

Chapter 6 - Overwork! The Holiday

In the evening we safely returned to the provincial capital Meltart after succeeding with the basilisk subjugation, Shea, Elemia, and I immediately visited the margrave. It's for the sake of offering him the beak, which we had gouged out of the basilisk, and the seething, dense blood.

Usually, the loot belongs to the hunters who obtained it during a subjugation, but the items picked up by Shea, a certified hunter, belong to the margrave, her sponsor.

A basilisk's beak and blood is extremely valuable, and fetches a good price when sold on the market. Both are also very potent when used as materials for magic enchantments. Even the gizzard is rich with magic elements, but—

"Hmm, these things are absolutely useless as pieces of art." The margrave declares with a sigh while casting a glance at the items arrayed up between the seven heads.

"Is that a complaint?"

As always, Shea's tone when dealing with the margrave is rather rude. For me it's a frightening bluntness.

"You know what I'm unhappy about, don't you? Why did you only retrieve the beak!? If we're talking about basilisks, it's common to go with its cockscomb and the pure, flame-colored eyes, no!? You should have brought its whole head."

"Heavy, and stinks." Shea flops down on the sofa as she pleases, and grabs a glass with fruit wine from an attendant.

"I'd have provided any amount of workers and wagons filled with preservative liquid. You're well aware that I fork over the money needed for things like this, aren't you?"

"I don't give a damn. Just use this as crafting material."

"Bah, that was 100% intentional. You've deliberately left the cockscomb and eyes behind because you've got no use for decorations. How sneaky."

"You a brat or what...?"

"I'm no brat, but margrave, okay?"

"Lady Shea...could you...umm...tone it down a bit?" Meeting the margrave for the first time, Elemia is frozen stiff out of nervousness.

She's curled up her body, spelling her usual spunkiness a lie... Well, it's understandable. It's a very natural reaction, after all.

"You were called Elemia, weren't you? Could you go pick up the basilisk's eyeballs? Those look pretty damn cool as decoration if you preserve them in a glass bottle filled with alcohol, you see?"

"Eh? Bringing it back now...o-okay!"

Elemia stands on attention, her spine upright like a stake.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Elemia. Even if you were to go back now, they've rotten away anyway. You don't have any duty to go along with a pervert's hobbies."

"...Lady Shea...I told you to stop." A voice as faint as the buzzing of a mosquito.

It clearly shows that she doesn't want to get dragged into this quarrel. But, I can totally relate. Denouncing a lord, who rules over a quarter of the Kingdom's territory, as a pervert...

If things go badly it's much more likely for us to lose our lives here than on the battlefield.

"You heard her? Shea, you're a really rude girl, you know? You see, I'm pretty important, and also accomplished, so there's always the option of imprisonment or dragging you around the city."

"I'm not worried. At the same time as old geezers like you become too distinguished, they stop being able to do things like these. Because they'd be regarded as intolerant."

"Hahaha, you sure stab where it hurts." The margrave looks somewhat happy.

Is it because he values people who take such an attitude with him now that he's become a powerful man? Or is it because he's the kind of pervert getting aroused from being maltreated by a beauty, unrelated to his social standing...?

"Oh well, whatever. Anyway, good work. Take your wage and get some rest."

"We'll also take the beak."

"Sure, go ahead."

The margrave gestures to have it taken away by waving a hand. Seeing this signal, attendants quickly run up to us, and carry away the beak and the jar filled with blood. They're very likely going to bring them to Shea's room.

This wraps up our business with the margrave...

"Ah yeah, Teo."

"Y-Yes?"

Suddenly the topic shifts to me! Even if it's not as bad as with Elemia, I'm still quite nervous when dealing with him.

"I received a letter from your mother."

"Huh!?"

"I previously told you that I'd tell your mother about hiring you through a letter, didn't I? It's the reply to that. An acknowledgment for me, and a private message for you, Teo."

"For you to personally contact her..."

"That's why I told you I'd make a special exception for you."

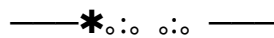
Once the margrave jerks his chin, an attendant runs up to me without a moment's delay, and hands me the letter.

I don't know the etiquette in such situations, but just to be on the safe side, I receive the letter respectfully. Shea watches all this play out with a bored look.

"So, anything else?"

"Nothing at the moment. You're free to go." The margrave signals that we may withdraw by loosely waving his hand while keeping his reply short.

Shea bows in a way making it plainly clear that she doesn't mean it, and turns on her heels. I copy her in a hurry, and walk out of the room with my back as straight as possible, as if being on a parade.



Returning to the lodging house, I break the letter's seal at once. A gentle, very familiar stroke of the brush - my mother's handwriting.

—To Teo

—I have heard that His Grace the Margrave has kindly allowed you to work for him as a blacksmith.

...That's not wrong. But mother, it's not the kind of work you imagine.

—I believe it will allow you to freely wield the prized skills of the Korpi family as a cortege blacksmith.

...I am wielding them. But mother, not in the way you think I do.

—His Grace has informed me that he will lend his help with the mithril. Everyone in the family is delighted over this great honor and fortune. Of course it means that he must have noticed your skill and sincerity, Teo. I think you should feel confident from that fact alone.

...I did catch eyes. But mother, those of someone else.

—The water and climate in the margraviate must be different from what you are used to, so please take care of yourself.

...I should genuinely take care of myself. But mother, at a level that's different from what you expect.

—Things might become painful, but do your best without complaining.

...I am doing my best at keeping at it. Just, it's not at the level of simple complaints, but rather me actually throwing up.

—I know that you will definitely come back with the mithril before the birthday festival. I am looking forward to the day of your return.

...I also want to do that. But, I don't have the leeway to spend my time looking forward to it.

The situation is quite different from what my mother perceives it to be. But that's reasonable. Back at home she perceived me as a craftsman liking to do plain, delicate work.

My mother is probably imagining that I'm currently creating elaborate, artistic works overflowing with holiness under the margrave. But, what I'm currently making is slightly, no, drastically different from that. However, I've got no intention to tell her any of that. It'd make her worry, and above all, mother might not believe me in the first place.

—That I'm currently enjoying doing this. The thrill and realistic approach of a field smith. And the existence of a person whom I help with my weapons, and who draws everything out of them.

I feel this is far more attractive and effective for wielding my skills than using them in some political strife between families. ...Of course that's nothing I can write about, though.

I decided to write up a letter that tells her that I'm doing fine in mind, body and spirit.



I'm swamped with work. On the work desk in the margrave's smithy lay a boorish, big machete.

After reporting the basilisk subjugation to the guild, meeting the margrave, and writing a reply to my mother, I'm now going to do maintenance on <Corpse Eater>.

"I told you before, but make sure to take some rest. This guy's curse is powerful for humes other than yughul. If you stay in contact with it for a long time, it'll contaminate your body and mind. It'd be a pain if you were to collapse on me."

"I know."

"Then, please take care of it." With those short, final words, Shea leaves her beloved blade behind,

and heads out of the smithy.

"Now then, time to go for it..." I mutter to myself.

It's a lot of work, but I'm brimming with eagerness. Shea has told me to take a break every now and then, but since I've accepted this task, I don't want to cut corners. Another aspect is me looking forward to handling <Corpse Eater>.

To be honest, it's no exaggeration to describe it as me being entranced with this weapon. It's crude and lacks any elegance, but the blade's surface possesses a unique texture. It's got a sticky feel. And then there's those bubbly goose pimples looking like pine tree bark, generated by all the tiny holes. A suspicious, purple-black aura oozes out from them.

And above all that, the machete has its mysterious seal created by multi-branch runes. As of now I'm unable to understand what's written there, but it looks very pretty as a design, and captivates me with its strange appeal.

Using a magnifying glass, I slowly and carefully examine the seal all over.

"Do you have a moment?"

As I look back towards the origin of the voice, I find the margrave standing at the smithy's door. He's holding a brass cup in his right hand, and carries a cloth bundle in his left.

"W-What might it be? I didn't expect you to come to a place like this, Your Grace."

"Sshhh! You're too loud! It's a secret that I am here." The margrave extends his index finger and places it vertically in front of his lips, smiling impishly.

"E-Excuse me. You startled me... Umm, please sit down. Watch out, it's dirty, though."

"I don't care. I'd rather hate it if a smithy was clean." After wiping off the dirt on the chair with the sleeve of his extravagant, silken shirt, he flops down on it.

"So, umm, what might be your business with me?"

"This here. This got delivered to me." With those words, the margrave holds out the cloth bundle to me.

It's a long and thin package. Even though it's just cloth, it somehow looks awfully expensive and glossy.

The margrave holds it out casually, but following manners, I go down on one knee, and reverently accept it with both hands.

It's quite heavy. Just what is this?

"Would it be alright for me to open this?"

"Of course. Or rather, hurry it up." The margrave's eyes dart around, him being very fidgety.

"As you command." I quickly unwrap the shiny cloth from the package. "T-T-This is...!"

Wrapped in the cloth is...a magnificent sword with three blades coiling around each other.

"Isn't that the Rapier of the Ivy's Flower!?"

"Sshhh! It's a secret!"

"It being a secret isn't the problem here! Why do you have this!?"

"Well, you see, I told Shea to inform me if there was something she's lacking. But when I did, she told me that this was lacking since you'd probably want it."

"No, no. No, no, no, no, wait! She got it all wrong!"

Of course it'd be impossible to decipher the seal as long as I don't have the Rapier of the Ivy's Flower. And it's correct that I've told her as much, but in the first place, I did so in the sense of it being impossible... Not in the meaning of an order to get it for me!

"How did you get your hands on this?"

The margrave drew close, beckoning me over. Once I bring my face close...

"I borrowed it...without permission." He whispers into my ear.

"You stole it...?"

"That's why I'm telling you to shush." The margrave's index finger tells me to not mention anything further.

The Rapier of the Ivy's Flower should be under strict surveillance, locked away in the treasure chamber, only to be taken out during the birthday festival and the Day of the Holy Mother. Having said that, someone in the position of a margrave might be an exception.

"Just three days. I'll return it after three days, okay?"

"U-Understood."

At this point, it's not a situation where my opinion would matter any longer. Seeing that things have turned out like this now, all I can do is to be grateful while looking after it...

Still, for me to be able to directly examine it... A beautiful, lustrous blade. 500 years have already passed since its creation, but even nowadays, no rust can be seen on it, and it emanates a clean, silver radiance similar to moonlight.

"Haaaaaa...haaaaaaa." Only deep sighs escape my lips. I harbor various feelings about the holy sword in front of my eyes, but the instant those feelings are about to leave my mouth, they're -

without missing a single one - translated into sighs.

"Enough with the sighs. Could I have you put it away for the time being. It'll be a problem if it's seen by someone else."

"I-I beg your pardon, Your Grace."

Recovering my senses just as my soul had almost slipped out of my body, I wrap up the rapier with its cloth.

"Make sure that it's not seen by anyone. When you take a look at it, limit it to late at night, and lock the door. On the night of the tenth day, I'll send a messenger to pick it up."

"A-As you command."

"Very well. I leave Shea in your hands from now on."

"Excuse me..." I stop the margrave who's trying to quickly leave the smithy.

"What is it?"

"Why are you going this far for Shea?"

"Because that girl is very precious."

"You're right, she's definitely an amazing warrior..."

I think she's quite awesome. But, this still makes Shea no more than a single warrior and huntress. For a margrave, who rules over a quarter of the Kingdom, to concern himself so much with her...

It looks like the margrave understands this doubt of mine. After deliberating for a moment, he continues speaking, "You're right. ...Say, Teo, do you know that mankind has entered a phase of decline?"

"What do you mean?"

"My margraviate is a frontier where humes have been exterminating demonic beasts for a long time. The heroes have fought the demonic beasts, expanding the areas under control by people, the hume domain, little by little."

"Yes, I know."

The magic blacksmiths have honed their techniques during those battles.

"But you see, in reality the hume domain has been shrinking in the last few years."

"Eh...? That can't be!"

"It's the truth. Step by step, it's gradually getting smaller."

I'm hearing about this for the first time. A piece of information completely unknown to me, and not just me either. At least the residents of the capital believe that the areas inhabited by people are continuing to expand.

"Well, this information is confidential. The demonic beasts are growing more active year by year. In the last few years, settlements in these borderlands have started to get destroyed, becoming completely uninhabitable. This year alone we had to give up on four settlements.

"No way..."

"It's saddening, isn't it? My territory ends up being stolen, and yet it becomes worse by the year. Among recent years, this year feels like the worst."

"I have heard stories about there being unusually many demonic beasts around, and stories about demonic beasts descending the mountains..."

I recall what the village chief of Mauser told me.

"Yep. On top of that, those reports keep increasing in numbers."

"I see..."

"Moreover, the locations mentioned in the reports are situated along a really bad route, you see? Yep, it's quite bad. I hope I'm wrong here, but..."

"What is the matter?"

"Probably...it's just my intuition, but...I wonder whether all of these might not be the harbinger for a coming Shadow Wave."

"Shadow Wave? If I remember correctly, this was a phenomenon caused by the Undead Dragon, wasn't it?"

"Ye, the Undead Dragon, one of the six calamities. Because it has started to move, the demonic beasts are kinda being driven into descending upon hume habitations."

"So, what's going to happen?"

"No clue. I can't tell. But that's the very reason why I need strong hunters. Among all of them, Shea stands out as special. To be frank, she's maybe the hope of mankind? No, I guess that's going too far. But, somehow I get such a feeling. Of course, you're also included in this, Teo." The margrave grins impishly while tapping my shoulder.

"Someone like me..."

"No, excellent magic blacksmiths are as valuable as certified hunters. That's why it's a waste for you to work on something like cortege blacksmithing. I believe you should freely exhibit your abilities on-site. But what's your take? Isn't this side more fun?"

"Fun or not, that's not the kind of problem it is..."

"Of course I'll keep my promise. I'll provide you with high-grade mithril when the agreed period of time ends. But you see, I think it'd really be too much of a waste. I'm certain that you're cut out for these borderlands here."

"No, not at all. I haven't gotten used to all of this, or rather, I'm still puking during battles..."

"Hmm, how regrettable. But, I'm a big shot, so it'd turn into me forcing you, if I pester you too much with this. No helping it. I'll extend our contract at any moment, if you change your mind."

"I am very honored, but since I am hailing from a family of cortege blacksmiths, I must go back home."

'I must go back home' — although that's my answer, I feel like this is worth doing. It's a dangerous world with death right next to you. But, it's also a world where you can exhibit your own skills to your heart's content. Though it comes with running from one place to another, and puking every now and then...

"Well, it's a shame, but please take care of Shea during the contracted period of time. Looking at it like that, she's a treasure of mankind. And, Teo, I feel you're the only one who can protect that daredevilish princess." He drains down the rest of the fruit wine in his cup.

"Protect? Me? What do you..."

"Oops, I got to head back now. For now, I leave that rapier in your capable hands." After playfully winking at me, he staggers out of the smithy.

Hume territory has shifted towards decline. And the treasure of mankind to stop that.

"Protect her...huh?"

She doesn't look like a person needing anyone's protection, though.

Shea's demonic way of fighting crosses my mind. And her appearance that makes me feel something akin to dignity once she removes her Breaking Bone Mask after the battle is over. She might not be conscious of it, but she's got a wild animal's beauty to her.

It'd be presumptuous of me to try protecting her, but I'll of course do everything in my capability.

—First I'll handle the maintenance of <Corpse Eater>.

Something like being able to compare it with the genuine Rapier of the Ivy's Flower is an exceedingly rare opportunity. For me to be allowed to touch and line up two old blades of the Heroic Age would be impossible even if I were to become the king's personal cortege blacksmith.

Moreover, in a place like this.

While feeling how my hands are faintly trembling from nervousness and excitement, I put on the leather gloves, and immediately get started on my work.

