

Shota 491

Chapter 491 Visiting Nobles (7)

Once that matter was settled, we returned to our room.

However, when we returned, I found that Viscount Teomold had left me a gift in the room.

It was the woman that I had saved this afternoon.

She had been forced into scanty clothing and was standing there in the center of the room as if she was waiting for me.

When I walked in and saw her, I couldn't help putting my hand on my head and shaking it.

It was clear that this was an attempt to appease me, but it just made me angry.

After all, I wasn't into things like forcing a girl to have my way with her.

I was someone that believed that consensuality was the best way to go. To force someone against their will would only cause troubles in the future, whether that was in the form of someone taking revenge or something else.

Not to mention, since this world didn't have a form of birth control, it was very easy for women to get pregnant.

Now that I was a noble, if I was to suddenly have illegitimate children...that would be a problem.

So I didn't even want to touch anything that could cause that with a ten foot pole.

I wanted to stay as far away from what the nobles considered normal behaviour as I could.

Standing behind me were Rose and Haley who could see the scantily dressed woman standing there. When they saw her, they immediately knitted their brows.

However, it wasn't because they were angry at me.

They were unhappy that Viscount Teomold would do something like this.

If it was something that I asked for, then they would have no problem with it since that was how accepting they were. But to try to do something like this in front of them, it would be strange if they weren't angry.

Seeing that three of us were all silent, the scantily dressed woman said, "Your lordship, if there's anything that you wish for me to do, please tell me. I am here to serve you tonight."

I knitted my brows even more when I heard this.

It wasn't because of what she said, but the tone that she said it in.

I could clearly hear the tremble that was in her voice, showing that she was being forced into saying this.

Whether it was a threat to her life or to the lives of her family, it was clear that she was being forced to do this by Viscount Teomold.

Since she was nothing more than a commoner, how could she dare resist a noble?

In the end, I didn't respond to what she said.

Instead, I turned to Rose and Haley to say, "Can you take care of her and calm her down? I'll be in the other room."

Rose and Haley nodded in agreement before moving forward towards the scantily dressed woman.

I went out the door and to one of the other rooms that had been prepared for us.

I had been confused why there were so many rooms prepared when we only needed one room to stay in, but I finally understood. This was just a normal thing for nobles since they were used to infidelity like this.

After all, even Rose's husband had bought a sex slave for her...

So these rooms were to be used for affairs if I ever wanted to bring a woman back.

I couldn't even feel angry at this since this was just how noble society was like in this world.

This was a world where Prima Nocta was still in place.

So it wasn't strange if a noble wanted a woman and it wasn't hard for a noble to take a woman.

I shouldn't have been angered by this, but I just couldn't help myself since this was not the way that I was used to.

After a half an hour, Rose came to the room that I was sitting in to call me back.

When she came over, she patted me on the back of my hand and said, "Are you alright?"

I was caught off guard by this since I didn't think I was showing anything off.

In the end, I looked at her and gave a nod before saying, "I'm fine."

She looked at me with a strange look that almost seemed like she didn't believe me.

But she still said, "Alright."

I shook my head with a bitter smile and said, "I can't hide anything from you, but now's not the time for that."

Rose gave a nod without saying anything.

With that, we went back to the room where the woman was now properly dressed and sitting there with a cup of tea in hand.

But when she saw me come in, she went to stand up as if she wanted to do something.

However Haley didn't let her do that and used her hand to press her down in the seat.

The woman had a terrified look when she saw this, so I said, "It's fine, you don't need to do anything."

She still looked scared, but she did remain sitting.

I looked at her which caused her to look away, so I gave a sigh and turned away from her.

Only then did she turn back and carefully look at me, as if she was trying to figure out what was happening.

In a calm voice I asked, "Can you tell me what happened? I want to help you, but I need to know what happened so I can help."

The woman looked scared and confused when she heard this.

She looked at Haley and Rose as if she was asking them for confirmation.

It was surprising to see this, but it seemed like they had made quite the impression on her while I was gone.

Though, I couldn't say that I was surprised since I knew how competent the two of them were.

After receiving nods from the two of them, the woman slowly told her story.

Chapter 492 Visiting nobles (8)

As expected, the soldiers had shown up at her house after the incident and had captured her.

They had threatened to imprison her family members if she didn't come with them.

Her father and mother were both beaten by the guards, but they had told her not to go.

In the end, she had no choice but to go or else they might have really killed her parents.

The rest was all very obvious based on what the current situation was.

Once she finished telling her story, the woman came forward and fell to her knees while we were all lost in thought. Then she bowed her head in front of me and said, "Please, if you send me away, they will kill my parents. I can't do that to them after everything they've done to raise me..."

She kept going, but I couldn't help deeply knitting my brows when I heard this.

When a woman was begging me to do her on the threat of her parents being killed...this was not something that I enjoyed.

I couldn't even think of a single person that would enjoy this kind of thing.

With a sigh, I looked at Haley and asked, "Do you need more people?"

Haley looked at the woman who was still on the ground and after a moment of hesitation, she gave a nod.

She did need people, but to take in commoners like this who had never done any kind of business before was like taking in dead weight. There was no knowing if this woman would even be able to learn the things she needed to teach her or if she would even work hard.

If she took on too many people like this...

So Haley felt the need to add, "If we do this too often..."

She let her voice trail off, but it was clear what she was implying.

I just gave a nod and said, "I know, but this is a special circumstance, right?"

She looked at the woman on the ground again before giving a nod.

I gave a sigh before coming forward, but I saw the woman tremble again when I moved forward.

Even though she was telling me to have sex with her, it was clear that this was her first time and she wasn't prepared for this.

But then again, it would be strange if anyone was prepared for this kind of situation.

So I turned to Rose and she gave a nod to show that she understood.

Rose was the one that came forward to help the woman up before saying, "It'll be alright. We'll make sure that everything will work out."

But the woman didn't want to get up as she looked up at me and said just one word, "Please."

I couldn't help revealing a deep frown when I heard this.

The fact that Viscount Teomold would drive a woman this far really angered me.

While I knew that this was just part of the laws for nobles in this world, it didn't stop me from getting angry with this. I guess that's just how it was for me, a person who was raised in a different world with different morals.

I looked down at her and slowly said, "I know it's hard for you to believe, but I really do want to help you. I won't force you to give up your body and I promise that I will help your parents. I hope that you will find yourself able to trust me."

The woman revealed a shocked look when she heard this.

I didn't bother staying in this room any longer since I knew that I would just become more angry if I stayed here.

So taking a deep breath, I turned around to walk out.

As I was walking out, I said to Rose and Haley without turning back, "Take care of her and help her calm down. When you're done, come and see me in the other room."

In the end, I waited another half an hour before they came to see me.

After they came in, I looked at them and asked, "How is she?"

Rose said, "I got her to calm down for now and she fell asleep, but she's still worried about what will happen to her and her parents."

I couldn't help giving a sigh when I heard this.

Both Haley and Rose looked at me with strange looks before Rose said, "It's fine if you want to take her in as a concubine, we don't mind."

Haley gave a nod as if she supported this.

But I shook my head and said, "I don't want to force anyone to be my concubine, that just causes trouble in the future."

The two of them looked at each other before looking at me with looks of doubt.

It was as if they didn't believe me when I said this.

It seemed that I really couldn't hide anything from them.

"It just doesn't feel right to me personally." I said with a sigh.

The looks of doubt disappeared from their faces, but they looked at me with strange looks as if what I said was strange.

There was no doubt that this was indeed strange in this world, but this was what I believed in and I would stand by it.

So I just looked back at them with a calm look on my face.

After a while, Rose said with a faint smile, "You really aren't like other nobles, are you?"

I said back with a smile, "I wasn't a noble in the first place."

Haley then added, "You aren't like other men either."

This time, there was nothing that I could say in response.

The two of them looked at each other before revealing smiles and saying, "But we like that about you."

I just looked at them with a warm smile when I heard this.

After taking a moment to enjoy this feeling, I said, "So, what is the situation?"

Chapter 493 Visiting nobles (9)

The two of them looked at each other before Rose said, "It's the Adventurer Guild."

I looked at her with a brow raised when I heard this as I showed a confused look on my face.

Just based on this, I didn't understand what she meant.

Rose naturally knew that as well, so she explained.

"Viscount Teomold has been hiring adventurers from the Adventurer Guild as mercenaries. So they can do whatever they want in the town as a result of that. The three that caused the commotion were adventurers from the Adventurer Guild."

A look of understanding appeared on my face as I said, "So he doesn't want to offend the Adventurer Guild by punishing those three."

Rose gave a nod in response.

The Adventurer Guild, naturally this staple also existed in this fantasy world.

As the name suggested, it was a place where adventurers who were those that did quests for money gathered.

But it wasn't as official as one would think.

From what I could remember from the game, the Adventurer Guild was formed by a group of mercenaries and that was what they were at the core. They weren't formed by someone important like any other fantasy world and represented freedom.

Though the adventurers were quite free, that meant that they were free to offer their services to anyone that they wanted.

There was no central command that restrained all of the branches, so they were free to do whatever they wanted.

In this case, the adventurers hired themselves out as mercenaries for the local lord.

But the Adventurer Guild...was not a small organization.

There was a reason why the Adventurer Guild was able to spread all over the continent and build branches in different countries.

Alone, the Adventurer Guild branches weren't strong.

But the name of the Adventurer Guild was very powerful.

Viscount Teomold was planning to borrow that name to bolster his own forces.

Still, in this part of the continent, it wasn't as if the Adventurer Guild was powerful enough that one could ignore the local nobles. Not to mention, I was a count, I had a title that was even greater than Viscount Teomold's.

So the Adventurer Guild would not do anything to me as long as I didn't threaten their existence.

I was fully justified to demand the execution of those three since they threatened me.

However, there was an underlying problem with this issue.

It was that Viscount Teomold was hiring the adventurers from the Adventurer Guild.

Unless he was planning something, he had no reason to do this.

But I didn't have the information that I needed to make a proper judgement of this, so I turned back to Rose with an inquisitive look.

There was no need for me to say anything as she understood what I was asking.

With a sigh, she said, "It's not just him, even the other local nobles have been stockpiling their forces." After a pause, she looked at me with a strange look and said, "It seems that they've heard about the power struggle in the capital and are preparing for that."

In the end, it seemed like it was still related to me somehow.

After all, the power struggle that they were referring to was the death of the second prince.

It was impossible to hide such a large event from everyone, so it quickly spread that the second prince was dead.

On the surface, it was said that he had passed because of an illness, but everyone knew that he must have been killed because of a struggle between the princes.

So they knew that the succession war was heating up if even a prince was killed.

It wasn't strange that they would start bolstering their forces for what was about to come.

However...

I just didn't like the way that Viscount Teomold handled things.

After a long silence, I looked at Rose and Haley and said, "He seems too unstable for our plan...I want to replace him." Then after a pause, I added, "No, even before that, I just dislike this person and want him gone."

I waited to see what kind of reaction Rose and Haley would have to this.

To my surprise, both of them revealed smiles as if they were waiting for me to say this.

Rose came forward to take my hand as she said, "No matter what decision you make, we will always support you."

Haley took my other hand and nodded in agreement.

I had been afraid that they would try to talk me out of this, but now I realized that I had been foolish. From the very beginning, I should have trusted them to fully support me since that was how it was between us.

I fully supported them and they fully supported me, that was the relationship we had.

There were many things that I wanted to say, but I stopped myself from saying them in the end.

After all, saying too much would make this relationship impure.

The only thing that I had to say was, "Thank you."

Both of them looked at me with warm smiles.

The three of us just stood there and enjoyed this moment.

But it passed in the end as Rose's eyes turned cold and she said, "Besides, if we take him out now, we can turn him into an example for the rest. When the time comes, they won't dare do anything."

Haley nodded in agreement before saying, "Not to mention, we'll be able to clear our way into the other territories as long as we take over this place. It'll make our trading efforts much easier in the future."

It seemed that they had already planned on doing this, but they were just waiting for me to give the word.

Still, since I decided to do this, I wouldn't back down.

I looked at the two of them and said, "Alright, what's the plan?"

I didn't even bother coming up with a plan since I was certain that Rose and Haley had already come up with one.

Rose revealed a faint smile and said, "The plan is..."

Chapter 494 Visiting Nobles (10)

The next morning, we were informed that the execution would be held later in the day.

It seemed that Viscount Teomold had come to a decision about what was more important to him.

In the end, he chose to go through with our deal since it would benefit him the most.

He invited us to come and witness the execution, but I rejected that proposal.

While I wanted the death of these three, that didn't mean that I wanted to watch it myself.

So I just sent one of the people from my group to go and watch.

We had naturally come with assistants and this was one of the times to use them.

Though I did feel guilty about sending them to watch an execution like this, I had no choice since I had to make sure that it would happen.

So all I could do was pay that assistant a bit more for this matter.

It turned out that Viscount Teomold didn't go to the execution either, so we once again gathered in the living room of the manor.

When we sat down, Viscount Teomold looked at me with a smile and asked, "Count Zwein, did you enjoy the present that I left for you?"

My lips couldn't help twitching when I heard this.

There was a part of me that had wanted to punch him in the face when he said this, but I forced myself to calm down since there was nothing to gain from doing something as rash as this.

All I would be doing is making things worse for me.

So I said in a calm voice, "I did. Thank you very much."

Viscount Teomold's smile became wider when he heard this, but the expressions of his two daughters on the side became ugly.

They could guess what their father meant by this and they were very unhappy.

After all, based on the way that they looked at Zwein, it was clear that they were already enamoured by him.

It wasn't their fault since that face...was too handsome.

It was just how it was since he had been the main character of this world when it was still a game.

But they couldn't say anything since it was not their time to talk right now.

After hearing what I said, Viscount Teomold said with the same wide smile, "I'm very glad that you enjoyed this gift. I hope that we can become even closer in the future because of this."

With the look on his face, it was clear that in his mind, he had done something very good.

By catering to my needs, I would forget about this matter and work more closely with him in the future.

With the look on his face, it was as if he could already see the bright future in front of him.

It was just too bad that in my mind, his future was dark.

Though I would never say that to his face.

Instead, I calmly said, "Yes, I hope that we can work more closely in the future."

There was a momentary pause before I said, "Actually, there's something that I want to ask of you."

Viscount Teomold was surprised when he heard this, but then he gave a nod and said, "Please, if there's anything that I can do, you can just tell me."

I gave a nod in response before saying, "The gift that you left me last night, I want to take it with me."

Viscount Teomold revealed an even more surprised look when he heard this, but then he revealed another wide smile as he said, "Of course, of course, you can take the gift if you enjoyed it. A gift given is naturally something that should be taken with you when you leave."

With the expression on his face, it was almost as if he wanted to burst into laughter when he heard this.

He had never thought that this desperate attempt to appease Count Zwein would turn out like this.

No, with how it turned out, it seemed like it even benefitted him even though he had to offend the Adventurer Guild.

He could smooth out his relationship with the Adventurer Guild, but building a relationship with this Count Zwein was already hard enough.

So in the long run, this was the better choice.

Or at least that was what I thought he was thinking based on the look on his face.

I really looked down on what a simple man this Viscount Teomold was, but that just worked in my favour.

Seeing that he accepted this, I then said, "But she doesn't want to leave her family behind, so I have to ask that you give them to me as well."

Viscount Teomold didn't seem to care at all, he almost even seemed to expect this.

So with a casual wave of the hand, he said, "No problem, no problem. I'll get someone to escort them to your territory tomorrow. I'll get the..."

Before he could finish, I suddenly said, "Thank you, but I'll get my own people to escort them back. I don't want to cause you any more trouble."

Viscount Teomold was surprised a third time, but he didn't remain that way for long.

After all, in his mind, he had already accomplished his goal.

Even if it seemed a bit strange this was the one thing that Count Zwein insisted on, that didn't mean that he would doubt it. Even if there was a part of him that told him that this seemed off, he ignored it.

In his mind, this was nothing more than a small matter, so there was no need to act up and risk offending Count Zwein.

With another wave of the hand, Viscount Teomold said, "No problem. I'll have my people work with your people on this. As long as you're happy with the gift that I've given you."

As he said this, he made sure to stress the part 'I've given you', as if he was trying to state something.

I just gave a simple nod and said, "I am and I appreciate your help."

The two of us just looked at each other with smiles on our faces, but the smile didn't really reach my eyes.

Chapter 495 Visiting Nobles (11)

That night, I received the report of a proper execution from my assistant.

It was a simple beheading with a proper executioner.

In one swing, it was over for those three rogues.

Apparently, they didn't believe that they would be executed like this since they were certain that they would be freed as adventurers. So in their panic, they started revealing information that would be damning to Viscount Teomold.

But before they could reveal anything too damning, their mouths were stuffed by the executioners and they were killed.

There was no doubt that there would be conflict between the Adventurer Guild and Viscount Teomold from now on, but that wasn't my problem.

What I cared more about was the information that the assistant brought back about Viscount Teomold's crimes.

It wasn't that incriminating, but it definitely could be used since it would give us a few leads to follow up on.

The next morning, we were setting off.

We weren't heading back to our territory yet, but rather heading to the territory of another noble that Rose had contacted previously.

This noble wasn't a part of Viscount Teomold's group, so I was interested to see what kind of noble Rose had contacted.

At the very least, it wouldn't be worse than Viscount Teomold.

To my surprise, this noble's territory wasn't that far from Viscount Teomold's.

It was practically right next to it, but there was a small barony in between them. However, when it came to territory disputes, this small barony served as nothing more than a buffer zone for them.

In truth, it could be said that this noble was considered Viscount Teomold's rival.

When I found this out, I couldn't help looking at Rose with a strange look, but she just looked back at me with a smile on her face. It was as if she wasn't disturbed at all by this and that she was proud of what she did.

Was she that kind of person?

After all, what she was doing was hedging.

She was basically putting chips on both sides so that no matter who won, she would be able to manipulate them.

But then again...I had seen this part of her before.

Could it be that she had been affected by another curse?

No, if she did, I would have been able to purify her with the Mark of God. That was something that I had discovered in my studies with the priest, I was able to dispel most curses, regardless of their level.

So the fact that the Mark of God didn't activate was a clear sign that she wasn't cursed.

Then this was most likely...part of her real personality.

If I thought about it, it kind of made sense.

The curse was a curse that amplified what was already inside, so there was this part of Rose to begin with.

After the curse was dispelled, she was made more aware of this side and she slipped into it from time to time.

So it could be said that this was a side effect that had been left after the curse was dispelled.

These thoughts had been on my mind when we left Viscount Teomold's territory.

Then when we were in the carriage, I couldn't help looking at Rose with a strange look.

So she asked me, "Is something wrong?"

I shook my head, but I still looked at her with that strange look.

In the end, after seeing her look at me with a raised brow, I asked, "Are you alright?"

Rose was surprised to hear this and she looked around as if she was trying to figure out what I was talking about. But in the end, she looked at me with a confused look and slowly said, "I'm alright..."

Still, I didn't look away as I looked at her with the same strange look and said, "Do you feel anything different about yourself?"

Even more confusion filled her face when she heard this as she didn't understand what I was trying to imply with this.

But slowly, she came to have some understanding.

Slowly, her expression changed as she looked at me.

Rose looked right into my eyes and slowly said, "I'm alright."

This time, it was my turn to be surprised since I could see that she understood what I meant.

After a long silence, she said, "This is a part of me and I accept that. It has been there inside of me the entire time, so I am just embracing what I am. You don't have to worry about me, I'm fine with who I am."

I just silently stared at her for a bit before slowly giving a nod.

I had been worried that she would be affected by all of this since she had shown distress when she found that her former husband had cursed her.

I was worried that it would have a negative impact on her knowing that there might be side effects to breaking this curse.

But it seemed that I had been worried for nothing.

In fact, it seemed that I had underestimated Rose.

She was fully aware of the changes with herself, but she had chosen to accept them since she knew that this was a part of who she was.

It seemed that she was much stronger than I gave her credit for.

I should reflect on this in the future.

Haley, who had been silent on the side, suddenly came forward and hugged Rose to say, "I like who you are too."

Rose revealed a faint smile and hugged her back before saying, "I like you too."

A warm smile appeared on my lips seeing the two of them like this.

I was worried for nothing, she would be fine.

So now it was time to focus on what would come next...

Unlike Viscount Teomold, the next noble that we were visiting was one that had earned his title instead of inheriting it.

He was a knight that had earned his title after many years on the battlefield.

I wondered how different he would be compared to Viscount Teomold.

Chapter 496 Visiting Nobles (12)

When we arrived, I immediately found out how different this noble was.

Unlike before where there were many people gathered to welcome us, there wasn't a single person who was waiting to welcome us this time.

When we arrived at this town, all that happened was that we were led by the captain of the guards to the noble's manor.

There was no fuss and no muss, there was only efficiency as we were led down the road to the manor. They didn't even bother doing anything such as closing off the road to let us pass, so we traveled with the people of the town.

This was a good chance for us to observe the citizens in their natural state.

Many of them didn't even care about us as they went about their lives.

But the one thing that was very eye catching was...

They all had smiles on their faces as they walked around.

It seemed that all of them lived quite fulfilling lives in this town.

It was completely different from Viscount Teomold's territory.

The people looked much more...alive compared to the people of Viscount Teomold's territory.

No matter how one looked at it, this was a testament to the governing of the noble in charge of this place.

I looked at Rose and she just revealed a faint smile.

It didn't take us long to reach the manor that was in the center of the town.

But there was also something different about this manor compared to Viscount Teomold's territory.

It was that this place was filled with people as well.

Unlike in Viscount Teomold's town where commoners weren't allowed anywhere near his manor, this place had an entire square with a fountain and many different shops nearby.

Though the commoners only seemed to be visiting, they were still allowed to freely move in this area unlike with Viscount Teomold's town.

There were also some other manors in this area that seemed to belong to some important people, but they didn't discriminate against the commoners either. There weren't any guards that were posted at the gates of these manors.

It almost seemed like there was no division between commoners and nobles in this place.

When we arrived at the manor, we found that there was a handsome looking man with two beautiful girls beside him.

This handsome man was a muscular middle aged man who looked like an accomplished warrior.

The two beautiful girls beside him looked like sisters, but if one looked closely, one could see that one of them was older than the other.

When they saw our carriage arrive, the handsome middle aged man came forward to greet us.

I looked at Rose and she gave a nod, so I went out to greet this handsome middle aged man.

But as soon as I came out, he waved his hand to greet me as he said, "Count Zwein, I've heard a lot about you! It really is great finally being able to meet you like this!"

Then without hesitation, he came up right in front of me and reached out around me.

I was caught off guard, so I couldn't react in time.

But he didn't have any intentions of harming me as he reached his arm out around me.

With his arms around me, he pulled me in and gave me a strong hug.

This was definitely the first time that I've received a greeting like this.

It was like being held in a death grip with all of those muscles, but I didn't resist since I knew that he didn't have any ill intentions.

It seemed that this was just the kind of man that he was.

After a while, the beautiful woman behind him said, "Dear, you're suffocating him. You should let go and let him breathe."

The handsome middle aged man revealed a surprised look before looking down at me. Seeing the awkward look on my face, he let go of me and stepped back before saying with an awkward smile, "Sorry, I've been told often that I'm quite a passionate person and I don't know how to hold back."

I shook my head with that same smile, but it looked less awkward this time.

Then I said, "It's alright, I don't mind. In fact, I prefer this kind of greeting compared to the regular stuffy kind that nobles give."

This wasn't a lie, it was the truth.

After all, I wasn't a noble by nature since I wasn't raised for it.

So an informal greeting was actually more natural for me.

The handsome middle aged man revealed a wide smile when he heard this before patting me on the shoulder and saying, "I feel that we'll get along quite well."

I gave a nod with the same smile on my face.

This man that had suddenly pulled me into a bear hug like this was Viscount Henry, the one that we came here to meet today.

The two beautiful women behind him were his wife and daughter.

Comparing Viscount Teomold and his family with Viscount Henry and his family, there really was no comparison between the two.

It was very clear which side was the winner.

Rose and Haley both slowly came over and stood there behind me.

Viscount Henry immediately noticed them when they came over, but instead of going forward to hug them like he did with me, he gave a proper bow.

It seemed that even with his rough look, he was someone who had the manners of a gentleman.

Both of them reached their hands out for him and he took them in a gentleman manner to place a kiss on them.

After that, he turned back to me and said, "Count Zwein, how about we go in and talk?"

I gave a nod before following him with Rose and Haley.

As we walked in, I couldn't help feeling good about this.

As far as I could tell, it seemed like this Viscount Henry was quite the good person.

Though, I wouldn't judge a book by its cover alone.

So I made sure to keep my guard up just in case.

Chapter 497 Visiting Nobles (13)

When we entered the manor, I was even more surprised.

After all, this didn't seem like the manor of a noble at all.

It was still a manor, but there weren't any fancy decorations at all. It was a very minimalistic and simple design that focused more on function than style.

At the same time, it didn't seem like they hired many servants as we only passed a single maid when heading to the reception room.

They even stopped when passing that maid to exchange a few words with her.

The way that they talked to the maid seemed like they were talking to a friend rather than talking to a servant. The maid also treated them with friendliness that didn't seem like they were addressing their master.

After we arrived in the living room, the butler who had been waiting brought some tea for us as we sat down.

The first thing that Viscount Henry asked was...

"How was your trip?"

He didn't flatter me or say anything else related to business, he just asked how my trip was as if he genuinely cared about this.

It was just like how a friend would talk to another friend, rather than a noble talking to another noble.

So I couldn't help being taken aback when I heard this.

Rose covered for me by saying, "It wasn't a bad trip. A few parts of it were a bit bumpy, but it was overall fun."

I looked at her with a grateful look when I heard this before following up by saying, "It's just how any trip would be, there wasn't anything special about it like Rose said."

This time, it was Viscount Henry's turn to reveal a slightly surprised look.

There was also a strange tone in that gaze as he looked between me and Rose.

It was almost as if he didn't believe that I would let her speak for me like this.

But that look quickly disappeared as he said, "I'm glad to hear that." With a sigh, he continued, "There have been reports of bandits roaming around the area, so I was worried that you would encounter some of them."

"Bandits?" Rose asked with a raised brow.

Viscount Henry was no longer surprised that Rose spoke for me, so he turned to look at her and said with a nod, "That's right. There have been many bandits reported in the area, but they've always managed to escape before my troops arrive."

After a momentary pause, he added, "From what I've heard, it seems that they've been coming from the direction of a certain noble's territory."

He didn't need to say which noble it was, we could already guess.

But it seemed that he was still a noble in the end.

When we got down to it, he still talked about business like a noble would.

Still, it could be said that I was biased since I believed him when he said that it came from the direction of a certain noble's territory.

After all, we had just come from that noble's territory and had seen what was happening there.

I had seen the adventurers that he had been hiring as mercenaries and it made sense to use those adventurers for this kind of job.

So it wouldn't be strange if it actually was the case.

Still, that wouldn't be enough to move me. Before I saw what this Viscount Henry was all about, I wouldn't make my stance clear.

The topic went from bandits to some other casual things.

We talked about territory management and some other things that nobles would chat about in their free time.

Though...it was mainly Rose that talked with Viscount Henry while I chimed in from time to time.

Even if I had wanted to join the conversation, it wasn't as if there was much for me to say since I left territory management mostly up to Rose.

Even Viscount Henry couldn't help being impressed by how knowledgeable Rose was when conversing with him.

But I had to admit that I was surprised that he could keep up with her.

It seemed that this muscular man wasn't just all about fighting, he also had quite the brain.

During this time, I couldn't help peeking at the two beautiful women sitting across from us.

Both of them just had calm smiles on their faces as they listened to everything that was said.

It didn't seem like either of them were bored by this, it even seemed like they were focused on listening to everything that was being said. I could even see the sharp glow that was in their eyes.

Both of them shouldn't be empty vases, they should both be women of great intelligence just like Rose.

They were just silently listening and absorbing any information that they could.

During this, the daughter saw me looking at them, so she looked back at me with a bright smile on her face.

I could only reveal an awkward smile at being caught before turning my gaze away.

After talking for a bit, Rose and Viscount Henry finally ran out of things to talk about.

Viscount Henry gave a powerful laugh as he said, "I never thought that I would enjoy our time together this much."

He turned to me and said, "Count Zwein, you really have a good one on your hands."

Hearing him praise Rose like this, I said with a smile, "It's my blessing to have someone like her."

Rose couldn't help revealing a blush when she heard this, but she also revealed a faint smile.

Viscount Henry gave a nod before saying, "You are quite the ladies man, aren't you?"

I just revealed a smile without saying anything.

There was a silence that filled the room, but it wasn't awkward since we were sizing each other up during this time.

Finally, I made a decision.

"Viscount Henry, how about we talk about some business now?" I said in a calm voice.

But Viscount Henry narrowed his eyes a bit after hearing this and gave a slow nod.

Chapter 498 Visiting Nobles (14)

Seeing him nod in agreement, I looked at Haley and she took out a piece of paper that she put on the table.

Viscount Henry looked down at this piece of paper before looking at me with one brow raised.

When he saw that I didn't react at all to him staring at me like this, he reached his hand out to take that piece of paper. He brought that piece of paper up in front of him and took a close look at it.

Behind him, his daughter and wife both leaned in to take a look at this piece of paper as well.

There wasn't much written on this piece of paper, but its contents made all three of them knit their brows slightly.

The more that they read this, the more that they knitted their brows.

When they finished reading this, they all looked at each other and used their eyes to communicate with each other. It was almost as if they were discussing what they had just read without saying a single word.

It could be seen how close this family was with how easily they communicated with just gazes alone.

Finally, Viscount Henry turned back to look at me.

He didn't say a word as he looked at me with those narrowed eyes.

With the way that he was looking at me, it was almost as if he was gauging me. It almost seemed like he was waiting for some kind of reaction from me so he would know what to say.

However, I just kept that straight look on my face.

After a while, Viscount Henry said in a slow and careful voice, "What's written on here, is it final?"

I couldn't help letting a bit of light appear in my eyes when I heard this.

This Viscount Henry really was different from Viscount Teomold.

Even the way that they talked was different.

One talked in a selfish manner while the other talked in a respectful manner.

Instead of asking if I was serious, he calmly asked if the prices were final.

This was his way of showing respect to me, but still trying to get what he wanted.

Just with this one move, I saw this Viscount Henry in a better light than that Viscount Teomold.

With a smile on my face, I said, "Everything is negotiable..." Then my eyes turned sharp as I said, "But that depends on what you have to offer."

Viscount Henry couldn't help feeling a chill run down his spine as he looked at this Count Zwein in front of him.

At first, he had thought that Count Zwein was one of those people that lets their wife do everything for them, but now he realized that wasn't the case. He wasn't someone that needed his wife to do everything, he was just waiting for the right opportunity to make his move.

They both had their roles and they had executed it perfectly.

The wife put him at ease and then Count Zwein came in for the kill.

But instead of scaring him, this excited him since that meant that both of them were capable.

Capable people were the kind of people that he loved the most since they were easier to negotiate with than unreasonable and incompetent people.

After a long silence, Viscount Henry said with a smile, "I'm sure that we can come to some kind of compromise."

Seeing him like this, I gave a nod before saying with a smile, "Of course."

The next half an hour was a slow discussion between our two sides.

At first, the first thing that Viscount Henry asked was, "What is your bottom line?"

I was surprised to see how forward he was, but it wasn't something that I was averse to.

People that were direct made things easier.

However, this was not one of those times where I could just be direct with him.

After all, even if I liked him, I had no idea just how far he was willing to cooperate with us. So before gauging that, I had to lead him on a bit and slowly find out how serious he was about this cooperation.

It was a back and forth where we brought out different things, but by the end, I had a good idea of what he needed.

At first, Viscount Henry didn't give me the information that I needed.

But then to my surprise, it was his wife that suddenly gave me this information.

She directly told me what they were planning to use the ores that they were buying from us for.

It seemed that they were planning to use most of it to improve the lives of their citizens. Of course, they wouldn't be directly giving the citizens the ores, but rather providing goods made from these ores at low cost to improve the standard of living.

She carefully explained how they would divide and use the ores without hiding anything.

Viscount Henry even looked uncomfortable when he heard this, but he was silenced with a single look from his wife.

When she finished explaining everything, she looked at me and said with a smile, "Count Zwein, I hope that this has made our stance clear."

Though she had a smile on her face, I could also see the sharp look in her eyes.

But with that, I knew that she misunderstood something.

She thought that I was worried about them using these ores to enhance their troops which would be dangerous for my territory. After all, their territory was close enough to invade my territory if they wanted to.

No one would want to arm those that could harm them in the future.

Since there was no alliance between us, it was normal for us to be vigilant of each other even if we were acting friendly now.

But in truth, I wanted to gauge their reaction on something else.

They had been direct with me, so the least I could do was be direct with them.

With a calm look on my face, I asked, "What do you think of Viscount Teomold?"

Chapter 499 Visiting Nobles (15)

This time, Viscount Henry and his wife were shocked when they heard this.

Viscount Henry immediately knitted his brows and looked carefully at me, as if he was trying to gauge me.

It was as if he was trying to figure out just what my intentions were when I asked this question. It was as if he wanted to see if I had any ill intentions asking him this.

What he mainly cared about was if I was setting a trap for him by asking this.

However, I just looked right back at Viscount Henry with a calm look on my face as if I wasn't bothered by this at all.

After a long silence, he finally said, "We are at odds sometimes, but that's to be expected from nobles that border each other."

This answer...was very safe, but it was not the answer that I was looking for.

Viscount Henry also knew that since he could see the look on my face.

However, it wasn't as if he could say anything else.

This was something that concerned the safety of both his family and his territory, so it wasn't something that he could be rash about.

He could only offer safe questions to keep him, his family, and his people safe.

That was his duty as both the head of his family and the lord of this territory.

But since I wasn't satisfied, I wouldn't let this matter go.

"Is that so?" I said in a calm voice.

Viscount Henry couldn't help knitting his brows when he heard this, but he didn't say anything.

Almost as if teasing him, I slowly said, "Then what if I said that I wanted to get rid of him?"

The moment that my voice fell, Viscount Henry and his wife immediately revealed shocked looks of disbelief. It was as if they couldn't believe that I would be so direct with this matter.

Even Rose and Haley were surprised to hear this.

They weren't surprised by the words I said since we had already agreed that this was something that was on the table, they were just surprised by how direct I was.

Viscount Henry narrowed his eyes to look at me as if he was trying to gauge if I was being serious or not.

After a long silence, he finally bit the bait and said, "Count Zwein, I don't know what happened between you and Viscount Teomold, but it is dangerous to speak in this manner. You should..."

Before he could finish, I suddenly said, "I just want to know if you want in or not. It's a very simple question."

Viscount Henry was completely taken aback when he heard this.

There was a part of him that started to feel regret since he had taken this Count Zwein lightly.

He had thought that he was just a simple straightforward person, but how could anyone that received the title of count possibly be a simple person?

It should have been clear that he was a cunning person who had his own plans.

Viscount Henry didn't know what to say as he turned to look at his wife, but she just shook her head to show that she didn't know either.

Seeing that the two of them were like this, I decided to sweeten the pot.

I looked at Haley and gave her a nod before saying, "Bring that out."

She looked at me with a surprised look, but she still took out a piece of paper for Viscount Henry.

Instead of putting it on the table, she just directly handed it to him this time.

In his daze, Viscount Henry just looked at the piece of paper out of reflex.

However, when he saw what was written on it, he snapped out of that daze and deeply knitted his brows.

After looking at this piece of paper and sharing it with his wife for a bit, he looked up at me with a slow and hesitant gaze as he asked, "Count Zwein, this is?"

I just said with a smile on my face, "A gift in a sort, but that depends on what you say next."

Viscount Henry deeply knitted his brows when he heard this, but it didn't seem like he was against what I had said.

He looked up at me with those knitted brows and it was clear what he was thinking.

Is this man a devil?

That smile on his face was clearly not the smile of a man, but a devil that tempted people...

After a long moment of hesitation, Viscount Henry asked, "What are you planning on doing?"

The smile on my face became wider the moment that I heard this.

After all, the fact that he said this meant that he was tempted and now all that was left was for me to reel the fish in.

With that wide smile on my face, I said, "Well, there are certain things about Viscount Teomold that I do not like, so I am planning on getting rid of him. For that, I ask that you help me with certain things."

Viscount Henry was once again taken aback when he heard this.

No matter how he looked at this, it seemed like there was no downsides for him to take this deal.

But the more that he thought about it, the more that it seemed like a trap.

So he was debating on whether he should let himself fall for it or if he should back out now before it went too far.

In the end, Viscount Henry couldn't help being moved as he asked, "Let's say that I was interested in this...what would I have to do?"

With this, I said with the same smile, "Well, before we can talk about that, we need to sign something."

I looked at Haley and she brought out another piece of paper.

Viscount Henry directly took it and knitted his brows again when he saw it.

After a moment of silence, he asked, "Do we really need to do this?"

I gave a nod as I said, "This is to ensure that we can work together without having to worry about anything."

He couldn't help revealing an even more worried look.

Without having to worry about anything?

The moment that he signed this contract, there would be physical evidence of their collaboration and he wouldn't be able to step back anymore. The moment that he signed this, he would be forced to walk down this path no matter what happened.

If anything, signing this would make him even more worried.

But there was also a part of Viscount Henry that was more relieved because of this contract.

Since Count Zwein was willing to bring out this contract, that meant that he was serious about this.

This wasn't a joke, he really was going to take down Viscount Teomold, the one that had been his rival the entire time.

After a long silence, I was the one that broke it by saying, "I promise that I won't do anything to harm you or your territory. I know that doesn't account for much, but..."

Viscount Henry shook his head and said, "No, that's more than enough."

Without hesitation, he picked up some ink and a pen from the side and signed his name on the contract before handing it back to me.

As he held this out, he said with a confident look, "I'm looking forward to working with you."

I revealed a faint smile before reaching out to take that contract.

As I took it, I said, "I'm looking forward to working with you as well."

Chapter 500 Preparing a banquet

A few days later, we left Viscount Henry's territory.

During this time, we had toured his territory quite a bit and found that it was even better than I thought.

Unlike Viscount Teomold's territory which was a mess, Viscount Henry's territory was very well managed.

He was someone that applied town planning quite well.

Each part of the town served a particular purpose and he grouped buildings that had similar functions together.

There was a residence area, a leisure area, an industrial area, and a business area.

It was perfectly divided up so that all these areas had places to grow and that they complemented each other.

He wasn't just a warrior, but also someone that was skilled in taking care of his territory.

No matter how I looked at it, he seemed like a S Rank character that I wanted to collect. If I could get Viscount Henry as my subordinate and have him help Rose manage my territories...

I could see that Rose also wanted the same, but the one she was targeting was different.

She was targeting Viscount Henry's wife.

During our stay in his territory, we had gone around with Viscount Henry and his family, touring his territory.

But while we were touring and asking questions, half of the questions were answered by his wife.

So it was clear that she was a very capable woman that fully supported her husband.

Rose was very interested in taking her under her wing as well.

When we left Viscount Henry's territory, both of us could see what the other person was thinking.

It was just too bad that the viscount and his wife didn't know what would be coming for them.

For our next destination...it was our own territory.

After being away for close to three weeks, it was time to head back.

If we stayed out any longer, it would be very likely that our territory would collapse without Rose there to manage it.

That was just how lacking we were in terms of manpower right now.

But it was also because of the extra territory that we received after I became a count.

Right now, those territories were still in an adjustment state, so it would be a while before they would fall under us completely.

After arriving back at our territory, Rose separated from me with a sigh and said, "I'll be heading back now. I'll miss the time that we had together."

The subordinates who had come out to greet us all revealed bitter smiles when they heard this.

All of them looked at me pleadingly as if they wanted me to say something, but I just looked back at them with a smile on my face without saying a thing.

After all, I knew that Rose was just teasing them.

But it seemed like they had suffered quite a bit during the time that she had been gone.

Nicole who should have been filling in for her looked like she had aged by several years.

Still, this was a good learning experience for them.

In the future, it was likely that they would need to run the territory on their own.

After all, there was no telling what would happen, so Rose might be called away for extended periods of time.

So it was better for them to get this experience now rather than later.

I just left Rose to tease her subordinates as I headed off to find someone.

I left the town and went to an outpost that wasn't that far away.

This was the outpost that had been given to Shaka and his subordinates who had been acting as spies and scouts for our town.

This time, Shaka hadn't come with me since it was official business for my territory and Shadow Garden shouldn't be involved in this. Not to mention, he was assured that I would be safe with Shadow Five following me.

But the main reason was because...he wanted a break after everything that had happened.

When he saw me walk in, Shaka revealed a bitter smile and asked, "What is it this time?"

I looked at him with a smile before saying, "Is it really that bad seeing me each time?"

Shaka shook his head with that same bitter smile before saying, "You tell me."

I tilted my head to think about it and I slowly gave a nod as if agreeing with him.

Now that I had been taught common sense, I recognized how big every single incident that I had caused had been.

But that wouldn't stop me from doing what I wanted to do in the future.

So I just shrugged and said, "It's not as bad this time."

Shaka revealed a bitter smile, but he still gave a nod as he said, "Alright, what is it this time?"

"It's very simple, I just want to host a banquet."

Shaka immediately revealed a surprised and confused look when he heard this as he slowly repeated, "A banquet?"

I gave a simple nod in response.

Shaka looked at me with a brow raised, but he didn't question it as he said, "Alright, then what do we need to do to help?"

I revealed a smile.

It was good when they caught on quickly.

I gave the instructions that I had for Shaka and they quickly set off while I returned to the town.

When I came back, I went to find Haley to get in touch with someone else.

This would be the surprise that would be prepared for the banquet that I would be holding.

After that, all that was left was to prepare the actual banquet.

This would be a banquet for several nobles, so it wasn't something that could be done casually.

It would take a lot of preparation before we would be ready to welcome all of these different nobles.

But of course, that was mainly for Rose and her subordinates to take care of.

All I could do was silently apologize to them.