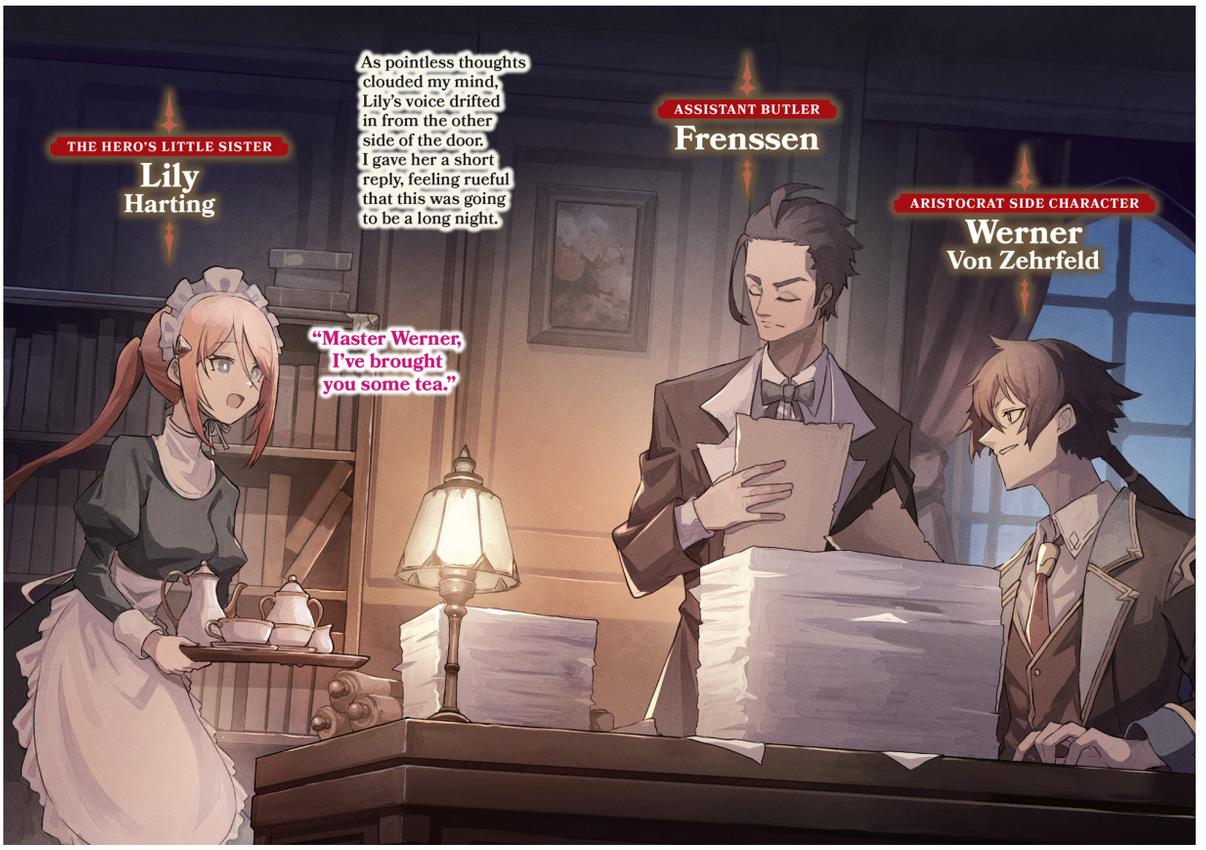

REINCARNATED
INTO A GAME AS THE
HERO'S FRIEND
RUNNING THE KINGDOM BEHIND THE SCENES
NOVEL
4
WRITTEN BY
Yuki SUZUKI
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Sanshouuo

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"Welcome home, Master Werner."
So, uh...why was Lily here?


THE HERO'S LITTLE SISTER
Lily
Harting
As pointless thoughts clouded my mind, Lily's voice drifted in from the other side of the door. I gave her a short reply, feeling rueful that this was going to be a long night.
ASSISTANT BUTLER
Frenssen
ARISTOCRAT SIDE CHARACTER
Werner
Von Zehrfeld
"Master Werner, I've brought you some tea."


“My name is Werner!
Werner Von Zehrfeld.”
“I’ve come to
take Lily back,
as promised.”

REINCARNATED INTO A GAME AS THE HERO'S FRIEND

RUNNING THE KINGDOM BEHIND THE SCENES

NOVEL



WRITTEN BY

Yuki SUZUKI

ILLUSTRATED BY

Sanshouuo



Seven Seas Entertainment

Reincarnated Into a Game as the Hero's Friend:
Running the Kingdom Behind the Scenes (Light Novel) Vol. 4
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REINCARNATED INTO A GAME
AS THE HERO'S FRIEND

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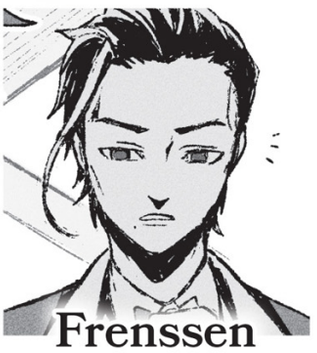
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~Mysteries and Questions~

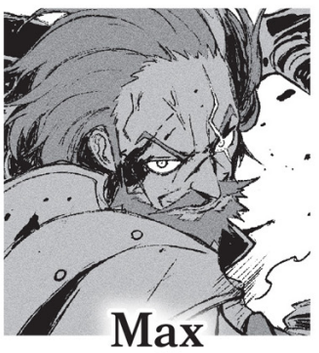
EPILOGUE

AFTERWORD



Frenssen

The protagonist's subordinate and aide. His role is akin to a secretary's, providing support in clerical duties.



Max

Veteran knight and second-in-command to the protagonist, in charge of leading his forces in battle.



Hermine

Lady knight and daughter of a count. Has taken notice of the protagonist's talents.



Schünzel

One of the protagonist's bodyguards. Works with Neurath to support him.



Neurath

One of the protagonist's bodyguards. Throws himself eagerly into his work.



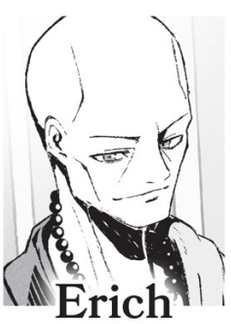
Orgen

A commanding officer serving under the protagonist. Possessed of courage and initiative.



Barkey

A commanding officer serving under the protagonist. Cool-headed and performs many supporting duties.



Erich

Member of the Hero's party. A monk who fights unarmed. Brings a mature perspective to the group.



Feli

Member of the Hero's party. A talented scout, if a cheeky one. Treats the protagonist like an older brother.



Luguentz

Warrior and member of the Hero's party. An acclaimed adventurer and a good mentor to the Hero.



Bert

An influential man among the city's poor. A shrewd man for his age, who never lets his guard down.

Characters



Laura

Holy woman and a member of the Hero's party. Gifted in divine magic such as healing.



Lily

Younger sister of the Hero Mazel. Worked at an inn until a major twist of fate.



Mazel

The Hero. On a journey to defeat the Demon Lord. Trusts the protagonist as his best friend.



Werner

The protagonist of this tale. Has memories of a previous life. While his best friend, the Hero, is afield, he has his own battles to fight.



Ingo

Current head of House Zehrfeld and Werner's father. The royal family trusts him deeply.



Seyfert

Elderly general and quasi-member of the royal family. Is interested in nurturing the protagonist's talents.



Hubertus

Crown prince of our protagonist's kingdom. Thinks highly of Werner.


Temple of Finoy
Denham Village
Arlea Village
Valeritz
Detmold Mountains
Wein Royal Capital
Lesratoga
Fort Werisa
SALZANACH
WEIN
Subritz
Anheim
FAHLRITZ
TRIOT
WORLD MAP

Prologue

I HAD A LOT TO THINK ABOUT ON THE WAY BACK TO the capital after the defense of the temple of Finoy. How to respond to what lay ahead? My first order of business was getting all the commanders of the Zehrfeld knight brigade together.

When Max and the other knights gathered around me, it occurred to me—rather belatedly, I admit—that it was a relief to see everyone unharmed. With my hands, I signaled to the other knights to keep a bit of distance from our gathering.

"Master Werner, may I ask what you called us here for?"

"Sure. I've got some orders for you."

"What might they be?"

Okay, yeah, there was an issue we had to address, but man, why did everyone have to squint at me so passive-aggressively? I couldn't deny that I'd broken protocol more than once, like when I pulled my forces away from Finoy without word to Duke Gründing.

I made sure that no one was nearby except for Max, Orgen, Barkey, Neurath, and Schünzel, and even then, I made sure to lower my voice for what I said next: "The moment we return to the capital, be prepared for military activities. That said, the only people who will take direct action are the knight brigade and the guards at the capital."

"Military activities?" asked Max.

"There are Demons hiding in the capital. This is almost one hundred percent confirmed," I said, with a deliberately nonchalant tone.

Everyone's faces twisted in shock. A natural reaction, although I would've preferred for them to be less conspicuous about it.

"To put it simply, it's fundamentally up to the knight brigade and the guards to deal with the situation. It's not our place to swoop in from the wings and steal the glory."

"That makes sense," Orgen commented.

"So what does that mean for us?" Barkey asked, rational as ever.

And so I broke down my orders for them. Given the murky situation, things would have to be touch and go, but neither could we afford to simply wait and see without any plans whatsoever. In the worst-case scenario, the entire city could end up embroiled in a battle. We'd at least need to prepare to respond to the situation as it unfolded.

"If our movements are too conspicuous, we could wind up being more of a hindrance than a help, but it's not as if I have access to all the information. So these orders are only going to be in very broad strokes. First off, Max.""Yes, sir."

"I want you to take a handful of our best people and guard my father at the palace."

"Understood." Max bent his massive frame in a bow. He was a personal retainer of our noble house, and his first priority would naturally be the count's safety. These orders were so obvious that they hardly needed stating.

"Orgen, I leave it to you to protect the families of our knights and soldiers. Make sure none of them get hurt."

"Will do, sir."

"Barkey, you're in charge of setting up a safety net for the squires and everyone else with ties to House Zehrfeld. The two of you have until we get back to the capital to decide on a plan of action. Give it to me in writing so that I can pass it along to my father at the capital."

"Understood, my lord."

The workings of a single noble house involved quite a lot of people: butlers, ladies-in-waiting, footmen, maids, gardeners, cooks, and a fair number who didn't directly work at the mansion, like the squires who served the knights and their families. Just as aristocrats had obligations to the citizens at large, they had a duty to protect the lives of their retainers and everyone else involved in their affairs.

If a noble house were to fall, dozens of people would abruptly lose their livelihoods, including the retainers and attendants. When you factored in their families and relatives, it meant upheaval for countless lives. Maybe this wasn't a big deal to the type of aristocrat who cared little about commoners, but it was a huge weight on my mind.

“Neurath, Schünzel.”

“Sir.”

“Apologies to you two, but I want you to work behind the scenes to guard Ms. Ernert’s orphanage. I told you about it before. Do you know where it is?”

“Not to worry. I remember.”

“We accept this role.”

Normally, their job was to protect me, but they responded readily to my orders. They’d seen for themselves how talented Feli was during the battle at Finoy. He may have been a bit casual in how he addressed the nobility, but Neurath and Schünzel had seen much worse in the chief of Arlea Village. Witnessing such a heinous point of comparison could overwrite a previous bad impression, surprisingly enough.

“What will you do, Master Werner?”

“I will take charge of securing the Zehrfeld estate. If anything big happens, go to my father at the palace for orders. If you can’t get in touch with him, then you’ll find me at the manor.”

“Understood.”

Normally, my father should have been the one determining their assignments, but the bulk of the actual fighting force was under my command at the moment. Although I could issue the deployments, I had to make the chain of command absolutely clear. If I didn’t, information might end up jumbled, or orders mixed up. Nothing good came of carelessness.

“I’ll ask my father for any provisions you’ll need to get things underway at the capital. Orgen, Barkey, use Neurath’s house as your base of command.”

“Yessir.”

My father would be at the palace, while I would be at the family mansion. If neither of us could be reached, then Neurath’s house would serve as a third base. I got the feeling that if my father was off the radar, we were probably already screwed.

The reason I chose Neurath’s house was because of its geographic position. It didn’t seem likely to me that an attack would hit the Zehrfeld estate and Neurath’s house at the same time. If we put all of our eggs into one basket, a freak accident

could make us lose contact with the center of command altogether. A frightening prospect.

Regardless, I had to ask my father to relay my orders and handle all the necessary arrangements. Needless to say, this included the matter of the Harting family. I had to submit my first report before the day was out.

***

We spent several more days on the march, during which I finished up the preparations and discussed strategy with Max and the others. After that, our forces linked up with the other members of the kingdom's army on the outskirts of the capital—the two waves of troops that had split up back at Finoy.

It was a little belated, but I finally found the opportunity to thank Count Fürst for intervening on my behalf when our troops were deployed at Finoy. The matter came to an innocuous conclusion. Lord Bastian requested an audience with my father once more, and I knew I would have to pass along the message after the Demon army was eliminated from the capital.

Afterward, the bigwigs appeared to have a long, secret meeting, although I wasn't present for it. I merely received a communication after the fact telling me to ensure that all my troops were armed so as not to "appear unsightly" when we were entering the palace.

The next day, we entered the capital armed to the teeth. It was all part of a big celebration ceremony for our successful liberation of Finoy. As we marched to the palace, we were buffeted by the cheers of the citizenry. This gave me newfound respect for Mazel—when he took back Fort Werisa, he'd weathered the brunt of the attention. It took everything I had to keep my composure amid the commotion.

Fortunately for me, the main characters of the day, so to speak, were Duke Gründing and the knight brigade, which meant that I was just playing the part of an extra. Getting put on the spot like this really made me appreciate how much better I had it as a security worker. Every so often, I felt like someone in the crowd pointed at me, but it was probably just my imagination.

I scanned the surroundings, just to make sure that nothing was amiss. The soldiers in charge of security and managing the traffic at the ceremony seemed a bit *too* heavily armed, but the residents didn't seem to care for the most part. The operation was already well underway, it seemed.

We marched all the way into the palace courtyard, where the knights and soldiers lined up in parade before His Majesty. The formal victory ceremony would take place at a later date. For now, the king simply made a statement of this thanks. With that, the aristocrats had permission to disperse their knights, and all could rest their weary bodies.

Not that this mattered, but I had to marvel at important people and their rambling speeches. Not only did this seem to be a cultural universal, it cropped up in other worlds too. Sure, our successful defense of Finoy was no mean feat, but it got a bit tiring listening to His Majesty drone on and on.

Oh well. I could put the long speech down to the fact that the Royal Guard and the Order of the White Dragon (aka the inner palace guards) were fully decked out on parade. On the other hand, the crown prince and some of the ministers, including my father, were conspicuously absent.

As the troops cleared the parade grounds, it became clear to me which groups had been briefed, however vaguely, on the situation on the capital, and which of them had not. The knights under Dukes Gründing and Seyfert stuck to their groups as they left, as protocol dictated, and so did those under Marquesses Norpoth and Schramm. The mage corps did likewise. It looked like they were prepared for fighting to break out in the streets.

Some of the noble house contingents likewise made their exit in small squads. House Zehrfeld fell into that category. I had a number of knights accompany me directly to the family estate, while sending some others on a detour to approach the mansion from behind. I couldn't guard an entire mansion by myself, after all—those places were massive. But it had to be done, considering that the servants were staying the night there.

The celebration had begun to wind down as well, though traces of festivities could still be found here and there. Not long after, the soldiers returned to their posts, still heavily armed. At

this stage, I could only pray that nothing was amiss at the mansion.

I should mention that although Zehrfeld was a house of civil officials, the estate was nonetheless outfitted with robust defenses. The window shutters on the first floor were all made of metal. Meanwhile, the second floor had panels that could be removed to reveal arrow slits, allowing the estate's defenders to launch counterattacks from the safety of cover.

This was pretty easy to achieve on a spacious property set on sprawling grounds. Here in the capital, however, where land was limited, the conventional wisdom was to keep the walls low enough that archers still had a clear shot at attackers at ground level. Unfortunately, this sometimes meant that the walls ended up too short to properly deter intruders, who could easily scale them to infiltrate an aristocrat's mansion. It was a tricky thing to balance.

On the flip side, I heard that making the walls *too* tall would raise questions about what exactly you were doing inside, among other issues. My house had never been subjected to such suspicions. Although glass windows were expensive, they were a luxury that aristocratic mansions could afford.

Of course, the buildings weren't fortified to the extent that their owners could pose a threat to the crown. Ostensibly, they were for sheltering the royals in an emergency like a coup d'état. The battle readiness of the structure was more a signal of our house's loyalty than practical security, although it does bear mentioning that plenty of rotten nobles throughout history have used their mansions as personal fortresses.

That said, barring extreme circumstances, hardly anyone actually used the security measures. If something were to happen now, the facilities would finally serve their purpose.

Knowing the circumstances, I just couldn't bring myself to relax, even though a jittery mind would only cause more problems. As I struggled to get my thoughts in order, I drew up to the gates of the Zehrfeld estate for the first time in a very long while.

I went into the mansion—and that was where my thoughts stopped.

“Welcome home, Master Werner.”
So, uh…why was Lily here?

Chapter 1:
Drama at the Capital
~Elimination and Negotiation~

“UM...IS SOMETHING THE MATTER?” ASKED LILY.

She was probably unsettled by my utter lack of a response, but I could hardly tell her the *matter* that had me stock-still and speechless was her very presence. That would definitely hurt her feelings.

Well, that and the fact that she looked way too good in that maid outfit. That was also making it difficult for me to respond.

“Oh, er, nothing in particular, but why are you here?”

“Ah yes, the count graciously allowed me to work here,” she responded with a smile.

What the hell’s my dad thinking? I retorted in exasperation, albeit within the confines of my own head.

Hiring for a noble house’s staff was quite a hassle, in truth. Would-be workers needed to be sponsored by either a person or an establishment, who would shoulder the consequences if they were involved in any misdeeds. Which wasn’t to say commoners never made the cut. Nobles were obliged to ensure people contributed to society through proper work, after all. The dark side to this was, of course, that the nobles also considered manual labor something only the lowborn ought to do.

To work at a minister’s estate required a certain degree of reputability. To be perfectly frank, what a petty thief could carry off would hardly scratch the coffers of even a mid-rank house. The real damage would come from the scandal of hiring a criminal.

Ministers had to deal with an absurd volume of paperwork on a regular basis, so it only made sense to recruit the daughters of current staff or hire young ladies from other noble houses. In the latter case, hiring such well-bred young ladies solved the problem of personal repute right off the bat.

To be fair, maids came with all sorts of pedigrees. Hiring a lowborn girl to handle cleaning and odd jobs would hardly cause a stir. However, Lily’s clothes were top-quality stuff, you know? Sure,

they looked great on her, but would people really be fine with her playing the part of a blue-blooded maid?

Also, I had no idea whether it was because this was a game world or anything, but the outfit was a mishmash of styles from Earth's Middle Ages, early modern period, and even the present day. Based on the ensemble, I could assume she was serving as a parlormaid, which meant waiting on guests and serving their meals.

Although that idea of maids is quite prevalent these days, they only existed in my old world from roughly the nineteenth century onward. In the Middle Ages, it would have been more common to have a male servant greeting visitors at the door and waiting on them during meals. In fact, I heard that in the early nineteenth century, poorer households made women do the job because they couldn't afford to hire men. Using women was a dead giveaway of your less-than-fortuitous circumstances.

Part of the reason was the misogyny of the Middle Ages. Apparently, female servants only earned between fifty to seventy percent of what their male counterparts did. The exceptions were jobs that involved raising the next generation, like wet-nursing or tutoring, but those were long-term positions, so they didn't quite count where servants were concerned.

In this world, however, parlormaids were already commonplace. There were female knights and adventurers, and women were even tutors at the academy. You could very well say that women had greater social mobility in this world compared to Earth's medieval times.

Another big difference from my old world was the existence of the royal academy. If you got good enough grades in the butler course, which specialized in training people to serve as retainers, then even a commoner would attain better etiquette than a lazy student from a noble background. Being skilled at the art of conversation also opened a lot of doors for you. Frankly, a commoner could do a better job than a nobleman who didn't take their training seriously.

Good grades in the butler course could earn you a job with a major noble house, or even the palace. The valedictorian could very well become the personal attendant of a royal family

member close to them in age. This was one of the ways a commoner could rise through the ranks.

Simply being admitted to the academy was a feather in your cap, so anyone who managed to graduate could probably count on a solid career. Maybe the academy existed to fill the needs of this world's society.

"Allow me to take your cloak," Lily said.

"Oh, thanks." I took off my ceremonial cloak and handed it to her.

Tillura watched all of this from the side. I suspected that she was the one showing Lily the ropes.

Going back to the topic of maid clothing, the iconic maid outfit wasn't prevalent until the end of the Middle Ages. It bears repeating that clothing—fabric in general, really—was quite costly back then. So if people did work that was likely to wear their clothes out, they'd wear old garments rather than new ones. Johannes Vermeer's *The Milkmaid*, though painted in the modern era, is a fairly accurate depiction of a medieval woman's work clothes.

In less wealthy noble houses, family members would typically give their hand-me-downs to their maids. This sometimes made it difficult to tell who was the servant and who was the master—a potential plot point in stories. For instance, a young male guest might fall in love at first sight with the young lady of the house, only to later learn she was a maid in the lady's hand-me-downs.

Servants were supposed to wear certain clothes specifically when visitors were around. So when the guests in such stories showed up unannounced, it would cause quite a stir for everyone involved. If those guests happened to see what the servants usually wore, it could expose the household's financial well-being. Basically it was a matter of saving face.

But in this world, for some reason, the servants of noble houses dressed themselves freely in fine clothes, like those iconic maid outfits. It was probably fine as long as you didn't dwell on the costs. Far as I could tell, the practice came into fashion several generations earlier, as part of a previous queen's efforts to improve the clothing and accessories industries. She had a vested

interest, of course, but I guess that's only natural for someone of her status.

Most tailors made clothes to suit the standards of the upper class. For better or worse, it meant that my own clothes were high-quality stuff. I felt like I'd get divine retribution if I complained about them, even.

But this also meant that a maid's formal outfit was so gorgeous and extravagant that it was pretty much a direct reflection of a Japanese person's idea of a video game Europe. Thinking about it too much only made my head hurt, so I decided to write this off as just another of this world's many quirks.

Having said all that, a parlormaid in the employ of a noble house in this world had position comparable to that of a receptionist for a major company in my old world. Their appearance was important because they interacted with visitors, and since they dealt directly with guests at parties and banquets, so were their polished manners. Put together, this gave them a certain degree of influence in their own right. Hmm...

***

To cut a long story short, there was a lot I wanted to say, but none of it was anything that Lily needed to hear. Besides, I could hardly second-guess her when she was doing her work so earnestly. I swallowed my comments and watched her quietly out of the corner of my eye as she put my cloak on a hanger and started brushing it carefully.

Meanwhile, I called out to Lily's teacher, Tillura. "I'll remove my armor later. Where's Norbert?"

"He is working in his room at the moment."

"All right. Call him to my study."

"Yes, Master."

Any questions I had for my father, I had for his butler as well. And between the two of them, I figured I was better off asking the butler. The study was on loan to me, which made it as good a place as any to attend to business. When I walked inside, I found Frenssen bowing his head to me...which was all well and good, but what the hell was going on?

“I am delighted to observe your safe return.”

“Thanks. So, uh, what’s this?” I asked, pointing toward the desk, upon which had risen a tower of documents. And, uh, wow, how was it not falling over? Had to hand it to whoever balanced all of them.

“This stack contains profiles of potential marriage candidates, each with an accompanying portrait. That stack, meanwhile, contains proposals and requests from the Merchants’ Guild and the guard corps. And this one is for reports and samples for prototype items.”

“I’d love to make a sarcastic quip about the potential marriage stuff, but what are those proposals and requests?”

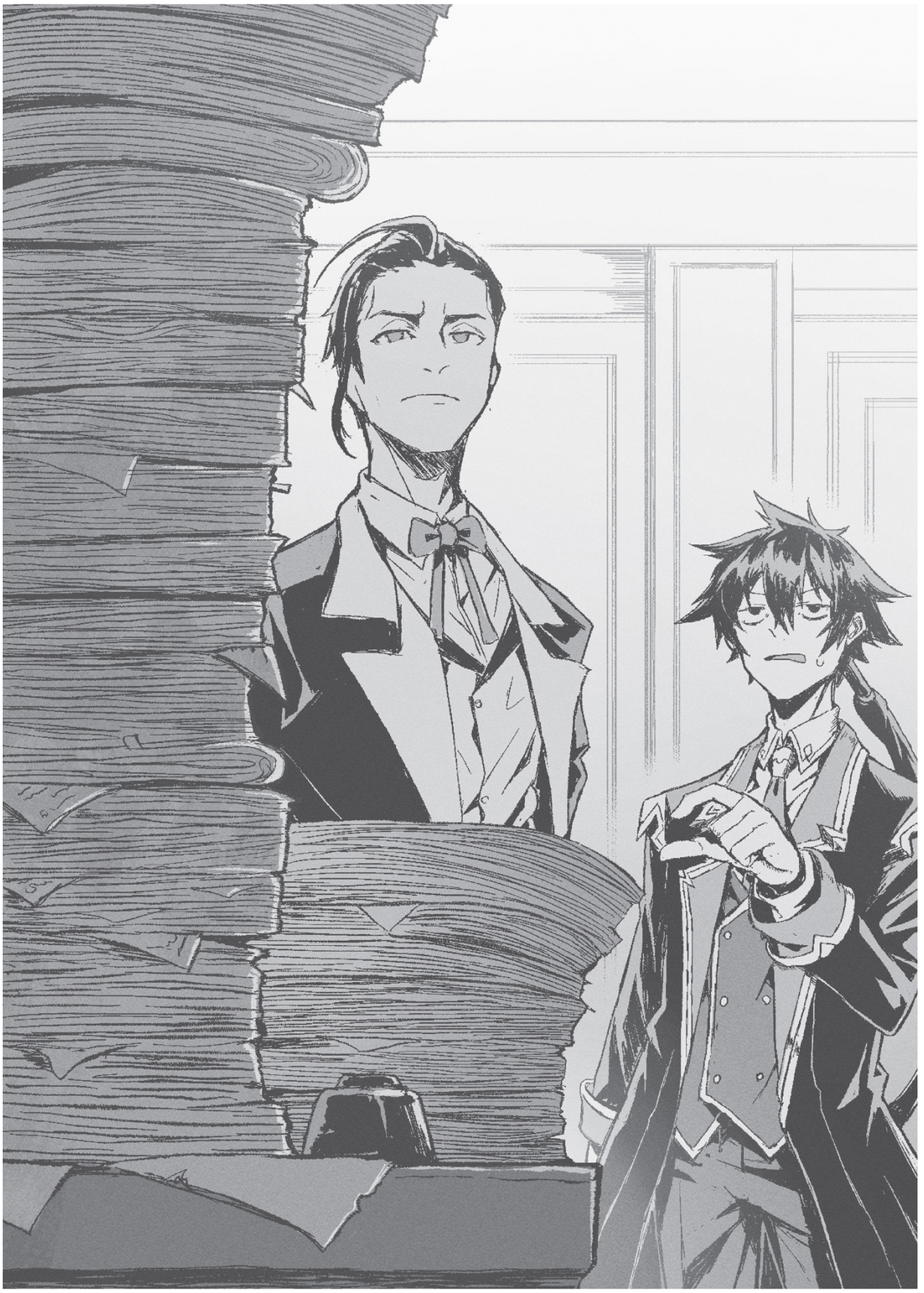
“The proposals are from people involved with the Merchants’ Guild. They seek your expert opinion on weapon types, Master Werner.”

“I’m not interested in sticking my nose any further into the business side of things.”

Besides, everything I knew about equipment came from the game. Being a nobleman, I did need a rudimentary understanding of the economy, but I wasn’t such an expert that I could actually *do* commerce myself, darn it.

Even if I did get involved in trade, it probably wouldn’t be till much further in the future. For now, at least, I didn’t have the time. Maybe I would think about it after the Demon Lord was dead and buried.

“The request forms concern the procedures you wrote for guarding the aqueduct. They would like to create similar manuals for other workplaces.”



“Why are they asking me?!”

Er, not that there was any point taking my exasperation out on Frenssen. More to the point, why didn’t they make those guides themselves? The requisite information would be different depending on the location. Things in this muscle-brain world really were at the point where people passed known technical know-how by just saying, “Look and learn.” Maybe they needed a manual to help them write a manual.

“There are also some people eager to make your acquaintance.”

“What great timing.” I couldn’t help but respond in monotone.

Well, I couldn’t say that I was anywhere close to well connected. As the head of House Zehrfeld, my father still did the lion’s share of networking. Besides, I was still a student. Anyone with their sights set on me was probably harboring ulterior motives, and I didn’t have time to spare for them. Most of these people probably saw me as a stepping stone on their path toward the crown prince.

I couldn’t stop my sigh. How had things come to this? I wasn’t at the point of clutching my head in my hands, but I did my fair share of mental grumbling.

My thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door and Norbert’s voice from outside. I wasted no time letting him in. For the moment, I turned my thoughts away from the mountain of papers. There was much I’d have to investigate, but I had to focus my attention on the matter at hand.

“I am glad to see you in good health, Master Werner.”

“Thanks. So, has my father told you about what’s going to happen?”

“I am familiar with the broad strokes.”

“Good, that makes things quicker. Bar anyone in the mansion from leaving today. Steps have already been taken to secure the servants’ families.”

“I see. The count has already taken measures as well. Everyone in the capital with ties to House Zehrfeld has been mobilized, including the mercenaries we do business with.”

My father was as shrewd and thorough as ever in that department. In a game or novel, the knights and soldiers only existed to make the protagonist look better, but at their core, they were experts at both combat and public order. I saw no problem leaving matters in their hands. That said, it was no excuse for being lax about security on my end.

As I eyed the mountain of papers, grumbling silently, I asked for a chair to be brought to the lobby. Just in case there was an emergency, I would keep vigil in the lobby until things settled down.

“What’s happening with the Harting family?” I asked, while I was at it.

“Under the count’s orders, they will live and work in this mansion.”

Okay, I would definitely grill my father about this later.

***

Around the time Werner was steeling his resolve, a certain group of mercenaries gathered secretly at the Azure Hour Inn. Situated in a corner of the capital, this establishment was their usual haunt. Ostensibly, they belonged to the capital’s guard corps, but in truth, they were under the command of the valorous Baron Kretschmer.

Although Baron Kretschmer was a nobleman, he was happiest on the battlefield. On account of his bravery, charisma, and the respect his subordinates had for him, Duke Seyfert had judged him worthy to serve as a commander during the refugee mission. Unfortunately, because the duke was in charge of the supply squad at Finoy, he’d left the baron to defend the capital in his absence. To say the baron was itching for a fight would be an understatement.

During this time, while Baron Kretschmer was twiddling his thumbs, the crown prince approached him with secret orders. Demons were hiding in the capital and, though his forces would act as a reserve, the baron was tasked with apprehending these fiends. As far as he was concerned, this was a prime opportunity to sate his bloodlust.

“How are the residents in these parts?” he asked the messenger sent by the guards.

“Sir. Everyone has left their houses to watch the parade. The eighth guard station reports that all is calm under their watch.”

“Good to hear.”

The baron peered at the Azure Hour Inn’s back entrance from the shadow of the building. Given that it habitually played host to mercenaries, its architectural style was slightly different from the residential buildings, and it inevitably had a different atmosphere as well. But neither was it like a noble’s mansion. If anything, its façade most closely resembled that of a traders’ hub.

“How was the investigation?”

“The inn’s owner hasn’t shown himself in a while. The merchant who handles the movement of foodstuffs in and out of the establishment has also been acting suspicious.”

“How many are inside?”

“About thirteen of them.” Notably, the messenger did not specify *people*. “Around the same numbers as in the Eagle Nest Inn in the third district and the Drinking Wind Tavern in the fifth district.”

“All right. I take it that I can’t let this scum slip away.”

“Yes. You need not take them alive.”

A ferocious smile lit the baron’s face. Still, he understood that it was only the royal capital guards who would tread directly into the inn. For now, he quelled his bloodlust and responded with a dignified nod. “Very well. I wish you good tidings in battle.”

“By your leave, then, sir.”

After the baron saw the messenger off, he signaled to his subordinates and positioned them a slight distance away from the back gates. From there, they could cut off the enemy’s escape on the off chance they tried to slip out.

Before long, shouts rose up from the direction of the front gate, swiftly followed by sounds of fighting from inside the building, and a slew of other noises.

People tend to assume that the average soldier basically used the same set of gear all the time. In truth, they regularly

switched equipment to suit their assigned duties. Gate guards generally carried weapons with long reach so that they could strike at the mounts of miscreants on horseback. Meanwhile, those patrolling the streets often had shorter-than-usual swords to avoid injuring passersby on the road. These swords were also well suited to fighting indoors. Their fighting style changed, too, focusing on thrusting maneuvers rather than cutting ones. Buildings, especially criminal hideouts, didn't have much room to swing a sword, after all.

Guards were more trained to fight in cramped, urban buildings, so they typically handled incursions such as this. In spite of his better judgment, the baron could only hope the guards wouldn't be so thorough that none of the villains got out.

Either his prayer was answered, or the enemy was just one step ahead. After a short while, the wooden shutter over the window on the second floor snapped. (Truthfully, it was more of a thin plank than a shutter). Then several human-looking figures jumped out onto the road. The baron recognized from their silhouettes that they were Werewolves and Weretigers.

"Shoot!" he shouted.

Several dozen arrows flew at the beasts. More than a few found their mark. Some monsters collapsed on the spot, although others deflected the arrows with their claws and attempted to flee. The baron smiled savagely; he respected a foe deft enough to bat an arrow away with no more than their arms.

"Don't let them get away! Keep shooting!"

The baron's weapon for today was a glaive, a polearm with a large blade affixed to the end, similar to a Japanese naginata. Although it was formidable in an open battlefield, it was unfortunately not so well suited for an indoor skirmish. But the baron had accounted for that in laying his trap outdoors. And knowing that there was no need to take captives, he saw no reason to hold back. With one single motion, the baron closed the distance between himself and a Werewolf. Then, without even a second's hesitation, he swung his blade deep into his foe.

His soldiers and subordinates were also brave, well-trained fighters with plenty of real combat experience. As their leader advanced, they followed suit, bringing the fight to their foes. A fierce battle ensued.

The fighting didn’t last long and was nowhere near as fierce or frantic as it had been at Finoy. After a brief and violent clash, all of the monsters—including the ones in the building—were reduced to silent husks.

“How goes the fight out front?” asked the baron.

“The royal family supplied them with Monster Repel for use in the field.”

“Good to hear.”

Things would have been easier if their backdoor squad had been given some of it as well. Still, though it hadn’t been an ideal scenario, part of him was glad for the chance to get his hands dirty. His subordinates gazed at his blood-soaked face, looking somewhat uncomfortable.

Seeing their expressions, the baron decided to change the subject. “There doesn’t seem to be time to send backup to the other locations.”

One of his subordinates nodded in response. “I don’t suppose there will be any problems unless they managed to get away.”

The baron turned his gaze to the palace.

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At almost the precise same time, a violent spectacle broke out at the Drinking Wind Tavern.

It was Baron Dohnányi who advanced on this location with the guards in tow. Although he was a member of the martial faction, he’d gotten himself injured in his hasty advance during the Demon Stampede. He was able to escape, though at the cost of his subordinates’ lives. After that, he took a short reprieve from military duties to recover his health and train new retainers.

A large scar marked the baron’s face—a memento from the Demon Stampede. Although a high-end potion or magic spell could have easily erased all traces of the injury, he chose not to remove his scar. The man himself claimed that he allocated the healing funds to training new retainers, although one certainly

couldn’t deny that he was the kind of person who would flaunt it like one would a trophy.

Despite his personality, he remained on standby at the capital throughout the entire battle at Finoy. When the emergency orders to deploy were issued, he was immediately assigned to a different mission, and so he had never appeared on the battlefield.

It had been Prince Hubertus’s idea to hold some of the martial nobles in reserve as a contingency measure. He’d chosen those from lesser houses, who displayed both reason and valor, to remain in the capital—which was bad news for the Demon army.

“Charge!”

Under regular circumstances, the baron should have left the job to the guards, but he took command of the elite troops and stormed the building himself. The Drinking Wind was a regular haunt for mercenaries and adventurers, but it was built no differently from an ordinary inn. The Demons and monsters within would have no trouble breaking the windows or fences to evade their pursuers. Anticipating this, the guards had deployed in force around the building, surrounding it. The baron would play the role of a hunting dog, chasing the villains out of their burrow and into the guards’ trap.

The baron did not even bother to hide his eagerness for battle, announcing that he would charge in himself while the captain of the guards remained on standby outside. Multiple witnesses, including members of the guard, spotted the captain standing in the building’s shadow, clutching his head in his hands.

As he stormed into the inn, the baron scattered the Monster Repel in a wide arc with his left hand, while brandishing his sword in his right. A man who looked like a mercenary stood up, trying to quell his surprise and discomfort. Quick as thought, the baron cut off his arm.

The man did not scream. Instead, he tried to punch back with his other arm. Realizing that it was no human arm, the baron ducked to avoid the blow rather than try to block it. Then, without missing a beat, he angled his sword at his foe’s exposed stomach and ran him through.

“It’s not humans you’re fighting,” he called to his soldiers. “Hold nothing back!”

The soldiers who'd charged in with him slashed at the mysterious, sellsword-seeming men as they were eating and drinking. One soldier's sword sheared off a monster's leg. Another blade caved in a head. People with short spears formed a second rank to support the soldiers fighting with swords, compounding their enemies' pain and preventing them from singling out any targets.

The monsters didn't take the assault lying down. With their true identities revealed, they fought back with bestial arms. One monster bit into a soldier's windpipe and gorged itself on their flesh.

One to one, the monsters were stronger than the soldiers. But the ambush had put them at a stark disadvantage. Moreover, they were baffled that their identities had been exposed in the first place. With their minds awhirl, there was a notable lack of discipline in the way they fought.

Only after multiple members of their ranks had been felled did the monsters begin to flee. Unfortunately for them, as they turned to run, their foes cut mercilessly into their exposed backs. Forced to turn back around, only slaughter awaited them. The monsters' counterattacks did not slow the soldiers' momentum—the only thing that slowed their approaching death was the pile of their comrades' corpses.

When fighting in a tight space, you always had to keep an eye on your footing. Failing to do so would invite death. Although it was no laughing matter, there was a story about a soldier pursuing his enemy down the streets, only to trip on the pavement and perish. Thus, the baron and his soldiers could not be blamed for slowing down their pace.

Some of the surviving monsters managed to break down the walls of the building and escape, but the guards waiting outside soon mowed them down. Knowing that the monsters were superior in a one-on-one fight, the captain of the guards prioritized projectiles and polearms, avoiding close-quarters combat.

Nevertheless, the incident did not end without injury. Screams and angry shouts rang out across the streets. In the end, taking into account the soldiers who stormed the building, more than ten people lost their lives.

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Count Mühe had been given command over the troops at the capital's outskirts. At Hildea Plains, he had commanded the left flank's second unit under Marquess Schramm's orders. Although he wasn't a looker by any stretch of the imagination, he was a reliable leader with sound judgment. He was as skilled at commanding troops as he was at maneuvering politics. Marquess Schramm regarded him as a valuable ally.

It was this solid track record that earned Count Mühe the command of a mobile unit outside the capital walls. While all eyes were on the knight brigade during their parade into the capital, the count had taken his own retinue outside through another gate. They would attack the enemy or assist allies as the situation demanded.

Although the count was renowned for both his civic and military acumen, he did have one peculiar weakness: for whatever reason, animals had a strong aversion to him. There were so few horses willing to bear him that he had to avoid any assignments that relied on mobility and maneuvering. Thus, he was typically deployed in defensive battles or situations that required walking a political tightrope. As far as the world at large was concerned, he was practically a nobody. The man himself claimed it wasn't his fault that he was terrible with horses, although one couldn't deny that there was an element of poor luck at play.

As the count stood on a chariot drawn by two horses, a voice called out to him. "My lord!"

"So they've come." The count nodded as he sighted two figures hurrying out of the capital. At first glance, they appeared to be guards because of their uniforms, but the way they ran and their remarkable speed betrayed the fact that they were distinctly inhuman.

"Surround them!"

The count's role was to prevent anyone from fleeing the capital. Although it was difficult for him to determine whether two foes counted as a minor threat or a major one, he decided to be

thorough about the task. His troops attacked their targets in unison, clad though they were in guards' armor.

The monsters revealed themselves to be Werewolves and fought back. Having avoided all fighting within the capital, the monsters were still in peak condition. But the numbers were not on the monsters' side, and under Mühe's guidance, the troops' coordinated assault ensured they suffered no losses as they subdued their foes.

"It seems they were carrying gatekeeper certifications," said a squire from the count's personal retinue.

"So it was impossible to capture them alive, hm?" said Count Mühe. "Ah well, you can't win them all."

"Indeed. The priority was to cut off any escape, after all."

"Still, I would have liked to handle a few more of them," Count Mühe muttered as he watched the squire extract magic stones from the monsters' corpses.

For a moment, he thought he heard a strange sound. His gaze flickered to the palace. In the end, however, the count's eyes detected nothing. He decided to return to his mission of patrolling the capital's outskirts until a messenger from the palace arrived.

In the meantime, the count's troops busied themselves screening travelers and merchants for monsters hidden among them. Using Monster Repel at the gates would have simply kept their quarry from moving in or out altogether, so they had no choice but to do the inspections themselves. It was tedious and unglamorous, but their efforts were rewarded—and each time a monster tried to slip their net, they chased it down without fail.

***

"Baron Kupfernagel and the guards have the Eagle Nest Inn under control. Apparently, the Twins of the Wasteland mercenary group turned into monsters. There were seven deaths on our side."

"Half of the knight brigade's first order went for Count Eggert's estate. The monsters disguised as the count's knights have been subdued."

“A third of the knight brigade’s second order have commandeered Baron Stahl’s estate. Eight perished, but they succeeded in apprehending and killing the monster disguised as the baron.”

Messengers hastened in and out of the large meeting room inside the palace. A map was spread across a massive conference table, with wooden pawns marking the locations of noteworthy occurrences. The crown prince and the ministers gazed down at the map, exchanging opinions and issuing orders. Although they were tense, they weren’t terribly grim. Seizing the initiative had given their side a firm upper hand.

After ordering several units to remain on standby, Prince Hubertus turned to Count Zehrfeld, who was seated near the king, and smiled. “Your son is quite the talented individual.”

“I am honored to hear that.”

Unlike Werner, Ingo had served in the court for a long time, and he had learned to keep his emotions veiled. A closer look, though, would show that he was attempting to restrain an embarrassed smile.

“You can say that again,” Marquess Schündler, the Minister of Military Affairs, said from across the table. “I’d heard he was an industrious lad, but I never imagined the extent of it.”

In fact, when Schündler considered what might have happened if Werner had not supplied the knights with high-quality equipment, a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. The Wein soldiers had suffered few casualties in the purge for the same reason the knight brigade had sustained minimal losses at Finoy: the equipment had spelled the difference. In Schündler’s opinion, Werner’s foresight following the Demon Stampede was well worthy of praise.

“It was also commendable of him to notice the enemy’s presence at Finoy, as well as their infiltration of the capital,” remarked Duke Gründing, who personally credited Werner for their successful defense of the temple.

“Too much praise will get to his head, so I ask that this does not reach his ears,” Ingo replied.

This time, the tension in his smile was plain to see. He could sense that the duke and marquess were trying to drag Werner

into their own factions. Although allegiances were split broadly along the lines of the military and bureaucrat factions, there were plenty of smaller cliques within those two groups.

Duke Seyfert shrugged lightly. “In any case, I’m curious to know how your son learned of those magic items.”

“I myself have no inkling. I can only assume he studied his books as assiduously as he practiced the spear.”

“He is a promising one,” the king interjected cheerfully.

Ingo inclined his head slightly.

If not for the Monster Repel Werner used at Finoy to isolate the Demon Commander, it would have been that much harder to determine who among the knights and nobility were enemies in disguise. After Duke Gründing recounted the particulars of what happened at Finoy, the crown had ordered as many trusted insiders as possible to procure large quantities of Monster Repel in utmost haste.

It was a pity that they hadn’t been able to obtain the full amount they needed. If they didn’t hit all the infiltration points in their countermeasures, any enemies they hadn’t detected could slip through their investigation. Nevertheless, after securing a certain amount of repel, the kingdom’s leadership came to a decision: they would eliminate as many enemies as was feasible at the moment. The more time they took, the greater the danger.

Under the pretext of holding a ceremony for the army’s triumphant return, the knights and soldiers were able to enter the city fully armed without drawing suspicion. They might fail to kill some of the imposters, but they could deal with each one as they emerged. For the moment, the royal family and the ministers agreed that they would purge what they could.

They scattered Monster Repel at various locations in the palace, flushing out anyone who had a negative reaction, and then monitored anyone in close contact with people who avoided the repel. While investigating suspects who went in and out of the palace, they gathered testimonies from people around them and sorted them into two categories: those who had already taken suspicious actions, and those who hadn’t.

The kingdom assembled its clandestine investigators, the Royal Guard, and the Order of the White Dragon’s scouts. Not a

word was breathed to anyone on the outside, and so they were able to launch a surprise attack on the Demon army. Everyone involved quite literally worked without a wink of sleep as they waited for the knight brigade to return from Finoy.

"That teleporting magic item is a real issue," said Audenrieth, the Minister of Domestic Affairs, as if he had just suddenly remembered the topic. "Who would have thought that something like that could exist?"

"If any are excavated in the future, we must prevent them from falling into the hands of other nations," Chancellor Falkenstein said with a frown.

"If any unexcavated ruins yet remain, that is."

The existence of the Skywalk Boots sent tremors of shock through the military. The reason the boots were not sold in the Wein Kingdom was because merchants from neighboring countries had bought up the pairs that were excavated within those territories. Other countries had plenty of ruins from the ancient kingdom and had come to learn of the Skywalk Boots through some means or other. It was probably no big leap of logic to assume that they were treated as national secrets in their respective countries.

The biggest concern was that no new ruins from the ancient kingdom had been unearthed in the Wein Kingdom over the past several years. They could only bitterly regret the fact that the kingdom's hidden treasures had been funneled elsewhere in secret.

Nevertheless, they had been able to use Skywalk Boots on this occasion to acquire Monster Repel. Frenssen, who was still at the capital, reported to Ingo that Oliver Goecke might have kept hold of some. The mercenary had worked with Feli to guard the merchant corps when they procured the first batch.

The end result cut deep into the national coffers, but it certainly hadn't been a waste of money. By using the Skywalk Boots in Goecke's possession, they were able to secure more boots and buy the Monster Repel. As for why Goecke bought the Skywalk Boots, he'd simply told the palace messenger: "I figured that there was probably something up with them since that viscount went so far out of his way to buy them."

“I would suspect that the diplomats stationed in our country have some in their possession,” said Rademacher, the Minister of Works.

“I thought that they responded rather quickly to the Finoy incident,” Schündler remarked. “That would explain it. I’m glad that we managed to resolve the matter at Finoy within a short time frame.”

Upon hearing these remarks, the prince exchanged a look with Equord, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Both men grimaced. It certainly hadn’t been easy for them to sidestep negotiations with other countries while the battle raged. That the soldiers and diplomats always thought they had it worse than the other side perhaps came down to a difference in perspective.

“It shall be necessary to conduct another survey of the ruins in the kingdom, but that is a matter for the future,” said the prince as he glanced furtively at Duke Seyfert.

“I would certainly like Lord Werner to participate in that,” answered Rademacher. As the Minister of Works, managing the ruins was part of his purview, and he remembered Werner well from his involvement with the aqueducts. It wasn’t just the planning that impressed him, but also the patrol manual Werner made for the construction site. Rademacher wasn’t so daft as to not notice how a manual for the construction itself would ease the difficulty of managing the laborers and transporting the materials.

Audenrieth, the Minister of Domestic Affairs, was also impressed by Werner’s proposal of government bonds and the Frankpledge system as a means of maintaining order and surveillance among the refugees. The idea of making the citizens keep tabs on each other was highly unconventional in this world, but as a politician he acknowledged that it would be an effective stopgap until people became familiar with each other.

If Werner had been present for this conversation, he might have screamed, *“This is a huge exaggeration!”* Both examples were simply stock knowledge he’d built up in his previous life. It wouldn’t have occurred to him that simply his ability to draft practical proposals from half-remembered concepts was reason enough for the ministers and their subordinates to regard him as immensely talented.

Werner’s reputation first began to rise with his proposal for acquiring new equipment. Since he’d submitted it to the prince in writing, every member of the kingdom’s leadership had the opportunity to see it. And it was especially impressive that he had gone out of his way to follow the formal procedure. Even if he was the heir to an aristocratic house, a student wouldn’t normally submit a written proposal.

To Werner, putting things in writing was merely common sense, but it nonetheless set him apart from his peers. And because his proposals actually produced positive results, the people around him naturally began to take note. Since then, people had kept an eye out for any plans he put into action, and with each one, his reputation only grew.

However, because his gaze was fixed on the future, these short-term gains were lost on Werner. The discrepancy could perhaps be explained by the fact that he approached things with the mindset of an office worker.

Just as someone was about to chip in with another comment, a slight yet distinct tremor ran through the conference room. Everyone went quiet. A moment later, a knight came rushing into the room.

“Report!” he shouted. “A fight has broken out at the mage corps’ laboratory! It is no mere Demon!”

“Calm yourself,” the prince said. He kept his tone level, even as his gaze was drawn to Count Ingo and Duke Gründing discussing some other matter. “We anticipated that a battle would occur there. Give the order to Vilsmaier and deploy the knight brigade and mage corps.”

“Yes, sir.”

The prince had prepared multiple layers of defense to minimize fatalities in the capital. Already, his mind was racing to contemplate the political problems that would crop up in the wake of the purge.

The fact that he did not foresee the unexpected from his own side was proof that he was only human.

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It was late in the night of the monster purge, after the return ceremony, that my father returned to the Zehrfeld estate. By the time I saw him, I'd sensed a number of faint, far-off rumblings, but having received no incident reports and with no disturbances in the mansion, I remained fairly calm.

I heard later that those rumblings came from a large-scale affair involving the knight brigade, the guards, and some of the private armies. Thankfully, casualties among the civilians were kept to a bare minimum. You really had to hand it to the capital's guards—they were professionals through and through.

I suspected that the kerfuffle would continue for a while yet. There was still the aftermath to deal with, and our side had to make sure that there weren't any Demons still lurking about. But that was for the authorities and specialists to handle. I couldn't do everything, nor was there any need for it.

Anyway, when my father came home, there was a lot I needed to talk to him about. Seriously, I had a whole mountain of things to report.

"So you're home, Werner?"

"I'm glad to see you safe, Father."

My father grunted as he gave Lily his coat. "Regarding today's matter, things appear to be under control."

"I see."

Max entered close on my father's heels. I gave him a small nod. Expecting that Father would need some time to change into his indoor clothes, I watched him go before turning to Max.

"You must have been hard pressed at the palace today."

"There was some trouble to deal with, though I can't go into the details of it," Max answered with a light shrug. It looked like the knight captains were under a gag order. I wondered if it was fine to ask my father about it all later.

"I see. Is everything under control in town?"

"More or less, I would say."

"Good. Then tell Orgen and the others that they can relax their watch. If they notice something, however, they are to contact me within three days. I'm authorizing you to submit documents."

"Yessir."

I rattled off a list of miscellaneous orders, though I knew he'd put half of them on the backburner. In a world without electricity, there was only so much you could do in the middle of the night. Even just walking the streets at night carried significantly more risks than it did in my old world. From this world's perspective, Japan's public safety was an anomaly. Fortunately, with the situation under control, there would be no need for anyone to take immediate action unless some emergency arose.

"Max, once you've taken care of the most pressing stuff, go get some rest. Good job today."

"Yes, my lord. Thank you very much."

I left all the finer details to Max. It did mean that he wouldn't be getting rest for a while, but things definitely got done quicker when they were left to someone who was used to doing the legwork themself. It was a better option than piling a bunch of ridiculous orders onto someone with neither skills nor experience. Besides, there were a lot of things I needed to talk about with my father.

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I briefly returned to my room and called a male servant to help me out of my armor. At the same time, I had Frenssen explain what had happened with the Harting family. As I sort of expected, they weren't happy about mooching off a noble household and insisted they help out in some way. I understood how they felt.

"At first, they did manual labor in the back garden, but after the count heard of their background from the royal family, he assigned them each separate jobs."

"That makes sense."

Of course he wouldn't just immediately turn Lily into a parlormaid. I could see it happening later due to circumstances.

Aristocratic mansions in this world had gardens that were broadly split into four quadrants, much like their counterparts in my old world, though the pattern was truer of early modernity than the Middle Ages.

The first part was the courtyard, which you saw as soon as you went in through the front gate. It was positioned right in front of the mansion proper, and it was where visitors parked their carriages. The average Japanese person might associate the word “garden” with flower beds, but generally, courtyards were filled with trees and shrubs instead. In my old world, tree worship still lingered in the form of the Christmas tree. This originated from the ancient Greek custom of holding gatherings underneath a large tree.

Generally, the flower garden was a place the aristocrats or their guests could stroll through at their leisure. Noble families of higher-than-average standing commonly hired a gardener to manage it. Flower gardens had a strong association with roses. But because roses didn’t bloom properly without a lot of fertilizer and attention, they served as a signifier of wealth. Aristocrats undeniably used flowers to signal their status to the world, and top gardeners commanded an even higher salary than butlers did. I guess this was because the job required a specialist who would explain to the aristocrats every so often what to do about the flowers they were growing.

The flower garden was usually adjoined by a large open space called a backyard. Here, the nobles and their knights could practice their weaponry and horse riding. Given that there was enough room to practice archery, it was far, far bigger than a Japanese person’s image of a typical garden.

I should preface this by saying that in my old world, the words “Middle Ages” referred to a time span of over nine hundred years. Also, “the west” was such a diverse region that the phrase was bound to invite misunderstandings. By no means was this the case everywhere throughout the Middle Ages, but there was a period when even medieval women honed their fighting skills in their mansion’s backyard. In fact, there were a surprising number of records of wives and noblewomen going hunting alongside men. In war, they would also participate in siege battles by shooting arrows from within the fortifications. The image of the dainty noblewoman, idle in her finery, was mostly a thing of the early modern period. The women of this muscle-brain world were more like the medieval women, which was fine, I suppose.

Even further behind the backyard were the back gates. People generally used them to usher in secret visitors. The children and younger siblings of noble houses could also use them to sneak out at night for some fun. If the front gates were for public use, then the back gates were for private use.

If the courtyard, flower garden, and backyard were spaces for the aristocrats, the rear garden was for the servants. There, they would hang up the laundry to dry, and grow herbs and vegetables to supplement the meals. This space was usually accessible from the mansion by a crude side gate. Generally speaking, aristocrats never set foot there.

Just because aristocrats had their fancy estates didn't mean that they *didn't* have kitchen gardens and the like. Maintaining the kitchen garden was also the gardener's job; they didn't just spend their days tinkering with flowers. It wasn't unusual for a baron's residence to go without a flower garden and backyard and only have a small kitchen garden and laundry area. Meanwhile, a duke's house could have a kitchen garden large enough to fit a tennis court. House Zehrfeld's wasn't too big from my reckoning. Probably. I'll admit my frame of reference for "big" was kind of vague.

The world I lived in had a class system similar to those common in the Middle Ages, which posed practical issues. The aristocrats couldn't use the same gates as the guild laborers who delivered firewood and food supplies. So the workers used their makeshift gate to enter the property and carry in all the items that the nobles wouldn't receive in person. This world was pretty much the same as my old one in that regard.

"And the head butler praised Lily," Frenssen said.

"Norbert was impressed, was he?"

To be fair, Norbert was generous with his praise, so that in itself wasn't too surprising.

"She was asked to arrange some flowers for visitors to gauge her abilities. I have been told that there was almost no room for improvement."

"Well, that certainly is something."

By "arrange some flowers," he was referring to decorating the table with flowers, which would typically be held in a vase or a

metal vessel.

There weren't any plastic greenhouses or anything, which meant that fresh flowers were expensive. It was fairly commonplace to present a visitor with flowers as a show of hospitality. Meanwhile, the host at the dinner table would engage their guest in small talk about their attire and accessories, as well as the cutlery and the menu. The flowers were just a sideshow.

It was tricky to draw attention to the food and cutlery while also ensuring that they were not intrusive. Choosing the flowers typically fell to highborn ladies-in-waiting. Their education in the arts included the symbolic language of flowers, so they knew which ones to use or to avoid for any given situation. That Lily did well enough at this task to receive praise from Norbert, the butler of a count, was certainly impressive.

Oh yeah, that reminded me of our chat about the constellations. I got the impression back then that she had good instincts where aesthetics were concerned. Having never risen above the level of "serviceable" in that department, I was honestly kind of jealous.

"So that's how Lily got picked to be a parlormaid, huh?"

"Yes, but not the only reason, apparently."

So she had even more talents? I'd have to ask my father about this the next chance I got. As if on cue, Tillura showed up to announce that the man of the hour was calling for me. It looked like he had finished changing clothes too.

As I made for my father's study, I told Frenssen to leave some space on the desk and take care of polishing my armor.

***

The first thing I heard when I entered the room was my father's voice. "Werner, first of all, let me congratulate you on a job well done."

"Thank you."

It sounded like my father had had a very long day. It must have been a veritable storm of activity for a top official. It went without saying that anyone with military duties had their hands

full, but even the Minister of Ceremonies had to be working closely with the Minister of Foreign Affairs to deal with external threats.

"Now then, first things first—you are to report to the palace tomorrow morning. There is much that His Highness the Crown Prince would discuss with you."

"Is this a private audience?"

"He would like to speak with you personally before putting it to the group."

"All right. Now, allow me to summarize what happened on my end."

"Go ahead."

My father undoubtedly knew what the crown prince wanted to talk about, but he wasn't going to divulge it to me here and now. That basically meant that it was close to a state secret, which could only be discussed within the confines of the palace. This was sounding like yet another pain in the neck.

For now, we switched topics. I told my father about what happened at Valeritz, the incident at Arlea Village, and the battle at Finoy. Even though only a month had passed, a whole slew of things happened. It didn't escape my notice that my father had a wry smile on his face throughout my entire account.

"Duke Gründing and some others have told me that they envy me such a talented heir," he said.

"I'm sure they were just being polite."

In my case, the knowledge from my previous world was something of a crutch. When it came to fighting prowess, I couldn't match up to the knight brigade, let alone Mazel. As for intelligence, there were *so* many people who were smarter than me, the crown prince first among them. All I had was my previous life, which included my memories of the game. I guess I was also good at working efficiently because of what I learned and experienced back then.



Anyway, after the way the duke had hassled me, I wasn't keen to get near him. That thought prompted a sudden realization. "Er, uh, when did you hear all of that?"

"When the messenger reported that it was your strategy that brought victory at Finoy."

"And is that when those marriage offers started coming in?"

"I would say so, yes."

Well, now I knew who to blame for *that* unnecessary development. As much as I knew that you shouldn't shoot the messenger, I was tempted to take shots at him in my mind. There was so much I had to do before the attack on the capital—I had no time to dally with young ladies at their tea parties.

"There is much I would like to do, so I'd prefer to turn down as many offers as courtesy will allow."

"I figured that there was something you wanted to accomplish when those sample items from the factory came in. What's your plan?"

"It's hard to explain verbally. I'll bring the items to the palace before long. When that happens, I'd like you to be present as the head of House Zehrfeld."

"Very well."

If this were a game, this was where I would say, "I'll bring them in tomorrow," but in the real world, you needed a third party to check any unknown object you were bringing into the castle. Such inspections kept assassins or other miscreants from bringing weapons into the palace, so I could hardly object.

Then again, the procedure itself merely involved a knight or an official giving it a look. The issue wasn't one of time so much as the fact that I hadn't yet examined the sample items myself. I had no idea if they were at a standard to present to the kingdom's bigshots.

"I should also mention that Count Fürst wishes to meet with you," I said.

"About the aforementioned issue with Count Teutenberg, I would assume."

"Indeed."

My father nodded. He had probably heard about everything from Max, including my unauthorized retreat and Lady Hermine's predicament. He said that he and Norbert would arrange a meeting at a later date, so I decided to leave the whole thing up to them.

After that, my father told me about what was going on in the capital. Because I'd rushed to follow the emergency deployment orders, my awareness of the situation in the capital had been lacking ever since.

"While you were headed to Finoy, the capital saw an influx of refugees."

"Really?"

At first, I wondered why that would happen for a second time, but then it occurred to me that the post-Demon Lord change in monster spawning habits must have caused a huge domino effect.

"Apparently, people in rural areas have been abandoning their villages out of fear for their survival."

"I can understand that for people who live on crown-owned land, but why can't those who live in fiefs go to their local lord?"

"They would have done so under ordinary circumstances, but the noble houses are out of resources because of their conflicts with the Demon army."

I pondered that for a while and said, "I see."

This was sort of like how in Japan, a catastrophic famine once spurred people to emigrate in droves to Edo. Even in a different world altogether, it was human nature to imagine that things would work out somehow if you moved to the big city. In some unfortunate cases, the local lord and his children might have all perished in battle, like in House Teutenberg's case.

It wasn't like I *couldn't* understand why people might choose the capital over their liege lord's territory. This was a muscle-brain world, after all. Part of the reason why noblemen existed was to protect the commoners from dangerous monsters. If the people heard that their lord had been killed in the Demon Stampede or the battle at Finoy, then it was only natural that their lives would be rocked with uncertainty.

A lot of people probably also assumed that the capital was safer because it had successfully fended off the Demon Stampede. If we were following the game script, then the knight brigade would have been obliterated at this point, and with it the choice of escaping to the capital. The people would have had to keep living in fear in their hometowns and villages. Now, however, the knight brigade was perfectly intact, so I could understand why the capital was perceived as safe. Perhaps this was another consequence of deviating from the game's script.

"Is the capital holding up well?" I asked.

"To maintain civil order, we've had the newcomers supervise each other under that Frankpledge system you proposed. However, they've been living outside the capital's walls."

"Considering the monster attacks and the issue of distributing food, that sounds like a problem waiting to happen."

"Indeed."

Shortly after the kingdom of Triot fell, some noble families had considered taking in refugees with a poll tax in mind. Now the tables had turned, and there were fiefs that couldn't even guarantee their own safety. Perhaps it was only natural that things would pan out differently than they did in the game. In this reality, the state shouldered quite a heavy burden under the Demon Lord's return. I could understand why the crown prince hadn't show up to the battle at Finoy.

"At present, we are giving them food and jobs as much as we are able to," my father said.

"There can't be *that* many jobs for so many people to do."

"It's mostly a way to keep them from stirring up trouble."

Saying the quiet part out loud, huh? That said, the people fleeing to the capital were convinced that things would turn out all right once they got here. The place was being flooded by penniless vagrants who wouldn't leave until they had wrung something out of it.

But it wasn't like you could just cut off all the newcomers without at least lending them an ear. Nor was it a textbook ethics problem; it was political. The prevailing view was that the nobility existed for the people. If those same nobles then snubbed the citizens, then what were they for? It was a threat to their authority.

Stories often depicted idiotic nobles who never thought twice about the people, but in the real world that was just the thing that had led to the French Revolution.

“What do the Zehrfelds plan to do about it?” I asked.

“Nothing in particular at this stage. The authorities concerned are handling it.”

“All right.”

I guess that was only obvious. Everyone had their own jobs to do. Common sense dictated that the house of the Minister of Ceremonies would have other fish to fry.

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The conversation turned from the state of the kingdom to matters concerning House Zehrfeld specifically. I really wished people wouldn’t change subjects so abruptly.

“At the moment, all is well with the orphanage we’ve taken under Zehrfeld management,” my father said.

“How are the classes coming along?”

I had a special interest in how they turned out. It was Feli’s orphanage, and Mazel had asked me to take care of it.

“We’ve seen a number of the youths receive an education. There is nothing to worry about.”

“Thank you for keeping an eye on things.”

“Some of them have been hired by noble families.”

Ah, that made sense. The houses that had lost their patriarch or knights from the Demon Stampede or the battle at Finoy would find themselves short on funds. Recruiting commoner servants rather than highborn ones would minimize their expenses.

In this world, even people of common birth could receive qualifications by attending the academy. Very few nobles would even consider teaching at an orphanage, but commoners were more flexible. If they were hired by noble families, they stood to gain a lot in social status.

“Very rarely, we get nobles expressing interest in teaching classes,” my father went on.

“It would be one thing if they already had a relationship with us,” I said, picking up on his hint, “but if they had no prior contact, it just seems suspicious.”

“It’s a pretext to get closer to you, I assume.”

I understood the impulse but had no desire to entertain it. These highborn daughters wouldn’t be picky, especially if they’d recently lost their well-connected fathers to the Demon army. “I have no desire to get involved with people like that.”

“Educating orphaned children is not charity work. The goal is to train people who can be useful to House Zehrfeld. I do not intend to hire anyone who does not understand what they are supposed to do.”

Spoken like a true head of a lofty household. Although my father was kind in many ways, he certainly wasn’t soft. Maybe these suitors would stand a chance if they could conceal their ulterior motives behind some shred of genuine interest in teaching, but their ploys were painfully transparent. That was basically what he was saying.

But if that was the case, then what about…?

“In any case, I would like to ask you about the Harting family,” I said.

There was the rub. If my father was predisposed to such coldly calculating decisions, then he must have had a reason for taking personal care of Mazel’s family, even going so far as to house them in our mansion. Well, maybe the fact that Mazel was the Hero was reason enough, but…

“You want to know why I took them in, yes? Simply put, His Highness the Crown Prince asked me to.”

“He did?”

Apparently, a messenger dispatched directly by the royal family had interviewed the Hartings about the events at Arlea Village. After that, the Zehrfelds were told to take care of the family for the time being.

“There are the political and diplomatic factors to consider.”

“Political and diplomatic factors,” I echoed under my breath.

I let the idea roll around in my head until I came to a conclusion: *Okay, so that’s how it is.*

In the game, the player's actions had no political consequences. You didn't have to worry about national borders, and you got a free pass to enter castles in other countries. Once you'd finished your mission, you could leave without saying a word and no one would complain about it. When I stopped to think about it, not even a medieval society would be so laissez-faire, although I could understand that the game lacked the memory space to represent things accurately.

But reality wasn't so simple. First of all, what was a country with a monster affliction going to do when the Hero showed up right in front of their eyes? Obviously, they would stop at nothing to put him under their thumb.

Threats would be a bad move, though. The party included no less than a princess of our fair kingdom, after all. Threatening her was tantamount to declaring war, and I say that with no exaggeration whatsoever. Besides, at his current level of strength, Mazel could easily take on ten guards or knights at the same.

If the stick doesn't work, try the carrot. A tempting enough offer would be hard for Mazel to turn down, even if he did see the ulterior motives behind it. But as long as Mazel's family was in the Wein Kingdom, he could use them as an excuse to turn down any reward. He could just say that he would have to discuss everything with his family first.

One would hope that would be enough of a deterrent, but every world had its share of dumbasses. What would happen if the royal family took custody of Mazel's family? Some would no doubt claim that the Wein Kingdom was holding the Hero's family hostage.

That claim, in turn, could spark even more incendiary reactions. People might take it as an excuse to claim, "To demonstrate the kingdom's sincerity, we shall take care of the Hero's family," or something. The Church seemed just about ready to do just that. Even in this world, the monarchy and the church clashed quite regularly. The church wouldn't waste the opportunity to make Mazel a part of their faction.

But if the Zehrfelds took custody, what then? It would be impossible for a single noble family to monopolize the Hero. Besides, Mazel himself would probably get mad at anyone who claimed that my house was trying to take his family hostage. He

might not blow his top or anything, but I could count on him sticking up for me, I would think. At this point, it was important to spin the story as “a personal acquaintance” sheltering Mazel’s family out of goodwill.

At the same time, if Mazel were to show any inclination to defect to another country, the royal family could kill two birds with one stone. It didn’t escape my notice that they could swoop in and put both my family and Mazel’s in confinement. Mazel definitely wouldn’t want to turn his back on his family and his friend.

I doubted that Mazel would ever think of abandoning his duty, but it was the state’s job to prepare for contingencies. It was only natural for them to approach things in a way that put them in the best position.

Basically, they were wringing Mazel’s relationship with me for all it was worth in order to prevent him being used by another country. The prince sure was ruthless to exploit that possibility right from the very beginning. I always knew that noble society was like that, though.

But hoo boy, the world of politics was bleak. I couldn’t help but sigh.

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“I don’t know what to say, but I’m sorry.”

I bowed deeply to my father. I’d dimly expected that my family would get dragged into the consequences of my actions, but I didn’t expect it to be quite so dramatic.

My father, however, remained calm… No, rather, he was downright cold as he brushed off my apology.

“Remember this, Werner. To be a minister in the court means anticipating events of a certain magnitude.”

By “events of a certain magnitude” he was referring to the tiny possibility that Mazel defected, in which case we would forfeit not just our titles, but our very lives. As apologetic as I was, I couldn’t help but be surprised at my father’s bluntness. Was it the obvious way to think because he was a minister, or because this was a muscle-brain world? Honestly, this was making me *not* want to become a minister.

“And you believe in Mazel,” my father went on.

“Absolutely.”

I could say that with confidence. Mazel would never betray the Wein Kingdom unless it gave him a reason to. The most I could see him doing was going off adventuring in other lands after he’d vanquished the Demon Lord.

Perhaps because of the certitude of my statement, my father nodded lightly. “Good to hear, then,” he said, and left it at that.

But there was still something I was curious about. I had to confirm it with him. “Don’t tell me that around the estate—”

“Count Stromer’s estate to the front of us and Viscount Ünel’s estate to the right have a full garrison of knights at all times. Behind us is the estate which belonged to Baron Diehl until his appointment as Minister of Domestic Affairs. It’s considered unoccupied since he moved out, but it’s been put under the supervision of Lord Goretzka.”

It took me a moment to process a response to all this. “So there’s nowhere a thief could slip in.”

I’d noticed that our estate was completely surrounded by guards. And by Goretzka, he was referring to the knight brigade’s vice captain, right? The former estate of Baron Diehl was packed with way more than just a few residents. It would honestly put other noble houses or the Merchants’ Guild to shame.

They were keeping a close eye on our house to make sure we were properly defended against anything that could happen. Meanwhile, if we were plotting something, they could overwhelm us with force at a moment’s notice. In spite of all of this, my father showed no hint of being perturbed—not just to his peers but even within the comfort of his own estate. He really was a politician through and through.

“They have more people at the gates now too,” he added.

“Given that the Hero’s family is with us, it would be strange if they *didn’t* ramp up their security, I suppose.”

There was certainly a level of performance to all of this. I had no doubt that the crown was pulling the strings behind all these gatekeepers. Not that I had any intention of rebelling, so even if there were Wein spies inside the estate, I had nothing to hide.

“Just think of it as the mansion receiving extra security paid for by the kingdom. Ari and Anna are learning how to cook for aristocrats. Lily is learning etiquette for now.”

“That makes sense,” I responded, figuring that this whole security thing was being deliberately kept on the down low. Well, if one noble house got an unusual amount of surveillance, it would damage their reputation in high society. If people knew, they knew. Everyone else, at least, would remain blissfully ignorant. You could say that it was an open secret in that sense.

Mazel’s parents never went to the academy, so I could imagine that they were having a tough time learning aristocratic manners. Not to mention that cooking for nobles bore a weight of responsibility. You didn’t get picked for that job unless you were trusted implicitly, since it would fall to you to make sure your masters weren’t poisoned. For that reason alone, it was a rather high-paying position.

As a matter of fact, the reason many cooks remained anonymous was because of the whole issue with poison. Everyone besides the head chef usually kept their names and faces hidden to prevent anyone from taking their families hostage and coercing them to poison their meals. In extreme cases, the mere incident of a chancellor or influential noble taking ill from a chef’s cooking was enough to disrupt the power balance within the court.

That being the case, turning Ari and Anna into chefs was the perfect way to keep them hidden. Their secrecy would be part and parcel of their new role in the midst of noble society.

As for Lily, she was young enough to become a student, but the academy was half shuttered at the moment. Besides, it was perfectly ordinary to learn etiquette by working in a noble’s mansion.

The problem was that I wanted Mazel’s family out of harm’s way well before the attack on the capital happened. What was I going to do about this? Because they were here under the prince’s request, I couldn’t simply move them out. There were a lot of things happening around me that I’d never anticipated, but this one was really a bolt from the blue.

At any rate, dwelling on it got nothing done, so I bowed and left my father’s study to return to my own. I hadn’t noticed it before, but there were vases by the windowsill adorned with

flowers. I didn't mind them because they weren't too showy or anything, but I was a little worried that they didn't suit the vibe of my room.

Still, I was relieved to see that my desk was clear. There definitely wasn't a side table with a mountain of documents on it. Nope.

As I made sure not to look in that particular direction, I opened up the two boxes on my desk containing the prototypes. At a glance, it seemed they came out like I'd hoped. I decided to give them a bit of a whirl. After that, I would have to get someone to write up a request form for me. The circus never ended.

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Just as Werner was testing out his prototypes, Count Fürst was taking a break from his paperwork. He had been dealing with the problems that had arisen while his soldiers were afield.

Being the head of House Fürst, Bastian was more experienced than most at dealing with paperwork. But in terms of pure strengths and weaknesses, one could not describe it objectively as his talent. The work was so dry that he rubbed his eyes as he did it.

There was a knock at the door, followed immediately by, "You've had a long day, Father," as Hermine stepped into the room.

"Is that you, Mine? I see you've had a rough time of things as well." Bastian couldn't help but respond with a wincing smile of his own.

While her father grappled with the paperwork, Mine had run herself ragged with the Demon purge and shepherding House Fürst's people to safety. There were signs of exhaustion in her face, but not of despair. Nobody under her care had died.

Bastian's eldest son, Tyrone, was not involved with the purge. He was at the count's fief, ensuring the soldiers deployed at Finoy returned to their original posts. He would probably have been frustrated to miss out on the action.

"I could never have imagined that the Demons would infiltrate the capital," Mine said.

“Although there were some casualties, we were fortunate to nip the problem in the bud,” Bastian said. Then, he abruptly added, “However…”

“What is it?”

“The Demon army went to the effort of impersonating humans in order to sneak into the capital,” Bastian declared. “I doubt that they would give up after one setback.”

Mine frowned too. She thought that her father was right to be cautious, but she couldn’t imagine what the Demon army was up to. “The only thing we can do for now is keep our guard up.”

“Indeed, although I would like to have some contingency measures in place.”

Mine nodded. She agreed, of course, but it was hard to determine what exactly they should prepare for.

“For now, we should replenish our forces,” Bastian said, noting Mine’s hesitancy.

“Yes, that is important.”

Between the back-to-back battles at the Demon Stampede, Hildea Plains, Fort Werisa, and Finoy, House Fürst had lost many of its knights. Much like any company, noble families had to recover from depleted human resources.

The problem, however, was that you couldn’t just fill the numbers and call it a day. After the battle to defend Finoy, many members of the kingdom’s army had come to a chilling understanding of just how vicious and formidable the Demon army was. Against that, there was no strength in mere numbers.

“There are some houses that have lost their patriarchs,” Mine said. “Talking to the knights employed by those houses would be…”

“There might be no other way.” Bastian grimaced even as he said that.

Valor was a form of virtue in this world, but the fight against the Demon army demonstrated its downsides. After the Demon Lord’s reemergence, even monster slaying had turned into a dramatically different task, but there were always people diving straight in without a second thought. One could say that it was

valorous to confront every foe without fear, but many knights lost their lives biting off more than they could chew.

You couldn't produce knights or soldiers without any training. Bastian also figured that the knights and squires belonging to crippled noble houses would likely have suffered a crippling loss of morale. It wouldn't be easy to gather skilled and capable fighters.

"First, you and Tyrone should ask the people you kno—"

Bastian was cut off by a knock at the door. Upon receiving permission to enter, House Fürst's family butler walked in with a slightly perturbed expression on his face.

"Is something the matter?" asked Bastian.

"Yes. I happened to overhear what you were discussing, and I have a report for you."

At the butler's next words, Bastian and Mine exchanged baffled glances. Judith Malen Teutenberg—the eldest daughter of House Fürst, who had married into the Teutenberg family—had left the Teutenberg estate and moved to another residence.

"Which other residence is this?" exclaimed Mine in surprise.

"I've never heard of House Teutenberg having a second estate," Bastian remarked, posing the question to the butler.

The butler responded that the house belonged to Count Gahmlich, a relative of Count Teutenberg's wife.

"I heard that my sister does not have a good relationship with the count's wife," Hermine said.

"So it seems." Bastian had heard that the issues with the count's wife ran deeper than the usual friction between a mother and daughter-in-law. An instinctive aversion could escalate into heated conflict given the right spark. "We need to get in touch with Judith right away."

Bastian also wanted to confirm what happened to his grandson Danilo. He instructed his butler to send a message to Judith asking her to visit House Fürst. As Mine watched the butler go, a vague sense of unease came over her.

Nobody at House Fürst could have known that later that night, a carriage stopped surreptitiously at Count Gahmlich's estate.

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As soon as I finished checking the prototypes to see if they worked right, it was time to draft some request forms, but hmm... it wasn't quite working out. As my pen hovered over the paper, I scratched my head with my free hand. There was a knock at the door, and I responded without paying much attention.

Lily came into the room with a tea set. "Please excuse me, Master Werner. I brought you some tea. Um..."

She was dumbfounded. Yeah, I would probably be the same if I walked into someone else's room and saw it looking like this. There was hardly even room to stand.

"What is this?" she asked hesitantly.

"Oh, sorry for the mess. Things aren't going too well." I smiled sheepishly as I put down my pen.

As I took in the sight of all the round objects scattered across the study floor, I had to admit it was embarrassing. I'd been so wrapped up in what I was doing that I'd even chucked my scrapped papers all over the place. What was I, some kind of old-timey novelist?

After putting the plate down on a table for visitors, Lily started picking up the mess. I hurriedly joined in to help. Some might say it wasn't very aristocratic of me, but of course I felt bad when the whole thing was entirely my fault.

Together, we picked up everything and packed it away in a corner of the room. It was a pity that the room didn't have a wastepaper bin, but oh well. I felt bad about what I'd done. Even though I was just using cheap monster skin parchment, I'd wasted a whole bunch of it. I mean, from a commoner's perspective, even monster skin parchment was a kind of a big deal.

"Sorry," I said.

"Oh no, please don't let it trouble you. Um, I brought you some tea."

"Oh, right, so you did," I said. Truthfully, I had been getting frustrated at my lack of progress. "Guess I'll take a break."

Relieved at my reply, Lily started pouring the tea. She certainly was a dab hand at it. Given that working at the inn was basically service industry experience, she was probably more accustomed to this sort of thing than your average villager.

“Please help yourself.”

“Thanks.”

I took a sip. The tea leaves had a proper, distinct scent, and the taste was suitably strong. Although it wasn’t quite as good as Tillura’s handiwork, Lily’s skills were perfectly respectable in their own right.

“It’s good. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She smiled in relief.

During my student days, I’d spent most of my time with male friends, so I was caught rather off guard seeing a girl smile at me up close. It would have been a different story if she were a familiar figure, like Tillura.

Anyway, I expelled all self-conscious thoughts from my mind. There was something I needed to find out. “By the way, may I please ask you something, Lily?”

“Um,” she responded with an awkward grimace.

Hm?

“Given our positions, I would humbly suggest that it is unnecessary for you to treat me with such courtesies.”

“Oh, uh…”

She had a point. I’d been speaking to her rather formally as Mazel’s sister, but it would be weird for a noble to defer that way to a servant. Maybe this was one of the things Norbert told Lily about beforehand. As much as I understood and accepted this, it still felt surprisingly jarring.

“No problem, Lily.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Oof, her smile was too powerful. Anyway, I had to get the conversation back on track. “It looks like you ended up working here. Are you fine with that?”

“I am. I never would have imagined working in such a splendid mansion. I am ever so grateful for the count’s

generosity.”

“O-oh, really?”

“And everyone is so kind. I feel like I have a purpose here, studying and learning etiquette.”

“Oh, uh, as long as you’re cool with it, I guess.”

Commoners typically saw it as an honor to work at a noble’s house. Inwardly, I had mixed feelings about Lily not getting the real story behind her being hired for the job. But since she seemed so happy about it, I decided to put my misgivings aside.

“Master Werner, what were you doing?”

“I was trying to draw a diagram.”

On my desk were a bunch of metal balls, a slightly modified magic lamp, and pen and paper. I was trying to express what I was doing in diagram form, but my awkward illustrations couldn’t capture the complexity.

“It’s just as you see here,” I said.

“Er, um…” She forced a smile.

Mm, yeah, it was just a bunch of lines and squiggles all over the place, with some bits that looked like squares and triangles. It looked like a mess even to me.

As I was grimacing, Lily spoke up unexpectedly. “Would you be able to lend me some paper and a pen…?”

“Huh? Uh, sure. Want to sit down?”

“If you will excuse me.”

I made my suggestion as a light joke and a change of pace, only for Lily to pick up the magic lamp without hesitation and unfurl the scrapped paper on the table. Then she began racing her pen down the page…wait?

“You’re really good…”

“We had some illiterate customers at the inn, so I would draw them pictures of the food and the store locations in the village, and so on. My parents said it was helpful.”

Although I understood her logic, her abilities went *way* beyond what was necessary for the task. I’d thought she had a good sense of aesthetics, but she was probably on the level of a master artist. We had no chance to even broach the subject, of

course, given that their inn had burned down and all sorts of other things had happened in Arlea Village. But still, it completely slipped my notice that she possessed such an uncanny talent.

“Would this serve your purposes?”

“Honestly, I’m amazed.”

Unlike my chicken scratches, Lily’s drawing was a one-to-one sketch comparable to a da Vinci work. Needless to say, it was very well done and easy to grasp what I was looking at. If I could just explain to her in detail what this was about and give her a clean piece of paper... No, wait.

“Lily...you can read and write, yes?”

“Hm? Yes, I sometimes handled the inn’s register.”

“Can you do sums? Addition and subtraction, at least?”

“If it’s nothing more complicated than calculating room and meal fees, then yes. Right now, I’m learning how to do more complicated calculations when I have time.”

Wait, wait, wait. She was born a commoner in this world, but not only could she read and write, she knew the fundamentals of addition and subtraction—*and* she was good at drawing?

This girl might be an absolute gem of a hire.

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“Um, what is it...?”

“Er, uh, it’s nothing.”

She was watching me so closely, I could feel the heat rushing to my face. I definitely wouldn’t win a staring contest against her.

I quickly averted my gaze to clear my head. If I got Lily to help me out here, then I could probably make good headway on development. And I was really pressed for time. Frankly, I appreciated any help I could get.

“Lily.”

“Y-yes?”

“Sorry, but could you go to the kitchen and get me some soft bread dough? Enough to fill a plate, if possible.”

“Bread dough, you say? Understood, my lord.” She shot me a puzzled look, but she could probably tell from my face that I was quite serious, so she headed promptly to the kitchen.

I had to get to work before she got back. After I moved the box with the prototypes to the guest’s table, I sat at my desk, brushing everything on it aside, and started writing furiously. I had only just finished when a knock at the door signaled Lily’s return.

“I apologize for keeping you waiting.”

“Oh, thanks. So, Lily, you’re still studying etiquette and manners and all that, huh?”

“Hm? Y-yes. As well as other subjects, like sums…”

“Sorry for taking up your study time, but there are some things I’d like you to draw for me.”

“Yes…?” She tilted her head, a question mark practically visible over her head.

Meanwhile, I took the bread dough—this would be a substitute for clay. The sight of bread dough in an aristocrat’s study might raise some eyebrows, but clay would’ve made an utter mess. Besides, I doubt you could even find clay in a noble’s mansion at all, for all the use they’d have for it.

Since I lacked the artistic skills to explain my ideas through diagrams, I figured it would be quickest to show her a physical model. This was going to leave a mess on my hands, but whatever. I had plenty of paper in the corner of the room, perfect for wiping myself off.

First, I flattened the dough out on the plate so that it looked like a board, then made some indentations with my finger. Seen from above, it looked like I’d drawn a ※ symbol.

Next, I made some spheres and put them in the depressions, which were shallow enough to leave half of each sphere poking out.

“What is this?” Lily asked.

“Just watch.” I put the bread dough model onto the plate that originally held the tea set, then flicked the plate to make it spin around. Given the components, I wouldn’t describe the motion as

smooth by any means, but my small-scale turntable was complete.

“Whoa…”

“If you use metal balls and put a pin through the middle, it won’t veer off to the sides. With the right support, it could even support a heavy object while retaining the ability to rotate. It’s just hard to explain all this in words.”

I showed her the prototypes: golf-ball-sized metal balls. When I rolled them lightly across the table as a demonstration, Lily peered in fascination. Damn, she was practically brushing up against me.

“You want to hold them?”

“C-can I?”

“They’re heavy, so be careful.”

She cupped her hands. When I plopped the balls on her palms, she let out a little shriek, though she mercifully did not drop anything. Then she rolled the balls over her hands, tipping them up and down and peering at them intently. She was like a puppy sniffing a rare new toy before playing with it. I couldn’t help but feel soothed by the sight, even though this was hardly the time for it.

Fun fact: turntable-like objects had a very long history. Emperor Nero’s rotating banquet hall used a water wheel to rotate the entire floor. This apparently allowed diners to enjoy an unlimited panoramic view of Rome. This was no mere legend; the archaeological remains persist to this day. There were traces of clay used to lubricate the metal balls inside the holes, making them spin. It was quite the feat of engineering.

On a tangential note, Emperor Nero is remembered by history as a tyrant, but in actuality, he might have been more of a reformist than anything. Between the conservative elites and his poor relationship with Christianity, what the chroniclers left us was decidedly hostile to him and his legacy. Although it might have been a bit much to describe him as an enlightened ruler, he was certainly not as bad as his opponents made him out to be. Even in modern-day Japan, novelists often defaulted to the inaccurate version of events. Poor Emperor Nero might have been a victim of slander.

Anyway, the emperor's revolving room wasn't so different from a turntable in the sense that it moved on revolving balls. Not that I wanted to make a whole-ass banquet hall spin around. It didn't need to be anywhere near that big.

I took the metal balls back from Lily and turned my eyes on the makeshift turntable once more. "I have to go to the palace tomorrow. While I'm there, do you think you could draw a diagram of this board? Make it so that you can see the indents where the metal balls spin. I'll ask my mother and Norbert to clear some time in your schedule for it."

"Okay. Um, what about the size...?"

"You don't have to worry about it. When I make my request, I'm going to show the prototypes to the manufacturer and make comparisons as I explain."

I opened the box with the prototypes and showed her the metal spheres inside. These weren't the actual size either, but I could just explain that when I presented them.

"I understand," Lily said.

"Oh, and also, it would be great if you could make a clean copy of that lamp diagram from before. Make sure the handle looks thick and sturdy. And you can see how it turns into a triangle like this..."

"Okay."

I also asked her to draw a diagram of the turntable and the main component of the prototype. Even though I felt bad about piling such fussy work onto her considerable workload, Lily seemed inexplicably happy about it.

"I can pay you extra for this work specifically," I said.

"Oh, no, you needn't do that."

"I'd be setting a poor example if I didn't."

My mother, the count's wife and the matron of the household, managed all the work that took place within the mansion, not just what the maids did. But what I was asking of Lily wasn't housework—it was a different job entirely. If I didn't pay Lily for it, I'd be disrupting the order of the household. Some noble houses were rather lax in that regard, but House Zehrfeld

was strict. The count wouldn't have become a minister if he weren't so scrupulous.

Not to mention that Lily's art was so good she could easily make a career of it. In this premodern world, people who specialized in lifelike art could command any price. Plus, there was the matter of maintaining her confidentiality.

"Oh..." Lily made a little moan.

Come now, it was only right to pay people for their work. I could afford to pay her from the wages I received as a viscount.

"I'll be sure to tell this to Norbert as well, but I'd appreciate it if you could keep everything you draw a secret."

"O-of course."

I suppose it went without saying, huh? Anyway, while I was at it, I decided to hand her something I'd written on a sheet of paper. "There's this as well."

"So many numbers... Is this a chart?"

"How do I put it...?"

I took out two of the bits of bread dough I'd used for my turntable demonstration and placed them on the plate. I put another two next to them. Then another two.

"How many bread dough balls is this?"

"Six, I would say."

"Yep. Now look at the table. Look at where the top says 'two,' then at the side where it says 'three.' What's the number that overlaps in both those columns?"

"Six... Ah."

It was a multiplication table, a familiar sight from my old world. This being a muscle-brain world, however, even something as simple as this was nowhere to be found. I remember being surprised about it in my student days. Then again, it wasn't like I needed a multiplication table at this point.

As an aside, Mazel didn't even need a chart because he could remember everything the first time he heard it. It sure would have been nice to have even half of his memorization skills back in my old world.

Back on Earth, the closest thing to a premodern multiplication table existed in ancient China. It predated Qin Shi

Huang, the first emperor of the Qin dynasty. For some reason, the charts in Japan started with nine times nine. Maybe it was in the nature of the Japanese people to love big numbers. Of course, I drew my chart to start from one times one.

Maybe this would help Lily with her studies…

“Wow, this makes it so clear and easy to understand. Thank you so much!” She thanked me effusively, her fascination plain to see.

“Mm, yeah. Hope you get some use out of it.”

Her reaction took me by surprise, even though I should have known that even something as basic as this would be eye-opening to a villager in a world without much numeracy. In fact, commoners by and large didn’t know their letters or numbers. It honestly made me squirm a little to see her so utterly impressed.

“Well, all this is stuff that’d be a pain for me to do myself. I’m sorry to dump it on you, but I really appreciate your help.”

“I’ll give it my all!”

As grateful as I was to her, I had to wonder if positive thinking was encoded into the Harting family genes. Anyway, I asked Lily to put away the bread dough while I picked up the trash from the floor. Already, my thoughts turned to how this would change my scheduled plans.

While I was organizing my thoughts, it occurred to me that an abacus or some such thing would probably sell pretty well, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to see it through, so I gave up on the idea. Like fountain pens, I would add it to the list of things to do if I survived.

Later, I heard through Lily that Norbert started using the multiplication table to teach the other servants too. Apparently, my mother was annoyed at me for not telling her about such a useful tool sooner. I had no idea that it would be such a big deal, but in retrospect, it would obviously be a valuable rarity in such a muscle-brain world.

Even after almost twenty years of living in this world, I was still running up against the culture gap. Just because I knew something didn’t mean that others did. Lesson learned.

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I showed up for work at the palace first thing the next morning. A shock awaited me upon entry—the place was scarred with signs of battle. That combat had erupted there wasn't, in itself, a surprise, but there were hardly any traces once you got past the walls. I had no idea who was in command of the defenses, but they were incredible at coordinating the troops.

I hurried through the routine to get into the crown prince's study. As I performed my usual bow, it occurred to me that His Highness probably had a packed schedule after this meeting.

"I, Werner Von Zehrfeld, have arrived."

"Thank you for coming, Lord Werner. My commendations, as well, for a job well done."

It surprised me to hear praise right off the bat. I decided to downplay it. "I am honored by your words. However, I did not achieve those results alone."

"I do not refer to Finoy. I speak of the matter at Arlea." Now that was unexpected. When I raised my eyebrows in a wordless bid for clarification, His Highness explained calmly, "First of all, you acted admirably, protecting the Hero Mazel's family."

"You honor me."

"Furthermore, his younger sister has a hazy recollection of what happened when she was abducted. Your assistance in delivering her to the capital proved a great boon to us. Without the information we obtained from her, there may well have been more casualties."

"So the information was that significant?"

When her abductors were about to make her swallow some kind of mystery object, Lily apparently heard them talking about "using her body" and a "resurrection" of some sort. Although she didn't understand what they meant about "using her body," her ability to memorize and recall must have been similar to her brother's.

Plus, the captain of the mage corps reported that the black gems had the uncanny power to charm their beholders. Lord Pückler, who was in charge of the investigation, was suspected of strange behavior.

Then there was the black gem retrieved in Arlea, which should have been in the capital. I had no idea whether the other gem was in safe hands at the moment. The prince, who was privy to all the information at our disposal, seemed to have an answer.

"We speculate that the black jewels form the Demons' cores. By 'using' a body, we take it to mean that they use the jewels to control or manipulate the victim's flesh. The fact that one jewel was smuggled out means that we can safely assume that at least one person was already under its control."

"That makes sense…"

"Your investigation of Mangold was also quite useful. When we followed your leads further, it came to light that Pückler was the hooded man in contact with Mangold. Everything fell into place from there."

I certainly couldn't fault his logic. It also explained why the three Demon Commanders were able to make a comeback in the game. So they were the type of enemy that could be resurrected as long as their cores were intact, hm?

A chill tickled my spine. If the Demon Commanders could revive by possessing a person's flesh, then what if the thing they had been trying to shove down Lily's throat was Dreax's core?

If things had panned out that way, then Mazel might have ended up in the horrible dilemma of either being attacked by Dreax in his sister's body or having to turn his sword on his sister. Just the very thought of what could have happened if I hadn't made it on time gave me a cold sweat.

I would have to tell Mazel about the dangers of the black jewels, though I decided that there was no need to trouble Lily over such horrific what-ifs. I could spare her from that, at least.

In any case, I found myself wondering whose bodies were used to resurrect the three Demon Commanders at the end of the game. Could they have been those of the crown prince and the captains of the knight brigade, who originally died at the Demon Stampede? Maybe they were actually captured instead of killed.

If my speculations were correct, then perhaps the story began to change when the kingdom's army evaded defeat at the Stampede, and the knight brigade remained intact. This thought brought its own set of fears.

It also raised another question: How exactly did the attack on the capital play out? Let's assume that a Demon had already possessed Lord Pückler when we met. Timeline-wise, this happened before Laura joined the Hero's party.

The black gem didn't show up in the game, but someone working for the state might have investigated the spot where Mazel defeated the Demon controlling the hordes. In that scenario then, the Demons would have infiltrated the capital quite early in the game's chronology.

I'd assumed that the Four Fiends destroyed the capital solely from the outside, but there was a distinct possibility that the Demons went on a rampage inside the palace as well. But this still left a crucial question unanswered: What was their goal?

So far, I had assumed the attack on the capital was simply a plot device that conveniently set the stage for Mazel to become king. But if the Demons had set this plan into motion long ago, it stood to reason that they were undermining the kingdom for their own purposes. What could those possibly be?

I was tempted to ponder this question further, but I deliberately dragged my thoughts away from it. It wasn't my job to think about it right now. I was in the middle of a conversation, after all.

"By carefully tailing those in contact with Pückler, we were able to identify a number of suspicious individuals in the palace," the prince said. "The guards and knights dealt with most of them yesterday, but..."

"Was there some kind of problem?"

"Pückler—or rather, the Demon Commander possessing his body—has most likely fled. He calls himself Gezarius. It galls me that even in winning the battle, we failed to close off his escape."

His Highness seemed rueful about not personally taking the reins at the battle, but that was the least of my concerns. Gezarius? Who the hell was that?! There was no enemy in the game who went by that name.

I only knew of three Demon Commanders: Dreax, Beliures, and Abdolas, who would show up in the game's second half. I was absolutely certain that no one by the name of Gezarius made an appearance.

Wait, hold on a second.

Right before the final battle at the Demon Lord's castle, there was a boss rush. The three resurrected Demon Commanders guarded four doors on the way to your destination. I'd always thought that they were simply standing in the way between the doors. But what if they were gatekeepers in the most literal sense? Were each of the four doors supposed to be protected by a different commander?

I could sort of understand it if the game cut the fourth Demon Commander because of production and hardware constraints. Still, that gave rise to all sorts of questions. But they would have to wait. Exploring what-ifs with so little information at hand wouldn't get me anywhere. The debriefing took priority for the moment.

"What did you mean when you said the commander 'most likely fled'?" I asked.

"The mage corps, the Royal Guard, and the palace sentries surrounded the fiend and inflicted what was most certainly a near-fatal wound. But after he scaled the walls, he disappeared entirely from sight. We were unable to retrieve the black gem either. How would you interpret this scenario?"

"Loath as I am to imagine it, it's only prudent to assume he will return in human form."

"I agree."

Searching for a single imposter within the capital's vast population was like looking for a needle in a haystack. I doubted that Monster Repel would work on a Demon Commander. In the game, such boss battles were unavoidable, after all.

But still, the game didn't have enemies who could disappear into thin air. Maybe it was this Gezarius guy's special ability. Either way, it meant more problems to juggle.

"Were there any casualties on our end?" I asked.

"Some dead and some missing, all within reasonable expectations. Those at the laboratory were aware of Pückler's suspicious behavior and were on guard, but nobody could have expected that a Demon Commander would go on an indiscriminate rampage after his true form was revealed."

That figured. If he didn't bother talking his way out of it and just went straight for the kill, then yeah, some soldiers would die. He must have had his guard up from the moment he learned that the attack on Finoy ended in failure.

To make matters worse, Lord Pückler's body apparently swelled and exploded from the inside. Seeing something like that, most people's brains would shut right down. Even an adventurer would probably get startled.

Still, I figured that with the right preparations, the knight brigade or mage corps could fight toe to toe with a boss-level enemy. That was another difference from the game. It was probably best to simply take it as a good sign that the army had been able to reaffirm its capabilities.

A sudden realization hit me. It wouldn't be weird for a boss to have followers lurking around him. Maybe this Gezarius guy didn't escape, so much as get an underling to ferry his black gem to safety.

I couldn't speak to whether they'd planned this from the start, but it would be foolish to assume they didn't have some sort of contingency measures in place. In that case, one of the missing might very well be a Demon in disguise. It would be important to confirm this later.

Speaking of resurrections, the causes of the Demon Lord's return had always been a mystery. It could be that the Demon Lord also managed to revive by taking over some poor sap's body. Ah crap, my thoughts were going offtrack *again*. I could leave the speculations for later, damn it.

"Will this have an adverse effect on the research into anti-area-of-effect magic?" I asked.

"The research is still ongoing, for better or worse."

So no real harm done, huh. I guess I could assume that things were fine as long as the researchers were alive and well. That said, from a pessimist's perspective, the lack of any breakthroughs was a definite problem. Still, I ought to call it a win if the losses were light. Besides, if they made too much progress too soon, the Demons might have gotten suspicious.

"By the way, what did the Demon Commander look like?" I asked.

“Like a cross between a man and a lion. He was strong and agile. His long leaps were most troublesome.”

So he was a lycanthrope, huh? That reminded me of something: the game had a commander for the undead, one for Reptipos, and another for giants, but not one for the lycanthropes.

But wait, that basically meant—

“Is the former region of Triot dangerous these days?”

“Ah, so you’ve noticed. Have you investigated that area as well?”

His Highness looked surprised. I had simply recalled that the field around where Triot was located spawned a lot of Werewolves and Weretigers in the game. I felt like I’d blurted out the wrong thing, though. The prince seemed to be jumping to entirely different conclusions.

“I, too, have heard reports that the refugees from Triot were attacked by Werewolves and similar beasts,” he went on. “If the fiend is still breathing, then it is reasonable to assume that he has fled there to assemble his forces, as you’ve surmised.”

“Then Marquess Kneipp’s territory must be in danger, given that it shares a border with Triot.”

“It is indeed as you say. However, we cannot simply mass our forces within a noble house’s lands.”

It was a sticky situation. Marquess Kneipp’s personal forces were woefully insufficient for protecting the land in these circumstances. But a foreign force rushing in would only strain relations with his house, regardless of intentions. It wouldn’t be the first time such a ploy had been used to take over a rival’s territory, after all. There was also the problem of who would distribute food to all the soldiers funneling in. It would be less of a problem if the marquess himself called for aid, but I doubted that he and his retainers would be understanding of the circumstances.

Either way, the whole thing was a mess because, whether you were setting up fortifications or supplementing the troops, the funds you’d need to do so had to come from somewhere. Asking a noble house to deal with the problem all by themselves

was widely understood to be a recipe for disaster. Nobles: There was always another headache when you dealt with them.

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The prince smiled, attempting to lighten the mood.

“If you have any good ideas for dealing with Triot, I would gladly hear them. On another note, I have heard that you are in need of craftsmen.”

“Yes, Your Highness. I am currently developing some new and improved weapons and tools.”

I was relieved to see that he wasn’t looking for an immediate, on-the-spot solution to the problem of Gezarius and Triot. I wanted some time to get the facts straight and think through the options. Unfortunately, I suspected that my game knowledge wouldn’t be too helpful in this situation.

Although I wanted to take the time to digest everything, I decided to shelve the matter for the time being. My head was already crammed full enough as it was. If I didn’t hurry up and get the materiel improvements over and done with, then I’d lose track of things entirely.

“To that end, I would like to request some of your time on a future date.”

“Very well. I will see you in three days hence.”

“Thank you very much.”

The prince glanced to the side before nodding. That was probably a signal to the aide in charge of his schedule or something.

Anyway, there was something on my mind that I needed him to confirm for me. “Incidentally, about the chief of Arlea Village…”

“Ah, yes.” His Highness had an unusually sheepish smile on his face.

“Did something happen?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“He has sent a letter of justification. Not that I have read it.”

Well, yeah, there was no way the crown prince himself would personally deal with problems in a rural town. One of the lower

judicial branches would have handled it.

“My sister Laura also sent a message to His Majesty regarding that matter.”

Correction: This had turned into an extremely big deal. Normally, the governor of the local fief was supposed to take care of village disputes, you know? Perhaps it was only inevitable that an issue involving the Hero’s family and the crown’s reputation would wind its way to the capital, but it boggled my mind that it had reached even the king’s ears. At this point, there was no way the village chief would get off easy. Not that I had much sympathy for him.

“Laura is normally polite and dignified, but she’s fiercely loyal to her friends,” the prince said.

“She did give me a positive impression when we met at the garden.”

Technically, I knew that from the game. She was a princess character with a heart of gold.

“Laura submitted a voluminous letter, which adhered perfectly to the etiquette and rhetoric of a diplomatic treatise, urging His Majesty to investigate the matter ‘thoroughly and exhaustively.’ His expression puckered as if he had bitten into an overripe fruit.”

“Yikes…”

I let slip a rather inappropriate comment, but His Highness graciously paid it no heed. Oopsies.

So basically, Laura’s letter was a veritable litany of demands. Her fury practically leapt from the pages. Now that this had turned into a whole big drama, I got the feeling that butting in would just make more trouble for myself.

“I apologize for giving you further cause for worry.”

“Do not trouble yourself over this. It happened because of the kingdom’s laxity and misjudgment. In any case, I would ask you: What did you do with the orphanage and refugees while you were away from the capital?”

Oof, not even *that* slipped his notice? Given that he’d managed to flush out the Demons in the capital in as little time as it took for me to get here from Finoy, perhaps it only stood to reason that nothing would get past his information network. Not

that I was trying to hide anything, though. In fact, this was a good opportunity to explain the whole deal and discreetly seek his permission in certain matters. The timing couldn't have been better.

"You see, I had this small idea..."

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After explaining my ideas to the prince, I met up with Neurath and Schünzel at my office. I sent Neurath on an errand and told Schünzel to alert a visitor I was expecting later in the day. After that, owing to a slight change of plans, I headed for the mage corps' building.

As soon as the laboratory came into view, I couldn't help but gasp at the massive hole in the wall. Outside of some specific cutscenes, it was impossible to break the walls in the game. The fact that this Gezarius guy managed to accomplish this meant that he must have possessed a hefty—no, outright *ludicrous* amount of force.

When I quizzed the sentries standing around the building, I discovered that the person I was looking for wasn't around. So instead of dallying around the mage corps' building, I headed to the palace infirmary. After the usual screening procedures, I was allowed to enter.

The procedure for going into the infirmary was fairly strict. This was because the injured and diseased knights and nobles were vulnerable in both body and mind. Their conditions could worsen if something out of the ordinary approached them. Sometimes, the workers would keep you on surveillance under the pretext of attending a patient's bedside. The security was nothing to sneeze at.

Anyway, my background was solid, so they let me through without any hassle. After a bit of walking, I arrived at the room I was looking for.

"Greetings, Lord Vogt. I have come to pay you a visit."

"Why, hello, Lord Werner. I'm grateful you came all this way."

Lying on the bed, looking somewhat bored, was Vogt of the mage corps. As we exchanged pleasantries, I quickly assessed his

condition. Thankfully, he didn't appear to have suffered any grievous injuries.

"My goodness, it was a mighty ruckus," Vogt recalled. "The entire building suddenly trembled and everything fell off the shelves all at once."

"I'm sorry for the losses you all suffered. Yet it relieves me to see that you bear no grave wounds," I replied as I gave him a sympathy gift (this was the thing I asked Neurath to prepare for me).

It made sense that the building would shake after the enemy smashed a hole in it. Given how the building looked from within and without, I had to wonder if the battered structure could even hold up. This was a fantasy world, so it was probably fine. Maybe.

"I was fine, but the potion researchers were in a very sorry state."

"Yes, I suppose those bottles would be rather hazardous."

Speaking of which, glass was expensive. Though it was probably a stroke of luck, all things considered, that the spilled substances hadn't caused some freak reaction when they pooled together all across the floor. Just the same, I went with a polite and perfunctory reply. After chatting for a short while about Vogt's injuries and other innocuous topics, I got to the point.

"By the way, I'm sorry to call upon you while you are ailing, but..."

"Yes, what is it?" Vogt seemed to be aware that this wasn't just a courtesy call, because he responded immediately.

"Could you, hypothetically, cause a magic stone that generates heat or ventilation to go haywire?"

I got the idea some time ago when Duke Seyfert mentioned that the magic pumps once went out of control. I wondered whether it was because of a problem with the mechanism or with the magic stones' output.

Of course, it wouldn't be a big deal if your garden-variety magic items stopped working as intended. The magic stones in them weren't terribly large. But it could be useful to know the principle behind it.

The question seemed to puzzle Vogt at first, but he soon put a hand on his chin in thought. "I have never done so deliberately,

but I suppose that it is theoretically possible."

"Interesting. In that case, would you be able to do this?"

This time, Vogt evidently wasn't alone in his bafflement. Judging by their expressions, Neurath and Schünzel must have been wondering if I'd lost my mind as well. Personally, I figured the idea I'd just presented could have its uses when the time came. Anyway, I endured the weird looks and asked Vogt to channel his research efforts in that particular direction.

With my visit over and done with, my next destination was the Royal Guard office. There, I exchanged greetings with the captain of the knight brigade, as well as Vice Captain Goretzka. We'd had no connection up to this point and basically no reason to become acquainted, but they responded readily to my request to meet with them. They seemed like good guys.

We talked about this and that. They seemed eager to praise my contributions at Finoy, but I felt awkward about that line of conversation, so I steered us away from that topic when I could. After that, we discussed their operation to purge the Demon army from the royal capital.

I wasn't sure how to react upon hearing what some of the knights had been saying when they jumped the gun in the fight against the Demon Commander. "Don't let Zehrfeld hog all the glory," they said, apparently. The two captains told me that I didn't bear any responsibility for that, but it still made me feel, well, *complicated*. Here I was feeling like I'd rather do something as long as I *didn't* get the glory for it.

After the greetings and small talk, I handed them a chart, although I was careful to emphasize that it was a work in progress. I didn't mind if they ignored it, but I figured it could come in handy. The vice captain seemed very enthusiastic about it, but since this was still in the experimental phase I quickly wormed my way out of the conversation. With all these miscellaneous tasks wrapped up before the morning was over, I returned to my office. I couldn't stand that cavernous palace.

***

Back in my office, sorting through my documents, I figured I might as well get the most pressing issues out of the way first. There were places I needed to be, so I'd need to get things done fast. If anything, sorting this stuff out was probably less of a pain in the ass than confirming the exact location of my intended venture.

In between processing all the documents conferring honors, I read a daily report from the orphanage, gleaning the necessary information from the chicken-scratch handwriting. As I'd anticipated, the person I was looking for appeared to be near the slums.

By the way, it was typical for ministers at the palace to eat light lunches at their offices. They were busy people, after all. Things were different, of course, when they were entertaining a colleague or fellow noble. In those cases, they would use one of the palace's many luncheon rooms. These rooms weren't nearly as stiff as typical conference rooms, being quite spacious and adorned with beautiful landscape paintings. I guess the nobility's interest in art stemmed partly from wanting something to decorate the walls with. I suppose you could say the conference rooms were meant for larger gatherings.

Use of the rooms was governed by various unwritten rules, such as the second luncheon room in the west being the counts' preferential territory. This was because, in practice, nobles who often participated in meetings tended to hog the rooms that were easy to get to. I also got the feeling that the Minister of Foreign Affairs had a luncheon room for himself. That place was soundproofed, with reinforced doors and windows.

Because of this, every day as lunch approached, the maids and servants would bring food on wagons to the ministers' offices and luncheon rooms, and the halls would be filled with appetizing aromas.

Kitchens were typically located at the basement level, or at least somewhat below ground level, so the servants would bring up the wagon on a makeshift elevator. One would think they would use magic stones for something like that, but it turned out that they often employed retired soldiers from the front lines and other such folk. Which made sense—the job did require brawn.

The palace employed a ton of people. In part, it was because of the sheer quantity of rooms and space to cover. Each minister's room had multiple people charged with its maintenance, which inevitably inflated the numbers. To be fair, security demanded it. Any room important enough to be a minister's office had a person specifically in charge of furniture and utensils, who checked every day to ensure that none of the shelf locks got broken or anything. There was a reason, however flimsy, for everything.

This was off topic, but it was quite common to see aged veterans working in public facilities. Military people had surprisingly few opportunities for meeting and courting members of the opposite sex, so it wasn't too unusual to see veterans still unwed at a ripe old age (some of them in their mid-fifties, even). Surprisingly, the military was quite scrupulous about health, so the average life expectancy was unusually high by medieval standards.

As long as they were in the army, soldiers could expect other people to provide for their meals and lodgings. Men who'd barely cooked a meal in their lives outside of military campaigns would wander around town post-retirement without a clue about what they were even supposed to eat. The idea of providing for themselves would come as quite a shock. People like that often sought jobs that took care of their meals for them.

Stories set in the Middle Ages often featured elderly soldiers. This was less because retirement wasn't an option and more because soldiers rarely knew how else to live after serving in the military since their teenage years. Being born into the nobility was quite the privilege indeed.

Such idle thoughts ran through my head as I rushed through the paperwork, getting as much of it out of the way as I could before my next errand. Then I quickly left the palace, making sure to inform my father before departing. I hung a scabbard at my hip—not my usual one, but rather the sort a common soldier might wear. Given my purposes, my wallet was heavier than usual, weighted with funds I'd drawn from the family coffer. My father wasn't too happy about that.

He'd cautioned me not to stay out for too long, but I wasn't a child. My plan was to find my target quickly, so I could get back home without delay. My schedule in the days ahead would

scarcely give me time to breathe; I had to review matters regarding the fief, as well as military affairs. It would be no laughing matter if an incident like what befell Arlea occurred within Zehrfeld territory. We could deploy scouts to survey our lands, but I was still contemplating whether to propose that to my father or not. At times like this, I truly felt the burdensome weight of my title as a viscount-cum-deputy-count. What a pain.

Not that this mattered, but sometimes when I passed by servants, maids, or fellow nobles, I would notice, at the edge of my vision, the way they looked at me and whispered. I chose to feign ignorance. As glad as I was that they didn't appear to be slandering me, it still made me queasy.

Once Mazel defeated the Demon Lord, I would shut myself in my fief and never again show my face to the world.

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At the entrance of the Adventurers' Guild, I told Neurath and Schünzel to go back to the mansion while I attended to business within. A raucous din greeted me—or maybe not. After the peace and quiet of doing paperwork at the palace, the bustle of the guild jarred my ears. It was like going from an office to a bar.

"Hey, if it ain't the viscount! Shall we drink a toast to your safe return?"

"Maybe another time. It'll be my treat."

"It's nice to see you again, Sir Viscount. I've heard some interesting tales about you."

"Oh goodness, please spare me."

Heads turned and a slew of voices called out to me as I headed for the counter. I was happy to return the casual well-wishes, but I made sure to distance myself from the more provocatively dressed ladies trying to corner me. There sure were a lot of people who seemed eager to talk to me.

"Well, look at you, Sir Viscount. Now you're a proper celebrity."

"Technically, it was Mazel who won the day at Finoy."

"But hey, I'm proud to know you."

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Although Mazel had definitely scored the decisive kill, nobody here seemed interested in getting the facts straight.

Also, not that it mattered, but the sudden tide of friends and acquaintances was rather more than I could weather. Although I considered myself chums with the Iron Hammer folks, the closest I got with the guild regulars was matching names to faces.

Even at this early hour, some folks were already plastered, so I danced my way around them as I made for the counter.

“I’ll get straight to the point,” I said. “There’s a job I want you to handle.”

“Cutting to the chase, hm?” The guild receptionist lady smiled wryly.

Hey, I was pretty darn worn out, you know? Besides, it took a while to get here. “I’d like to hire some ten to twenty scouts. They’ll be working in pairs on an investigation.”

“What would you like them to do this time?”

“I can’t say just yet. That’s why I need them to investigate.”

I wasn’t terribly familiar with the other nobles’ territories, even if they did happen to be in the same country. Besides, our relationship with Marquess Kneipp was cordial at best. We weren’t friends by any stretch of the imagination.

The problem was that even though we’d eliminated the immediate threat to the capital, the fourth Demon Commander was alive and in a position to strike back. The capital was not the only area under threat. I’d need to keep a careful eye on the lycanthropes of the wastes of Triot. Ordinarily, the royal family would be calling the shots here, but the prince told me that I could do my own thing as long as my plan was solid.

At minimum, I wanted to get a sense of the geography and population—that is, the public sentiment. But I couldn’t very well send someone from House Zehrfeld to test the waters. That would escalate inter-house tensions. And so I would be commissioning adventurers for the role.

“What do you mean by geography?” asked the receptionist.

“Like the mountains, hills, and basins. Basically, I want to know the lay of the land. But I don’t want it known that they are

investigating at House Zehrfeld's behest."

"Surely it's no secret at this point?"

I couldn't help but wither at the pretty lady's sharp retort. "Well, yes, but I don't suppose you could humor me, just the same?" I wondered if I looked like a mustache-twirling schemer—even though I was only taking necessary precautions to protect myself. A pretty benign reason for scheming, if you asked me.

In any case, my request was borne of a sincere desire to avoid riling up other houses. But even if I were out to cause trouble, the Adventurers' Guild would probably refuse to avoid political entanglements of their own.

I also had something to discuss with the Merchants' Guild, but since I knew that conversation would drag on forever, I gave up on squeezing it into the same day. Even if all I wanted was a status report, the guild would no doubt buffet me with questions till they wrung out all the answers and advice I could give. Just thinking about the growing pile of requests and proposal documents in my study made me heave a mental sigh.

At this point, nothing from my past life would be of much use to the guild. For one thing, I didn't know the finer details of supply and demand in this world. Furthermore, there were quite obviously no antitrust laws, nor were there any trucks or trains to transport goods in bulk. Plus, the powerful guilds had influential nobles running things behind the scenes. Given how frequently commerce and trade bled into politics, I was pretty sure that sticking my head into this business would be biting off more than I could chew.

Anyway, while I was here, I decided to ask one more question. Sadly, it turned out that the Iron Hammer adventurer group was away from the capital. Oh well.

After that, I bought some alcohol in a small ceramic pot, then stopped by the Mercenaries' Guild to leave a message for Goecke before exiting the building. It would have been nice if Goecke were around, so I could wrap things up in one trip, but life was never that convenient.

***

After finishing up at the Adventurers' Guild, I walked to the Blacksmiths' Guild to confer with one of their representatives about making chainmail.

Fun fact: To make chainmail, they forged a bunch of thick metal wires cut to the same length, curled them into rings, and then interlinked them with each other. Exactly the way it was done in Earth's medieval period. The number of rings depended on their size, the manner in which they would be put together, and the wearer's body size. It typically ranged from several thousand to about thirty thousand or so.

Apparently, when the rings were *really* slender, you'd need over a hundred thousand of them. With that many, you'd have to use a rivet or weld the rings together to make them wearable like clothes—a time-consuming task indeed.

The person I spoke to said they had no experience making the item I requested, nor were there any precedents for it. Despite this, they were willing to give it a shot. That was good news. I'd half expected them to call it impossible and turn me down.

As the meeting dragged on, I noticed that the sun had dipped rather low in the sky. Time to call it a day. I excused myself on the grounds of business back at the estate, then left the Blacksmiths' Guild.

On the road, I stopped by a second-hand clothing store and purchased an old cloak. I was just about to leave when it occurred to me to get some worn-out shoes as well. The owner gave me a knowing smile as I handed over the payment, then pointed out a spot where I could get changed. I had mixed feelings about his assumption—apparently, nobles were known to sneak out to enjoy the nightlife incognito. But anyway, once I covered up my whole body, including my face, I ventured into the slums.

It took me a while to find the guy I was looking for. Unsurprising, given I didn't actually know his face. Still, going by what I'd found in written records, I decided to approach a guy sitting on the road, looking for all the world like a beggar.

He glanced at me, though I couldn't see his eyes through his unkempt fringe. Even so, I could tell that he was wary of me. I wondered if his experience on the battlefield had honed his instincts for this sort of thing.

“May I ask for your charity, sir?” he asked.

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

I gave him a few coins and sat beside him. Although he had a bit of an odor, it was nothing compared to the stench of blood on the battlefield. It didn’t bother me.

“What is it?” he asked, after a pause.

“I’m Werner Von Zehrfeld. I want to meet your boss.”

He was on guard the moment he heard my name. Not that I blamed him for it. Normally, you’d have some code word or signal for things like this. It would be weirder if he *didn’t* tense up at someone steamrolling all the usual signals and subtleties.

“What are you talking about?” he answered.

“You don’t have to play dumb. I pretty much get what’s going on. You and the guy with the dark brown hair sit in the same spot every day when you do your beggar shtick. Not the most effective way to do things.”

The children on garbage duty had no filters when it came to their reports. And every day, without fail, the same old scruffy dudes were recorded sitting in the same spots. Guess they weren’t so guarded around children picking up garbage for a bit of coin.

I handed the guy the alcohol I’d bought beforehand and continued, “There’s just something I gotta ask you. As long as I get the answer to that, I’ll forget about everything else. I’m not here to cause you folks any trouble. I’ll even give you some coin. My sword, too, if you want it.”

He remained silent for a while. Then, at last, he said, “Come with me.”

The man stood up, keeping his eyes fixed on my feet. Then he started off, and I followed.

A short walk led us to a surprisingly neat and trim-looking building. There was another guy sitting by the entrance. My guide traded a few words with him, and he glared in my direction—oh, if looks could kill. It was kind of disturbing, really.

“Hand me your sword.”

“Okay.” I didn’t go as far as to say that I only had a sword because I couldn’t very well go around with a *spear*, but in truth, any sort of weapon would rightfully earn you suspicion.

At first glance, the inside of the building looked like a tavern, if one distinctly lacking customers. The guy told me to wait for a bit, presumably to confer with whoever was within. At length, a man emerged from inside and opened the door to the kitchen. The two guys tailed me. Would it kill them to dial down the hostility a notch?

I ventured down the hallway a few more steps before opening a door leading further inside. There, a man rather advanced in years peered at me from over his desk. I was expecting a rough-and-tough guy in his thirties or so, so this came as a bit of a surprise. This old man was the kingpin of the slums—or, I suppose, one of the leaders of the Information Brokers' Guild.

"You are the young Zehrfeld fellow, I take it?"

"My name's Werner. First off, thank you for letting me take up your time."

"How did you come to know of me?"

"Sorry, but that's a secret."

Half of it was stuff I knew from my old world. Pick any country, and you'd find thieves and beggars banding together for mutual benefit. In a tabletop RPG, this would be the Thieves' Guild or something. Maybe it was this world's equivalent of the yakuza or mafia, and this guy's grandchild or successor would eventually take over.

"Anyway," I said, "I'm surprised that you were willing to meet with me."

"I heard your name from Feli. I have also heard from *our* young ones that you have done some good."

Looked like he knew of me from when I employed refugees and slum residents for the aqueduct construction project. Plus, there were adventurers and scouts who came from that sort of background, including Feli. Since Feli apparently had nice things to say about me, I wasn't going to kick up a fuss when he dolloped the sugar in his tea. Looked like I'd succeeded in laying the groundwork for this encounter, even if it had been unintentional.

"Besides," he went on, studying my worn-out shoes, "you appear to be no amateur."

The man who guided me here had done the same thing. It seemed I'd earned some esteem by using more than just an old

cloak to disguise myself. Who would have thought that those TV shows where people had their cover blown ’cause of their shoes would come in handy? You never know what sort of things you’ll find useful someday.


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“So what do you wish to ask?” asked the old man.

“I’m looking for someone, you see.”

I described Pückler’s appearance and explained that he was the one behind the disturbance at the palace. I left it at that—their side was bound to do their own digging. Although a tell-all approach might make me seem more trustworthy, there was the chance they would take me for a loose-lipped fool instead. Honestly, it was hard for me to toe the line. I decided that as long as they kept an eye out for someone of Pückler’s age and appearance, that was good enough for me.

And given that the best place to hide a tree was in a forest, then it stood to reason that someone—or some*thing* in human form—could be concealed in the slums. If they weren’t around, then it was reasonable to assume that a lackey had taken the black jewel and run off. I had to narrow down the possibilities.

“If they’re dead, that’s all well and good,” I said, “and if they’re alive, you don’t have to tail them. But if left alone, this individual could wreak havoc on the entire capital. I want to trace their steps, at least.”

“I cannot give you an answer right away.”

“Of course. Just let me know if you find out something. You’ve got connections in the Adventurers’ Guild, right? Just leave a message there. Here’s the fee.” I piled a hefty sum of money on the table.

The old man stared at it silently, before he said, “I did not say that I accept.”

“If you weren’t game, you’d tell me to take my money and piss off.”

“You are a strange one.”

“I get that a lot.”

Well, people didn’t often say it directly to my face. I just thought that he would be more inclined to trust me if I paid him up front. I understood well enough that these guys found it difficult to trust the aristocracy. Then again, there were plenty of nobles who thought people like this were fishy, so I guess it went both ways.

“How rare it is to see a nobleman who doesn’t look down on us. Not to the extent you do. Very well, then. My name is Bert.”

“I’m Werner Von Zehrfeld. Pleasure doing business with you.”

“You two, see Lord Werner outside. No funny business.”

I guessed I should take this to mean that I’d earned his trust for now. They gave my sword back to me as I stepped outside. Although I tried to keep my expression even, my stomach was churning. Maybe I should thank my experiences on the battlefield for giving me the power to endure all that silent pressure. Back in my student days, at least, something like that would’ve wrecked me.

That evening, I spent the time with Lily. As I went over her diagrams, picking out points for revision, a visitor came to call on my father. For some reason, they wanted to see me too—and Lily as well.

The two of us exchanged quizzical looks. I left it to Frenssen to organize the documents, and headed for the reception room where our guest, whoever they were, was waiting for us.

“I extend my deepest apologies,” said Count Witthöft, head bowed low.

“I must humbly ask for your forgiveness, Sir Viscount.” The other visitor, who seemed to be the captain of the count’s personal army, followed suit. “And from the Harting family as well.”

Er, uh…I’d never interacted with the head of this house before. I was pretty sure that he belonged to a different faction from my father. He and the knight at his side were very attractive older gentlemen indeed. His features were in the upper percentile, yadda yadda. Before I knew it, I was zoning out.

“Um, first of all, could you please raise your heads?” I asked.

Mazel’s parents and sister were looking very flustered, you know? This conversation wouldn’t get anywhere until the guys picked their faces up from the floor.

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“Lord Erdoğan, could you start by explaining yourself?” my father said.

“Ah, yes, of course.” The two men finally raised their heads.

So the head of House Witthöft was named Erdoğan, huh? Wait, more to the point, him bowing to me and my father was one thing, but for him to extend that courtesy to a family of commoners was quite another. I could more or less see where this was going.

Judging by his tone, my father seemed to have worked out what prompted this. It was pretty obtuse of him to make the other guy spell it all out.

Incidentally, my father and I were seated, while Lord Erdoğan and his knight captain were at the other side of the guest table. Mazel’s family, including Lily, were standing. They may have been the ones receiving the apology, but they were still commoners. Not exactly what I’d call a fair arrangement.

“You see, Arlea Village lies within House Witthöft’s territory,” said Lord Erdoğan. “However, in recent years, we delegated its management to a deputy official. The result is as you have witnessed. I would like to apologize for the grievances our house has caused to the viscount and the esteemed Hero’s family.”

It was…hard to decide just how to respond to the groveling of an elder, let alone one belonging to the nobility. Mazel’s parents looked as if their brains had fried.

Given how profusely he was apologizing, the count must have been thoroughly upbraided by someone pretty high up the ladder. Just thinking about it made me want to skitter into a hole. The only person who seemed unperturbed by all this was my father. The atmosphere inside the room was kind of uncanny, in a way.

“So, um, how did that deputy handle the incident?” I asked.

Lord Erdoğan hesitated and threw a glance at his knight captain.

“Well…” began the knight captain.

He appeared to be the oldest person in the room. He had sharp, masculine features, which made him look less like a knight and more like a seasoned martial artist or adventurer. But that stout face of his seemed strangely subdued, and I got the

impression of an athlete at an emergency press conference, apologizing for some controversy or other.

"As a matter of fact, the chief of Arlea Village is my father."

A shocking statement. I glanced at Mazel's family. This must have been news to Lily, but her parents appeared to be acquainted with the knight captain. Their expressions were uncomfortable in a way that was difficult to put in words.

The man, Sir Heiner, went on to explain that he was indeed captain of the Witthöft knights and son of Arlea's village chief. Naturally, that meant he had been born in Arlea, but had left in his youth to serve the count. Mazel's parents, Ari and Anna, were apparently familiar with him.

"I do not mean to boast," Heiner said, "but I was told that I possessed some small fighting talent. When the opportunity to become a knight presented itself to me, I was able to advance beyond my humble station."

He probably possessed some kind of skill. Regardless, going from commoner to the captain of a noble house's knights was one hell of a level-up—an aberration, even. That in itself was a testament to his efforts. Honestly, I wouldn't have been surprised if he was the subject of admiration and envy.

"However, that caused complications between my father and the deputy official."

If I had to guess, I'd assume the deputy official started deferring to Arlea's chief. Having ascended from commoner to captain of the knights, Sir Heiner must've won Lord Erdoğan's favor, if not his predecessor's. In that situation, the deputy official simply couldn't afford to upset the father of a man in House Witthöft's good graces.

Or maybe Sir Heiner had married a woman from House Witthöft, perhaps from a branch family. Not that I intended to stick my nose into another house's business.

And then Sir Heiner's father, the village chief, mistook the deputy's deference toward the house as something else entirely. Which ultimately led to...

"My father...the village chief...did not pay his taxes. As shameful as it is to admit, I failed to notice this state of affairs."

“I, too, share the blame for leaving everything to the deputy. I am deeply sorry.”

With that, the two men once again bowed their heads in unison. I got the gist of the situation. Judging by their expressions, Mazel’s parents seemed to have some other bone to pick, but it was probably for the best to leave it there for now.

“Allow me to present this as a token of my heartfelt apologies. I hope that you can accept it.” Sir Heiner placed a box on the table and opened it, revealing a pouch and a sheaf of paper wrapped up in a cylinder. He presented the letter to me first.

It would have been uncouth for him to give a gift of money or goods directly to me, a nobleman. The letter served as a sign of apology, as well as more substantial reparations.

On the other hand, he had no qualms about giving physical gifts to the commoners—although it was less of a *gift* and more like a pouch full of money. The idea was that commoners should shut up and be grateful for getting something tangible. Admittedly, this was typical for the aristocrats of this world.

“This letter is a promissory note for Lord Werner. The pouch is for the Harting family.”

“Will the village chief and deputy be punished?” I asked before taking the gift.

Honestly, I wasn’t going to consider this matter resolved until I got my answer. A village chief was small fry from a nobleman’s perspective, but that didn’t mean we could simply let him off with a slap on the wrist. I tried to channel that sentiment into my gaze.

It was Lord Erdoğan who answered. “Both of them shall be duly punished, of course. The village chief has been sentenced to hard labor in Markkdea Mines, and that’s before accounting for his disparaging comments regarding the royal family. The deputy official has been stripped of office, and now serves as a stable hand. Both are long-term sentences. The villagers who participated in violence will be tasked with maintaining peace and order for a while.”

My, oh my. From a certain perspective, these guys were practically hanging their heads in shame. Lord Erdoğan had to be

pretty pissed off, but you could also interpret this as him throwing the elder Heiner under the bus to protect House Witthöft. He was pretty much obliged to announce some kind of punishment after receiving a reprimand from a higher authority.

By “long-term,” he meant that the offenders would be bound to their current stations for a matter of years at the very least. The duration wasn’t set in stone, but it was usually about a decade, and never shorter than five years. And in this case, they wouldn’t even let the guys quit. It all depended on where they were assigned to work, but it was essentially slavery. In fact, people who were literal slaves in this world might just have had it easier.

Labor in the mines didn’t necessarily mean working the earth or stone. You cooked, cleaned, did laundry, and handled other menial tasks to support the laborers. Normally, it was a role reserved for lower-class people. To put it in perspective, if you were the sort of person a village chief might task with such work, you wouldn’t be in a position to refuse.

If my memory served, the Markkdea Mines were a prime destination for brigands and felons. If you were going to work there for years on end, then you were almost better off being cast out of the village outright. In my mind’s eye, I saw the village chief getting pushed around by convicted murderers—er, fellow laborers. Considering his personality, I wondered how much he’d be able to put up with it. He could very well meet an “accidental death” at the hands of his colleagues sooner rather than later.

As for the deputy official, becoming a stable hand was a *drastic* demotion. To use an analogy from my old world, it was like going from a branch manager to a rank-and-file employee. No, actually, his livelihood was bound to take an even bigger hit. A lot of deputies practically ran a side business with all the bribes they took.

Stable hands generally lived in the stables themselves. They were even lower in the hierarchy than carriage drivers. An easy way to understand it was this: If a lowborn person aspired to be a deputy, then becoming a stable hand would be their very first step in building goodwill with a noble house.

I got the feeling that Lord Erdoğan was venting his anger on them. In my old world, the equivalent would be the Labour Standards Bureau suddenly sticking its nose into an HR problem.

A nobleman would probably get away with it, but that was beside the point here.

Finally, “maintaining peace and order” might sound vague, but it actually had pretty predictable implications. The villagers in question would be maintaining the roads around the village. They would have to take responsibility for cleaning up any trees blocking the way and whatnot.

The big problem was that in this world, the wilderness was filled not just with animals, but with monsters. Considering that your average person was only capable of fighting the weakest monsters around the capital…they risked their lives if they weren’t being careful.

Under ordinary circumstances, a fief lord would want to avoid civilian casualties. If monsters showed up, then the villagers would ask for the lord’s help or hire adventurers. But this was a punishment, so the villagers in question would have to take the risk. Defenders of public safety took responsibility for themselves and, in the worst-case scenario, eliminated threats at the risk of their own lives. Contrary to how the words sounded, it was quite a harsh punishment in this world.

“Also, regarding everyone in the Harting family…” Lord Erdoğan deliberately shifted his gaze to Mazel’s family, standing behind me and my father. Then, with an expression that could only be described as a sly grin, he said, “Arlea Village is part of House Witthöft’s territory, and the Harting family are residents of Arlea. I must take responsibility for the disturbance. No longer shall they impose upon House Zehrfeld. For as long as they remain in the capital, House Witthöft shall take the family under its care.”

Hoo boy, here we go.

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I understood his logic to a point.

Immigration was a finicky business in my old world due to poll tax. This world, however, had adventurers roaming all over the place, so packing up and settling somewhere else wasn’t as hard as it was in Earth’s Middle Ages. Occasionally, an adventurer and a

villager got cozy, and the adventurer suddenly moved in with their spouse. Because of this, the guilds had become quite adept at tracking addresses and residences.

Also, it wasn't unheard of for a powerful monster to destroy entire villages. In many cases, it was possible to move to a different residence by filing a bit of paperwork and paying an immigration tax. If you were moving to somewhere within the same fief, all you needed was verbal approval, as crazy as that sounds.

Thus, the commoners of this world possessed freedom of movement to a degree. Still, it was pretty rare for people to change residences. Putting aside major upheavals like a monster attack, people didn't normally see the need—hence Lord Erdoğan's proposal.

Even as he spoke of taking responsibility, however, he clearly had another goal in mind. For him, it was a way of getting hold of Mazel's family as a bargaining chip. Even if he failed, it was no skin off his nose, but you really had to hand it to the nobility. They could say the most brazen things without batting an eyelid.

Behind me, I could sense someone holding their breath.

"Is our house unreliable in your eyes?" I asked.

"That was not my meaning at all, Lord Werner. I am merely saying that, as a fellow count and equal in peerage, my house will shoulder responsibility for the disturbance. After all, the problem arose on our territory."

This coot had a polished smile, I'll give him that much. It was a bit rich of him to speak of responsibility when the whole problem happened because *he* shirked his duties.

I understood that the nobility wouldn't scrutinize an obscure little village very closely. After all, the speed at which information traveled was completely different from the era I once lived in. Getting from a remote mountain town to the fief's main city typically took several days. This world, much like Earth's medieval times, had deputy officials for that very reason.

But that was beside the point. It occurred to me that nobles really *could* be this shameless. Or maybe the Witthöft territory bred this sort of audacity. Whichever it was, the current situation

suggested that the crown's measures to secure the Zehrfeld mansion had been sufficiently discreet after all.

"Well, it is best to ask the Harting family what they think," said Lord Erdoğan. "Care to share your thoughts, my good fellows?"

His aristocratic arrogance was on full display. A commoner couldn't possibly say no to a nobleman's oh so generous offer. As characteristic as it was for a nobleman, this was still an underhanded move. The way he steered the conversation was aggravating for sure, but what pissed me off the most was that smug grin on his face. Just when I was considering snapping back at Lord Erdoğan, my father broke his silence.

"Lord Erdoğan," he said, "you are suggesting this to the wrong people."

The head of House Witthöft turned an icy look in my father's direction. "What do you mean, Lord Ingo?"

My father, however, was unruffled. Calmly, he took a sip of his tea. "His Highness the Crown Prince asked for House Zehrfeld to provide for the Harting family," he said.

"In that case, House Witthöft will make a request to the prince," I continued. "But I am sure that we can settle this issue cordially, like men."

"Let me finish." My father shot me a look, warning me not to butt in. I sat back down obediently. "House Zehrfeld indeed acted upon His Highness's request. However, it is not my personage that is responsible for the Harting family whilst they reside in the capital, but Duke Seyfert."

"Excuse me?"

"I see that word has not yet reached your ears. Duke Seyfert was supposed to take the family under his care, but he was occupied at Finoy. In the meantime, His Highness asked Zehrfeld to provide in the duke's stead."

Lord Erdoğan paled instantly. He must have thought that taking Mazel's family away from the Zehrfelds was just a matter of graciously shouldering the responsibility—not a question of trust at all.

But if the Zehrfelds weren't directly responsible for Mazel's family, that changed things entirely. With House Zehrfeld acting as

a stand-in, his actions could be construed as a challenge: “Are you saying that the royal family’s chosen representative is untrustworthy?” It was different from requesting that the responsibility be transferred to House Witthöft. As a matter of fact, this was the first I’d heard of Duke Seyfert being in charge.

“I also requested Duke Gründing’s assistance some days ago,” my father continued. “I thought that it would be difficult for our house alone to meet the demands of the task, you see. The duke has expressed no issues with our house’s service, though he has readily consented to offering his advice when necessary.”

Oh, this wasn’t even a fight. If the head of the queen’s house stood behind us, then there was no way in hell anyone else could request a switch. Even if, say, Lord Erdoğan had a trick up his sleeve to persuade the prince, not even royalty could rescind the duke’s endorsement so easily.

In fact, our house could easily consult with the duke about this very conversation. Given that the duke had expressly stated that he saw no issue with us, I could imagine how he would react if we told him, “Another house asserts it would be a more suitable steward than us.” This would have a direct impact on House Witthöft’s reputation, given that they tried to snipe the Zehrfelds’ position. In practice, House Witthöft was essentially questioning the royal family’s judgment.

After I thought all of this through, I came to a realization: They must have anticipated this would happen. It was all according to plan, in a way.

The kingdom definitely chose not to publicize the fact that Duke Seyfert was in charge of the Harting family. This was because, even though an important minister belonged to House Zehrfeld, there would be other noble houses trying to strong-arm their way into the position. Much like how the battle at Finoy had screened the nobles for any who had untoward designs on Laura, the royal family was using this setup to flush out those who might exploit Mazel to further their own ambitions.

This also explained why my father chose to make Lily a parlormaid. It was to make her stand out, as if to declare that this was the home of the Hero’s family. Keeping her in the mansion would ensure her safety and well-being, but it also set her up as

bait, so to speak. As much as I understood the crown's reasons for this ploy, it totally pissed me off.

This prompted another thought. Until just a few moments ago, Lord Erdoğan had been looking all smug. That riled me up, but now that I thought through it, provoking me must have been part of his plan. I'd made a mistake by falling for his bait.

Meanwhile, my father had kept the bigger picture out of sight. He'd even set things up with Duke Gründing as a form of insurance. Even then, he didn't argue back. Instead, he'd let Lord Erdoğan show his hand. And by using his house's position as leverage to take the Hartings from their royally appointed stewards, Lord Erdoğan had spun the very rope by which he would hang. Later, my father could relay the incriminating conversation to the duke under the pretext of "asking for advice."

And even now, he hadn't said a word about the fact that the Royal Guard was involved with us. He could have mentioned that the kingdom had arranged a whole security system to protect the Hero's family, but he kept that fact up his sleeve in case he needed to deploy it elsewhere. This was how the aristocracy fought their battles.

Lord Erdoğan must have realized by now that he'd been bested, but there wasn't much he could do other than curse his mistakes. After all, he'd screwed up by not confirming for himself who was in charge, and he couldn't make an open request for a change of hands. He would just have to keep quiet about everything, including the fact that Duke Seyfert was responsible for the Hartings.

The prince had set the stage, and my father played his part. Now I was watching Lord Erdoğan dance to their tune. I suppose they saw this as on-the-job training for me, and Lord Erdoğan as a demonstrative case study. Not that anybody had ever taught me about these methods. Still, my father clearly wanted to drive home the point that I'd need to understand this in the future.

I wondered if Duke Gründing involved himself in this as a way of paying me back for Finoy, specifically where Laura was concerned. Losing custody of the Harting family would have been a blow to our prestige. People would say that we were unable to protect the commoners to a satisfactory level, for instance.

Or maybe it was the other way around. Perhaps my father had taken advantage of Duke Gründing's high opinion of me. The duke could hardly reject our house after commending me publicly.

Whether it was the duke's or my father's doing, I couldn't say, but there was no doubt in my mind that my presence factored into this. My father pulled out all the stops to demonstrate that *this* was what it took to become a minister.

After that, Lord Erdoğan and his knight captain grumbled about this and that, but they eventually yielded with no further propositions. They left their apology gifts, but looking at it cynically, you could say that they were leaving an open invitation for us to reciprocate with our own gifts in the future.

Such thoughts ran through my mind as I saw them to the door. Norbert and the other servants, who were standing by outside the guest room, extended the proper courtesy to them as they left. Among the Harting family, only Lily joined us—and solely to fulfill her duty as a parlormaid. At this point in time, Ari and his wife weren't of high enough standing to see off guests.

As the count's carriage disappeared from view, I let out a sigh. "I'm sorry, Father."

It was a fact that I'd fallen for Lord Erdoğan's provocations. I decided to apologize, even if it didn't wash away my bitter dissatisfaction.

"Werner, anger is another weapon to the nobility. However, to let emotion blind you would be like grasping a blade with your bare hands. Master your emotions."

"Yes, Father."

I stewed in self-reproach as we returned to the reception room. There, we found Ari and his wife waiting for us, fidgeting uncomfortably.

"Sir Count, you have done so much for us…"

"You needn't worry yourselves over it. However, if you would prefer Lord Erdoğan's hospitality, then I can make arrangements for you."

"No, I'd like to remain here as long as that's not any trouble," Ari answered promptly.

Really? We were pretty annoying as far as aristocrats went. Well, “annoying” in this case was a matter of perspective.

Aristocrats came in all sorts. Some treated their servants violently, but my father, as Minister of Ceremonies, held our house to a higher standard, as was our custom. Public rites and ceremonies were our purview; vicious behavior would only bring shame and disrepute to our family name. For that reason, we would never treat our employees with unnecessary harshness.

Being a minister, my father also had some financial leeway, so the salaries were decent. Working for us was probably a pretty good deal. Besides, judging by how tense Ari and Anna had looked earlier, they didn’t appear to think too highly of Sir Heiner.

The thought suddenly occurred to me that maybe Sir Heiner was fated to perish at the Demon Stampede. Without his son’s backing, the village chief would have lost his clout. Then, after Mazel saved Laura at Finoy, the villagers would have flipped their attitude toward his family. This was all speculation, but it sounded about right to me.

“Very well,” my father said. “You may take the gifts Lord Erdoğan left for you as an apology.”

“W-well, about that,” said Ari. “We can’t possibly take such a large sum of money…”

In my old world, it was like someone flashing a giant wad of cash in front of you, so I understood his hesitancy. But I also felt like it was pretty stingy as far as compensation went. Not that I could say that aloud, considering how differently we estimated the worth of things. Or maybe Lord Erdoğan planned to give them even more money after the deal was done. That way, he would have them wholly in the palm of his hand.

“I see. Then Werner, I will leave this for you to keep hold of.”

“Whaaa—?” I blurted out.

No, seriously, why me?

My father, however, didn’t seem particularly bothered. “Consider it safekeeping until you can discuss things with young Mazel again.”

“All right.”

When he put it that way, I couldn't refuse. This definitely was something that needed Mazel's input. I wasn't planning on spending the money, so I just shrugged and decided to hold onto it as I was bidden.

That said, the Hero's party was absolutely loaded in the late game because they didn't have anything to spend on except lodging at inns. By the time Mazel returned, this pouch would be chump change to him.

"Do you consent to this?" I asked Mazel's family.

They all responded by bowing their heads. "Yes, by all means."

On an unrelated note, I felt weird about speaking so unceremoniously to a friend's father, thanks to my past life. Thinking about it, most of my friends in this world came from fellow noble families, so I was generally deferential to their parents.

It seemed that my father was using the Harting family to teach me how I was supposed to interact with commoners. Perhaps that wasn't his sole intention, but it was definitely one of his goals.

Come to think of it, my financial sensibilities were those of a noble's. But if I didn't understand a commoner's point of view, then I risked creating overinflated budgets when I took over the fief. This reminded me that Mazel was weirdly levelheaded about this kind of thing. You didn't come across people like him every day.

People in most walks of life would be shaken at the sight of this much money. I filed this observation away in the back of my mind. My father didn't waste a single opportunity to teach a necessary lesson.

"Then I will safekeep this for now," I announced to the family.

"Yes, please do," they replied, looking relieved more than anything. I marveled at how these people could trust me so unconditionally.

I returned to my study with a vague, sinking feeling in my stomach and Lily following at my heels.

"Thank you, Master Werner," she said softly behind me.

“I didn’t do anything in the end.”

The only thing I *actually* accomplished was losing my temper. You could definitely interpret this as a blunder.

But Lily gave me a small smile. “But I was still grateful,” she went on. “You stood up for us. You wouldn’t have let those other nobles take us away.”

“Ah…”

I didn’t know how to react. I did get the impression that they would have a better time of things here compared to over there. Judging by Ari and his wife’s reaction, they had an unpleasant history with those two, at least. Not that I intended to pry.

“W-well, if you say so. Looking forward to working with you.”

“Absolutely.” She nodded with a bright smile.

It was hard to believe that she was already so attached to this place. Well, if that’s how it was going to be, I had to steel my resolve.

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“How was he, darling?” asked Claudia, Ingo’s wife, when the guests had gone home and Ingo was back in his personal chambers.

“He showed some rare anger when he realized how Lily fit into all this,” Ingo responded with a light chuckle as he changed into his casual attire.

Claudia sighed. “It pains me to see the boy grow up that way.”

“They turn out that way sometimes. I just did not think it would happen at our house.”

As a matter of fact, people like Werner—who cared strangely little about their reputation and ambition, and instead engrossed themselves in their personal pursuits—sometimes cropped up in noble houses.

Aristocrats were supposed to be rulers and politicians. In their world, people who were indifferent to that calling were the anomalies, but the intelligent and discerning ones had their uses.

Although the court wouldn't have a high opinion of them, they could at least serve as patrons to artists.

"He's an unlucky boy, in a sense," said Ingo.

"Alas, he is..."

The two of them couldn't help but frown uncomfortably. Werner might have become an excellent aide to his older brother in another time and place. Unfortunately, his brother's passing meant that he now had to inherit leadership of the house.

A degree of detachment from wealth could be seen as admirable, if not simply quirky. Still, it ill-suited the head of a noble house. Werner was fortunate in the sense that his parents recognized his skills and achievements. At the same time, they saw the massive gap between the way he saw himself and the way that others did.

For all his experience with eccentrics and iconoclasts among the nobility, not even Ingo could fathom the inner workings of Werner's mind. Regardless of how effectively his son was to put his ideas into practice, Ingo found it vexing that Werner failed to see his own worth and, moreover, refused to demand the compensation his efforts deserved. At his age, a little self-interest was to be expected. Instead, he acted like an artist obsessed with perfection to the exclusion of all else.

The truth, of course, was that Werner only appeared to lack ambition because he was fixated on the specter of his death. Only he knew that the Demon army was fated to march upon the capital. To him, reputation and wealth were pointless, when death could sweep it all away in an instant. Yet because he had never discussed his priorities with anyone, the way he saw himself and the way others saw him could never align. To make matters worse, Werner himself failed to realize the discrepancy because he had never learned to adopt a noble's perspective. He would never be on others' wavelengths.

Nevertheless, Ingo noticed that Werner had his exceptions.

"Still, he does show a genuine desire to apply himself for the sake of others. He demonstrates that attitude toward Mazel, the Hero."

Werner shared this trait with plenty of noble dilettantes. People of that sort went beyond merely appreciating art, often

funding painters, musicians, and other such individuals to nurture their talents. Freed from financial worries, the artists could devote themselves to their careers. Many would become luminaries, shaping the sensibilities of their time and developing entire schools of art.

Ingo, however, knew that Werner had no sense for the arts, which meant that he was unlikely to become such a patron.

More to the point, the civil officials of this world suffered from a poor reputation. As Lord Erdoğan had demonstrated earlier that day, even a fellow count could treat them as if their opinions were worth dirt. Such interactions were emblematic of relations between the martial and bureaucratic houses.

Werner may have distinguished himself on the battlefield, but it would take at least a decade—likely much longer—for that reputation to extend to House Zehrfeld as a whole. Until then, the other houses would continue to look down on them. Given Werner's lack of ambition, some houses might even attempt to use him for their own benefit.

Thus, what Werner needed right now was a reason to take himself seriously on the political stage. Ingo understood that all too well—it was the reason he accepted the royal family's suggestion to make use of Lily.

Although there were certainly political reasons behind this move, Ingo thought it prudent to challenge Werner's outlook. Lily saw Werner as an individual, heedless of social standing. By influencing her, it was possible to influence him. This was necessary to mold the heir of House Zehrfeld into the next count.

Unusually for his age, Werner displayed very little antagonism toward people who threatened his ego. Even when he was disgruntled, he rarely gave way to anger. The fact that he *did* get angry on this occasion was, if anything, a welcome change.

"The first time he brought Mazel around, I wondered what he was thinking," Claudia remarked.

Even if he did bear the Heroism skill, Mazel was still a commoner. When Werner introduced Mazel as his friend, Claudia wondered if Mazel was there to pay a courtesy call to Zehrfeld's knights. This was well before the Demon Lord's resurrection, so it was only natural for a count's wife to think this way.

Ironically, the Hero was so important nowadays that Claudia found herself pulling back from high society so as not to jeopardize her house's relationship with him. She was partly motivated, of course, by the thought that she could call on his help if her fief came under threat from monsters.

"He's always been lucky about striking up connections with the right people," said Ingo. "It's much more common to be regarded as a threat if you stand near the top, unless you're the crown prince himself. Speaking of which, how fares the Harting family?"

"I cannot say that they have fully adjusted," Claudia said, "but they are eager to learn."

It happened in some noble houses that the lady of the house held more sway than the lord. In general, of course, the matriarch of the house was in charge of the servants and responsible for their training and education. Such was Claudia's relationship with the Harting family.

In this case, however, she wasn't just tasked with training them to serve the nobility. She was also equipping them with the necessary knowledge to manage servants of their own. She found the arrangement rather peculiar.

"Keep it up, my dear," said Ingo.

"Yes, of course. Upon this house's honor, I intend to teach them everything you have asked. But I do have to wonder—is this really something they *must* know?" Claudia asked. Her curiosity was genuine, free of malice or condescension.

Ingo chuckled lightly in response. "You mustn't forget what happens when one is made a peer. Who better to impart such knowledge than those who carry out the ceremonies?"

When a commoner family gained peerage, how would their case be handled? If anyone knew the procedures and precedents for such cases, it was Ingo, the Minister of Ceremonies. In that sense, Ingo's choice to shelter the Harting family and flush out opportunistic nobles wasn't without any expectation of a reward.

After defeating two Demon Commanders, Mazel would no doubt be made a peer. As a burgeoning noble family, the Hartings still lacked a go-between with the court other than the Zehrfelds.

Considering their long-term prospects, the Zehrfelds had a lot to gain from this relationship.

Claudia grimaced slightly at her husband's response. "You're a wily one, darling."

"A minister without wiles has never existed in this kingdom's history." Ingo laughed.

He left it unsaid that his own son was lacking in those very wiles.

Chapter 2:
Those Who Scheme
~Conspiracy and Response~

THE NEXT DAY AND THE DAY AFTER, I BURIED myself in paperwork. My father was apparently busy with his duties as minister, which meant that I got saddled with attending to the martial matters. Um, was now a good time to mention that I was technically still just a student?

One might be tempted to ask, *"Does a Minister of Ceremonies always have such a packed schedule?"* You see, whenever there was an incident, people would organize an exorcism or purification ritual (as they called it in my old world) at the scene. While I couldn't tell you whether these actually solved the issue, I guess they at least put people's minds at ease.

Thus, my father's role as a statesman involved overseeing the people who organized religious rites. Right from the very start of the day, people were constantly coming and going from his office. Meanwhile, all the administrative work related to the recent battle at Finoy wound up going to me. Well, to be fair, since I did technically have my own peerage, I *was* in the position to oversee that stuff.

I handed off about half of the Finoy-related paperwork to other people. I paired Orgen with Schünzel, and Barkey with Neurath, so that the senior in each pair could show the junior staff the ropes. I let the groups take turns so that they could have time off every other day. The combination of Finoy *and* Arlea Village meant that there was an absolute ton of things to get through, so I had to give them proper breaks.

I had Max serve as an advisor for my own work. If there was anything I didn't understand, I either shot him a question or threw the problem at him entirely. If I tried to tackle everything by myself, the work would never end. I could use the time I saved to double-check things at the end.

The biggest priorities were compensating the families of the dead or wounded, paying out the bonuses to the knights who distinguished themselves in battle, and so on. It was important in every world to reward and punish appropriately. In addition to

such straightforward remuneration, I had to offset the costs of treating our injured horses and so forth.

There was also the matter of paying for the disposable goods. Given that the merchants were eager to maintain a business relationship, I could trust them not to falsify their receipts or anything. That didn't necessarily mean that it was easy for me to swallow the numbers on the pages. Items purchased on the battlefield tended to be sold at inflated prices, so I had my work cut out for me cross-checking all the figures.

The annoying thing here was that if we *didn't* pay those pumped up prices, people would accuse us of pinching pennies, which wouldn't do for the nobility. It was important to figure out a compromise. Generally speaking, I wouldn't blacklist someone over a single infraction, but I would put them on a list of vendors to keep an eye out for.

"Ugh...this is so tedious."

Some purchases on the battlefield were snap decisions, which meant that they didn't follow a uniform template. I had to check dozens upon dozens of pages, written in a smattering of different formats. During the chaos, I had to use a piece of cloth as a permission slip for activating the Skywalk Boots—some of the receipts were in a similar state.

The biggest pain in the ass, incidentally, was when the person who authorized the purchase didn't return from the battlefield. There was no tangible proof that the purchase actually happened. You either had to take the seller's word for it or launch a full-blown audit. It sometimes took days on end to resolve a single dispute. I made some decent progress through the paperwork, though it felt like grappling with a mountain.

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During the daytime hours, I worked at the palace on what you might call "state business." Back at the mansion, it was time for "fief business"—looking over documents addressed from our house's territory.

With the limited options for communication in this world, it took a while to get a response to just a single order. In that sense,

things differed from modern Japan. Correspondence about something from a month ago would often pop up out of nowhere. Sometimes, depending on the instructions, even a month would be a surprisingly short time to wait for a response.

People would be scratching their heads over a problem for the days it took days to arrive. This meant that you had to anticipate every possible problem ahead of time and plan for it. Sure, it was pretty dry and tedious, like looking over the deputy official's work or double-checking the fief's security, taxes, and legal resolutions. Still, you had to do it.

On that note, specific ministerial duties aside, the work of the nobility generally focused on one of two spheres: their territory and the kingdom at large. Both were technically in service of the kingdom but juggling them was fairly tricky. Generally, people handled matters pertaining to the kingdom at the palace, while at their mansions they focused on tasks related to their fiefs.

It would be nice if there was a clear boundary between the two roles, but things were rarely so straightforward. For example: maintaining bridges or roads that span territories, moving your exports through another house's lands, securing safe passage and accommodation for travelers in your employ. All of these would require you to go to the palace to meet with other nobles.

The sheer amount of human labor involved in transport work presented some logistical challenges. Between the drivers and their guards, getting a wagon train of produce from one point to another required dozens of people. Figuring out which towns those people would lodge at was important work for a local deputy official. If folks from a neighboring fief started bitching that a caravan of foreigners was eating up all their food, it wouldn't just be the deputy's problem—their lord's reputation would be at stake.

So whenever you were organizing one of those large-scale transportation efforts, you would have to submit an itinerary to the other noble houses, which they would then use to allocate resources to the towns along the transport route. You didn't need to detail every last point, but you really wanted to avoid not having *enough* information.

It went both ways. If another noble house wanted to transport their goods, they would have to go through us. Much like the Middle Ages of my old world, the lord would have to take responsibility if another lord's people got waylaid within their fief. Keeping the peace was important.

You also had to keep a close watch to ensure there weren't any parasites raising the taxes right under your nose. Normally, it was the deputy's job to check, but since I was trying to evaluate their performance, I had to bite the bullet and double-check all the documents. I had to make sure that nobody was slacking on the job or fudging the numbers, a very tedious process indeed.

Speaking of which, I just about reached the age where I could handle the fief's administrative responsibilities with the help of an advisor. In houses where the children were very young, the lord's brother or wife might assume the heirs' responsibilities for a time. So if you thought about it, it was essential that a nobleman's wife have the skills and knowledge to handle the basics of a lord's affairs. People in my old world often assumed that noblewomen hardly ever participated in the administration, but that wasn't the case here.

Another common myth in my old world was that medieval women were uneducated. Although that was true depending on your criteria for "educated," the primary sources were sparse because women were under-acknowledged in society. For example, in the fourteenth century, a count's last will named his daughter as a legatee of his book. England, during the same period, saw the rise of duchesses. Women were receiving their due.

Anyway, putting the topic of women's rights aside, I had my hands full with the deputy's reports on agriculture and livestock yields. Other reports focused on monster sightings. I wrote up some suggestions for handling the situations they described. I had to consider how best to respond to areas under threat: Should we use the house's funds to hire adventurers and mercenaries, or should we dispatch the fief's knights and soldiers?

Since my father would make the final decision, the most I could do was write up a tentative proposal. Yet the dangers escalated with each passing day, making it hard to judge the best path forward. In the end, I drafted two documents: one proposed

“Send X number of people from the knight brigade to slay the monsters,” and the other, “We will provide X amount of coins from the fief’s budget to hire mercenaries or adventurers.” My father could sign whichever he thought the better choice.

Since the situation could change drastically before the instructions even arrived, I had to stay on top of the paperwork every single day. With Norbert’s helpful voice in my ear, I wrote up over ten documents a day. I made sure that each one followed a clear, standard format so that all I really had to do was fill out the “amount in funds” or “number of personnel” columns and scrawl my signature at the end of it all.

There was still some time before I could test this template out on a wider scale, though. I wouldn’t want unsigned documents to end up in the hands of a deputy or civil official with a penchant for fudging numbers.

When that was done, it was finally time for me to attend to personal business. I picked up the daily report from the orphanage, detailing its town cleanup efforts and the *other* business it was doing. With a groan, I attempted to decipher the writing.

Sadly, “decipher” was quite literal. The knight apprentices and guards wrote perfectly legible reports—not so much the children who were still learning their letters. Their penmanship was basically encryption. Still, I didn’t want their information to go to waste, so I hunkered down with a lamp. I was the one who’d insisted these reports would be good writing practice for the kids. Hadn’t expected it would come back to bite me in the ass like this.

Every day, Frenssen organized the reports by block. If I could just have him summarize their contents for me, that’d be great—but the way he was groaning while he squinted at the scribbles, I figured that wasn’t happening. Oh well.

Man, all this reading was bound to wreck my eyesight sooner rather than later. And in a world without glasses, that was something I’d rather avoid. Maybe potions worked on nearsightedness and age-related wear and tear? Not that I’d heard anything to suggest that was true.

“Master Werner, I’ve brought you some tea.” As pointless thoughts clouded my mind, Lily’s voice drifted in from the other side of the door.

“Oh. Come on in,” I said crisply. I had a sinking feeling it would be a long night.

“By your leave,” she said, and entered.

Lily began preparing the tea in front of us. Not without reason—my mother had told me to grade her abilities and technique. Frenssen and I had a duty to tell her where she messed up.

“Apologies for the wait,” said Lily.

I cast a glance at Frenssen; he nodded silently. It appeared that Lily had passed his test. Yeah, it was best to leave this kind of thing to the connoisseurs.

I took a sip. “This tastes great.”

“Thank you very much.” She smiled at me, relieved.

I wasn’t just being polite. She’d never been bad at this, but I could tell that she was steadily improving. Meanwhile, my concoctions occasionally turned out as clear and bland as water. I was shooting for a morning espresso kind of thing, but that never panned out.

After Frenssen took his tea, Lily gazed at me, looking puzzled. “The hour is late. Are you still busy with work?”

“Just some last-minute stuff.”

“I think you ought to ask for assistance, at the very least,” Frenssen pointed out.

“Guilty as charged.”

I couldn’t contest that. While deploying troops at Finoy was of peak urgency, I had to admit dumping the Mangold investigation and my own personal paperwork *entirely* on Frenssen was a bit much. He was even deeper in the pages than I was.

But hey, I couldn’t have predicted the kids would have such terrible handwriting. I mean, sure, it was obvious when I thought about it. The kind of parchment you would give out to an orphanage was cheap and low quality. It was hard to write on those things even at the best of times, and I wouldn’t describe the writing implements as top-notch either. Given that the kids only started learning their letters a month ago, you could say that they

were doing really well for themselves. So yeah, while I had my grumblings, I didn't have it in me to reprimand anyone.

"You certainly appear busy," Lily remarked amid my groaning. "Um, would you mind if I took a look at that?"

"Sure, be my guest."

I wasn't reading a top-secret document or anything. As I passed it over to her, I took another mouthful of tea.

"On Smithing Day Three, we did eight Block 8-5 in the shop area. After lunch, the fruit seller with the red mat on third street had a messy patch in front of their stall. Road was dented and filled with water after the rain." Lily read the page aloud without stumbling even once, then paused to comment. "Are the roads in bad shape, I wonder?"

Frenssen, who was frowning at the document in his own hands, looked up at her in surprise. For my part, I forgot to even swallow the tea in my mouth. Lily seemed confused by our stares.

Frenssen's eyes flitted between Lily and the report. "You can read this?"

"Yes, I can manage... Some of the pilgrims who came to our inn had messier handwriting, you see. The writer here has put in the effort to do it neatly. I would say that it is quite legible?"

At this point, it finally hit me that we had completely different frames of reference. Frenssen and I normally read correspondence between nobles, or at least people who trained to write for noble addressees. In other words, we exclusively dealt with documents from people who were schooled in proper penmanship.

Lily, on the other hand, had the reading standards of a commoner. She could even read squiggles on a plank if she had to.

Unlike Frenssen and I, who never got accustomed to that level of legibility, Lily was reading stuff like this regularly. Her ability to comprehend those letters was on a different plane from ours, and she didn't squirm at the sight of them either. A large part of it had to be mental tolerance from long-term exposure.

Frenssen looked at me with a serious expression. "Master Werner, what do you say about enlisting Lily's help for this matter?"

“Hm, uh, I dunno about that.”

“It is imperative that we compare how the stalls are placed in the business district. Otherwise, we will not make any progress.”

I couldn’t even muster a vague grumble. It was my failure to distribute the work that had driven us into this corner.

Lily looked puzzled. “What do you mean by ‘how the stalls are placed’?”

“Oh, right,” I said. “You wouldn’t know much about it yet.”

When aristocrats needed to buy stuff, the way it went was either merchants visited their mansions or hosted them in lavish shop buildings. In villages, on the other hand, shopkeepers had to hold down the store all day long, so buyers would go to them.

Naturally, Lily would have no idea how things worked for common folk in the big city.

Although large medieval cities had stores with full staff, there were also areas for traveling merchants to set up makeshift stalls. The rules surrounding these stalls were remarkably complicated, though. Specific sections of the city were allotted to merchants who had guild clearance to set up year-round booths. These weren’t big enough to be considered “shops,” but they weren’t merely carts either. Speaking of merchant carts, those had their own protocol to follow. Rather than the public spaces allotted to long-term booths, temporary shops were usually relegated to the side streets.

This stood to reason, I suppose. Far-flung streets were hardly prime spots for drawing customers. But the trade-off for the top spots was striking a balance with your fellow guild-sanctioned merchants: You had to consider your lineup of wares and your relationship with your fellow guild members. Not to mention the possibility of selling out in the morning and having to close up in the afternoon. This world was no different from my old one in that regard.

You couldn’t make sweeping generalizations about Earth’s Middle Ages because of all the regional differences. Perhaps it was more accurate to say that Wein’s royal capital resembled a specific region from a specific time. In some small towns, you could park a makeshift stall in the same spot all day.

But anyway, stalls in the capital were generally positioned based on the hour and day of the week. Since not every household owned a clock, this was determined by the bell chimes. Each bell was made with different sizes and materials so that nobody would mix them up based on how they sounded. In this world, we had a bell for telling the time and another, called the “market bell,” which signaled when to change shifts.

The time divisions were straightforward enough. In the early morning, while it was still dark, nearly every location had stalls selling bread. City folk generally bought their daily bread at that hour. This even included some of the lower-ranked nobility, like the baron and viscount houses. Of course, some permanent storefronts sold bread, but their tiny buildings would get congested if the customers swarmed in. This would be bad for business, so the shops coordinated operations with the stalls, which were often manned by the baker’s children or apprentices.

At around eight in the morning (to use my old world’s time measurements), the morning bell would toll—the cue for all the bakery stalls to clear up. The next period lasted until about midday. The stalls in this interval mostly sold light, portable items: traveling essentials, everyday utensils and bags, and foods like dried meat and cheese. The people out and about would have already eaten breakfast at home or at a tavern.

Almost all these stalls swapped out at the twelve o’clock bell. Most of the afternoon stalls sold vegetables, common cuts of meat, and other perishable food. Well, whatever you call stuff that you generally ate the day you got it. This time of day was all about stocking up an urbanite’s kitchen.

Other than that, the street food stalls generally started operating after midday. They sold what were basically ready-made meals for the city dwellers. These stores stocked food ingredients in the morning and used anything left over to make the meals they served in the afternoon.

Unlike in modern Japan, nighttime in Wein was severely constrained by the darkness. The cost of illuminating the city would reach absurd sums, so the city dwellers generally stopped working when the sun went down. Apparently, people gathered around the individual guilds, which had light.

Most stalls dealing with perishable foods closed up at the evening bell. Any stalls still standing after that were for cheap food and drink—the kinds of places usually marked by red paper lanterns, to use an analogy from Japan. In every era, people wanted a quick drink before heading home from work.

That was the daily rotation of stalls on your average side street. Established stores could sell the same sorts of things, of course, but the stalls were guaranteed to be cheaper. Some items were almost twice as expensive in regular shops. Part of this was because stall owners were eager to sell off all their wares before the day was over, but permanent storefronts also had to pay a tax just for setting up shop. On the other hand, they did offer the convenience of being open all day.

Weekly rotations, meanwhile, were determined by block. The open spaces for the morning markets were located near the gates. If one type of store monopolized the more trafficked areas, the other stores would suffer, so the specific guilds got to use those prime spots (not the actual term they used) only on specific days of the week.

You could see which guilds had the most clout by studying the rotations—it was kind of a test of influence in that regard. Weaker guilds sold their affiliated goods in the backstreets or out-of-the-way places almost all year round.

I didn't know the details, but apparently all the guilds met up once a year to determine the rotations. The guild wars were so intense that you'd find guilder corpses in the back alleys. I wasn't going to mention *that* to Lily, though.

"So yeah, the daily reports note down which stalls are operating, but the locations and times can change day-to-day," I said.

"I see. So, um, all I have to do is read this aloud?" Lily had only just heard my explanation, but she already seemed raring to go. Good grief.

"It's already pretty late. Don't you have things to do in the morning, Lily?"

"No, this is totally fine with me. Please let me help," she insisted, eyes bright with that familiar sparkle.

Well, now what? True, the help would make things easier for me, but…

“Very well,” Frenssen said. “Please read them aloud in order, Lily. I will scribe a clean copy for Master Werner to compare and confirm.”

“Yes, sir,” Lily chirped.

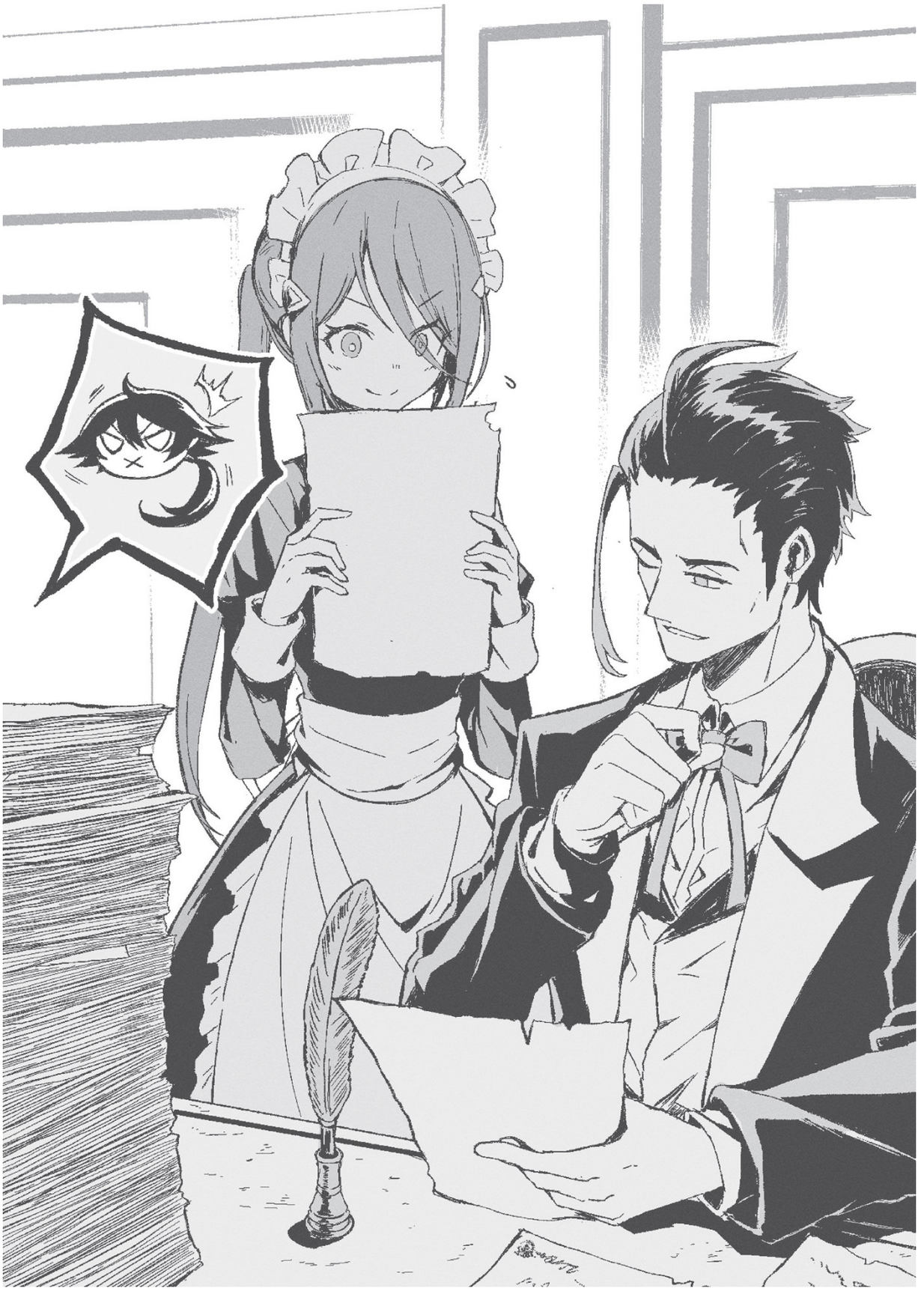
“Hey, c’mon.”

I sighed. Those two weren’t listening to me at all. I was going to have to concede defeat for today and think of some way of thanking Lily later on.

This was kind of a strange experience for me. Sometimes, on account of this world’s “medieval-ish” character, I found myself falling back on all sorts of preconceived notions about it.

Earth’s Middle Ages were commonly misunderstood. Even in Japan, people right up to the Showa period would claim that life for an Edo period peasant was grueling. In actuality, it wasn’t that bad.

Likewise, though every country and region differed to some extent, the European Middle Ages were hardly so-called Dark Ages. Thirteenth century England flourished with a school in every town and an abundance of teachers. In fourteenth-century France, the aristocrats strove to consolidate their fiefs, prompting them to provide a basic education across almost every village.



Compared to those examples, this world had even more opportunities and venues to foster an education, but for some reason, things weren't quite there. Maybe it was a deliberate political strategy to use the royal academy to gather the cream of the crop.

As curious as I was about this discrepancy, I didn't have the time to ponder it just then. I had to focus on what was in front of me. I sighed again.

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Several days later, I found myself standing before the nation's authorities—Prince Hubert, Dukes Gründing and Seyfert, and my father, among other individuals—for the grand unveiling of my work. I was still tired from organizing all the information the orphans and refugees had collected, which I'd submitted to my father to pass on to the state.

Even so, the time had come to demonstrate the weapon prototypes.

Because I was tragically inept at using bows, I borrowed a decent archer for the task. I carried the prototypes into the knight brigade's training grounds—but, well…

"What is the lad thinking?" a nobleman asked in anticipation.

"These are just refinements of existing weapons," I said, "so please don't get your hopes up too high."

There was a sizable peanut gallery. Duke Gründing had promised to attend, and so had Duke Seyfert, who supported the weapons' development all throughout. But why were the royal grandson and the captain of the Royal Guard here? Today wasn't supposed to be that big of a deal. Ugh, my stomach was turning.

Exhausted before I'd even begun, I first presented the bow. I know I was the one who commissioned it, but I was honestly pretty impressed at how closely they managed to replicate the real deal.

"Ah, this is the shortbow you requested," said Duke Seyfert.

"It seems properly sized for use on horseback," the prince remarked.

He had a point—this prototype was the size of a shortbow. Our crown prince sure was a sharp cookie. The bow was also stronger than I had imagined, perhaps because it was made out of monster body parts. You could say it was vaguely similar to a composite bow from my old world.

I passed the bow to the knights standing on the sidelines, who then passed it along to the prince. After that, the others each had their turn to hold it.

As he stroked the bow's helix-like shape, Duke Gründing asked, "Is that a horn wedged in the wood? And is that leather wrapped around it?"

"There is bark in there as well."

Without it, humidity would warp the bow out of shape. Wood and bone expanded at different rates at the same humidity, which would cause the glue to peel off. I only knew about that from what I'd read, but it seemed that later iterations of this weapon always had some sort of encasement wrapped around them. The leather wrapping also had the effect of increasing the bow's potency, of course.

After everyone had examined the bow, they returned it to me. At this point, I asked the archer from the knight brigade to shoot at a piece of gold armor we were using as a target. As they heard the bow stretch, the knights seemed to catch on to the way the drawstring differed from that of a typical bow. Then, with a rather satisfying twang, the string snapped forward, launching the arrow into its golden target.

The onlookers let out a hum of appreciation.

"This is a composite bow made from monster body parts," I explained. "As you have seen, its strength approaches, or even equals that of a longbow, despite being much smaller. To achieve this, though, the archer must be very skilled."

"So you have created a smaller model. But that could not have been your only purpose, yes?" asked the Royal Guard captain.

"Indeed. The bow pairs with this item." As I answered, I pulled out a small quiver.

One man in particular recognized the implication immediately. "I see. You are trying to foster mobile archers who

can shoot with the same force as a longbow user."

"Yes, you expressed it most insightfully."

He really was quick on the uptake. Well, to be fair, it wasn't too hard to guess the mobility part when the composite bow was originally conceived for archers on horseback. Maybe the reason they didn't exist in this world already was because there weren't any equestrian nomad tribes. Many of the composite bows used across the Roman empire, and Europe as a whole, originated from the horseback archers who gave the Romans grief during the Roman Republic era.

The arrows weren't materiel we could count on reusing, which meant the quantity we'd need them in would be quite tricky to source. Veteran archers apparently let loose up to ten shots in a minute. Looking at it from another angle, you could say that ten arrows would only last a single measly minute in a rapid-fire situation. If you were up against humans, you could round up their arrows and reuse them if you were willing to put in the effort, but monsters never shot arrows back at you.

In other words, if you were going to use archers in battle, they would have to stay at the rear with the supply squad. If you had a team of a thousand veteran archers, then some quick math would tell you that you needed ten thousand arrows a minute.

In reality, of course, they weren't constantly shooting at maximum output. But the English archers at the famous Battle of Crécy in 1346 had indeed lived up to their potential, shooting over three thousand arrows within five minutes of the battle's start. In actual combat, archers apparently averaged around six arrows a minute. For a thousand archers to keep that up over the span of an hour meant using upward of a hundred thousand arrows.

With those numbers, you couldn't afford to discount their physical weight. Even accounting for the obvious differences between longbows and shortbows across the eras, the arrows were made out of wood, not carbon. The arrowheads used in real combat were also quite large. If a single arrow weighed fifty grams, then a hundred thousand would weigh five tons. That was equal to the weight of 2,500 two-liter bottles of water. And even those five tons of arrows could get used up in half a day. That was war for you.

Every warrior on the field knew that arrows were superior in long-distance battles. Even in Japan, prior to the introduction of matchlock guns, bows were acknowledged for their might. But there was a reason why they never became the dominant weapon in actual combat. When just food alone was a massive expense, the cost of making arrows and bows was, frankly, untenable. Arrows alone wouldn't end a war. Eventually, you'd have no choice but to engage in close combat.

People in this world had it easier, what with offensive magic. It was enough to make you think that you were better off training mages, not knights, if you wanted to engage in serious warfare.

In practice, educating mages cost a ton of money. Not that training archers was anything to sneeze at. Plus, it was a pain in the ass to secure the arrows before and during battle. If archers could carry their own arrows at significant volumes, they wouldn't need to spend so much time resupplying at the rear. From there, establish a system for mobile units, and your options for archers would open right up.

I wasn't thinking of horseback archers at this point, however. That would require extensive training. In fact, the armies of ancient China and Rome often hired people of different ethnicities to fill the role of mounted archer. Although some Japanese warriors from the Sengoku period could shoot from horseback, relying on them would have cut the scale of troops by an order of magnitude. It was hard to find people who were capable of it, and you never had enough time and money to train them. I didn't know the details, but that was the gist.

Incidentally, Japanese-style bows were considered composite bows in a broad sense. They were by no means inferior to western longbows in terms of strength. However, because they were adapted from a different type of wood, nobody really made smaller versions of them. In fact, when composite bows were first introduced in Japan, people tried making them entirely out of wood. That's the Japanese cultural mindset for you—taking other things and trying to put their own spin on it.

Another thing about Japanese bows was that, because their shape differed from western bows, they required more skill to hit the target. Not that I had any desire to make Japanese-style bows for this world, so all of this was beside the point.

“It’s nothing too impressive, but it is a decided improvement,” a nobleman remarked.

“I suppose it would be no extra trouble for our craftsmen to handle something of this complexity,” another one mused.

“Speaking of craftsmen,” I said, “I asked them to make something else for me. Please bear in mind that this is merely a model.”

Neurath and Schünzel stepped forward, carrying a box between them. I opened it to reveal an object resembling a large crossbow. It was a bit much for His Highness to carry by himself, although the knights had no such problems.

Glancing at the box’s contents, you could immediately tell that the weapon within, with its metal-reinforced structure, was made for heavier duty than your average crossbow.

“Please take it from here,” I said to a burly-looking knight. “Take care when drawing it.”

As they watched the knight strain his muscles against the bowstring, the onlookers gaped in surprise. Since the composite bow was made out of monster body parts, it took a lot of effort just to draw it. There was no way around it—without it, the projectile simply wouldn’t fly the distance.

That said, to actually use this in combat, you would definitely need a cranequin, a device used to span a crossbow, to draw the string so it was ready to shoot. The problem was that I didn’t know exactly how those things worked. You could say they were like smaller versions of the ballistae on castle walls.

I set a metal sphere the size of a golf ball into the crossbow. I thought I heard some people object to how it wasn’t an arrow, but for the sake of the demonstration, I *couldn’t* use an arrow.

When the knight shot the ball, it clanged against the gold armor, sending it hurtling back past the stand. I had to marvel at this guy’s skill: Here he was, using a weapon totally new to him, and still he nailed the target on his first try. I made a mental note never to pick a fight with this guy.

While I was distracted with my thoughts, Duke Gründing spoke up. “‘Tis an interesting weapon, but pray tell why it does not use arrows. That must surely impede its range.”

“This has a different application. The ball is designed specifically for use at short range, based on my experiences on the battlefield.”

The humans of this world were regular joes, but the monsters were the stuff of fantasy games.

Unless a person had nerves of steel, the pain and shock from a single arrow shot would be enough to impair their fighting prowess. It might even cause them to flee.

A monster, however, would only lose some vitality from even a serious wound. It might stagger for a moment, but it would be just as strong and bloodthirsty as ever. The Lizard Magicians at Arlea Village were very tough indeed, and at Finoy I saw monsters still raring for the fight even with two spears stuck in them. The wounds clearly enraged them, so it’s not like the attacks were *nothing* to them, but perhaps they experienced pain differently.

A foe who was still willing to charge at you even after getting skewered by a spear would not be stopped by an arrow. Imagine a monster lunging at you while pincushioned with arrows—most people would freak out.

A projectile of sufficient mass, however, would have quite another effect. I pointed at the dented armor on the ground, the handiwork of the metal ball.

“The upside of the bullet crossbow, as you can see here, is that a successful hit throws the target off-balance.”

A headshot could knock the target out or crush their skull outright, but a bullet to any part of the body was plenty useful just as a means of knocking the enemy back. Hurrah for weapons of “mass” destruction. If it was scary to see someone throw a rock at you, imagine a metal or stone sphere speeding headlong toward you.

Most importantly: A monster that could use its arms to deflect an arrow would never be able to do that for a rapid metal or rock projectile. In fact, trying to deflect it like an arrow would only damage their arms. This weapon was made to deal with monsters and their high stamina and pain thresholds.

In any case, the crossbow differed in range and practical application. A bow’s effective range was a hundred meters by my old world’s standard of measurement. Nobody besides a trained

specialist would even be able to hit anything that far away, never mind the force. Soldiers used bows at full range by raining down volleys of arrows. Only at close range could they pick out individual targets. At point-blank, after all, even the average soldier could easily score a hit on an immobilized target.

"I suspect that this could also launch a short spear or bomb jar," someone in the audience mused aloud.

"I have not tried it yet, but it could be possible. Here's how I expect you could apply it." I held up a document which contained Lily's diagram and some of my miscellaneous explanations.

The audience let out cries of astonishment.

"Do you mean to place it on chariots, like some manner of small-scale ballista?"

"Judging by that lower mechanism...it turns? So it can shoot in all directions?"

"Yes, though it would be impossible to use it while running," I said.

I got the idea from the carroballista in ancient Rome. You loaded a ballista onto a two- or four-wheel cart. This shortened the amount of time to set things up, *and* you could obliterate the enemy lines with projectiles far stronger than your average bowshot. Although I doubted that you could use it on the move given that it lacked a sighting device, it was still a prototank of sorts. Instead of arrows, it used heavy bullets, which you loaded onto a tray beforehand. It was more efficient to send out everything at once, unleashing hell upon the enemy.

Unfortunately, if all you did was load a ballista onto a cart, then it would only be able to shoot in the direction you set it. It wasn't easy to change a cart's direction, after all. In order to make such a deployment viable, the ballista would need a platform that could turn independently. The idea was to position the cart, bring it to a halt, and immediately fire the ballista.

With a ballista-sized weapon, you could shoot metal balls at long range—a tough ask for a hand model. Probably. Definitely. I wondered how far you could blast a monster's limbs off, considering how robust they were. It was freaky just to imagine.

I had no idea whether the carroballista actually existed in this world's history. I'd never seen one, for what it was worth. I

was just guessing here, but I would imagine that even if you did manage to transport a ballista to a battlefield, it would just sit there and rot.

After all, just carrying it would require a vast quantity of magic bags. Besides, this was a world where people valued one-on-one combat for the sake of procuring ransom money, so projectile weapon technology, which no one really used, had been left to languish. This fixation on man-to-man combat was similar to the Middle Ages, which marked a departure from the rationalism of ancient Rome.

It was pretty strange how, despite the relatively little religious interference in politics and science, this world nonetheless seemed stunted in its reasoning. Hmmm. These strange inconsistencies always bugged me. I wondered if the existence of magic explained it. Maybe anywhere magic could provide a solution, people stopped looking for alternatives.

I would guess that there was no gunpowder because alchemy never developed in this world. In fact, I had no recollection of even hearing that word here… Yet I couldn't shake the feeling I was overlooking something.

But that didn't matter at the moment. I mean, I was in the middle of an explanation. I put my musings about history on the backburner to focus on the problem at hand. I figured that nothing less than these heavy weapons would take down whoever was coming for us at the attack on the capital.

You could say that everything up till Finoy was the game's opening act. The final member of the Four Fiends, who would lead the fateful assault, was probably a late-game enemy. The battle-hardened knights might stand a chance, but the average soldier definitely wouldn't unless we weakened the enemy first. I wouldn't send them in unless we could do that. And there were still a bunch of things I was a bit apprehensive about.

"Putting aside the choice of metal balls, the pivot will need to be strong enough to withstand their force," someone remarked.

"I suppose it will be possible to manage something with monster parts… Hm. So the idea is to use this to stall the enemy's movements, and then use arrows to winnow their ranks."

"A good point. I had not considered the monsters' endurance. This is all very interesting indeed. I can see the worth

in investigating this further.”

“I can see the merit in preparing both metal balls and standard ballista bolts.”

As the audience surmised and strategized exciting uses for the prototypes, my thoughts drifted elsewhere. It was relief enough they hadn’t dismissed the idea out of hand. If anything, I could see how open-minded and flexible they were. Even as they grasped the downsides, they saw how it could be useful and were willing to discuss how to make it work.

The prince, who was reading the explanations on the document, abruptly turned his gaze to me as if he had just figured something out. Truly, nothing got past him.

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Amid the pitched discussion, the prince addressed me.

“I understand the effect. Lord Werner, you wish to mass-produce this model.”

“I would like the knight brigade and the palace guards to adopt its use, if that can be arranged.”

I wanted them built and deployed already, but money was an issue. For some reason, though, my father grimaced, and everyone else gave me a strange look. Huh? Did I do something wrong?

“You do not intend to start with House Zehrfeld?”

“I am confident in its capabilities but not so confident about putting it into practice.”

Especially the bows. They were practically worthless if you weren’t trained. Sure, you might be able to hit a stationary target with some slapdash training, but they were very difficult to use in actual battle. In the context of a siege battle, untrained soldiers were better off chucking rocks than using a bow and arrow, no joke.

The Zehrfelds had never been proactive about training archers. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that they never felt the need. And we certainly didn’t have time to start training them now, so there was no point outfitting them with anything

besides crossbows or bullet crossbows, which were relatively easier to aim with.

"You thirst for little," remarked Duke Seyfert with a trace of exasperation.

Erm, I really didn't agree. I mean, just by virtue of being born into nobility, I could eat without having to work a day in my life. As long as I didn't die from the attack on the capital, I had no problem living within my means.

Maybe I *did* have modest aims because I didn't have to work my ass off in this new life, but it was still kind of vexing to be told I had the wrong attitude. Just like anyone, I wanted to eat good food and drink good booze if I could. I didn't have much interest in the arts, though—and not just because I sucked at drawing, I swear.

That said, the duke's reaction wasn't completely inscrutable to me. In this world where personal valor was prized above all, a martial officer would command more respect than a civil official. Just about any house would bolster their own troops before letting someone else take the glory.

But practicality had to take precedence for me. The Zehrfeld forces were just a drop in the bucket compared to the capital's massed forces. I didn't know the exact numbers. Even if we pulled together every last person we had, we wouldn't be able to cover the whole area. I could expect better results from upgrading the official army.

The crown prince seemed to have caught on to that implication. "Very well. I shall accept your invention. I shall make arrangements for its adoption once I've consulted with Duke Gründing and our most able iron casters. You are dismissed for today."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Just as I was bowing my head to the prince, a voice spoke up from the side. "E-excuse me, um…"

It was the royal grandson, Ruven, who had been watching the proceedings with keen interest. He sounded kind of impatient and eager.

"Is something the matter, Prince Ruven?" I asked.

"No, I wish to ask you something about Finoy, if I may."

At Ruven's polite interjection, numerous people in the audience took on strained expressions. Oh, so that was what this was about. Come to think of it, Lily had *just* told me off for doing the same thing.

"Well, sir, I would like to ask…"

"Your Highness, may I ask something of you first?" Although it was rude of me, I had to speak up.

His Highness cocked his head in puzzlement. He didn't seem to be aware of what he was doing. But it really wouldn't be a good idea to let this go unchecked.

"It would not do for a member of the royal family to speak deferentially to a subject, Your Highness. Ask what you will of me; I am wholly at your disposal."

"Ah, but…"

Now he was hesitating—not very regal of him. Frankly, I knew nothing about his upbringing.

His entire existence in the game was relegated to a death notice, and I didn't care about his life story in this world either. None of it mattered at this moment.

"Your father, the crown prince, is a splendid example. For many years he has given orders to His Excellency the chancellor. I ask that you make it a habit to speak in that way to others."

"Er, um…"

He still looked uncertain even after I said that. Hmm. I wondered if I should look for a point of compromise.

"Then if it please you, perhaps you could practice your manners on me?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say, Your Highness. One day, you will be in a position where you impart your commands to others. Perhaps it would serve you well to learn of this now, while you are young."

"All…all right."

He finally nodded. I expected that he would get used to it before long. It would suck if he got a big ego, but it would do him some good to do the bare minimum. I doubted that he had the personality to lead as either a tyrant or a fool. Well, I sure hoped not.

“Very well, Viscount. Tell me about the battle at Finoy. I heard that you had the enemy running in circles.”

Uh, who told him that? Inwardly, I wanted to berate him for believing such inflated rumors. I had to set him straight.

“I had nobody running in circles. I merely responded to the enemy’s inclinations, that is all.”

“What do you mean by their inclinations?”

“To express it broadly, everyone has hopes about what they would like to happen to the other side. When those hopes are being met, they are inclined to believe that they have the advantage, and so they let down their guards. That was what made them vulnerable to a trap.”

Well, it could only be a trap because Mazel was there. Who knows what would have happened if he never showed up. There was no point thinking about that now, so I stopped myself from chasing hypotheticals. Let’s just be happy that it all turned out for the best.

“Is that so?”

“It is commonly said among martial practitioners that one faces their greatest danger at the moment they believe they are victorious.”

Just like the old proverb said, don’t holler till you are out of the woods. This thought sparked a sudden realization in me. Sure, we dealt with many of the Demons hiding out in the capital. But what if we got cocky? In fact, wasn’t this the perfect time for the enemy to launch a second wave?

As soon as this thought occurred to me, I glanced at the crown prince. He and the others in the audience nodded back at me. By chance, our thoughts happened to be aligned.

“I see, so you make the enemy lower their guard.”

“Indeed, it is as you say.”

As I continued chatting with the royal grandson, I spotted the prince and his cohort nonchalantly leave the area. That was my cue to start thinking about what to do next.

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When my conversation with the royal grandson had concluded, I returned to my office in the palace. My father wasn't back yet. I passed the time sorting documents and drafting half-hearted answers to letters of greeting. I didn't really get it, but people seemed to want my time.

Before long, my father returned. He gave me an inscrutable look. "First of all, let me congratulate you on those prototypes. I also submitted your proposal; it prompted much discussion."

"Thank you very much." Best to express gratitude first. When he reacted with a strangely reproachful expression, I cocked my head in curiosity. "Was there something else you wanted?"

"That is what I find myself wanting to ask you. What do *you* want?"

Quite a philosophical question. I guess the answer was...to live? I could ponder the other stuff later. I mean, what else could I say? Not that I *should* admit this aloud.

Although, that said, part of me did think I ought to start verbalizing the *possibility* of an attack on the capital. As I chewed on that thought, my father shot me a meaningful look. It was half self-effacing smile, half look of disappointment.

Then he sighed. "Never mind. Just prepare yourself, Werner."

"Come again?"

Well, that sure was out of the blue. I had no idea what he was talking about. But my father turned his eyes to the mountain of paperwork, apparently not in the mood to talk any further. All I could do was bow my head and return to my own office.

Hmmm. I didn't get it, but a vague feeling of unease swept through me.

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Ruven, the royal grandson, visited the king's office that evening. The king and his son, Hubertus, had just finished a meeting about a diplomatic problem. There was a somewhat relaxed air about King Maximilian as he sipped on his tea and cast a doting smile at his grandson.

"Oh, Ruven. What brings you here, my boy?"

“I am sorry for disturbing you when you are busy.” Although Ruven could be described as a timid boy, he had thoroughly mastered the etiquette for speaking to an elder.

Seeing the boy’s diligent attempt at maintaining public protocol even in private, Maximilian’s gaze softened. When he noticed how serious his grandson’s expression was, however, he adjusted his own. “Did something happen?”

“Yes, Grandfather. There is something I want to ask you and Father.”

Ruven then began to explain something he had heard from a nobleman not too long ago. “That Hero who is fighting the Demon Lord is trying to take Princess Laura away, isn’t he?” he had said, with a worried expression on his face.

“He said something about how that Hero fellow is a threat to our nation,” Ruven finished.

“Did he now? And what do you think, Ruven?” Neither Maximilian nor Hubertus’s expressions wavered as they looked at him.

The boy was silent in thought for a short while before responding. “I do not know.”

“What made you come to that conclusion?” Maximilian asked gently.

“I have never met or spoken to the Hero,” Ruven said thoughtfully. “However, Viscount Zehrfeld has never spoken ill of him, and he has firsthand knowledge. And it was Elder Sister herself who asked to accompany him on his journey to fight the Demon Lord. I wanted to ask what you and Father thought of that…”

As Ruven trailed off, Maximilian and Hubertus briefly exchanged glances.

Incidentally, the “Elder Sister” Ruven mentioned was Laura. Although she was technically his aunt, Ruven had referred to her as his older sister throughout his entire life. According to one aide, he did apparently call her “Aunt Laura” on exactly one occasion. He refused to speak about the incident in detail, however. “I realized that I should be careful about misspeaking,” was all he said.

Returning to the topic at hand, Maximilian turned his gaze back to his grandson, who was waiting for an answer with a pensive look on his face.

“I see,” he said. “First of all, I do not regard the Hero as a threat. I do not sense any dangerous ambition in him. At this point, there is no evidence that he is scheming anything.”

Although this was the answer he put to words, he’d been sure to keep Mazel’s family close at hand, so he could use them as leverage if it came to that. Such was the life of a ruler. Still, as he continued, his face betrayed no hints of any misgivings.

“Now, imagine if I were to eliminate Mazel the Hero without proof, merely because I thought him a threat,” he said, as if trying to impress something upon his grandson. “What would happen next?”

Ruven looked slightly perturbed by this question. “Do you mean how there will be no one to defeat the Demon Lord?”

“No, something beyond that.”

This answer only served to deepen Ruven’s confusion. For a brief moment, Maximilian gazed at him not with the eyes of a grandfather but a king.

“Let us say I eliminated the Hero because he was a threat,” he said in a gentle tone. “It’s also possible that one day, a nobleman will poison our food. If we were to kill the Hero merely because he posed a threat to us, we ought also to kill all nobles because they *could* poison us.”

“That’s…”

“The knights could revolt and draw their blades against us. If the threat exists, then we must eliminate the knights. The citizens could rebel. If so, the citizens could well be targets for elimination.”

Ruven said nothing.

“If an unproved fear or unproved danger were reason enough to be killed, then a king must slaughter everyone besides himself. How would that make him different from the Demon Lord?”

He would just be making a reason for the Hero to betray him, Maximilian was saying.

“By the way, who was it that confided in you?” he went on with a gentle smile.

“Well, um…”

When Ruven said the name, Maximilian and Hubertus exchanged the slightest of nods. Then, as if nothing had transpired, they smiled at the boy once more.

“It gladdens me to see that you kept your wits about you,” said the king. “Never forget to look upon things fairly.”

“R-right.”

“Good,” Maximilian said. “You two may leave. I have a small matter to discuss with the chancellor.”

The crown prince stood up. “Yes, Father. Please excuse me.”

“And myself as well.” The grandson followed suit.

The two bowed their heads before exiting the room. As they walked along the thick yet tasteful carpet, Ruven looked up at his father.

After a pause, he said, “What do you think of the Hero, Father?”

Far from sounding uncertain, the boy spoke as if he already knew the answer. Hubert voiced his thoughts freely.

“I agree with His Majesty’s ideals. But it’s also important to consider mental readiness.”

“Mental…readiness?” his son repeated, puzzled.

Hubert regarded him with a faint smile. Then his expression sharpened. When he spoke, it was as if his words were directed less to his son and more to someone who was not in the room.

“A king is someone who can rule over a hero.”

He would not eliminate someone based on a perceived threat. At the same time, he would brook no traitorous ambitions the Hero might harbor. He would demonstrate his power and make the Hero kneel before him. Having poured his sentiments into that brief apostrophe, he turned back to his son with a smile.

“That is what I think, but you and I are different. You should strive to become the king that you wish to be.”

Hubert patted the boy lightly on the head and left. Ruven sprang vigorously to his feet. Then, somewhat hurriedly, he chased after his father.

In the history books, it would be written that Maximilian was a wise ruler and Hubertus an ambitious one. Ruven would be a kind king.

***

That same afternoon, Judith, the eldest daughter of House Fürst, was on her way to call upon her family at their mansion. Tyrone, who had just returned to the capital the day before, was waiting for her along with Mine. Bastian, their father, was at the palace on business that day.

Even before the Demon Stampede, the Fürsts and the Teutenbergs hadn't enjoyed a particularly warm relationship. Which wasn't to say they got on poorly. Still, that ambiguity weighed on everyone's minds when Judith left the Teutenberg estate.

"Can you hear something, Mine?" Tyrone asked.

"No, nothing."

Unable to relax, the siblings fell into silence. Eventually, their ears picked up the sound of a carriage just outside their estate. Then, all of a sudden, the mansion exploded with activity. Tyrone and Mine instinctively exchanged glances. Mine stood up, approached the window, and peered outside.

"What in the blazes?" she said, in a rare display of confoundedness.

"What happened?" Tyrone came to the window.

And then he made the same exasperated cry.

"That's quite the outrageous request you're making, Brother. What happened to our long-awaited reunion?"

The woman sat on the settee in front of Tyrone, her expression more irritated than disappointed.

“Big words for someone who got kicked out of the Teutenberg estate, Judith,” Tyrone sneered back.

“Well, aren’t you a naysayer?” Judith said with a sweet smile as she fanned herself.

There was a reason why Tyrone was so uncharitable to his younger sister. Judith arrived in a carriage with the Teutenberg family crest on it—which was all well and good, but the problem was everything around her.



“What was that entourage about, seriously?”

“My goodness, is it so strange for me to be accompanied by servants?”

“You didn’t need *eight* of them,” Tyrone snapped back in exasperation.

Mine silently agreed with her brother. It wasn’t strange, of course, for a person of noble standing to have attendants. The weird thing was how many of them there were. It was too much for someone of a count’s family when all she was supposedly doing was taking a walk outside the house.

“And why,” Tyrone went on, “did they all look like such weaklings?”

Each and every one of them was a handsome and slender man. Not one of them looked fit to serve as a bodyguard, which Tyrone had wasted no time insinuating.

Judith merely flashed another luscious smile. “Oh, but don’t men like to surround themselves with pretty maids? How am I different for choosing my men for their looks?”

“No one’s as blatant about it as you,” Tyrone sniped back.

As she listened to this exchange, Mine felt strangely unsettled. Her older sister did have a vain streak, true, but had she always been this outrageous? Mine had her doubts, but she decided to let the conversation play out before she came to any conclusions.

Oblivious to what her younger sister was thinking, Judith turned to Tyrone, her lips curled into a faint sneer. “I did it to prove that I have *not* been disowned by House Teutenberg.”

“If you haven’t been kicked out, then what’s going on?”

“We mutually agreed to part ways.”

“What?”

Did I hear that right? Tyrone’s expression said.

Judith smiled again. “My mother-in-law promised me that in exchange for cutting ties and making it so that one of her relatives inherits the title of count, they’ll raise my son Danilo as one of their own. They offered me a portion of the family wealth as a sign of goodwill too.”

“Of all the selfish things you could have done!” Tyrone roared, his composure failing him.

In a way, his reaction was only common sense. In this country, at least, this was something no noblewoman would do. Danilo was now cut off from both his birth parents. At best, he would be raised as the puppet of another noble family—presumably that of Count Teutenberg’s wife.

Judith watched her brother’s predictable display of anger with an air of calm. “Oh? Don’t you see? I gladly married into that family because my late husband and his father prided themselves on their skill at arms. Yet look how quickly they lost to those monsters…”

Their weakness was unbecoming for nobles of this nation, her cold smile all but said.

Then, she added with a thin laugh, “To say nothing of House Teutenberg losing its knights. Why should I cast my lot with such a pathetic bunch?”

“I can’t believe you…”

Even Tyrone was at a loss for words. As her eyes trailed over him, Judith laughed again—there wasn’t a hint of mirth in it.

“I have heard, too, that the knights of Fürst have suffered heavy losses. You hardly have bodies to spare to help House Teutenberg revive itself, hm?”

I left so as not to burden my house, she insinuated. Tyrone fell silent. Say what you would about her methods, but it was a fact that House Fürst did not possess the resources to spare.

Mine chose to speak up at this point, filling in for her brother’s silence. “So what do you plan to do now, Sister?”

“That needn’t concern you,” Judith replied coldly. She did, however, continue with a small smile: “House Teutenberg bequeathed me a considerable share of its fortune. It would be a respectable dowry were I to remarry into a house more fretful of its finances.”

She sipped her tea with a smile that gleamed with all her ambition: She would become the matriarch of a noble house. Then her smile altered with a sardonic twist.

“But never mind me. What are *you* planning to do to restore the knights of Fürst to their former glory?”

Tyrone didn’t respond for a moment. Then, finally, he said, “Why do *you* care?”

“Goodness me. Is it not my filial duty to be concerned?”

Tyrone glared at Judith as if to say *“Look who’s talking!”* But in his silence, Judith could read that he had no plan at all.

“Why not poach some skilled knights from another noble house?” she said.

“What are you talking about? *Poaching?*”

“Why, yes. Say, for instance, from the Zehrfelds.”

Mine’s eyes widened in surprise.

Judith went on, seemingly oblivious to her younger sister’s change of expression. “Surely the reason their schoolboy son was able to cloak himself in martial glory is because the Zehrfeld knights pulled his weight. It may be the house of a minister, but such skilled knights are wasted on a bunch of bureaucrats.”

“Hm…” Tyrone looked pensive.

“Brother, the Zehrfelds are our neighbors,” Mine cut in, alarmed by her brother’s attitude. “Taking their knights would jeopardize our relationship.”

Judith turned a cold look in Mine’s direction. “Then I suppose you have a better plan?”

Mine fell silent at those words. Every noble house was suffering from a personnel shortage. They wanted all the skilled hands they could get. And now, with the Demon Lord back, talented knights were in greater demand than ever. Replacing lost people was no simple task.

Poaching knights from another house, in other words, guaranteed a grudge. Mine could not bring herself to agree with her sister’s proposal. She resolved to consult her father about the issue later.

Tyrone continued to brood long after Judith finally left. At length, he looked up, his face twisted into a grimace.

“Mine, I know we’re going to talk to Father about this, but there’s something I want you to handle first.”

***

“How is it already this late?” I groaned, spreading my arms in a big stretch.

With evening having fallen upon the city, I decided to pause my work for the time being. After making sure that there was nothing pressing for me to do, I made my exit from the palace. Neurath and Schünzel, who had been lugging around the prototypes since morning, came with me.

Although I had a carriage with my family crest on it, I decided to walk instead. For one thing, I found it more relaxing. Nobleman carriages were surprisingly strong and sturdy, functioning like the armored cars of my old world. They were a must for anyone in my father’s lofty position.

In my old world, carriage bodies were fortified with oak wood, but they were even more durable here because of the use of monster body parts. The glass windows were an extravagant demonstration of wealth, but if you pulled the shutters over them, not even an arrow could get through. Plenty of lower-ranked houses had shutters without the glass, though.

On the other hand, some carriages were used purely for ceremonial purposes. These didn’t have shutters, although this usually wasn’t a problem because they would be surrounded by knights on guard duty anyway. This world didn’t have guns, after all.

As I was walking, lost in thought, I noticed a familiar face approach me. I was pretty sure this was one of the scouts I hired for the refugee mission. I signaled to Neurath and Schünzel to relax their vigilance.

“It’s sure been a while, Viscount.”

“Yeah. Glad to see you’re looking well.” I responded with a very standard, nonchalant greeting.

From my expression, he must have seen that I could tell something was amiss. He went out of his way to call out to me—why? The man opened his mouth and said, in a quiet whisper meant only for me and my attendants, “I have a message from old Bert.”

“So you’re one of his people.”

Wow, that old guy had a pretty big network at his disposal. Maybe he knew people in odd corners. I’d have to ask him about it next time I saw him. If he was sending his message to me directly instead of through the Adventurers’ Guild, it had to be confidential.

“Let’s talk over drinks,” I said. “I’ll pay.”

“And I graciously accept.”

I signaled to Neurath and Schünzel to join us, and we all went into a nearby tavern. I gave the waiter a tip and sat down near the back. Then I ordered alcohol and snacks for everyone.

“You seem accustomed to this,” said the scout.

“I often snuck out to drink in my student years,” I responded reflexively. But wait, wasn’t I technically still a student in this world? That was a sad thought, so I decided not to pursue it.

When the drinks arrived, I held a toast for appearances’ sake. Then I threw a few bean-like morsels into my mouth. I was pretty sure that these came from a plant-type monster. It was kind of confusing, since they had the look and texture of peanuts yet tasted more like corn. But maybe I only felt that way because of my memories.

“So what’s the news?” I asked, once I’d washed down the bean-corn with a mouthful of ale.

I wasn’t ready for the answer.

“They found the body of that guy you were looking for.”

“Pückler?” I asked in a low voice.

Predictably, Neurath and Schünzel exchanged shocked looks. At the time, I’d said to Bert that I was fine with them finding a dead body, but I didn’t actually expect one to turn up.

“Tell me more,” I said.

“Sure.” The man went on to explain that the corpse was almost entirely torn up, his clothes reduced to rags.

“He had a lot of weird wounds. Like they were half healed.”

“Hmm…”

In fantasy stories, lycanthropes tended to be on the tough side. I don’t think Werewolves and Weretigers had rapid-healing

powers in the game, but everything about Gezarius was a mystery to me. Wish the secret character could've been an ally.

As my thoughts bitched at this world's god or creator or whatever, the scout continued his explanation. Pückler had been found barefoot and not carrying anything. He looked like he had keeled over on the road, in a sense. Apparently, the fatal wound was the gaping hole in his chest.

"A hole?" I repeated stiffly.

"Yeah, and it looked very unnatural."

He went on. There was blood on the corpse's hand, as if he had plunged it into his own chest. I wondered if that meant...

"Was there something in his hands?"

"No, nothing. But judging by the state of the corpse, it doesn't seem like he died immediately. If he was carrying something, then someone else might've taken it and ran."

Did he dig the black jewel out of his own body? Then maybe somebody else came along, found his body, and was entranced by the jewel. Going by that assumption, the Demon would have found a new host. I never conceived that this could happen. I'd been a little too optimistic here.

But say that hypothesis was true. It was going to be difficult to trace the new host's steps. Were they hiding somewhere, or had they already slipped the city walls? Darn it, there were too many possibilities to consider.

"Master Werner, these are ill tidings," Neurath said.

"Yeah. Schünzel, I'm sorry, but I need you to contact Father right awa—"

But then the man cut me off. "Sir Viscount, please wait a moment. I have one more thing to report."

"All right, say it," I said as I signaled to Schünzel to remain behind with my hand.

Maybe it was because of my lack of hesitation, but the scout gave me an odd look. But hey, *he* was the one who stopped me.

"Don't you think I'm being fishy?" he asked.

I understood what he was getting at. "Doubt you'd pick now of all times to feed me bullshit," I responded in a deliberately rough tone.

I decided it was better to act like this than all noble-like. The man smiled awkwardly. “You have a point. Okay, so here’s the deal…”

As I listened to what the man had to say, I couldn’t help but grimace in disappointment. Oh great, so *that* was happening. There were all sorts of people I’d need to get in touch with immediately. But first…

“Schünzel, I’m sorry but could you go back to the palace and report all this to my father?”

“At once, sir.”

“Neurath, I want you to go on ahead of me to the Zehrfeld estate and tell my father’s butler Norbert about this. If Norbert’s not there, tell Frenssen.”

“Yes, Master Werner.”

“I’ll drop by the Adventurers’ Guild and the Mercenaries’ Guild before I head home. As soon as I get back, I’ll meet with Father and the others. I’ll tell you the details tomorrow.”

“Understood.”

Way to go, Demons. You added more to my plate when I was already so damn busy. I felt no obligation to hold back around *those* scumbags.

***

The next several days were rocked by the aftermath of the Demon purge. On the surface, life went back to normal in the capital—but everyone involved in official positions was busy at work.

Other developments were afoot in the palace, like how the new Marquess Kneipp returned to the court after a short stay in his territory. Ingo, the head of House Zehrfeld, and his heir Werner commuted to the palace every day.

One afternoon during this string of routine days, a visitor came to the Zehrfeld mansion.

“I am Rafed, and I run a jewelry business. In the Wein Kingdom, I have had dealings with the honorable House Bachem,

but I am eager to start a new business relationship with House Zehrfeld."

"Thank you for coming all this way, Lord Rafed."

Needless to say, the head of a noble house would never greet a visitor at the door. Visitors to a noble house were received by a servant—a butler, if they were important—and in this case, the job fell to the parlormaid, Lily. Norbert, the family butler, stood behind Lily, though his intention was to evaluate Lily's performance.

These days, ever since Duke Gründing had praised Werner for his contributions at Finoy, House Zehrfeld was seeing more business with merchants, influential guild members, and other aristocrats. Rafed was one such individual.

The man named Rafed had a droopy appearance, but the light in his eyes indicated that he was surveying his surroundings shrewdly. As he did, he drew two letters from his breast pocket.

"This one is for the count, and this one is for his esteemed son. I hope to make acquaintances with them both."

"Your thoroughness is appreciated. I will ensure that your letters reach the right hands."

Both letters were a tally of gifts. Rafed's subordinates brought the gifts themselves into a corner of the room. For security's sake, they were forbidden from carrying them inside any further until the count's staff had checked them. Lily passed the lists to Norbert, who retreated to the corner in order to cross-check the letters and the gifts.

Rafed watched this out of the corner of his eye. He took a step toward Lily and said to her in a low voice, "I also have something to tell you, Miss Harting—about your brother."

"Mazel?" Lily looked up, blinking in surprise.

Rafed's slightly droopy countenance took on a grave expression. "Indeed. I heard that Mazel the Hero was last spotted heading toward the Poida Desert in the neighboring country of Lesratoga. His destination was the ruins deep within the desert. Since then, his whereabouts are unknown."

"The ruins, you say?"

"Yes. You see, I have some connections with Lesratoga through my business dealings with Count Bachem. I heard tell of

this from them.”

“I-is that so…?”

“I am sure you must be worried. If you are interested in hearing more, I would be happy to sit down and chat further,” said Rafed pushily.

Lily nodded, her expression stiff and tense. “Um, I would like my parents to be there too, if possible.”

“Of course, I would be happy to oblige.”

“Unfortunately, my parents are out today… You see, well, it will be evening at the earliest by the time they return.”

Rafed hummed in thought before eventually nodding. “In that case, when you hear the evening bell, go outside the mansion walls facing the mansion. Bring your family with you. I will take you to a place where we can talk.”

“O-okay. Then I will meet you at the side gate.”

“Yes, that would be good. I am sure you must be worried, but given that this discussion concerns the Hero’s disappearance, I ask that you not speak of it to others.”

“R-right.”

“Now then, until we meet again.”

Rafed bade farewell with another affable smile. Lily and Norbert watched him go. When they went back inside the mansion, Lily immediately told Norbert about the entire conversation.

Norbert nodded. “Hm, I see. I understand. Take care when you leave.”

“Thank you. Please let them know.”

Upon receiving Norbert’s permission, Lily promptly picked up a magic lamp and mirror. She ascended to the third floor, slipped into a back room, and picked up a note on the table. Then she started making her preparations.

***

“Phew. I managed to draw them out.”

Once the merchant named Rafed had gotten some distance away from the Zehrfeld estate, he entered a relatively inexpensive restaurant in the affluent neighborhood. There, he called out to a tall, solidly built individual who was waiting for him, ale in hand.

The man's reaction seemed closer to irritation than indifference. "Heh. Looks like you spies come in useful every now and again."

"I am merely performing a duty for my country."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." The man scowled in displeasure and took a swig of his ale.

Rafed watched him, struggling mentally.

Spies like Rafed existed in every country. Their roles took on many forms. Sometimes, they posed as merchants and leaked information to other countries. Other times, they investigated potential enemy nations as adventurers. Under the guise of merchants, they would also hire adventurers to document the state of the economy in different towns.

Occasionally, they played the long game. With the financial support of their home country, they would live abroad for generations, secretly funneling information through the years.

The possibilities went on.

This did nothing to raise their esteem in the eyes of knights and nobles, however. This was a world where martial prowess was prized above all else. People thumbed their noses at those who existed to sniff out secrets. To them, this was not the kind of strength that won battles or thwarted foes. Although everyone had a different attitude, it wasn't unusual for some knights and aristocrats to regard spies as lower than peasants.

Such was Rafed's client, to whom he regularly reported his findings. He was used to it, as it were, and so the knight's reaction did not surprise him. He pasted a smile on his face, making sure that the other man could not detect his thoughts.

"After I have taken the Hero's family to Lesratoga, should I remain there?"

"Yeah, I ain't insisting you come back to Wein," the man replied with a distinctly unamused expression.

Rafed shrugged inwardly again. His orders came from a knight and secretary in his home country, not the embassy in the Wein Kingdom. It was doubtful whether the orders actually reflected the will of his nation. He suspected that there may have been some politicking involved.

But Rafed also believed that this was his only chance to target the Hero's family. He knew that Duke Seyfert's mansion, where the family was originally supposed to seek shelter, had discreetly increased its security by shifting the knight brigade to a separate building. If the family moved to the Seyfert estate, where they would be guarded at all hours of the day, then no amount of maneuvering would make them fall into his hands.

"Given that it is a house of bureaucrats, the security at the Zehrfeld estate should not be anything too deadly," he muttered softly.

Part of this was unconscious arrogance. As someone involved in manufacturing rumors and collecting intelligence, he understood the importance of information. However, because the number of guards and soldiers at the Zehrfeld estate hadn't increased drastically, Rafed was under the mistaken impression that the construction work at the Seyfert estate was to strengthen the security there.

On the other hand, he was undeniably phoning it in. No reason to do more than follow instructions, given all the condescension he suffered at the hands of the knight handling the whole operation.

Abruptly, he opened his mouth as if something had just occurred to him. "Oh, right. Is the Hero actually headed to the Poida Desert?"

"Who knows?" the knight said. "His Majesty asked the Hero to investigate the ruins or something, but I don't really care."

Either way, his job was to use the Hero's family to coerce the Hero into working solely for Lesratoga. That was what the knight's thin smile declared as he emptied his mug.

"We can't afford to touch the holy woman and make an enemy of the church, but the commoner Hero is an easy mark."

"Yes, you are quite right." Rafed had nothing else to say after that. The knight's words made his position clear.

From what Rafed recalled, the firstborn prince was sickly, yet wise and politically savvy. The second prince, on the other hand, was inclined toward brute force, for better or worse. He even had some slight disdain for the church. Judging by how the knight had regarded her as “the holy woman” rather than “Her Holiness,” he was probably part of the second prince’s faction. This furthered Rafed’s suspicion that this incident was a front for the succession war.

A corner of Lesratoga consisted of desert, but when the Demon Lord returned, that region had begun to expand. Powerful monsters started spawning in the Poida Ruins, located deep within the desert. The second prince was the one who had promulgated an investigation into the ruins.

But the investigation team had no success. When the second prince forced them into the ruins, a horde of powerful monsters wiped them out, leaving only a few straggling survivors. The fallout was messy because his older brother was always the higher authority. It was hard to deny that the second prince’s standing took a hit after that incident.

It made sense that the second prince, a staunch advocate of brawn over brains, desired the Hero for his combat prowess. That still left the question of whether he would treat the Hero’s family with the same courtesy. At the very least, it was hard to imagine him treating a family of commoners as honored guests. In all likelihood, the second prince had prepared a prison cell for them.

Angering the Hero was likely to put the throne further out of the second prince’s reach, but Rafed decided that it was best not to rock the boat. Whatever happened, it would be the prince’s problem to deal with.

As Rafed stared at the knight, who looked all but assured of his victory, the wheels in his head began to turn. How to sell this information to the eldest prince?

***

As dusk began to blanket the capital’s skies, Rafed borrowed a carriage and had it park near the Zehrfeld estate. He waited there, seated beside the driver, until he saw three people,

including Lily, exit the mansion through the side gate. He breathed a sigh of relief, shaking his head slightly. The three were wearing the nondescript clothing of ordinary citizens, ensuring that they would not stand out in the encroaching darkness. So far, so good.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting…” Lily said.

“Not a problem. Have you left a message for the count?”

“Yes, I have.”

“You have? Then let us go somewhere else. Please get inside.”

When Rafed opened the carriage door, Lily saw a solidly built man inside. She hesitated for a moment.

Rafed gave her a mollifying smile. “Oh, not to worry. This man will be guarding us. You are the family of the honored Hero, after all.”

“Oh…is that so?”

“Out of curiosity, what is that you’re carrying?”

“Oh, this?” Lily showed him what she was holding: a perfume bottle made of rock crystal. Because glass was so expensive, aristocrats sometimes used crystal for their perfume bottles—the top-quality stuff, of course. “Master Werner gave this to me.”

“Ah, I see. It has sentimental value to you. Take care not to drop it anywhere.”

“I’ll try not to. Thank you, sir.”

After that exchange, the three family members obediently entered the carriage. Rafed placed a heavy latch down from the outside. Since there were no windows, nobody could see anything from the inside, and nobody from the outside could tell there were people within.

Once he was satisfied that the latch was secure, Rafed sat down next to the carriage driver—an individual handpicked by a Lesratoga embassy secretary—and gave the signal to depart. The carriage slowly rocked into motion.

They had only traveled a short distance, however, when a man suddenly staggered out of a side street right into their path. The driver hurriedly yanked the reins, barely in time to avoid running him down.

“What the hell are you doing?!” he yelled in unrestrained anger. “You could’ve died!”

“Whaaat? I’m havin’ a drink, can’t ya see?” The man was red in the face and swaying drunkenly on his feet.

When he plopped himself down in front of the carriage, the driver exploded in fury. “You lout! Are you not aware that this carriage belongs to Count Bachem?!”

“Whaaat?”

The man appeared not to have heard. But then two other men showed up and hastily peeled the man away. “S-sorry, sir. He’s with us. He might’ve had too much to drink.”

“Terribly sorry, sir.”

“Just get out of the way already!” the driver snapped.

The men quickly grabbed the drunk-looking man and held him by the side of the road. The carriage rushed past, as if the driver was in a hurry.

“Ohh?” one of the men whispered wryly, too quiet for the driver to hear. “So the carriage belongs to Count Bachem from our dear kingdom, eh?”

“They’ve been acting shady, all things considered,” the red-faced man muttered with a faint chuckle.

The man on the other side of him pulled his hand away from his shoulder. “We got what we came for. Let’s get going,” he called out to the other two.

“Yes, sir.”

After that short exchange, the man who’d lurched into the carriage’s path sped off toward the palace with an adroitness that did not make him look very drunk at all. The two other men followed suit, their silhouettes soon vanishing into the twilight.

***

Meanwhile, Rafed and the driver decided that, despite the little problem they encountered on the road, there was no need to alter their course in any significant way. They cut their speed and

kept a gentle pace until they arrived at a deserted street flanked by warehouses.

As Rafed finished setting up a magic lamp, the driver pulled out a pair of Skywalk Boots. The boots transported equipment as well as people, so just like that, the entire group—the carriage included—vanished from the capital.

After recovering from the mildly dizzying sensation, Rafed and the driver lit the magic lamp and checked their surroundings. The spy and his lackey exchanged smiles.

“It’s a problem when the gates close at night,” said the driver as he shook his head.

“What problem? The carriage may not be able to pass through, but I’ve made arrangements at one of the side gates. We won’t need a Wein Kingdom carriage where we’re going.”

Nevertheless, they were outside the city walls. They had no idea when a monster would attack. Rafed made a signal and shone the lamplight around the forest. Over ten hooded figures emerged from within it, armed and spread out to encircle the carriage.

Rafed disembarked with the driver and smiled at the group. “It all went to plan. Now then,” he said, addressing Mazel’s family, “I would like to take you all to the Lesratoga royal court. I guarantee that no harm will befall you as long as you come quietly.”

The carriage shook violently in response. Judging by the vigorous thuds, Rafed figured that the father was attempting to beat down the door in resistance. He approached the carriage so that he could release the latch, when all of a sudden, the people who’d surrounded the carriage began pelting it with ceramic jars, that cracked loudly as they shattered.

Rafed turned around in unease. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, just a little precaution.”

The person who responded did not sound like anyone Rafed recognized. A chill ran down his spine as he registered the unknown presence.

“Wh-who are you?” he couldn’t help but cry.

“It’s rude to ask someone’s name before telling them yours. Or so I’d usually say, but it really doesn’t matter now,” the man

responded nonchalantly. Then, with a fearless smile, he leveled his spear for combat.

The driver gasped when he recognized the man's face.

"My name is Werner! Werner Von Zehrfeld. I've come to take Lily back, as promised."

***

At almost the exact same moment, several people were gathering in one corner of the aristocrat district. Although their clothing ran the gamut of social strata, they were alike in the peculiar bloodlust they exuded.

"The mansion is in disarray now that the girl is gone. If we attack now in the confusion and kill all the young men, one of them's bound to be that Werner boy Lord Gezarius was talking about."

"Indeed."

"We might as well massacre them all."

"I remember his face. As long as you don't eat their heads, we can check to make sure we have the target."

Although they looked human, there was something distinctly inhuman about the aura around them. Granted, they were no longer trying to conceal it. The figures continued their approach to the Zehrfeld estate until it came into view. They broke into a sprint toward the mansion. The darkness was no obstacle to them.

"Let's go!"

The leader of the pack shed his human form, revealing his Werewolf body. He leapt over the fence—only to scream like a dog run over by a carriage. As the noise rang out into the night, the others stood stock-still in shock.

The next moment, a hail of arrows rained down on the street from Count Stromer's estate, opposite the Zehrfeld mansion. The beasts standing there had their backs completely unguarded. As arrows pelted them from behind, even more shafts rained out from the window slits on the Zehrfeld mansion's second floor. The would-be attackers were buffeted by a veritable storm of arrows.

Their shouts of anger soon morphed into screams of agony, then dying whimpers.

“Keep calm and just shoot. They can’t escape,” Count Mühe declared. He was the one issuing orders to the gatekeepers on the Zehrfeld mansion’s second floor.

Mühe had entered the residence by carriage, riding the one Ingo should have been on. He left reinforcements at Baron Diehl’s former estate, which stood behind the Zehrfeld mansion. They would be able to handle themselves in a fight.

Meanwhile, Viscount Kranke had entered the Zehrfeld estate on foot disguised as Werner. He kept watch over the mansion’s rear just in case, though the situation did not appear to call for his intervention.

As Count Mühe calmly watched over the slaughter on the road, the Zehrfeld family butler Norbert approached him with a cup of tea. “Refreshments, Lord Mühe.”

“Ah, thank you.” Mühe’s face flickered with gratitude as he took a sip and sighed in relief. Then he asked Norbert, “How did you manage to get in touch with me when I left the estate for my post?”

“I used this method conceived by Master Werner.”

Using a mirror to reflect light from a magic lamp would create a prominent beacon even during the daytime. Although it wasn’t yet suitable for more complex communications, Werner had already provided the Royal Guard with a chart explaining the signals. The same chart was also in use at the Zehrfeld estate.

Only a single street separated the back of Zehrfeld estate from Baron Diehl’s former estate, which the vice captain of the Royal Guard currently presided over. A signal from Lily’s room could reach the windows of the baron’s estate.

Upon receiving the message, messengers furtively slipped out the back of Baron Diehl’s old estate and sprinted to multiple points in the city. They got in contact with everyone involved at the palace: Ingo, Werner, Prince Hubertus, the Royal Guard, and the garrison. At the same time, they swiftly took action based on their planned contingency measures.

Although it was only then that Count Mühe received the command to lead the auxiliary troops, the plan had been set in

stone since the night Werner presented his prototypes to the palace. Everybody knew what to do if someone came to Lily invoking Mazel's name, what signal would convey that, and where they should be positioned afterward.

"I must say, I never imagined that there would be Demons involved," Norbert lamented.

"His Highness and Lord Werner had no definite proof either," Mühe replied. "But they reasoned that if there *were* still Demons skulking about, they would choose this as an opportune moment to strike."

To be honest, even Mühe had been under the distinct impression that the preparations were a "just in case" sort of thing. But judging from the outcome, the caution was warranted.

Also, the reason Mühe was chosen to lead the defense was because his house ordinarily had little to do with House Zehrfeld. Prince Hubert was astute enough to foresee what might happen if a known Zehrfeld ally had been assigned to protect Werner and his house. Thus, he ordered for someone without such fetters to handle the reinforcements.

And Count Mühe fulfilled his duty to perfection. That night, all the surviving Demons in the capital would be wiped out in one fell swoop.

"I'm impressed, Count Mühe," Norbert remarked. "You held nothing back."

"Putting caltrops on stone pavement enhances their potency. Though it does tend to be a hassle to clean."

As his carriage entered the Zehrfeld estate, Mühe had scattered a considerable number of caltrops on the ground. So many, in fact, that in order to prevent passersby from injuring themselves, he made up false pretenses so that he could arrive at a later hour when the grounds would be empty.

Pain aggravated monsters, but it did not diminish their will to fight. Still, even they couldn't ignore large metal spikes being driven into their feet. It worked—the group of monsters was stopped in its tracks between the Zehrfeld and Stromer estates.

Mühe personally thought his reputation would be ruined if the enemy managed to infiltrate the Zehrfeld estate, though of course he did not say that aloud. Fortunately, the caltrops he

deployed near the wall were enough to stop the Werewolves. The hassle of cleaning this up was nothing compared to letting Demons roam free in the capital.

As an extra precaution, the count threw a torch onto the road. As he ordered his troops to check for survivors, he muttered to himself:

"I wonder how things are going on *his* end."

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"Keep them pressured! Cut down anyone who resists!" Count Witthöft called out.

At almost the exact same time that Count Mühe had repelled the attack, House Witthöft's knights were carrying out their duty, bringing Count Bachem's estate to heel. They stripped every bit of weaponry from Count Bachem's bewildered soldiers and servants, pausing every now and then to snap the shaft of a spear. Lord Erdoğan, head of House Witthöft, led by example at the fore.

Baron Kupfernagel, who had tagged along as a military overseer, smiled awkwardly at Lord Erdoğan's somewhat brutish methods.

"I know not what transpired, but I do know that His Highness the Crown Prince has a mean streak," he muttered.

It was not altogether an unreasonable assessment.

House Witthöft and House Bachem had no close ties, but neither were they in conflict. Prince Hubertus himself had ordered Witthöft to subdue the Bachem estate because they were "scheming against the Hero's family." Erdoğan had paled upon receiving the order and seeing the prince's feigned smile.

Erdoğan was chosen, the baron knew, because he had been plotting something himself.

But even if he was acting under the royal family's direct orders, such a ruthless attack would leave a stain on House Witthöft's reputation at court. There was a difference between doing a soldier's duty and the sheer brutality on display here.

A man who appeared to be the captain of the knights brandished his weapon on the frontline alongside a young

nobleman. The baron figured that this was the heir of House Witthöft, which also called to mind a certain court rumor.

Witthöft was a martial house, and both Erdoğan and his heir prided themselves on their valor. Unfortunately for them, their exploits were nothing compared to the recent exploits of House Zehrfeld's heir. The baron didn't know which of them was disgruntled by this state of affairs, but it had to have factored into this somehow.

Furthermore, House Witthöft's internal affairs weren't exactly all in order—something that could be said about more than a few members of the martial faction. Because of this, the count's son had planned to wed the second daughter of Count Friedheim, a member of the bureaucrat faction. Erdoğan was reluctant to accept a bride from a rival faction, and it was whispered in the court that he was only in it for the dowry. Few people doubted it.

But all those plans went awry when Count Friedheim's territory, Valeritz, fell to the Demons prior to the battle at Finoy. To Count Witthöft, who had never counted himself fortunate with his finances, it was an unexpected blow. The bountiful harvest he'd been hoping to reap had been nipped in the bud.

Meanwhile, House Bachem had plenty of money to spare. The count traded with the neighboring country of Lesratoga as extensively as the royal family allowed. On the other hand, they didn't have a good military reputation by any stretch of the imagination. In a country that valued brawn so deeply, Bachem inevitably got the short end of the stick.

House Bachem and House Zehrfeld were both bureaucrat families. In terms of their scale, there was not much difference between them. House Zehrfeld's head was a minister, however, and his son was an acclaimed military leader who had won the confidence of the crown prince. House Bachem, meanwhile, had never stepped up its game. And as far as anyone could tell, the house's heir had no plans of taking to the field. Regardless of what House Zehrfeld thought of them, the Bachem side most certainly had its own unspoken opinions.

Considering the circumstances, there was a distinct possibility that Erdoğan had some kind of deal with Count Bachem for monetary support. If this deal involved the Hero's family, then

one could easily guess what kind of backroom discussions there might have been.

“So Count Bachem was motivated by jealousy against House Zehrfeld. Someone cunning took advantage of that. House Witthöft would take custody of the Hero’s family, and then they would try to smear House Zehrfeld’s name by claiming the family deserted them,” the baron mused.

What would Count Witthöft have done if he got his hands on the Hero’s family? At this point, it was hard to say for certain, but he might have pretended to send them off to his fief while handing them over to Count Bachem for a tidy sum. Without all the facts at his disposal, the baron had no way of knowing that Lesratoga was also involved.

“I doubt he expected an attack from his would-be partner in crime.”

It was perhaps a bit too dramatic to make Count Witthöft stab Count Bachem in the back. But the baron saw no reason for sympathy. He watched over the battle carefully and told his troops to make sure nobody started fires.

He made his move not long after the head of House Bachem was tied up and restrained. The count was naked from the waist up, having been found sleeping with a dancer from Lesratoga. The dancer tried to escape from the window, but the baron was there to restrain her.

Furthermore, Count Bachem’s eldest son slipped out the back gate, though he was apprehended by the guards lying in wait on the road to the Lesratoga embassy.

“Wh-what indignity! I am the heir of House Bachem!” the young man shouted as he struggled against a soldier.

“That doesn’t mean you get a free pass.”

The young man looked up, startled by the elderly sounding voice. “Y-Your Excellency Duke Seyfert?”

Flanked by his personal bodyguards, Seyfert strode toward the prone man. He waved a hand to stop the guards from bowing to him.

Seyfert regarded the young Bachem with more cynicism than anger. “I don’t know who’s the master and who’s the puppet,

but we'll get to the bottom of it. As far as I'm concerned, this was a fool's errand."

"Er, um, Your Excellency..."

"You ought to prepare yourselves. The crown prince is furious."

Upon hearing these words from the military commander, the surrounding guards understood that they had no reason to play nice. Count Bachem's son turned pale. Nobody would censure the guards if they broke a few bones as they restrained him.

At this point, Seyfert actually expected Count Bachem himself to flee. Thinking that things would get tedious if the count flaunted his authority, Seyfert deliberately left the mansion later and added blockades to the road. He never imagined that the count would take a dancer to his bedroom the moment the sun went down. In the days to come, the duke would shrug at this fact with an awkward face.

"Your Excellency." A guard came running up to Seyfert as he was watching Count Bachem's son get dragged away.

"Ah, yes, good work." Seyfert looked away from the messy scene. "How goes the plan?"

"The Zehrfeld estate is safe. We have also secured Lesratoga's ambassador."

"Oho, so he did not run. I would not have been surprised if he used a magic item to abscond." Seyfert stroked his chin in thought, then, after a moment, nodded. "What else?"

"Sir, one of the secretaries at the Lesratoga embassy revealed himself to be a winged Demon."

"What happened to the Demon?"

"It was eliminated by the second squad of the knight brigade's first order."

"The report did not reach the palace. Hm..." Seyfert contemplated this for a moment and shook his head. "I suppose it's natural to assume that the ambassador was unaware. Lesratoga is not a monolith, after all. I suppose that'll be work for the foreign minister."

As he muttered to himself, Seyfert scanned his surroundings. The next instant, a single distant howl rang out across the royal

capital. It was long and guttural, the sound of a beast barely restraining its humiliation and disdain. The sound caused tension to spike across the palace and city, but nothing in particular happened after that.

That day, Count Bachem's entire family was thrown into the palace dungeons. Later that night, the Minister of Foreign Affairs decreed that nearly every building housing people with ties to Lesratoga be placed under surveillance. Officially, all the inhabitants were under house arrest.

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"W-Werner? How can you be here?!" shouted the man named Rafed. Even in the lamplight, he could tell who I was. His face was pale.

"Because I got here ahead of time, obviously."

"Are you an idiot?" I wanted to say but held myself in check. Or rather, my thoughts were interrupted as the carriage driver tried to make a break for it. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of my comrades in the encirclement strike him with a scabbard and send him sprawling. No way was he going to give us the slip in that state.

"I suppose I only need to hand one of you over to the authorities."

"You...rotten scoundrel!"

"Although I guess I should thank *you* for coming to us. Though my fists may want a word with you first."

I had people deployed at other spots in case they tried to make a getaway. No matter where they went, I could guarantee Lily's safety.

But I never imagined the neighboring country of Lesratoga would poke its head into our business. In the game's story, you passed through the country without incident, but life wasn't all like a game and clearly Lesratoga had its share of schemers.

"H-how did you know about us?"

"I have no obligation to explain."

It was probably just a simple coincidence. I might have been screwed if old Bert didn't tell me that people kept coming and going between House Witthöft and House Bachem during the dead of the night. The same thing went for the connection between Count Bachem and the Lesratoga embassy.

Well, the Witthöfts had already made a nuisance of themselves to our house, so they got off with a warning. I wonder what would have happened if the order of things had been different.

The Bachems, apparently, had a habit of playing around, all the way down to the servants. Maybe it was because the pay was good and they were never strapped for cash. Either way, the count didn't maintain enough control over them. But even if they *were* loose-lipped in the face of alcohol and women, I had to hand it to the ladies of the red-light district and their absurd communication network. Gotta figure out a way to pay the old man back for this.

"Wh-what happened to my country's soldiers?!"

"Looks like they stood you up."

From my own experience using Skywalk Books, it was best to teleport just outside a town, where you didn't risk people seeing you. Naturally, I imagined the possibility of an ambush. When I consulted with the prince the day after I met with Bert's messenger, he immediately gave me a whole bunch of Skywalk Boots, with spares upon spares. Before the day was even out, he summoned a diplomat noble for me, who teleported me to Lesratoga. I really owed him for that.

Laying the groundwork paid off; by the time a guy tried to hoodwink Lily by bringing up Mazel, I knew the likely spots in Lesratoga he would teleport to and confirmed where his soldiers were positioned. The machine moved fast.

The reason Lily stalled until evening was so I could take out the ambush troops first. That said, we had to adapt as we went, rather more than I could have foreseen. This did make me a bit nervous.

We sure did hop around a lot in a short time frame. How many Skywalk Boots did it take to transport all these people, and how much did it all cost...? I guessed Count Bachem's wealth

would be confiscated because of all this, so the kingdom's coffers would recoup whatever they lost.

Anyway, it didn't escape my notice that the guy said "my country." Right from the beginning, these schmucks were spies for Lesratoga. They were being played like fools too, although they were apparently yet to realize this. Oh well, I had no obligation to set the record straight for them.

Rafed (who knows if that was his real name?) glared at me. Not that it was very intimidating coming from a fat, middle-aged guy. When I took a step toward him, he retreated two steps and cast a glance at the carriage. His confidence suddenly restored, he turned back to me.

"W-wait! A knight is inside the carriage with the Hero's family. Are you sure you want to mess with hostages?"

"Sounds like a pickle."

If he was assuming I hadn't accounted for this, then this Rafed guy was either a greenhorn grunt or this rough-and-tumble stuff was completely out of his wheelhouse. I could take my time and ask him all about it later. Criminals in this world didn't have human rights, you know?

"Hey, Lily, you unhurt?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

Her voice was muffled by the carriage walls, but nothing seemed amiss.

Rafed, meanwhile, was stunned. "But how?"

"You might know Lily by face, but how about her parents? Did you confirm their identities?"

Cooks for a noble house worked in the back. Even a merchant who frequently came and went from the mansion would never see their faces. He assumed that he had tricked Lily and never suspected the adults she brought along with her. Way too sloppy. He underestimated commoners.

Just in case, I asked Norbert to quiz people over the past few days on whether they recognized Ari and Anna. He went through all the merchants who did business with the Zehrfelds. Outside the mansion, he also contacted the Merchants' Guild through Mr. Bierstedt.

Ordinarily, even the names of the Harting couple should have been obscured, yet somehow people knew that they were working as cooks in our estate. The kingdom had contrived to leak their existences, but not their faces. I had to admire my father's ability to handle the flow of information.

But this also meant that the lady knight I asked to pose as Lily's mother was affronted at the task. *"This is her mother, not her sister, right?"* Annette grumbled. I supposed I should say something to mollify her ego. Even though Anna was Lily's mother, she could have passed for her sister if we were just going by looks.

But all of that could come later. This Rafed moron looked like he still wanted to run his mouth, but he was getting to be a pain, so I knocked him on the side of his head with my spear shaft and sent him flying. A lot of people were built tougher in this world compared to my old one, so this was enough to shut him up without killing him. I wasn't gonna fret over breaking a few of his bones.

The guy writhed on the ground, and the soldiers moved to tie him up. I kept this scene at the edge of my vision as I approached the carriage and lifted the latch on the door. I shone a magic lamp inside, revealing Lily's relieved face. I heaved a mental sigh of relief as well.

I bowed my head at the man sitting opposite from her. "Thank you so much for lending your assistance, Vice Captain Goretzka."

"No problem, Viscount. I'm happy to assist an up-and-comer."

I never dreamed that the vice captain of the Royal Guard would volunteer to stand in as Lily's father. I genuinely freaked out and said it was fine for someone else to do it, but he said that he occasionally took to the front lines himself. This really was a muscle-brain world, yadda yadda.

Goretzka kicked a man, laying him out flat on the floor outside the carriage. Oof, merciless. The guy looked like he was twitching somehow.

"Poison is effective at times like these," said Goretzka.

"Oh, so he was even carrying around poison."

A closer inspection of the convulsing man turned up a small, concealable knife buried in his thigh. So it was coated with poison, huh?

Some monster poisons included numbing agents. If you watered them down, you could use them as anesthetic for surgeries. The Adventurers' Guild offered monetary compensation for gathering such substances. In the game, poison could kill the Hero if left unchecked, so I doubted that they used anything so potent on this guy. Probably.

But that sure was one hell of a stab wound. The knife was basically embedded in the man's thigh. They were *not* kidding around.

On the other hand, I didn't think they cut any major veins. Since magic could cure most ailments in this world as long as you didn't die, I figured that it was fine to leave the dude on the ground for a while.

I was still pondering this when Annette, the lady knight sitting next to Lily, threw something outside the carriage. It landed with a metallic clink. Wow, did those assholes prepare something like *that* for a commoner who knew nothing of violence? No wonder Goretzka and Annette were pissed.

"He was hiding these behind his back: three sets of shackles for criminal slaves," Annette spat. "This man was waiting for his chance to use them the whole time."

"A mere knight would never be able to clap those on me," Goretzka added.

I guess you could say the guy had an unlucky matchup against the vice captain of the Royal Guard. Not that I felt sorry for him.

Between the twitching knight, Rafed, and the carriage driver, there were three people in total. Since they were so gracious as to line themselves up for me, they seemed like the perfect guinea pigs for these cuffs. I signaled to my allies with a glance.

As I stepped out of the carriage along with its three occupants, I spoke to Lily. "Sorry about all of that. Were you frightened?"

"I volunteered myself for this, Master Werner. Besides, everything happened just as you said."

She must have been nervous anyway, but she still had a smile on her face. That put me at ease. Before I could help myself, I patted Lily on the head.

I'd been worried about how to handle her. Dozens of people already knew her face because she worked as a maid. Yet when I explained the plan to her, she offered herself up as a decoy, which honestly had me flustered.

But pulling off a switcheroo was undeniably difficult. I'd never heard of any disguising skill or magic spell, and besides, we didn't know how much our prospective enemy already knew about her. Maybe we could pull the wool over their eyes if they were visiting the mansion for the first time, but there was only so much we could do if someone had already scoped out the place. I couldn't make someone else stand in for Lily indefinitely.

Everyone else told me that we might as well go with her suggestion because we would never have to do this again. So I ended up conceding, albeit quite reluctantly.

Since I was biting the bullet, I took every kind of possibility into account. I even considered what might happen if she were transferred to the Witthöft or Bachem fiefs first. I actually asked the prince to send knights to both territories.

My own knights were not involved because I didn't want them fighting against fellow noblemen. Which turned out to be a good idea, since some agents from Lesratoga had apparently been keeping tabs on them. But there were so many people to thank, it made me ill just thinking about it.

At the end of it all, I had to say: Lily seemed placid on the surface, but she was stubborn as a mule underneath.

"The young miss was very calm and composed throughout it all. She had a lot of faith in you, Viscount," said Goretzka.

"Er, um..."

What was this guy saying? I mean, how was I supposed to react? For a moment, I genuinely felt glad that nobody from Zehrfeld was around, but the next moment, I felt a prickling sensation on my neck.

"Lily, I'm sorry but you need to get back in the carriage. There's still one thing left to do."

"R-right..."

Lily obediently climbed back inside. Without the need for me to prompt it, my allies started fanning out around the carriage. Wow, these guys were pros. Likewise, Vice Captain Goretzka and the lady knight Annette drew their weapons from the magic bags they were secretly carrying. Just from a glance, I could tell that those two were a cut above average. Goretzka wasn't even wearing armor, but just from the way he carried himself, I doubted my chances of winning against him.

But anyway, I focused my attention elsewhere. You see, I had anticipated that *they* might show up one more time. We could all escape with the Skywalk Boots we had on hand if there were too many of them to deal with, but I wanted to exterminate them here if I could.

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The trees rustled around us, then parted to reveal a host of monsters. Some were bipedal pigs, larger than human beings, carrying massive clubs. Others were knife-wielding beasts the size of small men. Then there were the moving clumps of dirt. These guys were back for round two, huh?

"Orcs, Gnolls, and Mudmen, it looks like," Goretzka said.

"I fought these monsters not too long ago. Looks like someone was pulling the strings," I said briskly as I readied my spear. "I'll fill you in later."

I'd anticipated that there would be Lesratoga soldiers lying in wait to apprehend Mazel's family, but there was a slight twist: they'd all been wiped out by monsters.

If we hadn't arrived first, that Rafed guy might have been attacked by the monsters we fought off. My guess was that the mastermind behind the incident arranged for Rafed and his cronies to bring Mazel's family here. The big question was how much of the bigger picture the Lesratoga faction was aware of.

But I could save such speculation for the future. Better to focus on what was in front of me. Goretzka and Annette guarded each other's back, while the rest of our forces took up a defensive formation around the carriage.

"Stay calm. This is all as we planned."

“Yes, sir.”

I left command of the troops to Goecke, the mercenary leader who helped me during both the Demon Stampede and the merchant guarding mission. I’d heard that he was a veteran, but this guy really didn’t bat an eyelid at slaying monsters.

Gnolls were basically bipedal hyenas crossed with humans. They were the archetypal image of hyenas in that they looked scruffy and drooled from their mouths as they eyed their prey (in this case, humans). Though I guess you could also say they were like a monstrous take on bandits. Their saliva wasn’t venomous, but you wouldn’t want one to bite you, anyway. It didn’t seem hygienic.

The orcs were exactly like you’d see in old-school games. They had pig heads, short limbs, and were generally hideous to behold. Among the monsters that spawned near Lesratoga, they were infamously tough. Not that this mattered, but they were inspired by pigs instead of boars because this was a fantasy game. Oh yeah, I wondered if they attacked women in this world. I’d never heard any reports, but maybe it happened? No, wait, monsters basically attacked every human on sight.

In the game, Mudmen were palette swaps of zombies, but in this world they were a distinct species of monster: clumps of dirt in the shape of a human. Contrary to their appearances, swords and spears were effective against them.

Despite their vague physical similarities, Gnolls and Orcs were apparently considered a different species of monster from lycanthropes. Maybe the difference was that they couldn’t transform into humans. I honestly didn’t get the distinction. Kobolds weren’t considered lycanthropes either, for what it was worth.

What I did know for certain was that these guys were the underlings of Eghibigör, one of the Four Fiends whom Mazel was up against. They showed up in the game in a town ruled by a fief lord transformed into a monster. You encountered them first in an inn, then later in Eghibigör’s dungeon.

Given that both locations were in Lesratoga, I would guess that Eghibigör was the one pulling the strings here. I didn’t have a shred of hard evidence, but whatever. Mazel would deal with Eghibigör soon enough, anyway.

“Ah! Arrrgh! Monsters?!”

The carriage driver picked that unfortunate moment to wake up and scream—basically painting a target on himself.

Picking up on his very audible distress, the Gnolls and Orcs came running. They rushed headlong toward their human prey with no apparent plan whatsoever.

Your average soldiers might have been spooked, but given that we were anticipating these monsters, their poor planning came in handy for us. The Mudmen started oozing their way toward us as well, but they moved at such a slower pace from the other monsters that it looked like a simple matter to dispatch them separately. I decided to start with the Orcs and Gnolls.

The Gnolls were fast on their feet, so I waited for them to come to me. Their weapons were longer than knives yet shorter than swords, but they were rusted and appeared to be coated with something, so I had no desire to engage them up close. I exploited my spear’s reach to stab a Gnoll dead.

As I kept an eye on my allies’ positions, I swung my spear in a wide arc to keep multiple enemies in check. My big swing made it look like I was wide open, baiting a beast into charging my flank. I stepped back to put some distance between us and stabbed the offending monster. Meanwhile, Annette bisected another Gnoll that was trying to close in on me.

At last, the Orcs were upon me, brandishing their enormous clubs. As I watched an Orc charge at me, I bent down and took a swing at its feet. My spear had a superior reach to its club. A glaive would have been even better, but this was good enough.

I brought up my spear diagonally, as if to scoop up my opponent’s foot. The Orc bent over backward dramatically. This made me wonder if monsters had an Achilles’ heel—not that the phrase would make sense to anyone here.

As these silly thoughts ran through my head, the nearby mercenaries lashed out at the enemies before deftly pulling back. The accepted tactic for fighting monsters was to strike and fade. Stay within range of them, and you’d find yourself on the receiving end of a nasty counterattack.

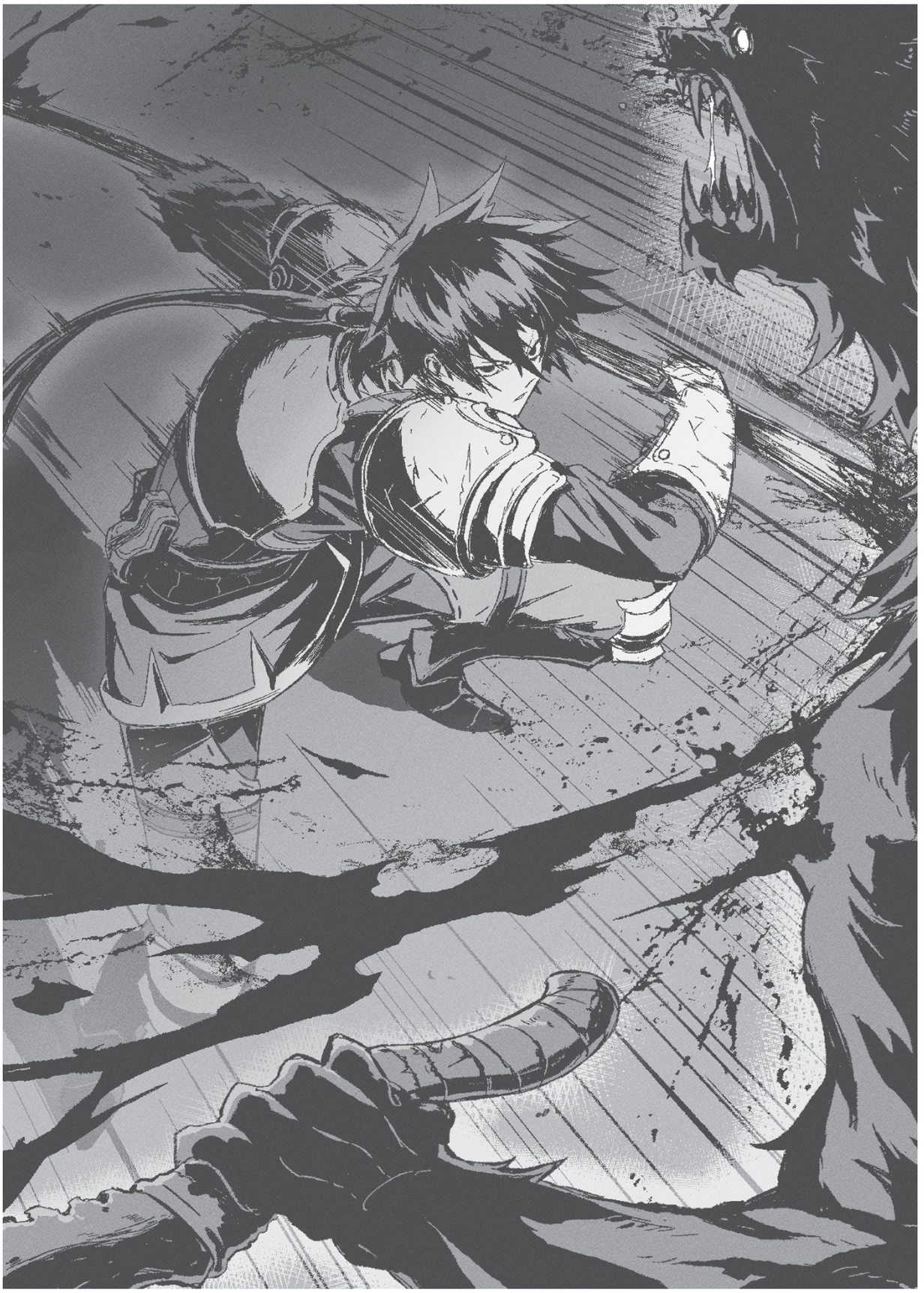
The Orc let out a wild roar of anger. As it attempted to regain its balance, I pierced its other foot. Its posture crumbled again. I

retracted my spear as two other mercenaries came in swinging their swords on either side. Right in tandem, I stepped forward and pierced the Orc's torso. Those guys were a huge help, honestly.

But man, not that this had anything to do with anything, Orcs reeked something awful. Their breath stank too.

When I snapped my gaze around me, I saw Goretzka and Annette finishing off a monster. They were way too overpowered. Further ahead, there was a group of three—one spear user and two swordsmen, just like me and those other guys just now. And there was one particular person taking down an Orc all by himself.

I knew he was a more than decent fighter, of course; he used to run with Luguentz, a member of the Hero's party, and he was the captain of a mercenary band to boot. But still, Goecke was an absolute beast. He was someone you wanted at your back. The mercenaries who worked under him were pros at dispatching monsters too.



At any rate, I didn’t think we were about to lose, so I decided to just focus on the enemy in front of me. The Mudmen were the easiest to send flying; I could just whack them away like golf balls so I wouldn’t have to think about them.

I was just contemplating what to do when I sensed another presence in the forest. Without missing a beat, I took a step back to cover the carriage. The next moment, something burst from the darkness and flew at me with blistering speed.

I couldn’t tell whether it was aiming for me or the carriage but decided either way to ward it off by swinging my spear. Right before my spearhead connected with it, the winged creature turned sharply in midair, slipping past my maneuver. This one sure was nimble.

The creature stopped briefly before descending sharply—not toward me but the carriage. I didn’t know whether it was trying to break down the carriage or take the whole thing away, but it was a bad move regardless.

With tremendous force, the thing landed on top of the carriage. As the carriage swayed, I thought I heard Lily emit a small gasp, but this was totally drowned out by the creature’s earsplitting scream. Like nails on a blackboard, damn. I was pretty sure everyone in the city heard that.

Rafed and the driver were cautious of Demons, so they had sprayed Monster Repel on the carriage beforehand. For a human, it would have been like plunging their hand into boiling water. I’d never experienced that for myself so I could only imagine how painful that was.

Either way, as the creature screamed and tried to jump off the carriage, I stabbed it in the back. The spear plunged a satisfying depth, but not far enough to put the enemy out of commission. With my current skills, I was fine tackling Gnolls and whatnot, but it was impossible for me to kill anything stronger with just one strike. But I could use the spear’s length to drag it down and finish it off.

Pushing my weight onto my spear, I half turned my foe’s body and pulled it to the ground. As soon as it fell, Goretzka and Annette wasted no time laying into it with their swords. A blow from Goretzka’s weapon basically pulverized its head.

So it was a Gargoyle, huh? They were found in Eghibigör's dungeon. They were highly agile and a pain to deal with when they had the initiative.

"Master Werner, there's another one overhead!"

I glanced up sharply at Lily's warning. I saw a Gargoyle descending soundlessly and a sense of foreboding came over me.

I jumped backward not a moment too soon. A hand shot out of the ground I'd been standing on—a Mudman, camouflaged in the ground. As I turned my back to the carriage, the Gargoyle swung around sharply, skimming the ground in a beeline for me. It was too fast and too close to dodge.

I steadied my footing, then thrust my spear with all my might. The tip went inside the Gargoyle's mouth. Since the beast didn't slow its momentum, my spear went all the way through the back of its skull. To add insult to injury, Goretzka came in with a sword to the monster's back. Meanwhile, Annette dealt with the Mudman.

Because I'd skewered the enemy so thoroughly, it took a bit of work to dislodge my spear. By the time I was done, the battle more or less seemed to be over. Oh man, I'd have to do some proper maintenance on this spearhead later. I didn't rack up a high body count in this battle, but Lily was unharmed, and that was all that mattered. Looked like we managed to get through this without having to use our backup option.

"What now, Viscount?" asked Goretzka.

"I've got a bad feeling," I replied.

I wouldn't want any Lesratoga soldiers storming us in response to the Gargoyle's scream. Besides, the underlings of the Four Fiends used both physical and magic attacks. Honestly, everything we fought in this area—the Gargoyles included—could be considered small fry.

Still, it was unusual to see a Gargoyle on the field, considering that they only appeared in dungeons in the game. I'd already seen this discrepancy for myself at Arlea Village, though, so I decided to just put it down to how things worked in this reality.

The issue was that I didn't want to be facing any strong enemies, especially any Minor Demons. They could fly *and* use

area-of-effect magic. If they pelted us with spells from the air, we'd rack up casualties for sure. Given that we had no projectiles at our disposal here on the open field, fighting would be pointless. Best to withdraw.

In the game, you could attack aerial monsters with a sword, no sweat, even under a wide open sky. What an enviable convenience. I wondered if maybe I was overlooking something there, but I didn't have time to think about it at the moment, so I would have to look into it later.

"Everyone, retreat. Your captains have Skywalk Boots."

"What a waste of materials and magic stones," one of the mercenaries remarked.

"I'll bump up your reward in exchange, so just deal with it," I answered.

Goecke nodded too. This, along with the materials we'd gathered from the monsters we defeated during the daytime, served as solid proof the Demon army was behind this. The carriage, meanwhile, was evidence of collusion within the kingdom. And given that Lily got through all this unscathed, it was best we quit while we were ahead—although I didn't say that aloud because the people of this world probably didn't understand the expression. All we had to do now was secure Rafed and his cronies, and we could pull back.

"Now then, to the royal capital."

Did I need to ask Goretzka what he thought? Nah, he probably agreed with me. So I moved everyone to the capital's vicinity, the carriage included. Although there was still more we could accomplish here, it was best not to get too greedy. Wouldn't want anyone dying on us.

I'd arranged for Iron Hammer, the adventurer group, to wait for us outside the capital just in case. After our uneventful reunion, I checked in on Lily again, and she assured me she was fine. By now, it was late at night, so I asked Annette and the Iron Hammers to accompany her to the Zehrfeld estate.

I parted ways with Goecke and his mercenaries at the capital. After promising to pay out their bonus at a later date, I passed them enough money to buy themselves some drinks.

Goretzka and I walked to the palace, where we reported the results of our mission. There were people dispatched across multiple regions, so it was a good thing I'd returned when I did. I'd have hated to leave so many people waiting on nothing. Naturally, we turned over Rafed's crew and their carriage to the soldiers at the palace.

The soldiers led me and Goretzka at a purposeful pace to a conference room, where I made my report to the prince and my father. Well, I say "report," but it was just listing some basic observations: everyone on my end was unhurt, nearly everything went to plan, some enemy monsters of this and that type showed up, and I was requesting the other squads to pull back from their respective positions.

In turn, the prince's subordinates briefly explained what went down at the capital—rather, the Zehrfeld estate—although they said they'd give a more detailed account later on. For the moment, they waved me off with a "good work today," so I left the room with my father. I sighed.

When we emerged into the hallway, I bowed my head. "Sorry for causing such a fuss."

The whole operation, including the choice of Ari and Anna's body doubles, had political ramifications. Basically, the crown took steps to ensure that I wouldn't desert to another country after I took back Lily.

"It was no matter," my father said. "You handled it well."

Nominally, my father was involved in miscellaneous duties, but in actual fact he was a hostage throughout this period. The same thing went for Ari and Anna at the Zehrfeld estate. Although Goretzka and Annette's primary duty was guarding Lily, they were definitely tasked with keeping an eye on me at the same time.

Knowing this, I stayed put and requested that the parents be played by people with no affiliation to the Zehrfelds. I didn't want to cause any drama, so I was fine with the surveillance. But still, I didn't expect Goretzka, vice captain of the Royal Guard, to show up for the task, even if it was his personal idea to take to the frontlines. He was probably giving a detailed report around now.

Anyway, I had exhausted every nerve in my body putting this whole military operation together—the political considerations

included. I cursed those annoying Demons for making so much work for me.

Tomorrow afternoon, I'd have to go on a thank-you tour. I'd asked Frenssen to make a list of people who'd lent us a hand. The order in which I greeted people would have social implications, so I would have to be careful.

Also, I found out later that a bunch of Lesratoga soldiers had come rushing in after we left the scene, where they encountered a bunch of fresh monsters. They had quite an over-the-top clash, resulting in a lot of casualties. Glad not to have been caught in that one!

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The next morning, I went straight back to working on state business, as if nothing had happened yesterday. Today's meeting was a fairly big deal because His Majesty would be making a bunch of decisions in front of a public audience. That said, I had no real role to play in the proceedings, so I could stick to the corner. No need for any speeches. They just told me that I absolutely *had* to be in attendance, so I sucked it up and did what I was told.

The first order of business was commendations. For commanding the battle at Finoy, the king granted Duke Gründing the development rights to the Zahsden Mines. I was pretty sure that Count Bachem formerly had those rights, so that was no skin off the royal family's nose.

The mining tax never changed, so it didn't matter from the state's perspective who was doing the extraction. Besides, the mines were located apart from the duchy, so it would be easier for the royal family to keep an eye on. At least it did mean extra income for the duke.

On the other hand, this also served as a sign to the other nobles—well, more like a declaration that Count Bachem would indeed get his just deserts after this. That said, everyone here was at least aware that the count had been up to some shifty business.

"Next, I call upon Ingo Fathi Zehrfeld to stand. Your troops' actions at Finoy are worthy of praise. Thus, along with a monetary

reward, we grant you the right to use a decorated frame with your family crest."

At His Majesty's words, I heard impressed gasps across the room. As for me, I couldn't hide a wry smile. The royal family was a bunch of cheapskates.

They say that when your basic needs are accounted for, you start seeking prestige. Among the nobility, there were a lot of people who wanted honor and glory. For aristocrats who placed a lot of emphasis on pedigree, honor was sometimes more important than even the patriarch's life.

And in this muscle-brain world, military glory was worth more at court than any old spit of land. Of course, it was only worth anything because of the nobles themselves. It didn't cost a dime from the royal coffers.

In my previous world, the family crests of the nobility were complicated and esoteric. The designs weren't just influenced by blood ties but also history. This made them tricky to explain. You certainly couldn't fit it all into one book. Some European universities offered master's degrees specifically for the study of family crests and coats of arms. You can see that it was a tricky subject to get a handle on.

This world, on the other hand, was relatively more straightforward. The crests here worked more or less as they did in Japan—they served as an indicator of family ties. Maybe it was that way because this was originally a game, although I have to mention that the nobility's crests never actually appeared in the game. I could understand why they wouldn't bother using cartridge space for it.

Anyway, each noble family in this world had a crest, which followed a few rules so you couldn't just do whatever you wanted with it.

Uniquely to this world, people didn't use fictitious creatures like dragons or griffins for their crests. After all, they were real here, and people weren't too fond of them. Old-fashioned noble houses used flora and fauna for the main icon or device of their crests, while most other houses chose inanimate objects like musical instruments and weapons. The newer blood often used simple patterns like stripes and polka dots, although none of it

made much difference in terms of court influence. There were plenty of capable people even among the younger houses.

The outer frame that surrounded the device signified certain things too. Crests without a frame signified honorary nobles, simple-colored frames represented regular nobles, and gold frames signified houses of a higher standing. In my case, I was a viscount but also a deputy count, so I could use the Zehrfeld crest without the outer frame. Branch families would use the outer frames.

Decorated frames were the most prestigious ones of all. The state recognized Zehrfeld as the highest of all count-ranked families. But none of this actually amounted to any tangible benefit. Maybe we'd have more prominent seats at a banquet, but that was about it.

People who placed importance on these things would see this as a big deal, but frankly, I couldn't muster much enthusiasm. Frames were cool and all, but you couldn't eat them. Plus, the people around you would hold you to a higher standard. Maybe I only saw this as a pain in the ass because I still had my lower-middle class values from my old world.

With all that going on, I noticed some noble families staring at me like they had a bone to pick. I wish I could tell them to chill out. I knew that one day I'd be shouldering that crest, but it was the least of my problems right now.

After some other noble houses received rewards of various sorts, a cold atmosphere came over the room—a total one-eighty from before.

"We will now announce the houses to be sanctioned. First, Marquess Kneipp."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Frank Pablo Kneipp, current holder of the title of marquess, stepped forward and knelt with head bowed. I got the feeling that he was honestly the victim of that incident, but that wouldn't fly as far as justice was concerned. His nephew Mangold was at fault for inciting all those battles in the capital.

"One of your kinsmen assembled soldiers without the royal family's permission, and because of this, they have brought harm

to many noble families. Do you, as head of your house, have any words to excuse yourself?”

“None whatsoever.”

The Demon posing as Mangold had killed a prominent knight from one house and the head of another. Hindsight was twenty-twenty, but the royal family couldn’t afford to let this go unpunished.

On the other hand, ever since inheriting the title, the new marquess had been running himself ragged rebuilding the house’s territory and dealing with the influx of refugees from Triot. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.

“Now then, for your sanctioning. The crown will confiscate your current fiefdom. Your new territory will be Count Friedheim’s former fief. The count will retain his court title, but due to his absence, his position remains empty.”

Murmurs spread across the room, and no surprise there. Valeritz, the capital city of Count Friedheim’s territory, was reduced to ruins prior to the battle at Finoy. The marquess was being charged with rebuilding the half-destroyed fief all by himself.

Not to mention that this was quite a significant reduction in territory for him. He would now be a marquess on paper, rather than one in practice. Even some lower-ranked counts would have more land than him. This was quite a harsh punishment indeed.

On the other hand, I had to acknowledge that the royal family maneuvered this deftly. With direct control of the erstwhile Kneipp territory, which bordered Triot, they could establish a proper defense against Gezarius, the fourth Demon Commander—quite a significant boon on their end. Not that they could say so publicly at this stage.

“Moving on…”

The king then singled out around twenty noble houses of varying size. They were the ones who had been infiltrated by Demons. Much like how Marquess Kneipp—well, just Mangold, really—had been sanctioned for his collusion, these houses had no choice but to face punishment as instruments in Demons’ ploys.

It really highlighted how many houses were aggrieved by Mangold's actions. Hmm. The royal family was obliged to be harsh in this case.

"Ordinarily, I would exact punishment on each of your houses," said the king. "However, there are too many of you, and I cannot deny that you were, to an extent, manipulated into your transgressions. So I will grant this leniency."

An attendant brought in a massive diagram, the size of a tapestry. It was a map of the royal capital. I recognized almost all the locations marked on it. And less importantly, it must have taken an insane amount of parchment to make this. What monster's hide did they use?

"As you can see, this is a map of the capital. The marks signify where there are cracks in the stone paving or buildings in need of repair due to age or other issues. These repairs have thus far been deferred, but need be addressed sooner rather than later."

The refugees and orphans had spotted these flaws during their cleaning rounds and noted them in their reports. I recommended their repair the same day as I'd presented the ballista prototypes. The marked locations closely matched the list I'd submitted. Other public facilities were marked as well.

"Should your houses provide the funding to refurbish these locations, your good names will not be tarnished by this incident any further. Nor will there be any record of your sanctioning. Furthermore, once repairs have been completed, the names of those responsible will be inscribed on nameplates."

No sooner had the words left His Majesty's mouth than multiple nobles raised their hands at the same time, eager to participate in the construction. That was fast.

"It gladdens me to see you so motivated. I have only one condition. Should you bring architects from your fiefs, I ask that you employ the capital's citizens and refugees as the laborers."

Nobody was particularly put out by that stipulation, if the number of noble houses pledging contributions was any indication. If anything, they were scrambling over each other for the opportunity.

I watched silently as the proceedings gradually dissolved into disorder, and the prince looked at me with smiling eyes.

They were basically killing two birds with one stone here. Not only did the nobles want to avoid the dishonor of punishment, they wanted the chance to inscribe their names upon the capital's stones for posterity's sake. This was actually a welcome opportunity for the noble families who prized glory so deeply.

Meanwhile, this would dispel the unease of the citizens who so recently experienced the brink of urban warfare. They wouldn't care a whit about where the money came from—as long as they saw the royal family doing something about their problems, it was all good. This was the perfect opportunity to overwrite their bad memories.

Also significantly, this would get the economy going. The cornerstone of any economy was making sure money kept changing hands.

Ever since the Demon Lord's revival, people had been loath to spend their money. In such uncertain times, thrift was wisdom. If the noble families spent on public works, the money would trickle down to the citizens, who could then spend more on goods and services without fear.

This would also have the positive effect of giving jobs to the refugees and keeping them under control. Like anyone, the refugees obviously spent their money on food at the capital. The slum dwellers would get a chance at employment too. By participating in fixing the roads, these people would gain experience in stonework. Training people for a trade was a good way of lifting them out of poverty.

There were other benefits too. Instead of relying on handouts, the refugees would be able to buy their own necessities. While it'd be a headache for the people in charge of distributing currency, the financial department would probably welcome it. The price of disposable goods, particularly food, might go up, but the royal family should be able to make up for it for a while given that they had some money to spare. After all, they weren't paying a cent for the construction work. I was guessing that the prince had a plan in mind for distributing the currency.

"However."

The king's cold voice was like a weight settling upon the room. *Wow, this geezer can actually project his voice,* I thought, rather rudely. My impression might have been influenced by his actions in the game, where all he did was just pass the buck to the Hero.

"Count Bachem, who is not present today, is not subject to this consideration. I will hand down my decision regarding Count Bachem in the coming days."

"Hand down my decision" was a pretty clear euphemism in this world. It basically meant "declare a punishment" or "deliver justice." The fact that he said this outright meant that he had something harsh in mind. He seemed very pissed, understandably so.

Still, I had to wonder how complicit Count Bachem was in this. Had he been tricked by Rafed into thinking that Lily and her parents would be delivered to his territory, or had he always planned on handing them over to Lesratoga? I didn't have enough information to tell at this point.

"Marquess Kneipp's former territory will be divided and apportioned to a number of deputy officials. First, Viscount Werner Von Zehrfeld."

"What?!"

While I was deep in thought, my name came up out of nowhere. I couldn't help but make a weird-sounding exclamation. Me?!

"I bestow upon you the official rank of viscount and designate you a deputy who shall act on behalf of the crown. You will be in charge of the Anheim region from Marquess Kneipp's former fiefdom."

"I...I am deeply honored."

I somehow managed to bow my head and muster a verbal response. Someone ought to praise me for that. I had a feeling that my etiquette might have been off, but I frankly didn't have it in me to care.

How did it end up like this?



Chapter 3:
A New Predicament
~Mysteries and Questions~

"IT'S UNHEARD OF FOR A STUDENT TO BECOME A viscount and a deputy official."

"Don't look so disappointed," Duke Seyfert said, chuckling as he studied my expression.

Me, though, I couldn't laugh.

After the aforementioned meeting, the duke had graciously invited me for lunch. When we were together, he bade me not stand on ceremony, so I didn't hold back on venting my complaints.

If this were your standard interaction between nobles, the duke would be trying to mollify me about now, but I couldn't help but see this as both a test and an interview.

"Doesn't the Anheim region in Marquess Kneipp's territory directly border Triot?" I said.

"What do you think about being appointed a deputy official there?"

"At the very least, I can see that there's a public reason and a not-so-public one."

As they say, there are two sides to every coin. I felt like there were more than just two sides to this one. Those hidden faces could wait till later, though.

"Then explain your interpretation of the public reason," said the duke as he ordered some more wine from a nearby waiter.

This really was a test, huh? A closer look at the waiter by the duke's side and the one standing by the wall, and I could tell they carried themselves more like knights than waiters.

"Part of it is a response to my actions at Finoy. The promotion in rank and deputization are rewards for my military achievements. But at the same time, assigning Anheim to me lets them forestall any other nobles, who might grumble about favoritism."

Assigning me to such a far-flung territory would seem like a punishment to balance out my prize. Any nobles who saw me as an upstart or a rival in their ambitions would have their fears allayed.

Going from the royal capital to a frontier region would be seen as a clear step down on the ladder of prestige. And because neighboring Triot was in ruins at the moment, I couldn't profit from trade. In practice, it wasn't a very appealing prospect.

When I was assigned to that place, I sensed multiple pitying gazes, while others were full of spiteful glee. I caught wind of rivalry from some people back at Finoy and the more recent encounter with Gezarius, but I had no intention of playing that game.

It was actually quite hospitable of them to officially appoint me as a viscount when I was already the heir to a count's title. It meant that even when I succeeded my father, I would still receive my viscount salary until the day I died. I was basically set for life.

There were a lot of especially wealthy count-ranked families. These nobles often received a separate peerage and salary for military achievements in their youth, bolstering their income. Sometimes, their sons turned out wastrels, and once their forebears passed away and their salaries were cut, those houses would end up mired in debt.

Newly appointed viscounts received this money so that they could hire servants and knights for their burgeoning house. In my case, though, I already had House Zehrfeld to fall back onto, so I didn't need to hire anyone directly. All that money went straight into my pocket.

Direct comparisons to my old world were tricky because of how much goods and currencies differed in function, but you could say, roughly, that I had a million yen at my disposal every month. It honestly didn't feel real. In exchange, I had a feeling that my spending habits would come under close scrutiny from here on out.

Now, to put it crudely, I could just sit on my hands and still make bank. In Earth's Middle Ages (depending on the era), it was generally accepted that a fief lord or deputy official could pocket around a third of the goods distribution tax. It was a little less in

this country, though still a sizable sum—enough that you didn't have to worry about your livelihood.

The position of deputy was highly competitive in areas with thriving trade. You could also make money from transport taxes on bridges and whatnot. For any deputy thirsting for cash, the question of whether you could trade securely with a neighboring country or region was very important. I couldn't care less at the moment, though.

By the way, this world differed from my old one in the sense that high-ranking nobles didn't hold multiple peerages. Back on Earth, a duke could be a count or earl of multiple regions, but those supplementary ranks didn't exist in this world. In fact, much like how things worked in the East, higher peerages overwrote the others, and you could only inherit the top-ranking title.

On the other hand, the individual would still retain their salary, so even when I inherited the count title, the state would still pay me my dues as a viscount. If I were to ascend from count to marquess, I'd be sitting on quite a lot of money—not that I knew of any prior examples.

I could see the strategic merits in making sure not to give too much land to a single noble. In Europe, the peerage was equivalent to the amount of land they owned, so there were even cases where you could buy up land and a noble title would come along with it. Considering that, a policy maker would try to avoid having too many nobles with landowning influence.

The duke's voice pulled me out of my wandering thoughts.

"Certainly, some nobles are jealous of you and see you as a rival," Duke Seyfert agreed. "His Majesty and his company are aware of that discontent."

"Is that my fault?"

"Well, even Duke Gründing has spoken highly of you. Those with designs on Princess Laura's hand would regard you as a significant obstacle."

"I didn't ask for that," I blurted out, causing Duke Seyfert to chuckle.

It wasn't my fault, darn it. I made my disappointment clear as I shoveled some meat into my mouth. I didn't care that this was a breach of manners. Pardon another tangent, but forks only

caught on in my old world toward the end of the Middle Ages—here, though, they were commonplace. They were convenient, so never mind accuracy, I guess.

Incidentally, the meat was from a massive monster pig called a Cow-Eater Pig. No prizes for guessing what they ate. They were infamously dangerous for being able to chew through a human skull. The meat tasted fine, but personally I thought the sauce could do with a bit of work. I wished they just cooked it in salt and pepper.

As I finished chewing, the duke shot me another question. “And the not-so-public reason?”

“They want me in charge of the new countermeasures against Gezarius.”

I was pretty sure I was allowed to say that aloud. The duke knew about it, and the only other people in the room were knights. So I didn’t bother beating around the bush.

There were so many layers to this. Not only was this about staving off the jealousy of other noblemen, there was also the practical issue of confronting the Demon army. Given the distinct possibility that the same forces that leveled Triot could set their sights on the capital, the royal family needed someone to prepare against it.

On the other hand, the existence of this Demon Commander wasn’t yet public. As things currently stood, the royal family couldn’t send a prominent noble or large army there.

In other words, they thought I was capable of holding my own. They were more than happy for me to win against the Demon Commander if I could manage it, but I would be holding the line until reinforcements from the capital could arrive. I would basically be responsible for stopping an army in their tracks without a real military force.

You could also theorize that my presence in itself was a decoy. If this Gezarius guy was occupied with attacking me, then the other fronts would have a bit of leeway. Was it just me, or was I totally a puppet on their strings?

Well, I knew what was going on, but I decided to just play the hand I’d been dealt. It was way better than having to deal with

another Demon Commander's assault on the capital before the Four Fiends even showed up.

Plus, if I succeeded in fending the enemy off, then I would probably get called back to the capital. It would be a waste to leave someone so competent rotting in the boonies, they might say. Anyone who criticized me after I produced results would just look like sore losers instead.

There would be just as much reason to call me back if I failed. The royal family could convince the other nobles that I never stood a chance against a Demon Commander. Since I was young, people would just go easy on me and consider it a lesson learned. The reason they didn't announce that I was up against a Demon Commander was probably so that they could have a valid excuse to summon me home when push came to shove.

So what would happen if I perished in battle? Well, there was no point contemplating *that*. I wasn't planning on dying, after all. I just had to think about how to win while staying on the defensive.

"Neither I nor His Highness the Crown Prince intend to send you off to your doom without help. You will just have to trust us."

"I wasn't worried about *that*, don't worry."

I was confident in how much they valued Mazel the Hero, if nothing else. If they sent me off to die, Mazel would probably get pissed. Considering the fallout, it was a big risk for the kingdom. And it was a risk that wouldn't go away anytime soon.

The kingdom also had another major objective in mind. Because it was absolutely impossible for me to defeat the Demon Commander by myself, I would need to rely on reinforcements from the knight brigade. And when those reinforcements launched a successful counterattack, my job would be kissing the kingdom's ass in gratitude.

Even if I lost Anheim, the kingdom could leverage this for propaganda. As long as the knight brigade retook the region after the fact, it would affirm to the populace that the knights and the royal family were indispensable for protecting the country. Either way, I was there to make the crown look good.

The circumstances also raised another problem. I was acting in this scenario as an independent viscount. In other words, I couldn't bring the Zehrfeld knights with me. Neurath and Schünzel

were fine, but Max, Orgen, and the others were out of the question.

This was probably to check the naysayers' claims that I owed all my success to the Zehrfeld knights. But this meant that I would be understaffed at my new job.

Of course, since I was a royal-appointed deputy, I would be accompanied by knights and soldiers who worked for the crown. But they were merely tagging along for the assignment. I wasn't confident that their morale would hold up in the face of mortal danger.

Also, because House Zehrfeld and the former Marquess Kneipp belonged to different factions, nobody could say we were buddy-buddy. The locals would see me as a young upstart from a rival faction going through a demotion. The citizens might not care either way, but the mid-level officials would regard me neutrally at best. To think I would have to fight a defensive battle with this many handicaps. My stomach turned at the prospect.

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In the midst of my mental bitching, the duke said, "There is also the issue of your house."

"What about my house?" I blurted out in response, thinking of all the trouble I'd caused. I didn't mean to draw all that unwanted attention to the Zehrfelds.

But the duke's reply caught me off guard. "It is not the issue you are thinking about. His Majesty and the Minister of Ceremonies decided between themselves that the Zehrfeld knight brigade will return to the count's control."

"Right."

I couldn't command the count's troops at the capital while performing my duties as a royal deputy out in the countryside. I nodded vaguely, but then the duke didn't say what I thought he would say.

"Somebody must keep the count's knights in proper form."

"Keep them in proper form?"

“For one thing, standards simply tend to relax after consecutive victories. I’m sure you’re aware of this.”

I understood what he was getting at. The same was true in my old world. For as long as organizations consisted of human beings, then no amount of top-down control would prevent stragglers and dropouts. It was like how no country was devoid of criminals.

“Given your age, it is unavoidable that some will take you lightly regardless of your actions,” Duke Seyfert went on.

“It is as you say.”

That came out stiffly, but I did agree with him. I understood I was a student and merely my father’s stand-in. Not to mention there were plenty of knights who were far stronger than I was. They *could* get sassy with me.

Not so with my father. First off, he was a minister—a bigwig on the national scale. He had the authority to make snap decisions. Frankly, he and I had very different options for responding to someone getting up in our business. So yeah, it was a good idea to return the reins to my father so that he could reorganize things.

“It also bears mentioning that numerous noble houses are suffering from major personnel shortages. They may try to poach skilled knights from other houses.”

“Is that even allowed?”

“It is not recommended. But given that knights may choose their master and refuse one they deem a fool, it’s not altogether impossible.”

This was new to me. If a knight strongly desired it, they could forge their own path. Alternatively, they could transfer to another noble house.

It was a way of ensuring their rights in case they got swindled into joining a dodgy noble house during their impressionable student years. Apparently, there was a tentative system for it in place, courtesy of the academy I suppose.

“You could also compromise and ‘lend out’ one or two of your knights to a house of higher standing if they claim it necessary for restoring the kingdom’s army.”

My throat seemed to go dry—that possibility never crossed my mind. I suspected that my father possessed the nerves of steel to turn down that proposition. Although I'd lived in this world for over ten years, I was painfully aware that I was still inexperienced in so many ways.

"It is not necessarily a bad thing. You have your own philosophy. The only issue is that not everyone accepts your methods at present."

"Right…"

Duke Seyfert chuckled lightly at my ambivalence. "Some might say you feign virtue. But I say pay no heed to cowards who are all talk and no action. You ought to fight according to your own standards."

The duke's candid affirmation left me agog, and he laughed in amusement at my expression. My stupor dispelled, I let out a big sigh. He had a point—I didn't have time to worry about what other people were thinking.

"But generally, wouldn't you want the noble houses to be about as strong as each other?" I asked.

Getting the nobles to quarrel among themselves was a good way of preventing them from angling for the throne. I thought that the royal family would see the overly powerful nobles as a hindrance.

"In peacetime, you wouldn't be wrong. But we are not at peace. In an emergency, there are too many concerns vying for the crown's attention. It exceeds a person's ability to manage them all."

"Is that how it works?"

"It is the same as a large battlefield. On some fronts, the soldiers are doing just fine, and you can afford to leave them be. Shore up enough of those troops, and you can send them in to prop up the unstable areas."

It was an extreme example, but he was basically saying that you had to prioritize what you paid attention to. But wait, that meant…

"The Zehrfelds are one of those set-and-forget troops?"

"It means we have faith in you."

It was a tactful way of affirming that some noble families needed some kind of “propping up.” I guess this made sense considering that a lot of houses suffered losses at the Demon Stampede and the temple of Finoy.

I could understand the logic behind the way they handled me. They were prioritizing certain problems over others. No choice but to accept that they temporarily relegated me to the boonies to avoid ire from the other nobles, and that they wanted to keep the Zehrfeld knights in top form.

“All right, I get the picture,” I said. “Thank you for looking out for me.”

“It is a matter of politics. Nothing for you to worry yourself over.”

Putting it that way was bound to make me worry about it. And they were so upfront about it too. They were sending me off somewhere with minimal preparation and telling me to work my ass off—and yet it was strangely difficult to refuse. Maybe the corporate slave in me never died.

“Okay. I want to give my role as Anheim’s deputy a proper shot, at least.”

“I’m sure you’ll do well. You *will* get support, though not directly. And not just from me.”

“I appreciate it.”

So the prince would be supporting me from the shadows as well, it seemed. In that case, I saw no reason to refuse. I understood that the kingdom had its circumstances to deal with, and I wanted to do my part as well. If the kingdom needed me to fight, I was happy to oblige.

“I will submit a list of things I will need for a siege battle at a later date…”

But, you know, this was ironic as hell. A few years ago, I would have jumped for joy at the prospect of serving as a deputy official out in the boonies. It meant that there was a good likelihood that I wouldn’t be around when the Four Fiends attacked the capital. Even if it was a downgrade, I could hole myself up in the country. I wouldn’t even care if I turned poor.

But now, it bothered me to leave the capital—specifically, it was the thought of those who lived there. Even if my individual

fighting strength wasn't all too impressive, it still left a bad taste in my mouth not doing what I could for them.

I struggled to suppress a self-effacing smile.

Assuming Mazel was facing off against the first of the Four Fiends about now, this meant that there was still some sand in our hourglass. The final showdown would begin when the third Demon Commander and the second of the Four Fiends were defeated.

I had to be back in the capital by then. In order to do that, I would have to drag Gezarius out of hiding one way or another. If he was hellbent on getting in my way, I wouldn't hold back against him.

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I got heated up for a moment there, but I felt the tension drain as I sighed. Besides, there was a lot to consider before I got carried away by battles. If they were going to leave me to sort this out alone, I figured I'd squeeze as much as I could out of the kingdom courtesy of Duke Seyfert.

"I'll take as many people as you can spare for the time being."

"You want people, eh?" The duke cast me an amused look. Was this guy playing with me?

"I am deeply lacking in experience as a deputy. I will definitely need an aide."

That's how it'd be on paper, so to speak, but I had a different motive, of course. The local officials were bound to see me as a demoted schmuck. Would they heed the orders of a deputy who hadn't even graduated from the academy? No, they wouldn't. That was obvious. If I were in their position, I'd have the same attitude.

A state-appointed deputy would take some lower-ranked bureaucrats with them, of course, who themselves would no doubt drag their feet about the whole thing. There was no getting around the fact that I was going to be surrounded entirely by people advanced in years and low on motivation.

As such, I'd need to send the signal that someone more senior than me was keeping tabs on them from behind the scenes. After all, I had practically no personal experience in government.

"It would be better for me not to send one of my own subordinates," the duke said. "Rest assured, however, that I will address this concern of yours."

The duke was a military man, after all. He did have a point that someone else from the bureaucrat faction would be a more convincing hire.

"Thank you. I'd also like to ask for multiple combat instructors who can lead the troops. Retired veterans would be fine for my purposes."

"Hm, I see."

This medieval—well, medieval-*ish* world—was still in the middle of its agricultural reforms. Producing even a single pair of shoes required a lot of work by hand. Since the population wasn't too large, it was hard to replenish lost troops. Equipping them was yet another struggle. Relatively speaking, a single soldier in this world cost way more to prepare than their modern counterpart would.

Given how common it was in this world to capture your opponents for ransom money, human resources were just that valuable in any country. You could say that there was an unspoken agreement among countries to resolve foreign wars with money rather than the loss of lives. Perhaps this was more effective than clumsy peace treaties.

Anyway, given the world I lived in, soldiers were meant to follow a different standard. Julius Caesar's army is a good point of reference for the sort of training required of soldiers from ancient times to the Middle Ages.

In one particular battle, Caesar deployed his troops some distance away from their enemy and commanded them to charge. The troops ran toward the enemy, but the enemy stayed put. They were waiting for Caesar's troops to come to them with a fragmented formation.

Seeing this, Caesar's troops stopped their advance without anyone telling them to. They used their own judgment to reassemble their formation and catch their breath. Only when they had formed back up did they resume their charge. Shaken by this unexpected development, the enemy troops melted under the assault.

Basically, a proper soldier could grasp the logic behind an offensive and adjust their tactics accordingly. Executing orders mindlessly and inflexibly was the hallmark of a second-rate army. In the aforementioned scenario, you could say that the opposing troops and their frontline officer were subpar for sitting there just because their supreme commander told them to.

The problem was that I was still a student in the middle of my tutelage. As I was, I wasn't confident in my ability to raise even a second-rate army under my direct command. I highly doubted that things would go well if I pushed myself to do something I wasn't capable of. Besides, I honestly didn't have the luxury to even consider it under the circumstances.

So yeah, I was outsourcing the training and leadership of the troops. In a defensive battle, it was more important to train the common soldiers rather than the knights. Besides, the man I was speaking to was the former commander of the capital's defenses. Nobody in the kingdom had more experience prepping for a defensive battle.

"Very well. I will find some suitable candidates."

"Thank you very much."

I didn't bother asking about consumable items because I wouldn't know what I needed until I was there. It was more important to have aides who knew what we were lacking. So I decided to focus solely on recruiting staff for the time being. That, and there were some other things I had to discuss.

"I also have a separate request."

"What is it?"

"First, to strengthen the capital's defenses."

I wanted to improve the capital's defensive capabilities even while I was away. I wasn't just talking about equipment—the roads would need to be refurbished so people could move quickly in the event of an evacuation. Plus, you could set things up in the

palace to allow greater mobility for the forces stationed there. Putting the idea directly to the duke would probably be quicker than submitting separate proposals.

"What made you think of this?" he asked.

"For one thing, we don't know what the Demons were planning when they infiltrated the capital."

I was being genuine here. What *was* their target? Conceivably, they were after His Majesty's life, but you couldn't say that for certain. Either way, it was hard to write it off as just part of the game's script.

There wasn't enough information at this point to determine what the enemy was up to. So for the time being, I'd have to rely on my own inferences.

"But they had to be up to some kind of plot if they were willing to go to such lengths," I said. "Wouldn't you say the chances are slim that they'd give up after the first attempt?"

"You have a point."

"Switching to a head-on attack after failing at subterfuge might be a bit rash, but then the Demon army has always relied on strength of numbers."

"So you think it is possible that the enemy will strike again. That certainly is conceivable."

A slight seed of doubt sprouted in me upon seeing him agree so readily. Did the kingdom's leadership or His Majesty's inner circle already know that the Demon army was after them? Although I had no idea whether their target was an object or person, it was easy to imagine that they were after *something*.

But if this was a national secret, then I couldn't possibly broach the subject. There were some things that they didn't tell the protagonist of the game. It would be a bad move to stick my nose where it didn't belong.

"I would also like you to tighten the security for the Hartings."

"Yes, that is a given."

I didn't even need to say it aloud. If anything happened to them, it would affect the kingdom's reputation. They wouldn't be able to face Mazel.

“I will submit a proposal at a later date,” I said. “There are some other things I’d like to discuss beyond the proposal as well.”

“Very well. I look forward to it.”

Was it really something you could say you *looked forward* to? This was just making my stomach churn. The meat was not helping.

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The morning was dedicated to His Majesty’s conferral of honors, and lunch was with the duke. That afternoon, I went around the palace, exchanging well-wishes. I felt obliged to thank the Adventurers’ and Mercenaries’ Guilds—not to mention old Bert—but that would have to wait till afterward. If only there were two of me.

Marquess Kneipp’s former territory was split broadly into three parts, each with its own deputy official. Although the three partitions differed in scope, they were structured around the region’s three main cities. My allotment, the region of Anheim, was closest to the border of what was once Triot.

Of the remaining two divisions, the area with the capital city went to Viscount Gröllmann, whom I got to know at Fort Werisa. He was aide to Count Schanderl, the commander of that operation and a trusted member of the prince’s inner circle. The viscount himself belonged to the prince’s faction, in other words. Optimistically, I could count on him for support.

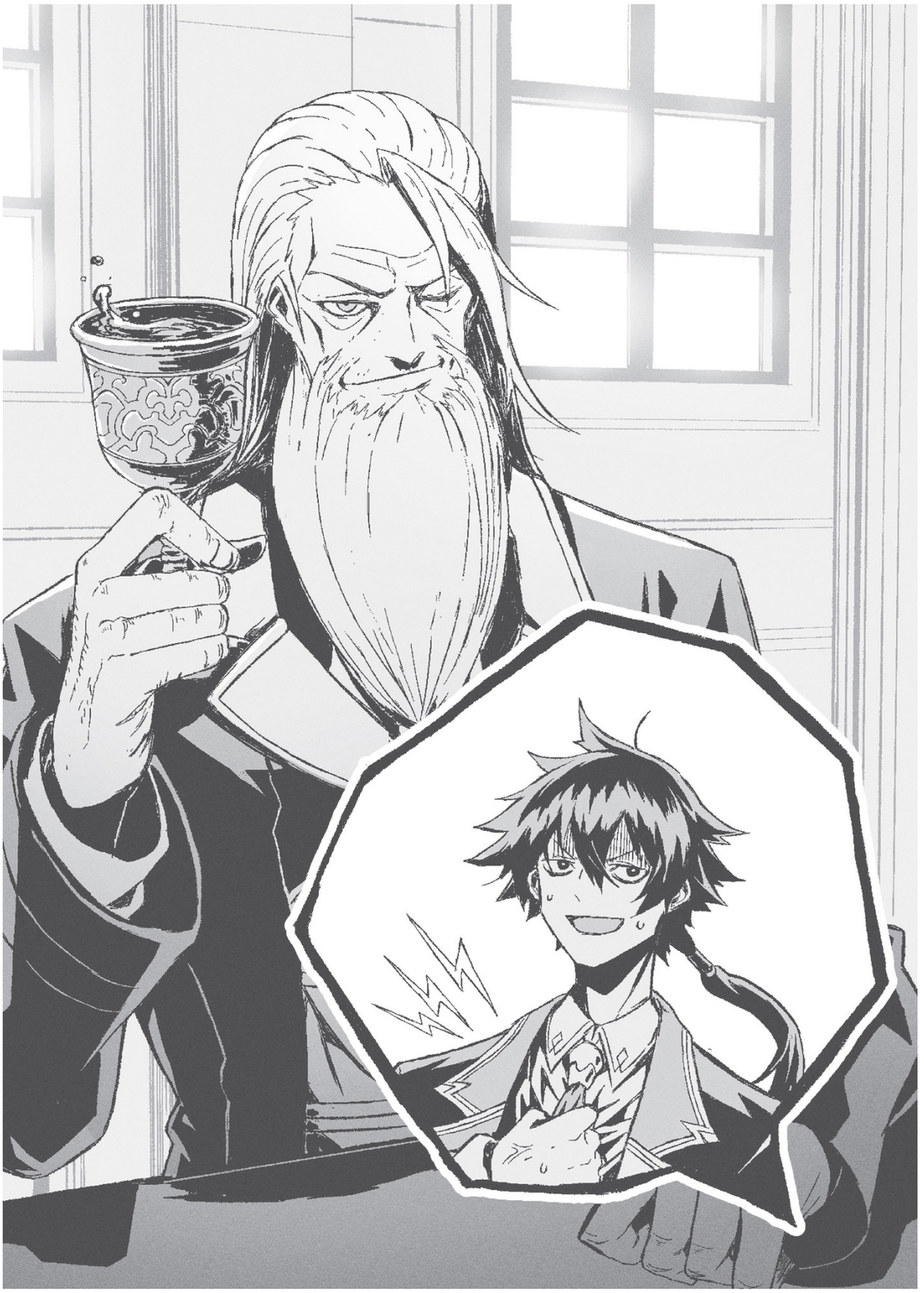
There was also the chance he’d been assigned nearby to keep an eye on me, but that nerve-racking possibility was one I decided not to dwell on. Got to stay positive, you know?

The last partition was allotted to a certain Baron Zabel. I honestly had no idea what kind of person he was. I had to pay a courtesy call to him and Viscount Gröllmann before the day was over.

Anyway, I was given a hefty dossier filled with all manner of writings pertaining to the Anheim region. Kind of made me miss the paper back in my old world. Sheep and monster skin parchment were heavy, after all. You couldn’t really tell the

difference with just one sheet, but it added up when you had a few hundred of them.

Incidentally, there was a period like this in Earth's Middle Ages too. This world handled official documents in much the same way. First, you got this huge paper—it was a pain to call it something else, so paper it was—and folded it down the middle.



You wrote the exact same words on both sides of the crease. The authority in charge signed both sides and, if necessary, they got a witness to write their name as well. Then they cut the document down in the middle. One side was the original, the other was the copy.

They didn't make the cut completely straight. It was deliberately jagged. If the document was ever used in a trial, the original and copy would be placed side by side. If the cuts didn't match perfectly, then the whole document would be dismissed as fake. The tallies used to verify monetary transactions in medieval Japan worked the same way.

Forgive the digression, but it was generally difficult to keep paper straight when it was made out of sheepskin or some other animal's hide. It tended to bend and curl inward because the skin still followed the curve of the muscles it had been attached to. Rolling the parchment was the most effective way of storing it, given its propensity to curl up anyway.

So when it came to important documents, people would stick a second layer on the back, making them less inclined to curl overall. But this also made them twice as thick, which complicated the matter of storing them. That and the weight really drove home the usefulness of paper made from trees.

Anyway, if this were a simulation game, I would teleport to my new job at the press of a button and start immediately, but real life didn't work like that. At least I didn't have it as bad as Marquess Kneipp. He'd have to make a list of everything he was taking when he moved territories.

This would now be state-owned land, which meant that fudging the numbers was a crime. For instance, the marquess had to record how many arrows were stored in a particular city, how many of them he planned to bring with him, and how many he would leave behind.

So when I say a list of everything, I mean *everything*: food, medical supplies, weapons, and other miscellaneous fixtures, like how many candles were used in the mansions and the tools for making fortifications. These preparations were a must for anyone moving. Considering they would be passing the reins to me afterward, I would probably depart in about ten days or so.

In other words, my time was better spent getting a grasp on which documents would have copies in the capital rather than cramming them all into my head at this point. I had no idea what they would be leaving behind, which meant that I didn't know what I needed. This was probably the annoying thing about a nobleman taking up public duties in the distant countryside. Why did I have to go through all this hassle?

I skimmed the documents, grumbling inwardly all the while. All of a sudden, a strange record caught my eye. Oh, this was a surprise—maybe I could use this. It would be a while before I got there. I'd have time to prepare.

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"Viscount Zehrfeld, may I have a moment of your time?"

"What is it, Miss Fürst?"

I'd finished looking over the documents and was on my way to my office in the palace when Lady Hermine called out to me. It appeared she had a purpose for seeking me out. Given where we were, I addressed her as "Miss," but that felt kind of weird when she was dressed in the full regalia of a knight.

"Might we discuss this matter in your office?"

"Um…sure. Let's do that."

Something told me that this would be a whole tedious thing. I led an apologetic-looking Lady Hermine to my temporary office and bade her take a seat on the guest settee, while instructing Neurath and Schünzel to stay at the edge of the room where they couldn't overhear us.

As she sat, facing me, Lady Hermine abruptly bowed so low that I could see the back of her head. "I am so terribly sorry, Viscount."

"What exactly is going on?" I couldn't help but exclaim.

I mean, what the heck was I supposed to do about an out-of-nowhere apology? As I listened to her story, it was a bit of a challenge to keep my feelings from showing on my face. Things had changed since that time at Finoy when House Fürst made that request of me.

“So what you mean to say is that the matter of your nephew…Lord Danilo…has been shelved for now?”

“Yes, I am very sorry to both you and the Minister of Ceremonies…”

A matter of this gravity seemed worthy of a personal apology from Lord Bastian, if you asked me. I wondered if it was a good look to make Lady Hermine the messenger. Maybe this was part and parcel of their condescension to the bureaucrat nobles. Not that there was any point saying that to her face.

“Well,” I said, after a pause, “I will convey your message to my father.”

“Once again, I deeply apologize…”

Mine looked so ashamed I found myself at a loss for a response. My pride as a noble had been affronted and I’d be well within my rights to vent my anger, but there was hardly a point in shooting the messenger. Besides, something about her seemed strange.

“What are Lord Bastian and Lord Tyrone thinking?”

“My brother…is honestly incensed by what my sister, Danilo’s mother, has suggested.”

When I heard that Hermine’s older sister—my brother’s former fiancée—was agitating to poach the Zehrfeld knights, my mind had rasped a ragged groan. Duke Seyfert had been right on the money. “How did Lord Tyrone react?”

“He scoffs at the idea of relying on the knights of Zehrfeld…”

Lady Hermine replied with an indecipherable expression. In this world, there was the saying “Hatred for a monster is more than skin deep.” It seemed roughly equivalent to the Japanese proverb “Hate a priest, and you will hate his vestments.” Basically, it meant that there were some people who would despise you no matter what you did, so you might as well not bother appeasing them.

“So he feels differently from her?”

“Yes. He told me to inform Count Zehrfeld of what our sister said.”

I could see the pride of a martial family in that attitude. Poor Lady Hermine was stuck in quite the unenviable position. Oh well,

Lord Tyrone seemed to dislike me along with the rest of House Zehrfeld, so I would just consider myself grateful that he wasn't the sneaky type. Truly, the very image of a muscle-head.

But, well, it was hard to describe my brother's ex-fiancée. One might call her a strong woman if they were inclined to euphemisms, but either way, her audacity was astonishing.

Still, I could vaguely imagine what she was trying to accomplish. There were accounts of noblewomen who'd hatched similar ploys back in my old world, as a matter of fact.

In medieval Europe, there were women who had been widowed more than once. On the second instance, they wouldn't receive a shred of family honor or land, just some wealth in the form of assets and that was it. On her third marriage, the woman might marry into a count's family while possessing the assets of a marquess. If her new partner were to then pass away, she would possess a considerable amount of influence as a countess until she herself died. Not that this mattered, but you had to marvel at how many spouses you'd have to outlive for this to be a pattern.

We're all human, so it was understandable for men and women alike to harbor ambitions. Women had more rights in this world, so it was no surprise that they would aim even higher. Still, it was pretty scary actually crossing paths with them. Hopefully the memory wouldn't stick.

"I should also mention that my father is away from the capital right now."

"Excuse me?"

That was a surprise. Lady Hermine went on to explain that after hearing about what was happening, Lord Bastian went to the Teutenberg territory to make sure that his grandson Danilo was okay.

"Would it be too cynical to think that they are holding Lord Danilo as a hostage against House Fürst?" I remarked.

"My father fears the same, which is why he went personally."

Hmm. Even if the other side did cut ties, it would hurt House Fürst's reputation if they forsook one of their own blood-related kin. Besides, from Lord Bastian's perspective, this was his first grandson...wait, his first?

I think I *just* managed to keep my face level. That said, Lady Hermine might have noticed the change in me if her thoughts weren't too preoccupied. That sudden realization hit me like a truck.

"Anyway," I said, once I'd regained composure, "I think I have more or less grasped the situation. I will smooth things over with my father."

"I am very, very sorry for imposing on you."

"It's not a problem. I'm happy to accommodate you with regard to this matter. Would you be fine with me relaying this conversation to my father—no, the Minister of Ceremonies?"

"Yes. I'm sorry to ask this of you when you are so busy. I leave the matter to your discretion."

Lady Hermine spoke hurriedly, perhaps even a little brusquely. When she was done making her appeal, she left. It took quite a bit of effort to avoid letting my emotions show, I must say.

What I just realized raised a big question, though it wasn't likely to become a problem by itself. My father dealt with a lot of promotions and demotions in the wake of Finoy and the commotion at the capital. At this stage, I didn't see the need to embroil him in the issue of a noble family's succession drama. I set forth for the Minister of Ceremonies's office, hoping I could get away with relaying just the surface-level information.

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Not that it was a bother, but there sure were a lot of people wanting a word with me today.

After I explained House Fürst's situation to my father, it occurred to me to go over Anheim's tax documents. As I traversed the needlessly large palace toward my destination, someone called out to me.



“Do you have a moment, Viscount Zehrfeld?”

“Ah…Your Excellency, what ails you?”

The voice belonged to Duke Gründing. Now what could I possibly have to offer a court dignitary of this stature, and one related to the king no less?

“You needn’t conduct yourself so stiffly,” he said.

“My apologies.”

Ugh, I wished he wouldn’t ask for the impossible. If I slipped up and put my foot in my mouth, who knew what that’d do to my reputation? Sure, we had an amicable relationship, in no small part because of my disinterest in his granddaughter Laura, but I knew I shouldn’t push my luck around him.

I didn’t know what he thought of my cageyness, but the duke’s expression did approach something like a grimace as he asked a passing maid whether there were any empty rooms. He beckoned for me to join him. Somehow, I managed to stifle the involuntary sigh that threatened to slip out of me as I followed the duke inside.

This was off topic, but Earth’s Middle Ages and Early Modern Period are relatively infamous for their scarcity of toilets, even in the luxurious palaces of the royalty. The reasons for this are slightly misunderstood, however. The rooms in aristocratic mansions and palaces were massive. You had to walk for ages just to reach the door.

To make matters worse, aristocratic etiquette called for a restrained pace. The women were especially obliged to move in an elegant and ladylike manner. And their clothes were…well. They were made with a ton of fabric, making them impossible to take off by oneself, and since there was no rubber, they were always put together with strings or buttons on the back. This applied to children’s clothing as well as adults’.

What do you think this meant? Even if there were toilets inside the building, you’d have to traverse dozens of meters to get to them. Then you’d have to undo the string on clothes you couldn’t take off by yourself. You just wouldn’t make it in time, especially if you were a kid. Not to mention that you couldn’t put your clothes back on after you’d done your business. It was an embarrassment waiting to happen.

And so, regardless of the existence (or lack thereof) of plumbing, the rooms would always have things called chamber pots, which were styled like chairs. In my old world, people often pointed out that they had fountains before they had toilets, but if you were going to have toilets that suited the aristocratic lifestyle, you'd need to build them in every single room.

So yeah, chamber pots made more sense when you thought about it logically. Kind of a funny prospect, huh? And even with the chamber pots, there were still plenty of occasions when you wouldn't be able to do your business in time, so you'd have to settle for the garden instead. Or you'd have to do it in the corner of a hallway while standing in a cumbersome dress. Their fault for having needlessly intricate clothes and absurdly large palaces, I guess.

This world did have water and sewer infrastructure in place, and you could get something akin to rubber out of monster body parts. There were even magic items that you could use to handle dresses. Despite all this, however, this world was hardly different from my old one in terms of aristocratic etiquette and voluminous dresses. Thanks to this, every room had chamber pots disguised as furniture.

The maids who worked at the palace generally knew which rooms were unoccupied. If you suddenly needed to do your business and didn't think you couldn't make it to a toilet in time, the maids could show you to an empty room. Then they would stand in front of the door to prevent anyone else from coming in. It was common to pay them for their trouble—you might say that this was the genesis of tipping culture in years to come. And that's the story of the fantasy-world palace toilets.

"You may sit."

"Then please excuse me."

As I was attempting to escape reality, the duke beckoned me into an unused room and bade me take a seat. Since he hadn't called me into his office, it didn't look like this was going to be a heavy topic.

I bowed and then, having obtained his permission, sat down. Then the duke opened with one hell of a conversation starter.

"Do you have a betrothed, Viscount?"

This guy didn't mess around. If I'd been drinking something, I'd have sprayed it all over his face. For a moment, I pictured the stack of potential marriage candidates and their portraits in my room.

I really didn't expect this from a guy who had told me in not so many words to stay the hell away from Laura. Then again, it was normal for aristocrats to discuss marriage partners for other nobles in their faction, even if it wasn't their own family, per se.

"Not at the moment, no," I said. "And I have no plans for marriage."

"I see."

"There is also the matter of the current crisis facing our kingdom." That was technically the truth, but I didn't want to sound like I was just making excuses.

But the duke nodded, seemingly accepting this explanation. "I see. Well, you are Lord Ingo's son. I can imagine that any child raised by the esteemed count would turn out like you."

"Right..."

Why was he bringing up my father? Well, I guess he was the serious sort. He always provided instructors for me whenever I said I wanted to train or study, and just like the duke, he never pressed the issue when I said I had no designs on marriage. That didn't seem to be what the duke was talking about, though.

But I did understand one aspect of what the duke was getting at. If, say, my father were an outrageous hedonist, nobody would have listened to my suggestions. Although the duke and other nobles did have a positive opinion of me, the fact that I was a Zehrfeld was indubitably a factor in that. In that sense, you could say I was lucky that my father was one of the king's esteemed ministers.

"Let's put that matter aside for now," said the duke. "You are aware that a great many refugees have come to the capital, yes?"

"I have not confirmed it with my own eyes, though word has reached my ears."

It was a total headache. Even if the guards were vigilant against Demons sneaking in under the guise of refugees, that didn't solve the burden it placed on local governance.

“They have been put to productive work, if I recall,” I said.

“And in exchange, we have been providing their meals.”

Those meals came from the monster meat, which we were getting in large quantities now that the spawn rate had changed. It was kind of ironic that the people who fled to the capital out of fear of the monsters were now subsisting on the flesh of those very monsters.

“Unfortunately, we have been running out of jobs to give them,” the duke went on.

“Oh dear…”

Not that this was a surprise. The capital was always doing fine for itself in terms of manual labor. This was a sucky way of putting it, but some people would fail to land a job when there was a manpower surplus, and those ones were bound for the slums.

In this medieval-ish world, the population wasn’t huge if you distributed it equally across the country. Thanks to the monsters, though, there weren’t too many places where humans could make a living. This meant that people tended to cluster in the areas where they *could* live.

And because the monsters had gone berserk after the Demon Lord’s return, the noose of the wild had only tightened around those scattered human settlements. With more outsiders pouring in than ever, the seams would likely burst if left unchecked. It was as if human society as a whole had been split up to fight their own siege battles.

This got me thinking. I hadn’t contemplated it too deeply, but this was a surprisingly sticky situation. The resources that humanity needed to survive were slowly being choked off. And given that the monsters had demonstrated that they could obliterate an entire country (as with Triot), it was only natural that you’d want to preserve anyone who was capable of fighting, like the knight brigade. Unfortunately, protecting what was right in front of you only meant waiting for an eventual death by attrition.

This made sense, it occurred to me. I could understand the impulse to rely on the Hero. The knights and standing soldiers had duties to the realm and couldn’t simply move from their stations. It would be a terrible drain of resources. As the

population of these cramped habitats increased, life would only get worse and worse.

A small group striking directly into the nucleus of the foe and slaying their leader could win the day for the whole realm. It wasn't unheard of to handpick a hit-and-run squad for precisely these purposes. Even here, where things had turned out differently from the game, the king's decision to entrust Mazel with vanquishing the Demon Lord made sense in a post-Stampede society. It might not have been the *best* choice, but it was one of the better ones.

But in that case, it would be reckless to leave the capital at its current impasse. More and more lords would eventually demand reinforcements for their threatened countryside territories. You had to hope Mazel would hurry up and slay the Demon Lord.

And if Mazel overextended himself and lost to the Demon Lord instead, then humanity's only choice would be to stake everything on a frontal assault against the Demon army's main force. Did a medieval army lacking in centralized command and inter-squad communication have it in them to beat a horde of powerful monsters that put the Demon Stampede to shame? Probably not. Even if they did manage to prevail, it would mean gathering the vast majority of their fighting forces onto one battlefield. Towns and villages scattered across the kingdom would be helpless in the face of monster attacks. The losses would be devastating. Humanity would be backed into a corner.

The duke broke the brief silence we'd fallen into, looking me in the eyes as he spoke.

"Do you understand the dilemma?"

"Yes, I do. You are right. We can't simply leave things as they are."

We wouldn't want to be completely screwed if the Demon Lord happened to turn the tables on Mazel.

But still, I had to laugh at my earlier naïveté for assuming that I would be fine if I just bided my time outside the capital until Mazel defeated the Demon Lord. There wasn't a single corner of the kingdom where death wouldn't take its toll.

"What would you do about it? Do you have any ideas?" asked the duke.

“My first question would be whether there’s enough water in the capital.”

“Thanks to the aqueduct, there’s just enough for everyday use.”

“What about the water source that was in use before the aqueduct was built?”

“That’s still under consideration.”

Hmm. This was a bit of a pickle. Even if they were able to avoid food shortages at this point, it would be hard for them to expand their primary industry any further in the capital’s outskirts. They might risk water shortages again if they tried to develop the farmland near the capital. Not only did agriculture consume a lot of water, it took resources to maintain the safety of the fields.

From an economic perspective, it would be a folly of leadership to account only for food. You had to make sure everyone who shoved themselves into the capital had work to do —*and* the work had to be meaningful. In this post-Demon Lord era, nobody could afford to busy themselves with bullshit jobs. Even if you couldn’t maximize every job’s productivity, you had to at least make *something* out of the time and resources you spent.

That reminded me of something. Apparently, a lot of residents were purchasing small weapons. Which meant that the capital still had plenty of weapons to go around. What if the state bought them up? They could offset the cash shortages for the time being by offering up food, magic stones, or other monster materials useful for everyday life instead of money.

Some of the villagers fleeing to the capital had to be experienced hunters. Plus, some who lost their jobs after the Demon Stampede had been gatekeepers and mansion guards. In a world that placed a disproportionate amount of emphasis on brawn, I wanted to believe that there were still some squires and soldiers with a bit of fighting experience. Giving them weapons seemed feasible.

I stitched these thoughts together and then put them into words.

“Then I suppose I would start by cleaning up the roads around the capital.”

“What do you mean by cleaning up the roads?”

“If you can’t increase food production at the capital itself, then you absolutely need to have things transported from elsewhere.”

Ideally, you would build something like the highways in Rome, but with all the people flowing into the capital, you wouldn’t have the time or technology for anything so meticulous. Still, even just paving the roads with gravel and shoring up the ruts left by wheel tracks would make the path way easier to traverse, while minimizing accidents.

Vehicles bound for the capital from much further out could use different roads. The guilds could transport the goods to hub towns, from which they could hire large caravans to transport goods in bulk along the paved roads. A mass transportation system would also reduce the burden on security.

A bit of trivia: The game had magic bags that could carry large quantities of things despite looking on the outside like tiny briefcases. A single person could pack a whole shipment of armor. In this world, however, not many magic bags were *that* effective.

The nobility were obliged to report such magic bags to the crown, and the guilds had to record which adventurers and merchants possessed them. This surveillance kept them from being used for smuggling illegal drugs. If the state discovered contraband items and couldn’t ascertain where they came from, magic bag owners would fall under suspicion.

In some cases where the kingdom needed to transport things around, they would approach the magic bag owners for a favor. I wondered if this situation warranted that. Magic bag owners often had a lot of work, and it stood to reason they were in especially steep demand these days. I guess it was unreasonable to pester them too much at this point.

“It would be ideal to transport foodstuffs by caravan so that you can assign guards to protect them from monsters. Unfortunately, if even one wagon in the line gets caught in a deadlock, none of them will be able to move,” I said.

“The merchants and towns don’t have enough guards to send out individual batches,” the duke replied, humming in thought. “Yet in order to transport goods as a group, the wheel tracks on the road need smoothing over.”

“You can send out the groups on different days of the week. One group could bring in goods from the north on day one, from the west on day three, from the south on day five, and from the east on day seven. Another group, meanwhile, could do the northern run on day two, and the west on day four. That way, the soldiers can get regular breaks.”

I definitely wanted to avoid overburdening anyone who was capable of fighting. I had to think of defending the capital in the future, after all. The soldiers and knights in particular would need their rest—this had to be accounted for right from the start.

“I think it would be a good idea to put the migrants to work on the roads and transporting the foodstuffs,” I said.

“That makes sense. Even those who are only experienced in farming should be able to handle that.”

“Right. And if the need arises, you can consider using magic items.”

Although I’d never seen them for myself, apparently there were magic items that could generate soil. That would be a worthwhile use for the magic stones you got while hunting monsters for their meat. An overabundance of magic stones would depress their prices, discouraging adventurers from hunting them, so any way of using them up productively was a good thing.

“You can take on volunteers for road maintenance and caravan security, along with anyone who has combat experience,” I went on. “There should be veterans from the Demon Stampede and the battle at Finoy.”

“Yes, there are survivors, though I doubt that they’d be inclined to fight,” the duke began, although he soon nodded. “Oh, I see. It will be like the battle at Finoy, hm?”

“Indeed,” I said. “Even the soldiers who had their confidence shaken by their previous experiences should be able to handle the monsters near the capital at the moment. Just equip them well, and their confidence will return after some successful battles.”

“If we can add those foot soldiers to our forces, then we should be able to count on them to handle a siege battle should the knight brigade ever leave the capital.”

He was a sharp one. That was what I was angling for as well. I wanted us to at least have enough hands on deck for a siege battle. That way, even if a second Demon Stampede were to break out near the capital while the knight brigade was away, we wouldn't be dead in the water.

I explained my other ideas: collecting the weapons from the citizens who didn't need them and giving them to the people who did want to fight, and also adopting the fleet escort system I used to guard the refugees from Triot. The latter could also be applied to protect the roads.

"The other consideration is the funding," I said.

"I must admit that our funds are hardly abundant at present. For the moment, we will divide the duties among several noble houses, particularly those governed by younger nobles."

That made sense. The previous heads of some noble families perished in battle at the Demon Stampede or Finoy. The state could give the successors public works projects, allowing them to establish themselves and their houses. It might be a hassle for those families, but that was nothing new for upcoming nobles.

"We may also be able to wrangle some funds out of selling items from monsters to the neighboring countries," the duke went on.

"Are there any countries willing to buy those?"

"Some nations are frantically attempting to secure arms now that the Demon Lord has returned. We can sell them the monster weapons we obtained at Finoy. They are in a very different position from us."

He shot me a meaningful look. True, I was the one who suggested refining our equipment right after the Demon Stampede.

"We were able to reduce our casualties at Finoy and within the capital because of that equipment. It was a good plan."

"I am humbled by your praise..."

I was glad it came in handy, but his gaze was freaking me out.

"Your suggestions are compelling," he said. "I would like you to submit them in written form."

“Excuse me?”

Huh? Was this going to be my job? I wondered, but the duke responded to my silent question with a straight face. “You will not be able to oversee the task directly. It will take time to announce the project and appoint overseers. I will discuss it with His Majesty, the prince, and the chancellor. When that is settled, I will ensure things are set into motion with utmost haste.”

“I am, um, grateful for your consideration.”

You see, didn’t my father tell me not to poke my head into stuff that wasn’t my business? I didn’t want the plan to be attributed to me, if possible. Alas, despite the duke’s efforts to get the ball rolling, a formal proposal was still mandatory, it seemed.

“Besides, my position is not so weak that I must steal the ideas of a young man like yourself.”

“I-I am very grateful.”

Not that I was concerned about that in the slightest. I felt like I’d gone and run my mouth. Since I didn’t want to get on the duke’s bad side, I would have to sacrifice some sleep tonight.

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That night, I called for Norbert as soon as I got back to the estate. I couldn’t leave the problem at hand unattended. Frenssen was also around, listening in so he could serve as witness should the circumstances call for it. I wasn’t planning any skullduggery involving House Fürst, and I wasn’t about to let anyone allege that I was.

“You called for me, Master Werner?” the butler said.

“Yeah. I’m going to be assigned to Anheim soon. While I’m gone, there’s something I’d like you to investigate,” I said, before asking him to look into Lord Tyrone, heir to House Fürst, and his circle of acquaintances in particular.

Looking rather puzzled, Norbert pressed me for a reason.

I hoped he would cut me some slack for answering a question with a question. “Lord Tyrone doesn’t have a fiancée or anything, right?”

“So I have been told. From what I’ve heard, his heart is set on Her Highness Princess Laura.”

You had to hand it to the heroine. Even Lord Tyrone was head over heels for her. I wasn’t necessarily surprised, considering how beautiful Laura was. Still, his extreme fixation on her *was* unnatural. It was so unsettling, in fact, that I couldn’t help but wonder if where the smoke rose, there was more than the fires of love.

“Lord Tyrone isn’t just senior to me, he’s even older than my elder brother would have been.”

“Indeed that is so.”

“Let’s say he’s ten years older than me. When he was my age—in other words, marriageable age—Princess Laura must have been five or so. It’s strange for him to have been so smitten with her since the first time he laid eyes on her, don’t you think?”

Well, it wasn’t *impossible* for Lord Tyrone to be a total pedo, I guess. Even then, it was still weird of him to exclusively have feelings for Laura after all that time.

Upon hearing what I had to say, Frenssen coughed out a “You have a point…”

“But what’s even weirder is that we never saw it as unnatural until literally this moment.”

At this point, even Norbert’s expression flickered. “Did Lord Bastian not think it strange?”

“It’s hard to imagine that he saw *nothing* amiss, but I haven’t heard so much as a whisper about him trying to find Lord Tyrone a fiancée.”

If this was just a matter of what Lord Tyrone thought, it wouldn’t have been a big deal. I wasn’t going to comment on individual preferences. But the fact that nobody else batted an eyelid *was* unnatural.

“So what?” you might ask. Let’s say, for instance, that Lord Tyrone was like this because the scriptwriter of this world willed it. In that case, this matter had some deep implications. A person who was supposed to love someone else could suddenly be fixated on Laura instead. For as long as I had questions about her oracle abilities, I wouldn’t be able to let go of my misgivings.

“May I communicate this matter to the count?” asked Norbert.

“Sure. Just be sure to tell my father when he’s a little less swamped with work.”

I doubted he would find an answer right away, and I didn’t want this to disturb my father’s work. Otherwise, I was happy to leave this to Norbert’s judgment.

“Just ask around within the house for now.”

“Understood.”

Norbert bowed his head and left. As I watched him go, I heaved a heavy sigh. This was a suspicious matter indeed, but alas, there was only one of me. All I could do was set things in motion and see if anything turned up. And still my stomach ached.

Then I let out an involuntary groan because I realized that I still had to write my proposal to the duke about the road maintenance. This was going to take a hell of a lot of time out of me. I still had rough drafts of the documents I submitted for the Triot refugee escort mission, but not the full proposal. I’d just had to live with that, seeing as this world didn’t have digital data or copy machines.

Using my notes on the monster spawning habits and the fleet escort system, I could draft a security system. Unfortunately, there was no guarantee that the person in charge would actually refer to the other documents, so I figured I should write down the basic gist at least.

I asked Frenssen to call Lily to my study. As I waited for them to show up, I scribbled some rough notes about my proposal. If I forgot any details, it’d just mean more trouble for me down the line, so I made sure to put the salient points into writing. Just as I was pulling the documents I needed from the shelf, Frenssen and Lily walked in.

The first thing I did was ask Lily to draw me a diagram. Nothing complicated, just writing some simple letters on stakes which would be placed along the roads. The stakes would be made out of wood and reinforced with the Reptipos skins, which we had in abundance following the battle at Finoy.

“What is this?” asked Lily, looking puzzled.

“Markers,” I responded.

They would be used as milestones. The idea was to carve numbers on them so that you could tell where you were, no matter which direction you were coming from. By placing these at regular intervals along the roads, the construction work could progress smoothly no matter how many laborers you swapped in and out.

At the same time, the stakes would have a purpose when the road maintenance ended and the mass transportation started. If, say, a wagon got stuck, they could send out a message saying, "I'm caught up between Markers Six and Seven," and the repair people would immediately know where to find them. This would save some time.

In this world, so long as you were outside a town, you were at risk of being attacked by monsters. And with the monsters more violent than ever thanks to the Demon Lord's comeback, our defenses had to be as efficient as possible. Lily understood when I explained this to her. Then I explained something else I would be using for the road work and got her to draw that up while I focused on writing the proposal.

"Lily, when you're done with that, can I ask you for some tea?" I said when I'd finished the general outline of the proposal and was turning my attention to the next thing on my list.

"Of course. I'll prepare some light snacks too." Lily was considerate—probably because I'd been working until the early hours of the morning every night lately.

I asked Frenssen to get me a list of things I would be taking to Anheim, plus my reference documents for a big-ish construction project I would be undertaking there.

As I continued scratching away at my writing, Lily came by with tea and a light meal: cheese, thinly sliced bread, and an assortment of jams. These were things I could eat with one hand occupied, and they tasted perfectly good even when cold. A conscientious choice.

As an aside, the jams were made from berries, figs, apples, pears, and quinces. Sometimes, people used sugar to make jams, but since that was expensive, they often used honey instead. Personally, I thought honey lent itself to a classier sort of sweetness.

“Thanks, you’re a lifesaver.”

“Not a problem. Um, Master Werner…if you work late every night your body will tire out…”

“I know.”

She was finally telling me off. I mean, yeah, I would have been lying if I said I wasn’t exhausted. But I still had it way better than Mazel, who was off on his journey. At least my life wasn’t in danger.

Not that I was going to say that to her face. Lily already knew that Mazel was on a dangerous quest. There was no need to unsettle her by dwelling on the fact. For now, I decided to keep the conversation focused on myself.

“If I get it out of the way now, I can take it easy later.”

This was half true. I just had no way of knowing whether things actually *would* ease up for me. Still, if I didn’t do it now, there was no guarantee it wouldn’t be too late down the line.

“Anyway, things are a lot easier for me because of your help, Lily. Thanks.”

“Er, um, don’t mention it,” she answered, suddenly flustered.

But I was telling the truth. The fact that she was able to draw things for me and make corrections based on my instructions was a huge boon for me. As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words.

“But, you know, I would really appreciate it if you made something easy to digest tomorrow morning.”

“Of course, sir. Shall I make some milchreis?”

“Hmm, I’d like to avoid having something sweet in the morning.”

In my old world, rice pudding existed in Medieval Scandinavian regions like Finland and Denmark. Some fourteenth-century English recipes used rice as well. Likewise, this world also had rice dishes, so I could eat it if I felt like it. Unfortunately, it didn’t taste like Japanese rice. It didn’t retain its firmness when boiled, so it was more typically cooked in soup. You could mix the soft slurry with salad.

Milchreis was rice boiled in cow or goat milk or, on occasion, almond milk, with jam added as a sweetener. Although they didn’t

use sugar in this world, it was considered a type of rice pudding. Occasionally, they boiled it with beans—well, monster bits—to make it into a rice gruel, kind of like *zosui*. That's how you knew that this was a different world altogether. It was regarded as a staple food, though, not a dessert.

This is yet another tangent, but in my old world, almonds were such a commonplace food ingredient that they even showed up in Greek myths. This world was identical in that regard. Unlike milk from farm animals, almond milk was preservable to an extent, which made it a mainstay in cooking. To be honest, I didn't really like the taste of it in my first life, but I got used to having it all the time here.

"Then I shall inform the cooks to make vegetable soup," Lily said.

"Thanks," I replied, at which she bowed and left the room. Looked like I managed to get her on the same page as me.

At that precise moment, Frenssen came back with a bunch of documents and I decided to continue my work. Since I didn't want to cause too much worry for others, I considered taking breaks every so often. Would I still get everything done, though? I supposed I should keep my hands busy instead of worrying. I sighed.

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"To command others as a noble, it is not enough to dictate what they must do. You must guide them so their actions are always to your benefit."

While Werner was grappling with the proposal document, Prince Hubertus was in his office. As he listened to Duke Gründing's stories, he chuckled lightly.

The duke, for his part, was wincing. "Viscount Zehrfeld has a broad insight and makes astute decisions. However, he still lacks experience."

"Understandable, given his age. Besides, if he *was* experienced, your methods would not have worked on him," Hubert said, his voice buoyant with amusement.

Yes, he was indeed correct. By asking Werner about how he would counteract the problem, the duke was trying to instill a sense of urgency in the young man. Instead of dwelling on the question and formulating an answer later, Werner responded straight away. This could be interpreted as naïveté on his part as a noble, though it could also be a personality issue rather than merely a matter of experience.

"You are not wrong. Though I must say that it is hard to reject the insight of a viscount with an eye for both military affairs and administrative work."

"Is there value in promoting him?"

"Plenty, I would say."

In this world, a promotion did not merely entail a raise in status and salary. It also occasioned a rise in standing among one's peers. Others had to perceive one's actions, deeds, and knowledge as indispensable. Not to mention that these traits shouldn't just be for their own sake but would also help others. Someone who worked only for themselves or who only criticized others wouldn't be in line for a promotion. If Werner had been present for this conversation, he might have thought that this world was very similar to Earth's Middle Ages in that sense.

"The people are quite taken with him as well," the prince remarked.

"Enough so that I am considering offering him a bride from my family."

"Seyfert said it was a shame he doesn't have any granddaughters," Hubert said with another smile, though this one bore something of an edge. Not that Duke Gründing was much invested in the subject, either.

Hubert took on a more serious tone. "Count Zehrfeld has confirmed to me that he has no official fiancée. I wonder if the viscount has his eye on any woman in particular."

"Judging by his demeanor, I would say not."

If Werner got pulled into a faction at this point, his talents could end up serving their interests instead of those of Wein as a whole. Hubert and the duke were both well aware what this would cost the kingdom during a time of crisis.

Aristocrats wanted to strengthen their positions within their respective cliques, but Werner would have been unworthy of joining the king's maternal clan if he was blinded by that desire. The future was still uncertain, but at this point the duke was not seriously considering marrying Werner into his family.

"That is a good sign," said Hubert. "A timely reminder for those who are not thinking clearly."

"I agree. Now, about the viscount's proposal..."

"It is generally viable. We should begin refurbishing the roads from the south side."

Cleaning up the roads was an absolute necessity if they wanted the knight brigade to be able to move at speed across the kingdom. Given that they expected a battle to break out in Marquess Kneipp's former territory, arriving even half a day quicker would be ideal. With this in mind, Hubert gave the command to prioritize the road work to the south.

The duke understood his intentions clearly. "How do you intend to deal with the regional nobles?"

"For now, we must only tell them that we are presently working on the roads so that we can send reinforcements immediately. Make the individual fiefs responsible for maintaining their own roads until we've made sufficient progress on the highways."

"Understood."

Some nobles were inclined to leave the most dangerous work to the crown. Hubert was planning to deal with those regional nobles by promising to lend priority assistance to those who did their own upkeep. Part of this was also because of the Demon Lord's return. As a governing body, the kingdom wanted to discourage people from passing the buck during a national crisis.

The chancellor, who anticipated that this would eventually become a diplomatic issue, was also present at the scene. By the time they put together a plan involving the efforts of so-and-so noble families, night had passed and the next day begun. It was quite a lot of work indeed.

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The next day, the Zehrfeld estate received no further invitations to tea parties. I had no idea whether this was because nobody wanted to bother with a guy who had practically been demoted or because they were being considerate of how much work I'd have to do leading up to my departure. Honestly, I was just grateful that they weren't pestering me anymore.

According to my father, there were some idiotic houses that had offered to take in Mazel's family while I was away at Anheim. My father handled it, though I don't know how exactly. Amazing to think there were still people like that. The royal family might have been trying to lure them out.

At that moment, everyone involved with Count Bachem and the Lesratoga incident would be receiving the reports about it. The prince and his circle were apparently too busy to meet with anyone personally, so they sent a messenger to my office.

"Firstly, we extend our commendations to the viscount for his deft handling of the incident."

"Thank you very much."

I assumed this was a matter of formality, but apparently not. This incident would serve as useful leverage in the Wein Kingdom's diplomatic relations.

By the way, I spoke deferentially to the messenger because he was a civil official serving as a representative for His Majesty and the prince. On the other hand, this was more of an exchange of information than a one-sided official report, so while we both observed proper courtesies, we didn't overdo it.

"Although it had been an embarrassment to our kingdom that monsters infiltrated our capital, it has been confirmed that the same happened in Lesratoga."

"Oh, I see..." I nodded at the first half of what the messenger said, but at the second part, I pulled up short. "So it happened in Lesratoga too?"

I'd focused most of my game knowledge and strategizing on the affairs of this kingdom because of my position here, but it turned out that other countries had their own drama to deal with.

"Lesratoga is currently locked in a succession dispute between the first and second princes."

“Oh, really?”

Was this issue such a big deal that even the Wein Kingdom, a different country, knew about it? Hmm. If I recalled correctly, only the king of Lesratoga showed up in the game, but it turned out that there were two princes. Perhaps their absence could be chocked up to the same reasons all the other nobles didn’t appear in the game.

“It would seem that one of the second prince’s aides was a Demon, who was pulling the strings behind this incident. The eldest prince’s faction has thanked us, though not through official channels.”

Apparently, the ambassador stationed in the Wein Kingdom was a member of the eldest prince’s faction. If Mazel’s family had been kidnapped, the blame would have fallen onto him.

I wondered if this second prince was trying to take the Hartings hostage so that he could force Mazel to do his bidding. Maybe his side was so thoroughly backed into a corner that they needed something this desperate to turn the tables. Not that there was much point speculating given how little I knew.

Regardless, this incident made it clear that demons weren’t lurking just in the Wein Kingdom. And if Lesratoga had the same problem, the same could well be true of other nations. Oh, maybe that was why the messenger said that the incident *had been* an embarrassment.

“Is the Wein Kingdom in a position to claim that it has already eradicated its Demons while pointing the finger at other countries?” I asked.

“Indeed, that is so. Although they do not speak of it openly, other countries have sneered at us for allowing Demons to infiltrate our capital. Now that a Demon has been exposed as a royal aide at Lesratoga, the other countries have begun consulting us on methods for flushing out Demons.”

Even if I was a nobleman from the same kingdom, that was quite a blunt way of putting it. It gave me the impression that the messenger was either involved in high-up diplomatic situations or interacted frequently with people who were. He was no ordinary civil official, I would guess. Either he was very high up the rungs or he was an aristocrat’s aide.

I decided not to tip my hand too much. I didn't want to get entangled with a political faction, and I didn't have a firm grasp on this person's position. I decided to discreetly steer us to a related subject instead.

"Did the merchant calling himself Rafed also belong to the second prince's faction?"

"Yes, he did. However, he also threw himself upon our mercy, crying and claiming that he was unaware that he was following a Demon's plan."

A grown man begging and weeping? No way, he had to be acting. Although I couldn't deny that part of humanity's strength was being able to cast away all dignity for the sake of survival.

But anyway, this was a lot to chew on. So the second-eldest prince was trying to use Lily and the others to extort Mazel. However, the Demon who enacted the plan was actually trying to snatch them away entirely. The monsters lurking outside Lesratoga's walls were part of that kidnapping plan.

Now that his rival had self-destructed, the eldest prince would solidify his position as the successor. Meanwhile, our kingdom could use this situation to its advantage in its diplomatic relations. Even if he was only the second-eldest prince, this was solid evidence of Lesratoga royalty dancing to a Demon's tune. A tidy bit of information to drop when haggling over tariffs, trade, and all that.

It also looked like this would have implications for our relationship with other countries. No wonder the diplomats and His Majesty were so busy.

"What was our own Count Bachem after in conspiring with a foreign power?" I asked.

"Well, that..." The messenger smiled wryly. There was some sympathy mixed in there as well—what gives? "It is a rather complicated story. Count Bachem was originally a bridegroom from a viscount-ranked family. His current wife is his second wife."

"Okay..."

"It would seem that he got along very well with his previous wife, the former count's daughter, but she passed away from illness. His second and current wife does not have a good relationship with him at all."

Apparently, the second wife was the younger sister of the previous count—which meant that she was quite a bit older than her husband. He had married into her house from a lower position, and considering the age gap, he probably cut a pretty pathetic figure in his own home. Ouch.

"Count Bachem's eldest son was born to his previous wife. His second son is the child of his current wife. She has insisted that her own child become the next count, and she has been needling her husband about this every day."

"A…common enough story, I suppose."

So Count Bachem's side was also involved in a family dispute. I wondered if the count actually fathered this second son. After all, this world didn't have DNA tests or anything.

"Count Bachem got fed up and left his territory for the capital, where he stayed with his eldest son with no apparent plans of returning. It would seem that he became acquainted with that man during this time, when he started wishing for his wife to pass away from 'illness' or 'accident.'"

So Rafed must have approached him first, looking for collaborators within the Wein Kingdom. Although he called himself a merchant, he seemed savvy about poisons. I was reminded that the knight with him used a paralyzing agent.

"In exchange for handing the Hero's family to Lesratoga, Count Bachem was told that his wife would die from an 'illness.'"

That sucked the energy out of me. Seriously? *That* was his motivation? No wonder His Majesty was pissed. Well, maybe the count's wife hounded him like crazy. Heck, she might have been plotting for him and his eldest son to die. Noble families had a way of stocking their closets with skeletons. Either way, I'd love to give him a piece of my mind when it came to making his family affairs everyone's problem.

"Count Bachem tried to convince His Majesty that the Hero was dangerous because of his ability to go toe to toe with the Demon Commanders," the messenger went on. "He claimed that he was trying to drive the Hero into another country for the sake of our nation. That this would become the seed of war in *their* country."

“How did His Majesty react?” I think I did an okay job at keeping my face neutral and my voice level. It shouldn’t have surprised me that there were people out there making extreme claims.

In Count Bachem’s case, though, it was just an excuse. If the royal family accepted that as an explanation, they would basically be declaring that they saw the Hero in the same light. There was no way the kingdom would swallow it—it was honestly a bad move.

“He became terribly enraged. He said, ‘So you would conspire with a foreigner and kidnap our own citizens out of deluded suspicion against the Hero?’ Then he threw him into the ‘rat hole.’”

“Oh…”

I had no sympathy for him, but I still had to wince at that punishment.

The image that typically comes to mind when you say the word “prison” is a big room with three stone walls and iron bars facing the hallway. They were fairly spacious, since you’d want a single cell to fit multiple people. And that was what most prisons were like.

When a nobleman was incarcerated, however, it was more often than not a bespoke arrangement. Although there would be windows and bars, they would get a private room to themselves. Granted, this sometimes came with being shackled to the wall all day long.

But the “rat hole” was another dimension entirely.

That enclosure was reserved for particularly heinous criminals. To use the standards of measurement from my old world, a rat hole was about a meter tall, forty centimeters wide, and sixty centimeters deep. These tiny burrows were completely encased in stone walls. In lieu of a door, a thick plank would seal the entrance.

From that size, I’m sure you can imagine that an adult wouldn’t be able to stand up straight inside, nor would they be able to lie down. All they could do was sit and lean against the wall all day long. They had to eat and sleep in that position too. Since there was no light, the nights were pitch-black, and the lack of

toilets meant that they had no choice but to soil themselves. And they'd have to stay like that for ages without a change of clothes.

Basically, the "rat hole" was a form of torture in and of itself. To use a term from my old world, people thrown in there would often come out with PTSD. I suppose that if a noble got stuck in there, they might bash their head against the walls and die "by accident."

"The eldest son is in a separate hole. Soldiers have been deployed to arrest the count's wife and second son, and the crown has seized Bachem territory."

"Oh, I see. I understand the situation now." After a pause, I said, "Thank you for coming here and explaining the matter."

Honestly, what I took from this was that I shouldn't get involved any further. The conspirators were in the hands of the law now. I thanked the messenger, and he went on his way.

I sighed when he was gone. This was hardly a surprise. I knew that there would be people eager to stir up trouble for Mazel.

Still, despite the circumstances, I was grateful to our monarch for publicly denouncing the suspicion against Mazel. This was a cynical way of putting it, but I felt like I could use his statement to my advantage.

***

"Oh? So Lord Tyrone did *not* poach the Zehrfeld knights?"

"He did not. He can be *so* ornery."

Anshelm Zeagle Jhering and Judith Malen Teutenberg shared a knowing laugh. To a casual observer, they might have looked like lovers in their corner seat at a certain restaurant, but there wasn't a single spark of passion between them. If anything, they seemed closer to merchants or diplomats smiling before they cut a deal.

"But I have to wonder, why are you so interested in the Zehrfelds, Lord Anshelm?"

"I was merely worried about my old friends at House Fürst," Anshelm said matter-of-factly before taking a mouthful of food.

One noble house was climbing in the crown's esteem, while the other had lost a chunk of its fighting force. This threatened to upset the balance between the two neighboring families.

Judith's eyes narrowed as she studied Anshelm's demeanor. "Don't you think it would be smarter to poach knights from another martial house? Make up some rumors and hit them while their reputation is on the rocks?"

"That might work if not for our royal incumbents."

Judith's smile vanished. She nodded—no choice but to accept that her idea was a bad move.

Even if they did succeed in smearing another noble and taking their knights, the royal family would be furious when they found out. Anshelm had judged it would be too dangerous to make that kind of play while Prince Hubertus was alive and well.

Judith attempted to lighten the mood with a different subject. "By the way, there is a meeting today, not at the shrine but at the mansion of an acquaintance of mine. A priestess with the gifts of an oracle will be in attendance. Won't you come along?"

"As much as I appreciate the invitation, I'll have to pass on today."

"Goodness, you're no fun." Judith made a show of shrugging at Anshelm's response. It was impossible to determine what she really felt. "If you are lucky, you might hear a prophecy, you know?"

"That's very interesting, but I have my reasons for keeping my distance from the church's adherents," Anshelm replied, his surface equally inscrutable.

Although the vast majority of nobles were cordial with the church, a few were not so friendly. In some cases, this was because the nobles had disgraced themselves before the church, while in other cases, it was the regional curates whose wanton behavior repulsed the local aristocrats. Throughout the kingdom's long history, there were times when the royal family had to intervene and mediate the relationships.

"Oh, so such things can happen even to a man who conducts himself as impeccably as you."

"The problem is with them," Anshelm responded lightly.

Despite Judith's continued prodding, Lord Anshelm refused to consider a visit to the oracle. Then, at last, the two made ready to depart.

"It is a pity that you have lost out on the chance to hear your future, Lord Anshelm."

"I have nothing against those who run hot with ambition, but I don't want to come too close and get burned."

The two boarded their carriages and exchanged smiles through their coach windows. And then they set off, each with their own destination, neither one having emerged a clear winner from this encounter.

After he returned to the Jhering estate and changed into his indoor clothes, Anshelm immediately called for a servant to pour him some wine. He also summoned his personal butler.

"Welcome home, Master. How was your day today?"

"The food wasn't bad. Feel free to let it be known that I don't get on with the church's people."

Even if that is far from reality, thought Anshelm as he chuckled and sipped his wine. Then he added, "By the way, what is *he* up to?"

"If you are referring to Lord Gunner, he has been *shown* the basement of Marquess Cortolezis's mansion."

"Has he now?"

As the kingdom exhausted itself in the battle against the Demon army, the noble houses that managed to keep their armies intact were steadily climbing the pecking order. Although he was biding his time for the moment, Anshelm saw the need to prepare himself for when the Demon army weakened the nation. Similarly, he waited for when the Hero, so esteemed by the royal family, crippled the Demons.

As those thoughts ran through his mind, Anshelm took another sip of his wine. "Now is not the time for haste. We don't know what Marquess Cortolezis is trying to do, either."

Although Anshelm was ambitious, he was certainly not careless. He had a grasp on both the Wein Kingdom and the Demon army's strengths.

Where he miscalculated, however, was in focusing solely on Prince Hubertus's talents. He forgot to be wary of the kingdom's other leaders. And, under the sway of the kingdom's emphasis on martial prowess, he'd overlooked the capabilities of the bureaucrat houses. It would still be some time before he saw the need to sabotage Werner's burgeoning reputation.

This complacency of his would have a major effect on the events to come.

***

The next evening, I invited a ton of people to the Zehrfeld estate for a briefing session. My geographical survey of Marquess Kneipp's former territory was shaping up to be useful, though I wouldn't have guessed at the time that I would be going there myself.

The scouts came over to the mansion. As I paid them for their work, they told me about the Anheim region's topography, the state of the roads, and the geographical landmarks. Listening to all their accounts took ages, but hey, it was what I signed up for.

Neurath, Schünzel, and Frenssen paid rapt attention, asking questions of their own and confirming several points of information that had slipped my notice. I disn't know whether it was because they knew about my circumstances or because I'd made a tentative offer for them to join me, but they really had my back.

This wasn't the case in every aristocratic mansion, but a count's house would have both soundproofed rooms and rooms in which every word exchanged could be heard through the walls. The latter were useful for dealing with suspicious guests. You would station soldiers in the adjoining room, then, if push came to shove, they could storm in and accost the individual. Wait, did that example make me sound like the bad guy?

On this occasion, however, I had Lily listen in from the next room instead of a soldier. I wanted her to draw diagrams based on what was discussed. Honestly, I would have liked for her to be in the same room from the start, but it would have been weird for a maid to stick around the whole time. It was important to keep up

the aristocratic façade no matter what the circumstances. What a huge pain in the ass.

This medieval-ish world didn't have contour maps. When I explained the idea to Lily, she made a face that said she got the idea but only sort of. As handy as they were, maybe it still seemed incomprehensible because she had never needed a map before.

Much like Earth's Middle Ages, this world had rudimentary relief maps, which used different colors to indicate the differences in altitude. However, there were very few people who could estimate the ranges properly. Not to mention that maps were considered military information. This meant that there weren't any national efforts to estimate the height of every single mountain. Many topographic maps just went by feel, although this was enough for your average citizen to get by.

Since this was the norm as far as everyone was concerned, the scouts used vague descriptions like "the hill on the lift was taller than the one on the right" or "there is a road between the left hollow and the right hill." Because this was all relative to where the speaker was standing when they did the survey, you could easily get the directions mixed up. I had to be careful when processing their explanations.

When the knight brigade or other military professionals delivered these reports, they followed certain standards for the directions, but on this occasion, I had asked your friendly neighborhood adventurers to do the job. I wasn't going to hire them for a second inspection, so Frenssen and the others had to double-check all their observations. I felt bad for taking up so much of their time.

Going off topic, there was a period when medieval maps put east at the top of the page, but this world was like modern Japan, where north was the top. That made things easier to understand, so I was fine with that. Maybe this was another artifact from the game design?

"Pheeew..."

"That was tiring..."

Everyone was wiped after analyzing reports from twenty people. Lily, who had been listening in the whole time from the other room, also looked somewhat fatigued, but she brought us some tea, nevertheless. What a godsend.

The tea was lukewarm, perhaps out of consideration for all of us. We each drained our cups in practically one swallow.

“Sorry to impose, but could you pour me another cup?” Neurath spoke up.

This started a wave of refill requests.

“C-could I have a refill too?” asked Frenssen.

“Same here. Also, you ought to have a break yourself, Lily. Help yourself to some tea.” I meant it, too. She’d been busy pouring our cups, after all.

“I will, thank you very much.”

As I sipped on my second cup, I looked over my notes and my rough diagrams. Hm. I sucked at drawing, but I thought I got the gist of where things were.

“Frenssen, did you prepare the thing I asked you for this morning?”

“Yes, I have the bag of wheat.”

“Good. Then let’s get going after a short break.”

Oh man, I wish I had some chocolate or candy right about now.

***

After our pit stop, we all went further inside the mansion. We cleaned up a room that had been relegated to storage and set up a small table (although technically it seated around six people). Then, to stop things from falling off it, I set up a large board with a raised, tray-like frame. Yep, this looked good.

“What do you plan to do with this?”

“It’s for the work I’m about to do. I’m going to mark everything the scouts told us, but feel free to point out any errors I make.”

I didn’t want to waste any time, so I dug right into it. With a bowl, I scooped out the grains from the bag of Käthe wheat and dumped it on the board. Gasps of surprise sounded around me, but I decided that it would be quicker to demonstrate what I was doing instead of explaining it.

By the way, Käthe wheat was a type of plant endemic to this world. It was shaped like really tiny wheat and was somewhere between the size of a sesame seed and wheat grain. It was also cheaper than the usual grain. It tasted just like regular wheat if you ate it raw or made a porridge out of it, but try making alcohol out of it and it would turn transparent and oddly spicy. The plant was filled with mysterious properties, but that was a fantasy world for you.

Some people liked drinking Käthe alcohol straight, though it was more common to mix it into hot sauce or as part of a cocktail. Not that I was eager to drink it. Anyway, that was beside the point.

I scattered a heap of Käthe wheat on the board, just about covering the surface. Then, I used the lowest elevation as the base level and started sifting the grains around to make hills.

Lily was the first one to catch on to what I was doing. “Oh… Um, Master Werner, the hill you’re making ought to be a little taller.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. Otherwise, it won’t correspond with the size of this hill.”

“So more like this?”

“Yes. And I’ll add some more grain here.”

Frenssen and the others appeared to grasp what was going on from this exchange. As understanding dawned on Frenssen’s face, he exclaimed, “Please excuse me!” and flew out of the room. Oh right, we didn’t have *quite* enough Käthe wheat, huh?

I got Neurath and Schünzel to help out. As they consulted my notes and diagrams, they started adding to the model. Yep, it was more efficient to get them to understand the work through a demonstration.

When Frenssen came back, he also pitched in with the model. Through our combined efforts, I was finally able to grasp the picture as a whole: the mountainous areas, the valleys, where it was easy to conceal troops, and the most efficient paths for transporting an army.

“Okay, this looks good, right?”

“This really puts it into perspective,” Lily commented, looking impressed.

As much as I appreciated the earnest praise, it was because she didn't know anything about this subject. Neurath and Schünzel, who were only familiar with 2D maps even as military personnel, gaped at the finished product. I guess their reactions made sense. When maps were rare enough to begin with, 3D models would basically be a national treasure in this world.

"Sorry, Lily, but could you draw some diagrams based on this model? Three drawings. I won't need them till two days from now. Also, could you draw how tall things look from this angle and from that angle too?"

"I can do that, yes," she chirped with a smile.

I was grateful for the response. I felt a little bad about relying on Lily to draw so many things for me over the past few days. If I kept hogging her time with these requests, my mother was bound to tell me off sooner or later.

But hmm. You wouldn't say this land was easy to defend. With this layout, it was probably better to rely on defensive structures than the geography. No, in fact…

"Master Werner, where did you get this idea from?" asked Frenssen.

"Hm? Oh, I just wanted to make the info easier to parse for my own benefit," I replied.

Honestly, I had a crucial lack of information. Knowing that the unknown fourth Demon Commander, Gezarius, was bound to strike at some point, I wanted to at least grasp what I could beforehand. I just didn't imagine that I would be deployed there.

"We could apply this same method to make a hazard map for our own territory," I mused.

"A hazard map?" Lily echoed, mystified.

Crap, I had a bad habit of blurting things out. Regular maps weren't even common in this medieval-ish world. A hazard map was, you know, well… Wait.

"Okay, Lily, I'm leaving the diagrams to you. Frenssen, don't clean up this room until she's done. You wouldn't want to destroy the model. Neurath, Schünzel, help Lily if she has any questions."

"R-right."

"Master Werner?"

Everyone looked puzzled at how I suddenly started speaking so rapidly, but I didn't have a moment to waste. I had to go check on this matter right away.

"Sorry, but there's something I need to look into. I leave the rest to you."

I left the room without waiting for a response and headed to the butler's room, looking for Norbert. I sensed the maids shooting me some odd looks, probably because I was power walking.

"Norbert, could you lend me a key to the archives?"

"Master Werner, were you not in the middle of work? What do you need from the archives?" Norbert must have noticed that I was acting funny, but he answered in his usual tone. That was a count's butler for you.

Anyway, I rattled off the first excuse that came to my head. "I figured that there might be some records that will come in handy for my deployment."

"I see. You refer to the Zehrfeld fiefdom's administrative records?" he asked as he took out a ring of keys to the mansion. This made sense since it was the butler's job to open the locks. He even prepared a magic lamp for me.

From there, we headed right on over to the family archives, which he unlocked for me. The room was very much what you would expect from the house of a minister. Although it wasn't large by any means—about the size of eight tatami mats, to use a standard of measurement from Japan—almost every inch of it besides the door and window was crammed with bookshelves.

I expected that it would take ages to scour each and every book here. Got to start somewhere, though, so I picked the closest shelf.

"Well then, be careful," Norbert said.

"Yeah, I will."

He wasn't saying "be careful" for my sake, though. He was worried about injury to the books. Honestly, it *was* easy to mishandle them if you weren't being careful. Anyway, I pulled out the agricultural records and some diaries written by people during the rule of the previous counts.

I didn’t read them thoroughly, though. Instead, I flipped through the pages looking for keywords. From skimming around ten books, I confirmed that my memories were not incorrect. The whole thing left me reeling. Why?

Why did this world have no records of large-scale natural disasters?

Epilogue

THROUGHOUT MY ENTIRE LIFE—OR AT LEAST after regaining my memories in this world—I could not recall a single large-scale natural disaster. At worst, there were some years with good or bad harvests, but all within the margin for error. I did not know of any famines, crop failures, floods, or anything else catastrophic enough to wipe out a village.

I could understand how there were no records of volcano eruptions. Mount Fuji hadn't erupted for hundreds of years. The geography could also explain why there were no earthquakes. It might be a coincidence that there had never once been a disaster like a famine in my ten years of life in this world.

But it was definitely strange that there hadn't been any destructive storms or floods, nor any accounts of snowfall destroying so much as a house. Not once in a hundred years.

Maybe there was a slight chance that our territory was just lucky, but if something of that description happened somewhere else in the kingdom, someone would have written it down in their diary. It was safe to assume that there had never been any large-scale natural disasters, full stop.

True, there were hardly any natural disasters in old role-playing games. Sometimes, flooding would obstruct a road or something, but all you had to do was beat the boss that was behind obstacles like that. I guess it would be annoying in a game to navigate natural disasters that you couldn't do anything about.

But the world I lived in had such an active ecosystem. It was definitely strange that the people living here were never subjected to nature's caprices. Sure, this was a fantasy world, but this defied any semblance to nature. What the heck was going on here?

The more I thought about it, the more this linked up with other things that stood out as weird to me. Looking up from the book, I set my train of thought in motion.

Let's start with what people on Earth call the natural sciences—the efforts to understand nature. Some easy examples include using the stars as indexes to predict when the Nile River in ancient Egypt would overflow, or when to start planting seeds. This would give rise to the art of astronomy.

Early astronomy was about measuring the position of the stars, although the practice of using calculations in this pursuit eventually opened the path to mathematics. Some theories even posited that natural sciences were responsible for the discovery of algebra and the number zero. In that sense, you could say that the study of science and mathematics began from nature.

Alchemy had the same roots, in fact. The earliest alchemical theories were attempts to explain why water on fire created steam and such. A water spirit on a fire spirit would alter it to a wind spirit, or something like that. Their ideas would be rejected later, of course, but that was how science got its start back in the day.

The idea that adding something caused a transformation led people to believe that they could make gold out of iron through some kind of additive process. Alchemy thus turned into a money-making scheme. But that was beside the point. What's important here is that chemistry derived from alchemy.

The royal academy did not teach any classes on astronomy or alchemy. I didn't care because those topics frankly never interested me, but it *was* strange now that I thought about it. They only taught things that had an immediate application, like herbology, commerce, and engineering. The natural sciences barely got touched upon.

It was weird that Lily and the other fief people knew practically nothing on the subject. Despite possessing the knowledge to build such sophisticated aqueducts, the country taught very little in the way of mathematics. They even got sloppy about basic arithmetic, never mind advanced mathematics. One could argue that this was to keep the knowledge concentrated among those with power, but the oddities didn't appear to end there.

What if this world had monsters instead of large-scale natural disasters?

Let's assume that, instead of dying to floods and famine, many people perished from Demon Stampedes and monsters. They would probably neglect to study the natural environment in favor of developing magical techniques and items to fight against the monsters.

The lack of natural disasters meant that people saw no need to study nature out of fear. The monsters were scary. By

comparison, the land was a nonissue. What if they saw no real danger in it because of that? The fundamental discrepancies between the worlds could be explained by their different existential threats.

I'd been poo-pooing the muscle-brain mentality in this world, but maybe it was like that because hardly anyone applied their intellectual efforts to understanding nature.

No, wait. The Star-Counting Tower had an astrolabe—basically a star chart. Old Uwe said he found it when he was researching the ancient kingdom, if I recall correctly. Given that the current civilization had no constellations, the existence of an astrolabe implied that there were natural sciences during the era of the ancient kingdom…hm?

Now that I thought about it, the ruins from back then were very durable from a technical standpoint. Maybe the structures remained intact because their society's architecture required robust mathematical knowledge.

While I was on this subject, what even were the dungeons anyway? Putting aside the etymology of the word, not every single dungeon in the world could possibly be a grave. I wondered if people built underground structures because they saw them as safe—because there was a problem on the surface. This lent credence to the possibility that there had been natural disasters back then.

I wondered if maybe they built the dungeons to serve as tornado shelters, as we called them in my old world. Or maybe they were like seed banks, to borrow yet another concept. If they were facilities that preserved important items, that would explain why the herbs inside remained intact, or why there was equipment you would never find elsewhere.

Also, if the underground facilities were built with the same indestructible walls as the ruins, then the current civilization should have been able to create shelters from the monsters. But that never happened. Our only underground structures were prisons and mines.

People nowadays might be able to dig a mine, but they weren't able to create the sorts of underground structures that qualified as dungeons. What if they were missing a crucial reserve of technological knowledge? What if the technology that did

remain was regarded as a secret art, passed down to only a very small sliver of society?

Let's say that this world appeared to be a medieval one because the sciences gradually stagnated, neglected due to the lack of natural dangers. The technology remained, yet without the scientific knowledge behind it. It was like giving an app to people who didn't understand its programming.

The previous Demon Lord emerged during the era of the ancient kingdom. When he was vanquished, the kingdom crumbled, and a chaotic era followed. Multiple warlords vied against each other before we reached the current centralized medieval-ish society. That was how the history books told it. If a portion of the old technology persisted to this era, then…

Who exactly *was* the Demon Lord?

If the monsters were a replacement for natural disasters, then what did the Demon Lord's existence mean? If the ancient kingdom prior to the Demon Lord's emergence had magic alongside astronomy and mathematics, then was it really a coincidence that their knowledge vanished when the kingdom fell?

In this current world, I could only imagine that monsters and magic were an impediment to scientific knowledge. Between the ancient kingdom's superior equipment and the fact that there were numerous item drops that this society could not recreate, it would seem that the requisite knowledge of magic items had long since disappeared. This would explain why, no matter how much time passed, this society never developed magic items surpassing those recovered or preserved from the ancient kingdom.

This raised questions about the Demon Lord, who was ostensibly responsible for that by destroying the ancient kingdom. It also raised the question of whether the Demon Lord we were facing was the same one vanquished in that era.

The story I heard was that the Demon Lord was revived, and that tale traced its roots to Laura's visions as an oracle. But how much could this oracle be believed? Was this really the same Demon Lord as the previous one? Did they come back to life, or did someone else rise to the same position, meaning that they were different on the inside?

Although the Demon Commander cores would get revived, the same didn't apply to the Four Fiends. Did this discrepancy between the members of the Demon army's leadership have any bearing on the kingpin themself? Was the "Demon Lord" an individual or a position? The difference might actually be crucial.

"Are you here, Master Werner?" someone called out from the door, snapping me out of my reverie. "I'm terribly sorry to disturb you, but there is something I must ask you about."

Crap, I really got ahead of myself there. I did *not* know enough to speculate. Without any actual facts, I would only risk losing myself in webs of ungrounded theories. But still, I felt like I'd brushed up against something important.

Right now, I was a nobleman who served the crown. My priority was fighting against the Demon army. Although I would have to put the matter of natural disasters aside for now to focus on fighting Gezarius, I would definitely, *definitely* look into this later. Not that I knew of a way that I *could* research it at this point.

Even as the unanswered questions nagged at me, I knew that I had to respond to the immediate matter at hand. To the person who was calling out to me. I cut through the darkness of the archive, returning to the world of light.



Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR PURCHASING THIS BOOK. I am Yuki Suzuki.

I've had a lot on my plate lately. This summer was especially humid. Plus, I've got more duties at my day job, which has really affected my personal life. I'm very sorry to the readers of the web novel for not keeping them in the loop.

Nevertheless, I've been invigorated by the many readers who have continued to send warm messages of encouragement, fan letters, and fan art. Thank you so, so much.

The fourth volume focused on internal politics. Maybe that's why it has a lot of scenes where the adults around our protagonist Werner show off their (very individualistic) personalities. Still, I like to think that the writing covered the important points, much like how the illustrations captured the cool highlights. I hope you find it enjoyable.

Finally, I'd like to extend my deepest thanks to readers old and new, and to everyone who has ever encouraged me. I'd also like to thank my editor Kawaguchi-sama, the illustrator Sanshouuo (who never fails to impress), the manga adaptation artist Rampei Asio (whose work is incredibly polished), and Uchida-sama from the editorial department.

Yuki SUZUKI
October 2023



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