

Schtappe Acquisition

Schtappe Acquisition Day is finally here! At last, I will have the key to the gate that stands between me and the more interesting magic. Not to mention it will lend more credence to my status as a noble. Estelle was also supposed to be here today, but apparently, when she did her Divine Protections ritual, it ended with her getting her schtappe early.

The other first years and I are taken to the Farthest Hall. After receiving our instructions on how to prevent mana contamination that could result in a poor schtappe, we are sent forward. For a while it goes just like the story with the laynobles finding their Divine Wills first. It really did look like they were carrying something that only they could see as they walked back to the shrine.

I figure I would find mine somewhere between the archnobles and archduke candidates since I have pushed my mana capacity up so far. Just in case, I start looking more intently when I reach the point where the mednobles were finding theirs. As expected, I haven't found mine after the last mednoble has turned back with their prize. Then the last archnoble and finally the last archduke candidate find theirs. It's not much farther before I reach the end of the hall, but the spiral staircase that should lead to the tree where Rozemyne found hers isn't there.

Starting to panic, I backtrack as far as I dare without risking being seen by anyone waiting at the entrance. I don't want anyone to know that I can't find my Divine Will. I can only imagine the ridicule I'd receive if that happened. I go through the Farthest Hall again, looking even more intently this time in case I had missed it somehow. Again, I reach the end without finding it.

Was there a mistake and it wasn't created or is it actually up on that tree? But if so, why are the stairs missing?

A feeling of dread sweeps over me as I realize there is another possibility: Professor Fraularm may have sabotaged me. I have yet to meet her since I came to the academy, so I don't yet know for sure if she will be hostile towards me. However, it does seem likely that I will at least share the animosity she had for Rozemyne in the story. I might even bear the full brunt of it since, like an idiot, I volunteered to be the sacrificial lamb of the Bindewald incident and any other "commoner blue shrine maiden" stories. On top of all of that, I escaped from Ahrensbach after a lot of money was paid for me, took a high-manaed girl with me and left behind nobles contracted to me.

The professors had stressed that today was the only chance we would get to acquire our Divine Wills, so sabotage or not, I absolutely have to find a way to get mine now. I take several deep breaths to calm myself and focus on the problem. With nothing down here other than rough stone walls, but there must be some kind of barrier either hiding the staircase itself or, if the staircase is not there, there must be a barrier hiding the opening at the top. I wrack my brain trying to think of ways to get through it.

I haven't learned anything about magic barriers yet and the only barrier circumvention I know of was in the story when Justus and Eckhart break into the Merchant's Guild. I could try pushing my mana into the barrier, hoping to somehow register my mana with it like they had in the story, but first I have to find the barrier itself.

I spread a thin film of my mana over the walls looking for areas with mana concentrations. I find several that start at the ceiling, travel down the wall, and continue down the hall.

That is probably what generates the Divine Wills down here. I'll bet it goes up to that tree.

I find another in the wall at ground level and when I probe all of its edges, it is almost certainly a camouflaged barrier hiding an opening in the wall. I try pushing mana into it, but nothing happens. I try pulling mana out of it, but it doesn't allow it.

Maybe it is set to reject my mana color or maybe it requires certain colors?

I don't know if I would need to be dyed with different colors or if simply containing different colored mana within my vessel was enough to fool it if mana color was the key. Unfortunately, dyeing myself isn't an option here, so I can't try that.

Since the barrier won't let me pull out mana, I try it on the first mana source I find. It works, but it is the most disgusting-feeling mana I have ever done this with. I almost can't bear to have this foreign mana in my vessel, so hopefully this will work. But when I turn back to the barrier, it is still there.

I momentarily consider using my highbeast and knife to make a rock drill to force my way through, but I would certainly be caught when the instructors came to investigate what the noise was.

Maybe as a last-ditch attempt before I give up...

If I can't get through the barrier, then the only thing left is the possibility that my Divine Will was supposed to generate down here, but for whatever reason didn't. If that is what happened, then I need to find a way to force it to generate. Problem is, I have no clue what causes them to generate or whether it is a manual thing done by the professors or something automatic.

The only thing I can think to do is pump mana into the mana conduit I just pull mana out of and hope it can be kick-started. I pour mana into it, returning the mana I took from it first, then continuing with my own mana. I really have no idea how much to put in, so I decide I will stop when the two rejuvenation potions I brought with me are gone and my mana is down to perhaps an eighth of my capacity.

As I am nearing the point to stop, a voice says, "who are you and what are you doing?"

I whip my head around looking for the source of the voice that had scared the crap out of me, but there is nobody there. It had sounded like it was close enough to have come from right next to me, but at the same time, it sort of sounded like it came from everywhere.

“Umm... My name is Mila and I can't find my Divine Will, so I was hoping I could make one appear this way...”

“That won't make a Divine Will appear. In addition, I sense that you already possess one, though it seems rather odd.”

I already have one? But that can't be. Unless... surely he can't be talking about my knife and pen!

As these thoughts careen through my mind, a chunk of my mana is taken and my vision starts to distort like it had when I teleported to the academy. When my vision returns to normal, I find myself standing before the tree. The illustration in the light novel didn't do it justice. Other than Verdrenna's magic circle written in the sky with lightning, it is the most fantasy thing I have seen since coming to this world. I want to circle around the tree to find my Divine Will, but I find I am unable to move.

As I struggle in vain to move, the tree starts taking on a human form. When the transformation is done, a tall, thin man with white hair and clothes stands before me.

Without opening his eyes, he says, “how rare. Only a few people have made their own Divine Will, but that was long ago. You are the first since the early days to do it, though it would seem yours is still quite incomplete. If you desire one from me, I cannot give you one now because it would conflict with the one you already have. That is assuming your vessel was able to endure that clash.”

It was like a bucket of freezing water had been thrown on me. Actually, no. That would be more pleasant than this. This is even worse than when I was told I would be adopted into Joisontak. If I don't have a working schtappe, my days as a noble are over. Images of Adeus and Erenit's crestfallen faces as well as a disappointed Meredith flash in my mind. I could practically hear the nobles who despise me saying, “see? She was never fit to be a noble!” But before my turmoil progresses to a full-blown mental breakdown, the man continues.

“I cannot maintain this form for much longer with the mana you have given me in this unconventional way. I can see that you have no more to spare, so we shall continue our conversation this way.”

He leans forward and places a hand on my head. The chaos in my mind fades and time seems to stop. I then hear his voice in my head.

"I require information from you. Why has nobody come to collect their wisdom? A Zent must dye the foundation soon. Time is running out and all will turn back to white sand if something isn't done."

"What? The foundation should be held by Zent Trauerqual."

"There is no Zent. Dyeing the foundation is a prerequisite to becoming Zent. The one who last held the foundation met the Supreme Couple recently and none have dyed it since. For quite some time before that, even when the foundation had been dyed, the one who had done it had not obtained their wisdom."

"I thought the wisdom was directly passed down through the royal family from one Zent to the next. Why would they come here to get it?"

"It would seem things have become corrupted somehow. I need to see what Geduldh's children are doing now. Unfortunately, this will be unpleasant for you."

He starts rummaging around in my memories. It borders on excruciating, but I have no way to resist. The discomfort tapers off after a bit and dies down to only very unpleasant as he continues searching. He goes through my knowledge of Yurgenschmidt's recent history regarding the country's leadership. When he has seen what he wanted to see, the discomfort subsides and I instead feel his anger boiling.

"What are those fools doing? They have corrupted everything!"

"I don't understand. Who has corrupted what? And who are you anyway? Are you one of the gods?"

"No, I am no longer a god. I am Erwaermen, the creator of this garden and I require your help in setting it straight."

It was shocking enough to be talking to the country's founder, but shocking revelation piled upon shocking revelation as he tells me the original way Zents were selected and there was no place in any of it for a royal family. The position of Zent was always supposed to be filled based on merit.

"I don't see how I can be of help. I'm just a mednoble and a former commoner at that. The royal family would execute me if there were even a suspicion that I knew what you just told me."

"You *must* assist. Otherwise, the garden will be destroyed and Geduldh's children will perish when the foundation collapses."

Images flash through my mind of endless white sands as Erwaermen shows me what Yurgenschmidt had been before he shaped it into what it is now. It's starting to look like I won't be able to wriggle out of this.

"Supposing I were to help, how much time do we have?"

"That is difficult to say. There are several failing foundations draining mana from the country foundation and they are becoming worse as time goes on."

"Those are probably the duchies that got purged and the foundation paths lost. There is no way to have new archdukes assigned to them until the paths are found again."

"What do you mean, *lost*? The foundation of every duchy is and always has always been under their temples and the path is in the library. How have these fools lost even that knowledge?"

I feel his anger surge again and once more, my memories are searched. When he sees what has happened to the reputation of the temple and the reluctance of nobles to even set foot in the place, his anger rises to a new peak.

"There is, indeed, much that we need to repair."

"Why does it have to be me? Why can't you get someone more willing and suitable for this task?"

"Because I cannot leave this place and you are the first person since Quinta to come here and speak to me. You also don't hold the temple in contempt the way the rest of Geduldh's children seem to now. That makes you better qualified than nearly all of the others."

If I can't get out of this, then I'll at least try to get his help with my incomplete divine will. I complain that, without a functioning schtappe, I would be expelled from the academy soon and my status dropped back to commoner, making me unable to do anything for him. He asks what I am unable to do that would get me expelled and I tell him that for this year, the rott and ordonnanz spells are the big problem. I add that the other transformations I haven't done yet might be a problem because without having tried them yet, I don't know if they will work. I tell him that the only transformations I've done so far are a pen and a knife which I've played with the shape of.

"You should have no trouble with rott. For the most part, that is just a directed mana stream and you have the attribute needed. Ordonnanz will require you to obtain the favor of a few of Schutzaria's subordinates. If you have already done those two transformations, the rest are either variations of the knife transformation or are just shapes, which you should have no problem with."

He made it sound like no big deal, but my suspicion is that, like everything else in my life, it won't be as easy for me as it is supposed to be.

"How about we make a deal then? I will agree to do my best to achieve these things you want done, but in exchange, you have to give me any help or advice I need to complete my Divine Will."

"That is acceptable. Just know that I can't do it for you now that you have started it yourself. If your goal is to have a Divine Will with all of the capabilities of the ones I supply, you will have to gain the favor of all of the gods and then pray sincerely for each ability you need to add to it."

Though that sounds really daunting, I don't seem to have much of a choice since I do want a schtappe that isn't gimped. The only problem is I have no guarantee that he'll keep his end of the bargain if he got what he wanted before my Divine Will was completed.

"It seems you doubt my trustworthiness. Would a contract ease your fears?"

"If it's not worded in a way that tries to force me to do things I am unable to do or that would definitely result in my death, and if it removes my obligation if I bring you someone better suited to the task, then yeah."

In my mind, a sheet of iridescent parchment appears with glowing words written on it. Erwaermen tells me to read it and decide if the terms are acceptable. It is written in the ancient language and when I say that I'm not fluent enough in that to understand everything, a small flood of information flows into my head. When it is done, I can read the contract with no problems. The wording of the contract seems reasonable enough. My concerns are addressed and it would make him hold up his end of the deal.

"This looks fine."

His signature appears on the contract and he says, "put your mark on the contract and it will be finished."

Since this is in my head, just imagining my signature appearing on the contract makes it become reality. The signatures and writing glow bright gold before the contract vanishes.

With our mutual agreement, Erwaermen gives me my short-term tasks. One is to reveal the path to the duchy foundations so the abandoned duchies will have aubs, stopping them from draining the country foundation. The other was to either find one of the two omni-elemental students who should still be in the academy and guide them to their wisdom or locate this "Quinta" person and have them come back and complete their wisdom.

He could tell me nothing specific about the three people he wanted me to find, not even their genders since he apparently only sees mana. He could only say that of the two students, one

had received their Divine Will a very very short time ago, but also said that time passes differently for him than for us.

He then tells me about the small shrines of the subordinate gods that dot the land surrounding the Royal Academy and how sincere prayers at one would gain the favor of that god. He then explains that, by gaining the favor of all of the subordinates of one of the primary gods and then performing the Divine Protections ritual, I would gain that god's protection and element if I didn't already have it.

He reiterates that, in order to build up my homemade schtappe to have all of the benefits and functions of a normal schtappe, I would have to become omni-elemental as it would require the favor of all of the gods. The real kicker is when he tells me that if I reach that point, I could tour a set of large shrines to further strengthen my schtappe, making me eligible to become Zent. He says that it is an alternative to the "find Quinta or the omni students" order he had given me.

"Whoa, hold on! I can't become Zent! Not only do I not want to, I would be assassinated instantly if anyone even thought that I *could* do it! I mean yeah, I'd like to have all of the other benefits you've mentioned and the Book of Mestionora would probably be really handy to have, but I just can't become Zent."

"We shall see what comes to pass. Now that the garden is in such a dire state, I am not discounting any valid options. If it came to be that Quinta and the omni-elemental students could not be found or refused to come here then you would be the garden's only hope."

Not letting me complain further, Erwaermen filled my head with the rest of the things I needed to know for the tasks he was giving me. Etched into my mind was the full set of steps needed for one to become omni-elemental and then acquire their wisdom along with a magic circle for performing the Divine Protections ritual in the temple as well as instructions on how to use it. As a side note, it seems that because my Divine Will is self-made and therefore apparently more flexible than a normal one, I am exempt from the "must be omni-elemental before schtappe acquisition" rule.

"So in short, I just have to undo hundreds if not thousands of years of changes to the fabric of noble society?"

I wish I shared his optimism that I could successfully complete these tasks.

"My time in this form is nearly at an end. I have made an exemption for you in the barrier to this place, so you can skip the mana tricks next time."

"I don't think I will be allowed to come to the Farthest Hall again. Is there another way to get here? One that doesn't require going through all of the steps to get Mestionora's book?"

"I suppose that leaves only this."

Two more magic circles are etched into my mind.

“One will teleport you here from anywhere in the Holy Land. The other will do the same, but from anywhere in Yurgenschmidt and will require far more mana. Both of them will teleport only you.”

“Wait, these require attributes I don’t have!”

“The barrier you bypassed to get here also required those attributes and you had no problem with that. If you wish to do it the correct way, I have told you how to acquire them permanently.”

“Fine.”

I feel him withdrawing from my mind and he starts reverting to his tree form.

“Now go and perform your tasks.”

The flow of time returns to normal and I nearly collapse onto the floor now that my mind is no longer joined with his. My ears ring loudly and it feels like my head is about to split open. In a daze, I walk over to the spiral stairs leading back down to the Farthest Hall. As Erwaermen had said, the barrier doesn’t stop me this time.

As I walk back to the shrine where the instructors were waiting, I have a little time to actually think about what happened now that my thoughts aren’t being railroaded by a former god. He didn’t actually force me to agree to help him, but I feel like I was overly influenced by the mind meld or whatever that was. I’m pretty sure I would have found a way out of it or at least not sign a contract forcing me to do it.

Or would I? There *is* that whole “end of the world” consequence if nobody helps him. At any rate, I need to decide what my next steps will be, so I push down the urge to wallow in anger and self-pity and focus on what to do next.

First, I need to make sure I can pass Schtappe Fundamentals class so I don’t get expelled. Once that is out of the way, I can move on to the one Erwaermen put the highest priority on. Revealing the location of every duchy’s foundation would get me killed if I’m not extremely careful about how I do it. I will need to put a lot of thought into that.

About halfway back to the shrine, I run into instructors who have come looking for me and I have to explain what took me so long.

“I suspected that people would try to contaminate my Divine Will, so I took some time to dye it here.”

They look at me in disbelief, so I manifest my knife in the shape of a schtappe like a tiny fencing rapier without the guard.

“See? You just hit it with a lot of mana and it dyes much faster.”

It was only a partial lie. I truly had planned to absorb my Divine Will before I left the Farthest Hall because I really had feared that someone would accidentally on purpose bump into me hoping to contaminate my Divine Will. I show the professors my empty rejuvenation potions and they believe my lie. After some apologies for wasting their time, I return to the Ehrenfest dorm.

I am barely through the door when a fifth year archnoble actually does bump into me. The smirk that breaks through his facade as he “apologizes” gets on my last nerve and what little mana I have left surges. His smirk turns into one of abject terror as he suddenly backs away frantically and then runs from me. If I weren’t pissed off, it would have been hilarious seeing an archnoble literally tripping over themselves trying to get away from me.

Many classmates in the main hall who saw the altercation wear shocked expressions. As I make my way toward my room, people give me a wide berth. Some also wear fearful expressions.

I know I’m in a foul mood, but do I really look that scary?

When I arrive at my room I am greeted by Anlia, who is keeping her distance.

“Lady Mila, I have prepared your bed. You may rest while dyeing your Divine Will.”

“I already dyed and absorbed it. I’m almost out of mana and I need another rejuvenation potion.”

As she approaches me, her concerned expression changes and she shrinks back.

“Lady Mila, what has happened to you? Your mana feels... different.”

Things click into place and I realize what has happened. That mind meld with Erwaermen dyed me and I am radiating former-god mana, but I can’t tell Anlia that. I need to make myself scarce for the next few days until my mana returns to normal. That works out since I have to start working on the gods I need to woo to get ordonnanz working.

“I can’t say. I have somewhere I must go now.”

I grab four rejuvenation potions and try to leave, but Anlia stops me.

“You took two potions with you to the Farthest Hall and you apparently used them. Now you’re taking four more? Just what is going on?”

“There is something I need to do and it needs to be done before Schtappe Fundamentals class, so I have to go.”

In reality, I had the whole semester to get my schtappe working, but I am not giving up on my goal to pass my classes on the first day! Actually, now that I am saddled with Erwaermen’s tasks, I really do need to be exceptional if I am to get anyone to listen to me when I start telling them they need to pray to the gods. I try to leave again, but Anlia follows me.

I sigh and say, “You’re set on following me, aren’t you?”

“I am your attendant and I promised Lady Meredith that I would keep you out of trouble. Whatever you’ve gotten yourself into I’m a part of it too! If you’re going to try to leave without me, I’ll just have to follow you.”

I sigh again. I suppose I can’t hide my shrine visits from her since there is going to be so many of them. I’d just rather nobody know what I’m doing until I’ve had time to think about what is safe to tell who and when I should tell them.

“Okay, fine. But don’t expect me to explain what I’m doing or why I’m doing it. I’m probably going to be flying very far as well.”

I take the door to the outside, produce my high beast, and embark on an expedition to the shrines of the gods I would need for the ordonnanz spell.