Faena, even if she was the one who suggested to watch Brendel's reaction. The responsibility would still fall on him.

Rono was probably interested to watch Brendel a little longer, but Elman had seen enough talented people and simply did not care. It was especially so when Faena was the only successor of the Redhill family.

[What an awful mess. I came here all for the sake of flattering this girl, but that Brendel ruined my perfect image. A genius or a duke's successor, everything is pointless if my life is forfeit, but the ending to this scenario was a mere warning... Damn this bastard from Aouine.]

Faena did not seem to realize Elman's actions back then because she was also panicking. Rono was certainly the victim, but he was not fond of speaking ill of others and did not give away Elman. Still, the latter's eyes regarded Rono as though he was a dead person.

[If he were to tell Lady Veronica the things I have done to him...]

"Look over there!" Faena suddenly yelled.

===== Brendel's POV =====

Everyone felt the night sky brighten a little.

A pair of gigantic wings of green light extended on the battlefield. But when they looked at the pair of wings, they discovered that it was actually made up of countless Magic Formations. The Wind Spirit Spiders appeared in the air one by one, with a golden shining sword hovering over each of them.

The green lights quickly took on a golden hue.

Everyone held their breaths. Many had already seen Brendel's magic before, but it was never cast in the night. The golden Holy Swords that were pointing to the ground had more of a mysterious air to them compared to the ones summoned in the daytime.

[Is this magic?]

Austin could only stare at them like he had been turned to stone. The ambassadors behind him felt like their world had suddenly gone crazy. The youth was clearly a Gold-ranked swordsman.

How was he able to use magic?

But the gigantic pair of wings were clearly coming from him. Yet the scale of this magic was far beyond what an Arcane Knight could do.

[He's a spellcaster too?]

Brendel was used to such gazes and ignored them. He merely yelled out as he pointed Halran Gaia at the wolves: "Lower your eyes!"

"Lower your eyes! Our lord is going to unleash his attack!" The squadron leaders immediately yelled as well.

The knights subconsciously looked at the sky. They were just in time to see the brightness of the glowing swords increase in intensity. Eyes squinted as pillars descended from the sky, easily piercing through the wolves. The creatures had the durability of a strong Iron-ranker, but it was still weak enough for the magic to pierce through them.

The pillars of light became lasers that burned the wolves' fur before reaching their internal organs. Even when the monsters tried desperately to run away, the lasers tracked them in their general direction and continued to blast at them. The wolves who suffered the attack eventually had light pouring out from the other end of their wounds, and they exploded in a shower of burning ashes.

Beams continued to sweep across the monsters. A few went close enough to the knights and youths, causing them to shudder and shrink a little from the terrifying firepower. Each beam of light killed about two or three wolves before they went into cooldown.

A stream of golden light flew towards Brendel, and after sweeping the battlefield with the ten-odd beams of light a few times, the black wolves' charge started to crumble. Half of their numbers were slain, allowing Brendel to net around close to 1000 XP. Each wolf that was personally killed by him gave 7 to 8 XP, depending on the creature's level.

The knights and youths were relieved to see the wolves weakened, but Brendel shouted a new command: "Advance and push them back!"

Austin was startled. His intention was to retreat and meet up with the main bulk of the ambassadors' guards, or to go behind the Druids' defense lines.

"It is too dangerous for us to attack them. We should retreat, Ser..." Austin turned to Brendel and said, before realizing that he did not know the youth's name.

"Brendel, the Baron of Firburh," Brendel gave a single laugh in response, "Aouine will never retreat in the face of these monsters—"

Austin was completely stunned. Perhaps the youth in front of him was a crazy fool? It would explain why he went against the people from Kirrlutz. Even if the youths under his command became Silver-rankers because of the Potion of Dragon Strength, going against the endless waves of wolves was impossible.

"Lord Brendel, you have to calm down, we will be torn into pieces if we fight them!" Dolant ran up to the youth as well.

Even though he looked down on Brendel initially, the latter fought together with them as Aouine's citizens and taught the wild beasts from Toquinin a lesson. His opinion on Brendel went up, but the decision to march forward was too frightening.

And yet the number of knights that was brought along merely amounted to twenty-odd men. If Brendel insisted on going forth, they had no choice but to follow him. Dolant's eyes briefly went over to the black wolves. The opening created by Brendel was starting to be filled up. The tremors that reached his feet was making his hair stand.

Brendel shook his head and pointed to the right: "Count Dolant, you're the one who needs to calm down. We will not be torn into pieces because our allies have arrived."

Dolant quickly followed Brendel's finger. A group of wolves was scattering from

something as though they had encountered something frightening.

A metallic glint flashed briefly in the forest.

It was a centaur that suddenly charged out from the forest, clad in silver armor with a silver lance on his back. He wielded a huge ornate longbow that was the size of his body, chasing after the group of black wolves.

With each arrow fired, a black wolf would tumble over and cease breathing.

A few seconds later, hundreds of centaurs galloped out of the forest, firing at the wolves and thinning their numbers at a quick rate. There were many Druids who rode on the centaurs' backs, and they raised their staffs. Large vines shot out from the ground and overtook the charging centaurs, lifted the dead black wolves up and hurled them in the midst of the beasts that were still alive, causing many to stumble on the ground.

The monsters got up shakily, but the centaurs came up and finished them with a thrust of their lances. The reinforcements were like a group of heavy cavalry causing a great din, and they changed the dire situation in an instant. They cut straight into the wolves, reached where Brendel and the ambassadors' forces were at, and quickly eased their pressure.

A centaur who appeared to be slightly older than the others trotted forth. He had a different suit of armor. His pauldrons had the shape of a pair of deer antlers that curved majestically outwards, while his gold armor followed the shape of his chest closely, making it look like he had bare skin that was gold in color.

With a shake of his lance, he came before Brendel with a loud voice: "Human, I am Wydall! The Elder Druid have made his request known, and we shall assist you to break the first wave of the Calamity of Wolves!"

The nobles from Aouine snapped their heads towards Brendel What agreement did the youth make with the Druids?

"You agreed? What about the Tree Elves?"

"We are here in the battlefield too, young one."

There was a sudden shift of lighting on Wydall's back, revealing a tall elf with green

hair adorned with leaves. He wore a robe, but did not wear a shirt and had an exposed chest. He too had a longbow, but it was even larger than what the centaurs used and made one wonder how he was able to use it.

“It’s you—” Amandina expressed her surprise; he was the Druid that she and Scarlett saw when Brendel entertained the children.

He nodded with a tiny smile: “If it were another human, we might reject the Elder Druids’ proposal, but I am pleased with your actions, young one, and I can try believing in the proposal.”

Brendel was a little confused as to what he did to gain the elf’s trust. But he glanced at Amandina and took a quick guess, nodding:

“There’s no time to waste, allow me to explain the plan.”

Chapter 138

Piercing through the siege

===== Druids' POV =====

While Wydall had led his subordinates to reach Brendel's camp, the Druids launched a formal attack to break the siege. War horns rang out in the darkness, causing countless birds to fly out and many factions to look at the Druids' march.

It was as though a slumbering dragon had woken up with a roar; its voice clear and melodious that made the forest tremble.

More than a thousand Druids and Tree Elves poured out in response to the war horns. These allied forces wore robes made out of reeds, forming a line of green that severed the wolves' charge.

More than a hundred Ents woke up from their sleep under the Druids' summoning magic, and these giant trees that reached several meters high smashed into the wolves with their feet. They then lowered their body and swatted the black wolves the size of cows with their immense hands. Once they entered the battlefield, the black wolves that poured out like a flood were suddenly halted.

The summoning magic was a fourth-circle spell. While these Ents could not compare with a real Treant, they were classified as intermediate Silver-rankers, which were more than enough to handle the monsters.

But the Druids who could summon them were elite Druids within the Blackthorn council, and they planned to stay in the area until Brendel succeeded in entering his destination, making it clear that the Druids were determined to support him by risking their lives.

While the Ents were indeed powerful, they were really shields for the Tree Elves. The latter was natural sharpshooters that shot twice as fast as a human, and they used longbows that were much harder to pull. Even the most untalented soldier was able to shoot twenty-five arrows in one minute. It was a frightening storm of arrows, especially when the projectiles were made from Ironbark. While the wolves were fast

and powerful, their defenses were considered weak for a monster, and it ended in a massacre.

With just two volleys of arrows, the wolves' left flank immediately lost its shape and they began to scatter.

The Alpha Wolves howled when they realized the sudden loss, commanding the scattered wolves and notifying the wolf that lorded over them—

The Warg.

Howls echoed throughout the forest to echo the Alpha Wolves' cry, and the tyrant that hid in the deepest area amongst the wolves raised its head and answered.

It was an ear-piercing bellow that could be heard everywhere in the Dark Forest. Hundreds of Alpha Wolves began to move at the same time, making the wolves that followed them change their directions.

The original movements of the wolves were to directly charge into the area, but now they moved in the shape of a large spiral, turning slowly and changing the shape of the battlefield.

===== Brendel's POV =====

The Calamity of Wolves was spawning around the entire Loop of Trade Winds. The wolves that entered the Green Tower's outer areas were merely the vanguard of the wolves.

[If there are no unexpected changes, there are twelve hordes of wolves for the first wave of attack. I can't remember the exact numbers, but there are at least two medium-sized groups that have approximately five hundred wolves.]

The first wave was the weakest amongst the Calamity of Wolves, but Brendel did not take it lightly. There were thousands of wolves led by the Alpha Wolves, and each mature Black Wolf had the strength of a peak Iron-ranker. More than half of the Blackthorn council's Druids had not even reached that level, let alone numbers.

[The biggest advantage the Green Tower has is the Fire Seed's protection. The flames emanating from it are strong and stable, and it suppresses the monsters' levels by 15. The Druids should be able to hold out for days. The area we are in also has a Fire seed,

but it's much weaker in comparison. Once we leave this area to go to the Loop of Trade Wind, it will be much harder.]

Brendel's plan was simple.

The first wave of wolves and the second wave of wolves were nearly apart by ten hours. He needed to break the first wave and reach the Loop of Trade Winds before the next night. The Druids had agreed to lend their assistance to create a distraction—

Brendel did not waste any time while the Druids had the attention of the Alpha Wolves. He tasked his men and the newly-join centaurs and carved out a bloody path.

The group of ambassadors had no choice but to follow him from behind because Austin failed to persuade 'Lord Firburh'. There was no choice. Twenty-odd guards were insufficient for them to break through the siege and return to their camp. The Centaurs and Tree Elves that appeared were unlikely to escort them back.

[These damned barbarians are completely ignoring our status as Aouine's ambassadors... But at least the people from Kirrlutz are also ignored.]

Dolant was originally making a din and wanted to get Brendel to send them back, but a group of wolves came close enough to frighten him. He stumbled and quickly ran back to his guards and did not think about making this suggestion again. The three youths from Kirrlutz were forced back once again to Brendel's camp when the Centaurs drove out the wolves. They called out to the centaurs later on and asked if they could be sent back to their camps, but they were ignored.

Calling the Centaurs and Tree Elves' attitudes towards Brendel polite was an understatement. Quinn and Wydall agreed to let Brendel command them after a few moments.

Things quickly turned out to be difficult.

Brendel's tactical explanations initially made it an easy task for the Centaurs to make a path, but as they reached the eastern side of the Wall of Flowers, the Spiny Ridge, there was a gradual change.

"Look over there!" He heard a certain familiar voice that was grating to his ears.

[The trio from Kirrlutz. Not foolish enough to try and leave for their camp on their

own. What a pity. I might be able to absolve myself from any responsibilities if they died there and then, but now I have to ensure their safety.]

He looked over to where Faena was pointing. He thought it might have been a naive aristocrat's exaggeration, but he did not expect to see something noteworthy. Amongst the stream of black wolves, there were a few abnormal ones that were much bigger leading the pack.

[Dire Wolves! Six of them are close to us, with five in the back. Shit, eleven mini-bosses. Something's wrong— Did I predict wrongly, and the Warg is actually nearby us?]

He immediately scanned his surroundings, trying to find out if there was a Warg. Logically, if there were so many mini-bosses that appeared, a Warg must be commanding them. But he clearly heard the Warg howling from far away, with the wolves around it responding.

Still, he did not discover the Warg's unique presence even after several attempts. With 25 OZ worth of perception, even if it was during the night, there were no blind spots over hundreds of meters.

"Elder Wydall!" He shouted, unwilling to let things go.

The Centaur Elder was just piercing a wolf's skull with his lance, but he immediately turned towards Brendel with questioning eyes.

"Left side, Lord-class Black Wolves, do you see it?" Brendel shouted with a pointed finger.

Wydall nodded immediately. Even though it was his first time experiencing such an outbreak of wolves, he was the highest ranking officer amongst the Centaurs and had a vast combat experience, and he quickly understood Brendel's description.

"What about them?" He asked.

"Let your men back away a little," Brendel ordered. He needed to observe the Dire Wolves' reactions, and it would be good if he discovered the Warg's position.

Even though Wydall was puzzled over Brendel's sudden command, he did not ask about it and immediately whistled. The hundred-odd centaurs instantly changed their formations and gathered next to Brendel's side.

The youths under Brendel's command exclaimed in surprise. It was the first time they saw the Tree Elves and Centaurs, and these two races only existed as allies to humans in bardic tales. The orderly change in their formation was indeed swift, but it only made their lord more mysterious because he could issue orders to them so easily.

"Lord-class black wolves, what a funny description. Does he mean that the wolves are able to act like aristocrats?" Faena giggled.

Brendel's ears caught that remark, and he whipped his head to glare at her with the words 'shut up!' written on his face.

Faena's temper rose up. There was no one in the Kirrlutz Empire who dared to be so rude to her! But she quickly knitted her brows in shock as she remembered what Brendel did a while ago, and she forced back her words of insult.

"Hmph, what an evil man." She could only mumble to herself in frustration.

Naturally, her voice was so soft that even Brendel could hardly hear it with his high perception.

Chapter 139

Warg

Brendel could not be bothered with the spoiled brat. His eyes went back to observe the endless sea of wolves. Indeed, once the centaurs retreated, the wolves began to become restless.

In a few moments, the eleven Dire Wolves began to weave in and out of the black water like sharks, driving their own forward in order to surround the races.

Brendel did not waste this opportunity. The Wind Spirit Spiders he summoned earlier were commanded to hide in the trees when the centaurs appeared, and it allowed the wolves to lower their guards. Two hundred golden lights shot out into the sky when the youth raised his hands, flying over to the Dire Wolves in a packed formation.

A golden pillar of light shot out at a steep angle.

Brendel did not use the Holy Swords conservatively and focused them at the area that was dense with wolves, forming the singular pillar of light that devastated the ground, before it dimmed and another pillar of light shot at a different place.

– 7 XP gained

– 7 XP gained

– 7 XP gained

– 8 XP gained

– 7 XP gained

He watched the reported XP in his retina change like a waterfall. It might appear to be impressive, but it was actually quite low since it was on a battlefield.

The golden pillar of light changed into a net that went for numbers, causing the black wolves that passed through the net to burst into flames. The net went up and down,

causing countless sources of light as the wolves writhed in burning pain. Finally, they stopped moving after screaming in agony for a few seconds.

This process repeated several times until the Holy Sword card finally spent the EP in it.

The centaurs had stopped moving forward. Even though Wydall had seen many harsh battles and even fought an Earth Dragon, he and the other centaurs still took in a deep breath as they watched the scene unfold.

A hundred feet around where they stopped—

The sea-like wolves had been completely massacred, and there were only burning ashes. It took less than a minute and hundreds of wolves were completely wiped out. The monsters even looked like they hesitated to approach.

[5250 XP in total.]

Brendel paid 2 Earth EP to replenish the Holy Sword card again, and the Wind Spirit Spiders glowed once more, waiting for the Dire Wolves to drive more wolves to them.

But the wolves continued to run around the empty space.

“We should move now!” Wydall shouted to Brendel. Indeed, it would be a good time since they were unchecked. But this was not what Brendel’s current objective.

The youth’s eyes narrowed and stared at the extreme limits of the encirclement, where clumps of fogs filled it.

Quinn was also staring in the same direction—

“Wait, something isn’t right.” He said.

Brendel nodded. The reactions from the wolves proved this point. He used the Holy Sword card not to carve out a path, but to watch the reaction of the wolves, which appeared to be ‘logical’.

[Beasts corrupted by Mana are typically berserk and lack intelligence, especially if it’s a Black Wolf. They will not act as a normal wolf pack or become afraid from watching its own die. They will only become more rabid if they are injured. But they retreated.

This proves that a Warg is in their midst. The creature is nearly as intelligent as a human adult, and would order the horde back in order to cut its losses.]

This reaction exposed the Tyrant amongst the wolves.

But a long bellow pierced through the black sky. It was low and vicious, as though to announce something.

“He realized that we have discovered him.” Quinn’s expression changed and he immediately took out his longbow.

The black wolves started to rush towards them again.

There was an unsettling feeling spreading throughout everyone. A beast that was as smart as a human, planning to tear out their throats with a plan. Brendel felt it had seen through his intentions to test it.

“A wild beast that’s this clever?” Even Carglise who was always bold had a worried expression, though his tone was one of disbelief.

“Hush—” One of the Tree Elves said.

“Do not doubt the abilities of a Warg. Beware that it will tear your throat while it’s dreaming.” Another Tree Elf said; the contents of his words were equally mysterious.

The strange words made not only Carglise shiver but also Roland and Janos too. Brendel did not find it funny when he saw them.

The description in the game for a Warg was this:

‘Every one hundred years, when the two moons shone in the night, the young wolf that was born under the red moons will eat its siblings and parents, becoming a gargantuan wolf that was stronger, more cunning and cruel than a normal wolf.’

‘The Warg is the mate of the Wolf of Calamity, Skoll. When they mate in summer, their descendants would be able to walk humans and cause endless chaos for a thousand years within the Dark Forest; an aberrant shadow of the night.’

And it was the truth.

Brendel stared at the distant fog, but he was unable to see past it.

“Amandina,” he said.

“What?” The girl took a deep breath and turned to the youth with a pale face with tightly pursed lips.

Her heart was racing, but the constant howling drowned out the sound of her heartbeats. She felt like she was on a boat in the ocean, facing against strong waves that threatened to capsize at any moment. At the same time, there was an acrid smell within the air from the smoking corpses of the wolves, and she felt like she needed to empty her stomach when she realized how violently the wolves died.

In fact, there were many youths who had the same expression as she had.

But she resisted her urge to puke, raised her skirt a little higher to avoid the filth on the ground as she came over.

“What is it, my lord?” She asked.

“The potions are with you?”

“Yes.”

“Please pass me the grey potion.”

Amandina opened the hard bag on her waist, allowing Brendel to glimpse at the vials and potions that were packed neatly in the bag. It was organized so well that he could easily identify them, and he could not help but knit his brows together.

Despite being a level 130 warrior, he was pretty much used to throwing all his potions into his bag, and it was like a mysterious surprise each time he took one out.

[Shameful. How shameful. I definitely can't do something like this, but this is reminding me how I took out a bottle of tomato paste instead of a healing potion in the game.]

It was a fatal blunder that happened several times, but Brendel was starting to appreciate how Felaern and Amandina worked when he saw this scene.

The girl took the third vial from the left and passed it to Brendel in less than a second.

“Amandina,” Brendel could not help but call out to her.

“Yes?” She was a little confused.

“I feel that compared to Dia,” he took off the potion’s cork, “I feel like you’re more like sisters with Felaern. But who’s the older sister?”

Amandina glared at him while she carefully closed the bag.

When Brendel looked at the fog again, it actually increased in density. Wolves with red eyes continued to pour out, getting closer towards them.

[Each Warg has their unique name, along with their unique ability. Perhaps it’s Shadowmist? It’s capable of moving quickly within the fog and attack those who lose their senses in it.]

He frowned. Wargs related to nature were the hardest to deal with. It was easier if they were related to physical attributes instead. He hurriedly drank the potion that murky liquid grey in it. It was a Potion of Eagle Eye, raising 20 OZ worth of Perception through the vision. The materials used to create it were Griffin’s feathers and Mana Fern. They were sold at a ridiculously low price in the Green Tower, and the potion itself was quite useful, so Brendel made a few.

His eyes sharpened immediately. The fog seemed to turn translucent and saw a wolf that was the size of a hill.

[Shit!]

He immediately cursed in his mind. Wargs were dangerous Gold-ranked monsters with Element Powers. Everyone started to realize the fog was getting thicker and starting to affect their vision. The ambassadors and their guards in green armor got closer to the centaurs for protection, causing the mist around them to swirl about.

Everyone was tense.

[Even with a thousand Druids just to make a distraction isn’t enough to lure them? Did the Warg think it’s a trap instead? Just one Warg would be difficult for this group. Shit, it’s moving. F-fast!]

The gargantuan wolf sprinted in the fog, and the youth immediately roared: “There is a Warg approaching us! Cease all chatter and be on the alert now!”

The Dark Forest became still.

And a terrified scream suddenly broke the momentary silence.

It was the sound that belonged to a human’s death throe.

Chapter 140

The enemies in the fog

Heads turned around to the scream to see the ambassador's knights chasing after a silver wolf, but the latter was too slow. The noble that was dragged away screamed for a while, but the gleaming white fangs bit harder and crushed his throat, causing the scream to stop suddenly.

Everyone watched it drag the body into the white mist helplessly.

"How did you let it approach us! Are you fools!?" Austin roared at the knights.

[Mist Wolves! They are descendants of the Misthowler!]

Brendel watched the dying noble kick his legs feebly a few times as it disappeared into the mist. His eyelids twitched as he realized the identity of the Warg he was facing. He immediately raised his hand and shouted:

"Everyone, move closer to each other! These damned wolves turn invisible when they are in the fog!"

Before his words ended, two swirling currents of fog suddenly rushed at the youths.

"Watch out!"

Quinn raised his bow with lightning reflexes and shot three arrows consecutively. The arrows tracked its prey beautifully in the air like silver threads. Two spurts of blood fountained out in the white fog, with one arrow missing its targets.

A silver wolf emerged from the fog by jumping into the air, apparently dodging the arrow, and it landed onto the ground lightly. It pounced onto one of the youths with incredible speed, and when they finally reacted, the wolf had already lodged its fangs onto the youth.

There was a gut-wrenching wail as the youth was nearly broken into halves. The monster had bitten hard enough to shatter his bones and crush his flesh into pulp. The

youth's eyes were wide open, as though he could not believe he would die here, and his bloody body fell forward.

“Clancy!” His companions called out his name in bitter rage. Anger consumed them and they lost their heads, and they rushed at the silver wolf with their swords to take revenge for him.

Brendel's reaction was much faster than them. Even though he knew that they would be casualties, he was still furious to see one of the youths die before him. Ten beams of light shot down from the sky at the wolf, creating several holes in it despite its attempt to flee.

At the same time, he suddenly had an idea, and the beams were used to form a wall of light, preventing the invisible creatures that were circling in the mist from approaching the youths.

But the ambassadors and centaurs were on their own. Even though the Mist Wolves were rated as weak Silver-ranked monsters, they were powerful assassins in the fog and would retreat into it after attacking. This allowed them to get the first strike all the time.

In addition, they functioned as a pack and attacked with coordination. Even if their enemies possessed stronger combat strength, they would still be at a great disadvantage.

It did not take long for the group of knights to lose half their numbers, either injured or dead. The Centaurs lost ten-odd men as well, with each centaur attacked by at least two or more Mist Wolves.

Confused yells and pained screams filled the vicinity for a while.

The place was starting to become hell. Wolves tore apart the men who were pulled away. Bones and flesh were ripped apart by force; an uninjured knight was turned into a pile of bones in the blink of an eye.

Amandina was so afraid that she held her breath. Her face was pale and her hands trembled but she stood resolutely. Faena was just as frightened, but Rono was quick enough to show off the discipline of a Kirrlutz's Combat Alchemist. He threw down several vials and strange vegetation quickly grew around them, isolating a space around them that denied the fog from entering. Elman had a grimace, but he pulled off

his sword and stood beside Faena, occasionally forcing the silver wolves that revealed themselves and tried to invade their space.

The fog was becoming thicker, and the other wolves were beginning to join in the attack. It was clear to the everyone that it was just the beginning. Despair was starting to seep into their minds.

[A little longer. Just hold on a little longer. The Warg needs to be lured in a little closer—]

Brendel was standing in the open, exposing himself. He controlled the Dragon Knights System to protect the youths while looking out for the Warg at the same time.

[Got you. You're finally moving closer to us—]

“Dia, Felaern, Wall of Wind!” Brendel shouted as he smacked away several Mist Wolves. Even if they were unable to harm him, they will eventually charge through the beams and kill the youths. He brought them to get XP, and not become food for the wolves.

Felaern immediately grabbed her younger sister and moved to the center of the army. With the Dwarven Treasure Vault attached to the Mercenaries of Lopes, the two sisters became powerful Silver-ranked Elementalists. Creating a spell of the second circle was simple for them.

The sisters cast the spell and created an air current on their fingertips.

“Wind, spread your wings!” Felaern shouted, and the current expanded by a thousandfold.

A hurricane was formed around them. An endless doleful roar wormed into their ears as the Wall of Wind extended over a hundred meters. The spell was used to counter physical projectiles and was not very useful, but it was certainly a counter to the Misthowler’s passive Element Power.

The hurricane started pulling the fog away and caused it to dissipate in seconds.

Several spots started to ripple like water and silver wolves near the hurricane were revealed. They appeared slightly confused, not understanding what had happened. Brendel did not waste any more time. With a point of his fingers, the beams of

destruction turned ten-odd silver wolves into dust.

“A wonderful idea.” Quinn lowered his bow and praised.

He had lived for two centuries and heard the rumors of a wolf that spewed out mist, but he truly admired Brendel to come out with a clever solution so quickly.

The Mist Wolves were just slightly stronger than the Black Wolves after losing their advantage in the fog. The centaurs could easily drive them back when the wind lifted the fog. But Brendel knew that the Wall of Wind was just a temporary solution and the main problem still needed to be solved.

“Ser Kodan, I’ll leave the command to you temporarily. Carglise, you’re the vice-commander.”

“I’m the vice-commander?” Carglise jumped a little.

What orders could he give to defend against the endless wolves? Could he keep the casualties to a minimum? He had no guarantee. But how could he answer Brendel’s trust if he did not dare to face these wolves? He bit his lips and nodded hard: “Not a problem.”

Brendel gave a thumbs up to the youth, but Kodan frowned and asked: “What are you trying to do?”

“I’m obviously going to kill the Warg. Scarlett, cover me.”

The red-haired girl was using a shortbow to kill the wolves that retreated out of the hurricane. When she heard Brendel’s words, she turned around and swiped her stray hair back with her left hand, and tossed her shortbow to one of the youths. She wielded the lightning halberd on her back and walked to Brendel’s side.

“Are you fine with it, Scarlett? It’s risky,” asked Brendel.

“It’s not the first time anyway,” she answered.

“Mister Quinn, are you fine with following us?”

“Not a problem.” Came the light reply.

Brendel nodded. He thought of taking Ropar, but the latter was mainly a Strength-type warrior and was unsuited for this battle. He took a deep breath and started moving forward, but a hand reached out and grabbed him.

He turned around to see Amandina's deeply furrowed brows. She spoke to him through gritted teeth:

"My lord, have you forgotten your promise? You're now a lord who carries the responsibilities of countless lives, why are you risking yourself yet again!"

Brendel was slightly taken aback, but he pulled off her hands: "This battle isn't because of me wanting to be a hero. It's because it's necessary. Don't worry, I am confident of the outcome."

Amandina's lips parted and closed a few times, but she gritted her teeth and swallowed her other words.

"Understood," she lowered her head and said.

Brendel did not know what she was thinking, but he did not lie. Staying here for too long would only get the Warg to call for more reinforcements, and by then they would all be surrounded and killed.

[It would probably end up as a death sentence for others if they go. The Warg is too cunning for them. Since I'm the only one who has a strategy for him, it has to be me. I might even be able to take it down in one blow. That's the advantage of another soul's memory—]

"But how are you going to reach it?" Kodan asked: "The wolves outside the hurricane are endless. It won't be easy to cut a path to the Warg."

"Do you need the centaurs to do so?" Quinn said.

"No." Brendel shook his head. He raised Halran Gaia and yelled: "Hear my command, separate to my left and right!"

The armies under Brendel were momentarily quiet.

The Centaur Elder, Wydall, looked back at the youth puzzledly, but he knew that a military command could not be refused. Even though he had a mind full of questions,

he raised his lance.

Chapter 141

Rock Bridge

Austin's sword ran through a Mist Wolf that pounced onto him from the air, and threw the corpse far away, momentarily wondering if the wolves corrupted by Mana would cannibalize their own.

Dolant tapped his shoulder and spoke aloud: "Look over there, are they crazy!?"

Austin heard Brendel yell out something, but he did not pay attention to the latter. When he looked at the youth in confusion, he saw this scene—

The youths were the first to move; Carglise and the squadrons' leaders raised their hands parallel to the ground, and they moved accordingly.

The Centaur Elder held up his lance and reared up to make himself taller, giving out the loudest roar he had:

"Formation, divide!"

It was as though an explosion had rung out. The Centaurs stiffened for less than a second, and the crescent formation immediately divided into two in an instant.

"Thorsar!" Quinn shouted as well, echoed by the Tree Elves. Their magic over their conjured dark green vines made it move to the sides.

It did not take very long for the Warg to command the wolves to rush in. Even though it was strange for the enemies to divide their forces, doing so allowed them to surround them easily.

The wolves charged through the Wall of Wind like flood water rushing through a broken dam. The earth rumbled loudly.

[Why? Isn't this a death sentence? Dividing our forces will only work if they have a limited number to surround us, but these wolves have an endless supply of reinforcements. No matter how many we kill, the numbers will only increase.]

Austin stared at the scene with wide eyes.

“Mad! They have gone utterly mad!” Dolant was jerking Austin’s arm and shouting: “Even if they want to meet their deaths here, do they have to drag us down?”

Austin did not reply and suddenly narrowed his eyes. Brendel was moving to the center where the armies divided alone.

Another howl came from the Warg, and the horde of wolves rushed towards the youth. It was certain that the youth was their highest commander, and it wanted to finish him off as soon as possible.

But Brendel also had the same idea.

“Are you ready?” He asked, looking back.

“Yes, my lord,” Scarlett said.

Quinn had gotten off Wydall and nodded as well.

Ten meters.

Brendel gripped Halran Gaia tightly with both hands and rotated his body to his limits.

Five meters.

The front row of black wolves lowered their bodies and readied themselves to pounce at the youth. They bared their fangs and uttered loud guttural noises from their throats.

Brendel could almost feel their eyes that were full of crazed bloodlust staring at him. He expelled all the air in his lungs.

[Power Break and Frontal Assault into White Rave Sword Arte—]

A violent maelstrom far stronger than the Wall of Wind formed from Halran Gaia and reached the sky. Invisible blades cut across the ground around the youth, forcing Quinn and Scarlett to back away from him.

The Warg felt its fur stand on ends when it saw the hurricane from afar, and it started

moving away from the battlefield. The sense of danger only grew stronger over time and it saw the most shocking scene in its lifetime.

The Black Wolves that pounced with terminal velocity slowed as they got nearer to the youth, and were eventually flung back from the violent wind.

Brendel lowered the blade vertically, inch by inch. Light burst forth as energy fed into Halran Gaia, and the hurricane that reached the sky was gradually turned towards the ground. The invisible blades were spinning so fast that there was a whining pitch that grated in everyone's ears. When they finally came into contact with the wolves, the beasts were knocked backward with countless cuts that eventually separated skin, flesh, and bones.

A frightening, bloody rain was created.

The wind of blades was finally projected at an angle that was parallel to the ground. It was strong to cut all the wolves within a hundred meters, and the shockwave beyond that range blasted the wolves away and rendered them unconscious. Even half the battlefield was upheaved with countless scars.

Brendel felt his stamina drop till it registered red fonts in his retina.

– Fatigued State.

– Unyielding Talent activated. Strength and Agility unaffected by Fatigued State.

[A normal person in Fatigued State would see at least a 50% drop in terms of Strength and Agility stats.]

Brendel stumbled onto the ground with Halran Gaia stabbing into it while gasping. While the Unyielding Talent still allowed him to use his full strength, it did not help with the pain and exhaustion. He felt pins and needles stabbing in his hands and could not help but tremble.

But using his full strength allowed him to clear a path that thinned the area between him and the Warg. The only problem was that the path was starting to fill up with even more wolves. The beasts clearly did not care how many of its kind died under his sword, and they were starting to fill up the void.

“We need to hurry,” Brendel said to the two behind him.

Austin finally understood what the youth was doing, but the plan did not appear like a success in his eyes. In just a few seconds, the wolves had started to create a barrier around the Warg.

[There's just no time to exploit the opening!]

He could not help but sigh.

But Brendel's attack was not yet over. He started moving towards the Warg as he shouted: "Mother Earth, grant me blades!"

The ground in front of the Warg started to collapse, while the earth next to it suddenly jerked in the opposite directions as though springs were loaded into it, causing the wolves to be dumped into the center of the collapsed hole. Even though they tried to jump out of it, the earth continued to sink further and the earth from the sides buried them.

Brendel put in more MP into the sword as he formed his hand into a fist. The earth beneath his feet suddenly rose up vertically over twenty meters, raising Scarlett and Quinn along with him. The second mount of flat earth spiked up, followed by a third, and countless more that eventually merged at the top.

An artificial bridge was suddenly formed in just a few seconds, and it extended all the way towards the Warg.

The Warg stared at the unnatural event in confusion before it realized what the human had done. It looked at the bridge for a few more seconds before it thought of fleeing. But it lost its opportunity to do so.

"Move closer to me, now!" Brendel shouted.

Scarlett and Quinn did not waste any time and move to his side, even though they did not know what the youth was planning. Their combined weight was not a problem for Brendel, and he grabbed both of them like they were potato sacks and activated the Charge ability.

900 OZ worth of agility blasted across the bridge. A black line sped across hundreds of meters in the blink of an eye and jumped off—

Right across the Misthowler's head.

The Warg looked up at the tiny humans with its blood-red eyes. The trio also saw the Warg clearly for the first time. It was a massive wolf that was the size of the Five-headed Hydra with a thick coat of grey fur.

[A single eye. The lore in the game states that this Warg lost its other eye against another Warg. Amazing, I can feel the heat from this beast.]

But Brendel did not have much time to marvel at the terrifying creature's grand appearance. There was less than a minute before the hastily made rock bridge collapsed, and they would not want to get surrounded by the black wolves after killing the Warg.

"Scarlett, limit its movements. Mister Quinn, please cover me!" Brendel yelled as he released them on the bridge and descended like a comet to the Warg.

Misthowler growled at the youth. It did not like to fight personally, but if there was anything that challenged its authority, it would shred them into pieces.

It tried to slap Brendel away with its paw.

Brendel knew that he must appear to be as slow as a snail in front of the monster's eyes. It was a level 60 Boss after all, let alone that it was a creature that was known for its Agility. But he was ready for it as soon as he saw the Warg's muscles move.

"Oss!" He roared, and a Wind Bullet shot out at the paw. Even though it was more like a breeze to the Warg, the resistance from the air propelled him backward and avoided its attack.

Even though the swipe failed, the Warg immediately moved forward and bit at Brendel, its figure in a white blur from the incredible speed.

"No!" Scarlett gave a short cry; she knew that the magic ring was unable to be used consecutively.

The youth was still suspended in mid-air and he looked like he was going to be crushed.

Chapter 142

Misthowler

Brendel's vision was a mouth coming at him filled with sharp fangs. An awful stench erupted in his nose as the Warg growled at him. Scarlett felt as though time had stopped for a moment as the wolf's jaws closed down.

Any Gold-ranked warrior would be greatly injured by the attack.

But Brendel turned around at a sharp angle and shouted:

"Wind, unshackle me!"

The Wind Dance spell was cast on himself. It was a cantrip spell similar to the spell Feather Fall. Brendel copied this technique from an Elementalist player who founded this technique. It allowed the angle of a flight direction to be changed, allowing an Elementalist to dodge at sharp angles, and became one of the signature low-level spells in PvP.

Although Brendel was not an Elementalist in the game, it was required to at least know the trick in order to deal with it in PvP. Wings appeared behind Brendel's back and he suddenly jerked sideways, causing the Warg to miss him.

An angry howl was made as the Warg realized it failed to bite the youth, and the latter spun around and grabbed onto its fur with both hands while quickly sheathing his sword. It seemed like Brendel had managed to ride on the Warg, but it was nothing like that.

The monster was moving so fast that the wind seemed to smash against him. Its reaction was also swift when it sensed Brendel had grabbed onto it. The ground shook as it landed and tried to shake him off. Brendel did not stop moving and pulled out Halran Gaia with one hand and stabbed it into the wolf's spine.

A stream of blood spurt out from the Warg.

[Wow. A level 40+ NPC piercing through the defenses of a boss that's at least level 60.

An ordinary weapon wouldn't even break its skin, and any weaker Fantasy-ranked sword would just cause a simple flesh wound. As expected of the highest tier amongst its class, Halran Gaia's sharpness and hardness allow me to bypass the level difference.]

Misthowler let out a sharp cry. Its blood quickly turned into a mist and spread out with the wind.

"Don't breathe the air that's tainted with the Warg's blood!" Brendel quickly covered his nose and mouth as he shouted. A corrupted monster's blood, especially when it's a high-level one, was more like poison.

He quickly jumped off from the Warg's back. Someone who was inexperienced with it might have stayed behind and continued attacking it, but any monster that had an Element Power would not be that easy to deal with.

Mist gathered around the Warg and formed into four whips that swept against its back at different angles. If the youth still remained there, he would have been crushed by them.

The wolf only took a few moments to realize that the human had landed on the ground. His cunning actions had greatly surprised it. It believed that each of its attacks would have killed him, but he dodged it every single time.

Once or twice might be a coincidence, but escaping three times was an anomaly, and it immediately chose to distance itself from Brendel. The entire exchange was only a few seconds. The people far away were only able to see blurry afterimages, and only Scarlett and Quinn saw things clearly. The red-haired girl was unable to discern how strong the creature was when Brendel avoided it so easily, but Quinn paled a little.

As a Tree Elf protecting the Green Tower, he had encountered countless monsters and the Warg was one of the most powerful opponents he had ever seen. Yet even when it attacked the young human first, it was him who gained the upper hand by using a perfect control over deft tricks, almost as though he predicted how the Misthowler would attack.

His guess was not wrong.

Even though Wargs had their unique names, they attacked in similar ways. Brendel knew that the Misthowler was preparing to attack again after a moment of

consideration. It lowered its body and lunged at him again.

[It's too fast. I'm not steady on my feet yet—]

Brendel made a judgment that he was unable to dodge it. He quickly conjured up the spell Barkskin and activated it at full speed. Black Ironbark covered his entire body.

[250 MP spent to create 5 armor, with Bahamut's Grasp at 7 armor. Let's see if 12 armor holds up against one attack.]

He needed to make the Warg focus its attention on him. If it had gone for Scarlett or Quinn during that jump, they might have been torn into two. He was the only one capable of escaping from it. Halran Gaia was raised over his head, preparing to receive his foe's attack.

But that was unnecessary.

The monster's charge was halted mid-way. Two green lines descended from the air, firing straight into the Warg's body.

[Arrows of Purity!?!]

Brendel immediately identified the projectiles. The Warg could easily ignore any ordinary arrows shot at it, but these arrows were certainly not ordinary. Lore stated they were divine arrows blessed directly by the Goddess Nia, the counter to all monsters born from Chaos or Darkness. It was a little exaggerated, but these Arrows of Purity could indeed suppress a monster's Element Power. If the Warg was struck by them, then it would become an ordinary monster with the stats of a Gold-ranked creature.

But the Warg felt an instinctive fear from the arrows and immediately retreated away from them. Perhaps it had encountered a similar power in the past.

Scarlett jumped down as well. Her first attack came after a few seconds of preparation.

'Lightning, Seventh Chord'; her strongest technique.

She knew that the Warg was one of the strongest opponents she had ever encountered and struck at it with all her strength.

Five lightning bolts shot out from her left hand, more potent than when she fought against Madara's elite general Iamas, and they shot towards the Misthowler's body while rotating around each other with frightening velocity and sound.

An explosion of noise rang out.

The light intensified and forced the girl's eyes to narrow. Electricity surged and ran all over the air, but to her surprise, the lightning did not reach the Warg. A mist shrouded it and with a shake of its body, the mist expanded forcefully and dispelled the electricity.

Scarlett thought that she was able to at least halt the monstrous wolf for a few seconds, but since it did not, she quickly went into a stance and observed it.

The Warg turned around and stared at her with a pair of glowing red eyes.

She held her breath as the Warg's muscles tensed up—

“Quinn!” Brendel yelled at the top of his lungs.

When the Warg jumped away, it distanced itself by nearly sixty meters. It was impossible for him to help her in time. Even if Scarlett had the status of a God Acolyte, getting struck by it would mean that she would probably need to stay in bed for at least half a month.

At least, that was how long she needed when she fought against Ekman—

The Tree Elf did not need Brendel to tell him; his bow was ready and it was another two Arrows of Purity, forcing the Misthowler to retreat. The monster roared in anger, frustrated that it failed to even land an attack on its foes.

A low bellow came from its throat, ordering the Dire Wolves and its minions to attack the three people that came after it.

[Fifteen seconds— Fuck, I almost screwed up. Even with the Golden Apple, her Element Power lost out to the Warg. I originally wanted Quinn to suppress the Dire Wolves, but it looks like their roles have changed since he has the Arrows of Purity.]

“Scarlett, deal with the surrounding wolves,” Brendel gave a new order with a yell, “Quinn, aim for the silver tuft of fur on the Misthowler's head. That's where its Mana

Point is.”

A creature corrupted by Mana gather its Mana at a certain point, and it could be seen as a fatal vital point.

Quinn narrowed his eyes and indeed found a small patch of silver that seemed to glow a little. He hesitated for a moment before he quickly raised his bow; it was a small area and the Warg was fast enough to dodge his projectiles.

Two Arrows of Purity formed between his fingers and on the bowstring, but he did not release them, as he wanted to wait for a better opportunity.

Scarlett created a continuous loop of lightning to the wolves that charged in, immediately causing their skin to rupture and burn up with a choking stench.

Brendel started running to the Warg’s side and the monster’s eyes momentarily went towards the youth, recalling that he had injured it. However, it felt a different source of danger and became restless and uneasy.

Chapter 143

Outflow

The Warg took a moment to ponder where the Arrows of Purity came from, and it deducted that they came from the Tree Elf. It turned towards him and bared its gleaming white fangs at the Tree Elf, before it leaped onto the rock bridge, causing it to wobble a little. The Warg's claws dug deeply into the bridge and caused large stone fragments to rain down.

Quinn waved his hand and conjured a vine which grew from the ground. It quickly climbed around the rock pillars, and the Tree Elf jumped down and caught onto it, dodging the monster that awkwardly tried to swipe at him with its paw. The Warg eventually jumped down onto the ground and snarled at the Tree Elf, who was hanging on to the vine somewhere in the middle of the rock bridge's height.

Brendel judged that he was close enough and leaped into the air, bringing Halran Gaia above his head and intending to chop the monster's head, but it suddenly turned its head to bite at him. The youth was forced to change his attack into a defense, knocking his blade against the fangs. The sounds created sounded more like pieces of metal crashing against each other.

The huge force made Brendel retreat repeatedly and he could hardly feel his fingers from the feedback. The second time he blocked the Misthowler's fangs after it pounced on him, made Halran Gaia bend nearly ninety degrees.

[Are you kidding me!?!]

Halran Gaia proved to be a weapon that was made well. The weapon was flexible and robust, and it returned to its original form like a spring, but it also resulted in Brendel pushed far away from the Warg.

The huge wolf jumped a short distance away to assess the situation. The Tree Elf was slowly climbing back to the top of the rock bridge, while Brendel was fending off several black wolves that came after him.

It decided to attack the youth first. It started running in the fog, causing the three to

lose track of the monster.

Brendel barely caught sight of the Misthowler charging at him at top speed. He subconsciously raised his right arm and felt a tremendous jolt of pain to his whole body, and found himself high up in the air. The Ironbark armor was ripped off along with the bonus armor provided by Bahamut's grasp.

The youth soon crashed onto soft ground and rolled several times—

[Soft... ground? Shit, my head's bleeding. My sword knocked against my own head.]

He sat up and nearly found himself falling over and hurriedly steadied himself. At first, he thought he had been knocked dizzy, but he suddenly found himself looking at a pair of confused red eyes. A Dire Wolf the size of a large horse carriage turned its head, and it was blinking and looking at him.

Brendel screamed a little at the sudden surprise. The Dire Wolf reacted far better than the youth and bit at his shoulder without any hesitation.

There was a crunching sound.

"My lord!" Scarlett screamed as well. She was busy with dealing with the wolves around them, that she took a moment to realize the object that was knocked into the air was her lord. When she finally realized that fact, she turned around to see a wolf munching on him.

She felt that the world had become dark and became dizzy.

But Brendel wrenched off its jaws and pulled out his arm. He stood up and climbed over its head.

"Sit, doggy!" He yelled as he punched its head. The sounds of crushed bones could be heard audibly. The Dire Wolf sank down in a strange position. Brendel had an eye closed as blood was streaming over it. Even though he looked calm, he was screaming and cursing inside his mind.

[Fuck, it hurts like hell. This is really quite a bad situation. Unlucky, too.]

His HP had gone below zero. The Unyielding Talent activated fully, and he hurriedly took out a health potion and drank it immediately. A slight rumbling on the ground

made him search for the Warg, only to discover that it was charging at him again.

But Quinn had positioned himself once again and used an invisibility spell to mask his presence. The distance was far away and the target was small and moving quickly. Even for an Elf, it was a difficult target. There was also the situation where the Warg reacted much too quickly even without seeing them. Two green lines went straight at the Misthowler's forehead, perfectly calculated to meet it halfway.

But they missed, easily going through the Warg's body as though it was mist, and the tail feathers still shaking on the ground.

Quinn was utterly shocked and stared in disbelief. The arrows were blessed by the Goddess Nia, and were divine objects that countered Element Powers from any monster—

But the Warg could use its Element Power on them without issues?

[Nice one, Quinn! You forced it to use its trump card!]

It was a technique called Mist Projection. It was a magic that protected against all physical or magical attacks, as the body was projected away to another plane by casting on it. Even Divine spells or magic derived from Laws could not affect it. Fortunately, this magic could only be cast a single time per day.

Brendel wanted to get the Misthowler into a berserk state, and one of the ways was to get it to use this magic.

Startling blood-red runes lit up all over the Warg's body. Mana Rampage was an ability that all higher-ranked corrupted monsters had, which was similar to a Berserker's Rampage ability, but it had almost no side effects other than expending all the mana in the body.

It was one of the trump cards a corrupted monster had, and would not be used unless they were in danger.

Their levels would go up by 5 and their stats by 10%.

Brendel guessed that the Warg was now close to level 70, and this powerful burst of strength caused Quinn and Scarlett to tremble.

The Tree Elf saw the Misthowler return to physical form. It opened its jaws, with a red light gathering in its throat. Quinn wanted to flee to another area, but he discovered that mist had gathered all around him and the air was almost solid, making it impossible to move.

A red beam fired from the Warg and struck directly at him. His bow fell to the ground and he started to scream.

Curse-type magic, Life Vaporization.

It was one of the most frightening spells that a gamer could face in the Calamity of Wolves. It was a magic spell classified under witchcraft, a true Instant Death magic spell, and it vaporizes all the liquid in a person's body. This was an instant kill for most creatures.

"Hahahahaha!" Brendel was apologetic in his mind when it happened. However, he laughed maniacally, almost as though he was enjoying Quinn's screams, but it was also true that he was waiting for this moment. His left hand was already up in mid-air with a card even before the attack landed on Quinn.

– Magic Control card activated

– Sensing...

– The following spells have been detected, "Life Vaporization, Aura of Lightning, Protection of Life"

[Aura of Lightning is probably Scarlett's ability, but Protection of life is probably from Quinn. I don't remember him casting this spell, so it's probably from an equipment that got triggered from the Life Vaporization. He really has quite a good set of equipment. Target Life Vaporization.]

– Target acquired

The Misthowler suddenly roared in confusion, realizing that it was unable to control its magic. Brendel pointed at it, and the beam of light suddenly jerked in multiple angles and shot back at the Misthowler's body.

There was a sharp bestial scream that caused everyone to flinch. Red mist constantly poured out from the Warg's body, and it quivered under the tremendous pain before

falling to the ground.

“Hold your breaths and run away!” Brendel yelled out as the red mist extended its range to over ten meters.

The Warg had fallen unconscious and canceled the spell, however, that did not mean that it was over. The Mana in its body was out of control and was destroying the body from within.

An immense explosion happened. The innards of the Warg exploded everywhere, leaving behind a pile of white rotten meat. Because of the remaining Mana in its flesh, a series of explosions continued on it like water was thrown on heated oil.

Brendel finally felt relieved at seeing this ghastly scene. He sat on the ground and sighed, glancing at the corpse. He took a double take and gasped when he saw a black rock with tapered ends.

[No way, a Warg’s heart?]



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