
REINCARNATED
INTO A GAME AS THE
HERO'S FRIEND
RUNNING THE KINGDOM BEHIND THE SCENES
NOVEL
5
WRITTEN BY
Yuki SUZUKI
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Sanshouuo

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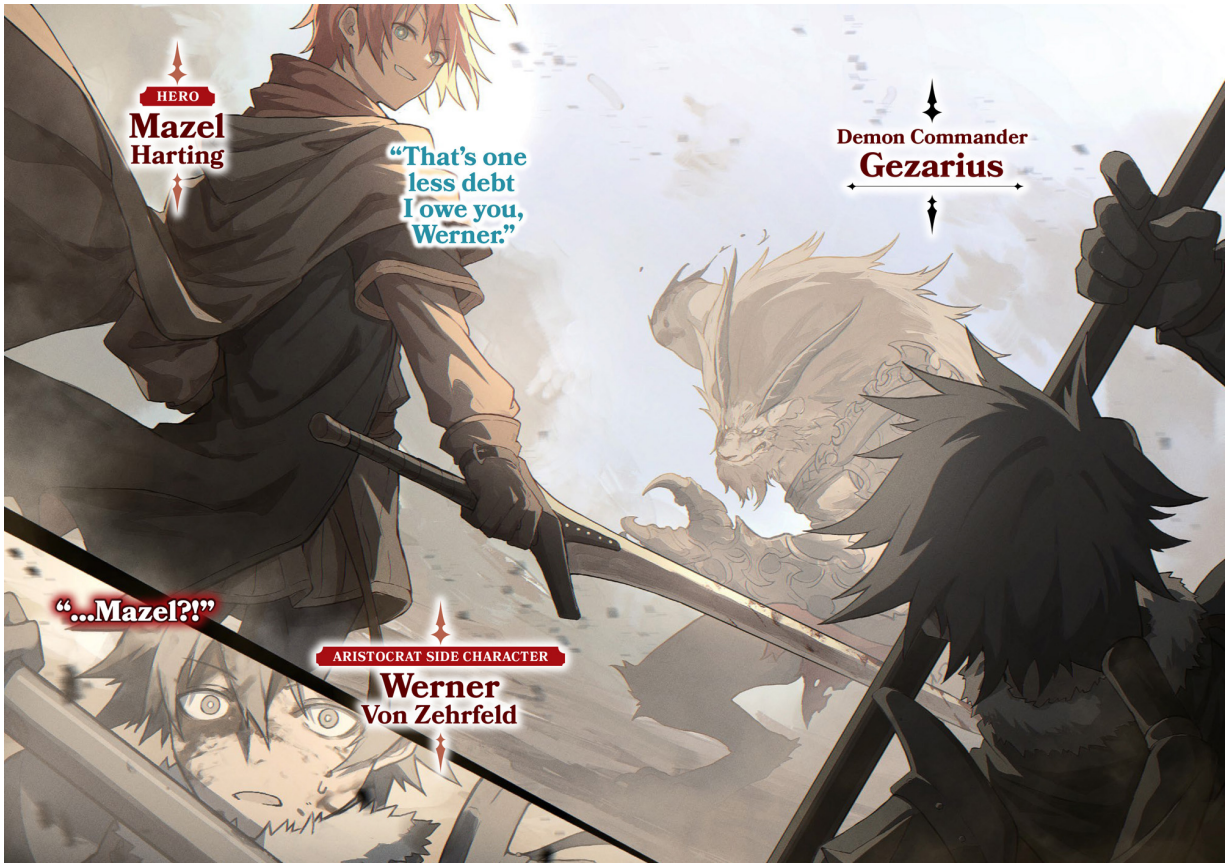
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“Our opponents are amateurs.”
“I do wonder how this will turn out.”


HERO
Mazel
Harting
"That's one less debt I owe you, Werner."
Demon Commander
Gezarius
"...Mazel?!"
ARISTOCRAT SIDE CHARACTER
Werner
Von Zehrfeld


On the Road to the Capital

REINCARNATED INTO A GAME AS THE HERO'S FRIEND

RUNNING THE KINGDOM BEHIND THE SCENES

NOVEL

5

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Yuki SUZUKI

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

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REINCARNATED INTO A GAME
AS THE HERO'S FRIEND

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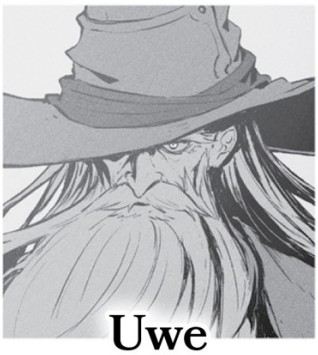
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~Governing and Control~

CHAPTER 2
SUBJUGATING BANDITS
~Appointed Lands and the Capital~

CHAPTER 3
THE FIGHT FOR ANHEIM
~Strategy and Reunion~

EPILOGUE

AFTERWORD



Uwe

An expert in offensive magic and member of the Hero's party. Wise and sagacious.



Seyfert

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



Hermine

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



Ingo

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



Schünzel

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



Neurath

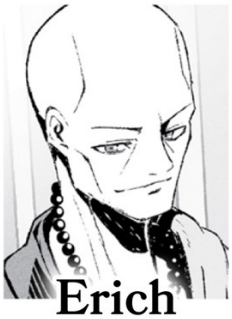
One of the protagonist's bodyguards. Throws himself eagerly into his work.



Frenssen

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

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. Having been rescued by Werner, she now works for the Zehrfeld household.



Mazel

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



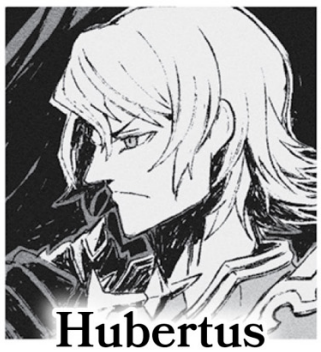
Werner

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.



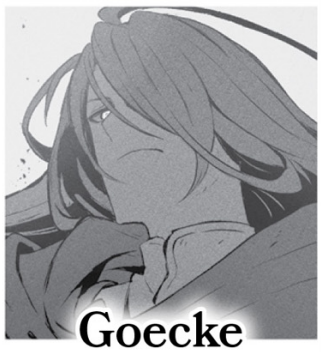
Rafed

A former spy for a neighboring country. He was captured by Werner and has since worked for him.



Hubertus

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



Goecke

A mercenary leader. As good with a sword as he is at getting his rowdy crew to fall in line.


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

Prologue

EVEN BEFORE WERNER WAS APPOINTED TO ANHEIM, the Zehrfeld residence had seen an uptick in visitors so drastic that Count Zehrfeld himself and his wife, Claudia, wore tired, wry grins throughout the day. For better or for worse, the Zehrfelds had become the talk of the town both within and outside the palace.

Werner had never had a shining reputation in the first place, and now it was an even split between good and bad.

Half the visitors were sold on the rumors that he'd been assigned to Anheim, which lay close to the borders, because his talents had been recognized by no less than Crown Prince Hubertus, Duke Seyfert, and Duke Gründing—also grandfather to the second-born princess, the holy woman Laura. Thus, his current position was nothing but a detour from a career that would one day see him returned to the center of the kingdom and ascended to the highest ranks, or so they believed. With all this in mind, there were many nobles who approached the family in unconcealed attempts to ingratiate themselves, or to get one of their daughters engaged to Werner sooner rather than later.

There were also those who took issue with Werner's supposed penchant for squandering money, which had been gaining infamy throughout the capital. It all began with a rumor that he had been gathering funds to use for his own merrymaking, and now many would furrow their brows at the first hint of news that he was ordering construction materials from the capital to be shipped to Anheim in order to build brothels.

For better or for worse, there was never a shortage of muckrakers in the court, and they were all too happy to drag the Zehrfeld heir's reputation through the mud.

Not to mention, Lily—the younger sister of the hero Mazel, who had slain a Demon Commander of the Demon army—was now employed at the residence of the Zehrfelds. Many had come to lay eyes on her, and more than a few had designs to take her for themselves. As a result, the entire Zehrfeld household, including the count, countess, and their staff, had to spend ever more of their time dealing with the influx of guests.

And on this particular morning, an especially important figure had come calling, his early visit kept secret by borrowing the carriage of another count. His arrival left not only the master of the house but even the lowest-ranking maids filled with anxiety. While the man himself paid little mind to lapses in manners, the greatness of his name left those around him thinking otherwise.

"You must be Lily. I am Jech Altig Seyfert."

"Y-yes, I'm Lily Harting." Lily managed a proper greeting, even if she couldn't quite conceal her fraying nerves. Seyfert, in Werner's words, looked like a stubborn old geezer. He had the imposing aura of a military man, with a noble rank that far exceeded that of count. Lily's reaction received a passing score.

"You may relax. I simply wish to question you about a map recently submitted to me by Lord Werner."

"R-right."

"You are the one who drew it, correct?" He took out the panoramic map of the Anheim region that he had received from Werner. The map had left Werner's father breathless the first time he saw it, and even a veteran of the military such as Seyfert had been stunned.

It wasn't that panoramic maps didn't exist in this world, but the ones they had were simply diagrams drawn from atop tall mountains or high towers. They were closer to an artist's rendering, such as you might find on a folding screen in the capital of Werner's previous world. While there were such images that depicted towns and famous sights, maps that could capture a territory in its entirety had yet to be invented.

Additionally, it was not just the idea that had been so great; the execution was near perfect as well. Looking at the diagram was like looking down on the whole territory and its battlefields. People of this world also used chess pieces to simulate battles on top of maps, and this seemed like the perfect type to use.

"Y-yes, it was me."

He grunted. "It would appear that something was first built to aid you in drawing this map. Would you explain how you created this image? You can keep your explanation brief."

It was a predictable question, given that Werner, in his focus on producing the map, had neglected to explain the process of its creation. His mind had quickly turned to the mystery of why this world lacked any natural disasters, and, in doing so, he'd left the matter of the map without any proper closure. When he had asked Lily to take a

few days to create this map, he had prohibited anyone from cleaning the room where the 3D model was being built, but he had not prohibited simply entering.

So Norbert, the family butler, curious about what Werner could possibly be up to once again, had entered the room. He was shocked by what he had found, with Werner none the wiser about the incident. Norbert had brought the matter to Lord Ingo, who quickly made it clear that none in the house were to speak of it. And when the map had finally been submitted to the king, the existence of the 3D model had been kept a secret. This, too, was something that Werner had been left in the dark about. His thoughts had been bent on his appointment to Anheim and the lack of natural disasters, but that didn't absolve him from his carelessness in this matter.

Seyfert's question had inspired a moment of uncertainty in Lily that made its way to her face. However, Lord Ingo was also in attendance, and at his nod of approval, Lily answered directly. "First, we had a few men head to the region…"

Several people had been hired to examine the topography of the region from different locations, their knowledge serving as reference for a 3D model, which Lily then turned into a 2D diagram. The big picture was simple enough, but explaining the finer points of the process was difficult. And as Lily tried to simplify the whole thing, Duke Seyfert picked up on something that seemed amiss.

"I do indeed understand the process. Count Ingo, I have something to ask of Lily here. Could you lend us some paper and drawing supplies?"

"Yes, just a moment." Ingo quickly gestured to Norbert to see to it, and when he returned with the necessary supplies, Lily was still at a loss.

"Miss Lily, could you draw an object that appears rectangular from head-on, but hexagonal from above, in a three-quarter bird's-eye view? Just the outline will suffice."

"Yes."

The shape was a simple hexagonal prism, but Ingo was slightly surprised to see she had easily drawn the object without warping it.

Seyfert continued. "Next, will you…"

He tested her with multiple diagrams, and by the end, Ingo, too, was astounded, even if he didn't let it show.

Seyfert looked at the completed outlines and nodded. "I have caused you enough trouble. This is all I need, but… Yes, I may have some work for you shortly. By your leave, Count Ingo?"

"Of course, Lord Seyfert."

"And," he said, turning to Lily, "has Lord Werner shared anything else with regard to these maps?"

Lily thought for a moment. "My deepest apologies. While he did explain them to me, I cannot remember the details. I do not think I can explain it myself."

"I see," Duke Seyfert said. Lily's answer had been stiff and laconic, and he didn't press her further. "I understand. You may take your leave then, Miss Lily."

“Then I thank you, Duke Seyfert.” She had already learned the manners to adopt when addressing nobility, but she couldn’t suppress the relief plain on her face.

Once Lily had left, the count turned to Duke Seyfert with a bow. “My deepest apologies.”

“It is no matter. I am sure she was uncertain whether sharing this with me would be to Lord Werner’s advantage or disadvantage. It is good that she is not too loose-lipped.”

“I see there are those who would rather ride a cow than a horse,” Ingo answered with a wry grin. While it was possible to ride cows, their gait was slower and the overall experience quite unpleasant. It was an idiom people used in this world to say that each person had their own preferences, the way people in Werner’s past world might say “some prefer nettles.”

The duke responded with a smile of his own. “I do not believe your son to be cattle, however.”

“Thank you for your kind words. Still, I was quite shocked.”

“As was I.” Seyfert looked at the drawings in awe. The last thing he had commanded Lily to draw was a piece from a board game popular among nobles. Being an item for the leisure class, its shape was intricate and far more detailed than the cut of a small gem. Yet, she had rendered it perfectly on verbal instructions alone, even without a reference to look at. Even among artisans, there were doubtfully many who could create 3D objects so precisely with only verbal descriptions to rely on.

“It appears that Miss Lily is able to see the objects in her mind in three dimensions and even illustrate them.”

“Indeed.”

Had Werner been listening, he might have said that she had an advanced sense of spatial awareness, but no such words existed in this world. Still, they could recognize the advantages that someone with such talents could afford them. At the very least, it was a valuable enough skill for an artist that a noble house may want to claim her for themselves.

“How fascinating. Would you mind if I borrow some of her time at a later date?”

“Not in the least, but do you mind sharing what it is you want her to draw?”

Seyfert didn’t mind in the least and said, “Why, I want her to draw the area around the castle.”

A detailed diagram of the castle town would be useful in deploying troops. Since Crown Prince Hubertus had implemented Werner’s proposed road improvements, it had become much easier to move through the capital. Still, Seyfert believed the roads would need to be made even more efficient.

Thus far, the town around the castle hadn’t been especially organized. It was divided roughly into a few districts, but that was the extent of it. Previously, “head from the third district to the west gate via the seventh district” was about as specific as orders could get, but now they could say, “third squad, head to the west gate via Viscount Lieberman Street, and fourth squad, go via Baron Heeks Street.”

Neither Seyfert nor the crown prince had been idle after hearing Werner's warning of a possible assault on the capital.

"Yet, she is the younger sister of the hero whose triumph over a Demon Commander has earned him such acclaim of late. I can hardly just call her to my residence on a whim. Do you happen to have any spare rooms, Count Ingo?"

"Do you mean to assign her a personal guard?"

"Indeed. I shall also summon Duke Gründing on one of the days she spends working on these maps."

There wasn't a noble left who hadn't heard the praises the king had sung for Mazel. Should a duke like Seyfert summon this hero's younger sister to his residence, appointing his own soldiers to guard her and having the queen's father in attendance, their reputation among the nobility would never be the same. Still, having her draw a map of the capital would mean letting her get comfortable with classified matters of state defense. Seyfert had explained all this, along with the plans the king, crown prince, and prime minister had envisioned. The whole affair left Ingo scowling.

"I see. So His Majesty and His Highness had such plans in mind."

"Please do keep this a secret from Lord Werner a short while longer."

"Understood." Ingo nodded. He, too, believed that there was no need to explain it all to Werner now.

Having reached an understanding, Seyfert let out a merry laugh. “Once Miss Lily finishes her diagram of the capital, perhaps we should have her capture Crown Prince Hubertus’s likeness in a portrait.”

“You go too far in your jests.”

The girl would be so nervous she wouldn’t be able to lift a finger, let alone a brush. The very thought left Ingo with a bitter grin.

Chapter 1:
A New Job
~Governing and Control~

AMID THE FAINT LIGHT THAT HINTED DAWN MIGHT break at any moment, the bandits ran frantically, chased by smoke. I had no reason to hold back against them, so I ordered a redoubling of our assault.

"No need for recklessness, but as long as you have a weapon firmly in hand, give them no quarter!"

"Yessir!"

The first thing I did once reaching Anheim was to carry out some military movements away from the convoy. There was nothing we could do until trade with other regions had stabilized, and I wanted to test the strength of the cavaliers and foot soldiers that had been left under my command.

Sir Holzdeppe, a knight representing the military force under command of the deputy count, took charge of a renewed attack. Meanwhile, I took up the rear with my spear, stabbing into the throng of bandits. Our enemies were great in number, but we had the advantage of surprise, and they now lacked strength to offer any organized resistance.

Usually, I'd be fine with just watching, but this was a chance to prove my mettle in the eyes of my subordinates. I couldn't just bark orders from the back and leave all the work to someone else. So I put

my spear to work at the front lines, even as I took stock of the bigger picture.

There was a vast difference in strength between our knights and these bandits. In the medieval ages of my old world, during what was called The Jacquerie—a peasant rebellion, by the way—forty knights killed seven thousand in a single night and only lost one man in a quite remarkable story. For one, if we divide seven thousand by forty, that means each knight took out seven-hundred-and-fifteen peasants. Neutralizing that many immobile targets would be one thing, but the timing just doesn't add up if that's moving targets we're talking about. The numbers had to be exaggerated, and there had to be many that fell like dominoes or got crowd crushed running around in all that confusion.

"Lord Werner! Some of the enemies are trying to escape!"

"Which way are they headed?"

"It appears to be the basin to our left."

The kingdom had placed thirty cavaliers and sixty foot soldiers under my command. Neurath was leading twenty foot soldiers into battle to my right, and Schünzel was lying in wait with twenty mercenaries in the spot we predicted our enemies would try retreating to. The shipment from the capital was back on the roads, under the careful watch of Frenssen, various civil officials assigned to the deputy count, five soldiers on horse and ten on foot, and half of the mercenaries under Goecke. Even with our forces split up this way, we had the strength of arms to take out these bandits.

"Yaaaah!" One of the bandits, probably driven to desperation, rushed toward me.

"I don't think so!" I deflected his attack with the tip of my spear before cutting through his torso. These guys were slower than Gargoyles and weaker than Alligator Warriors. We'd have to really let our guard down to lose against such riffraff. Or so I figured—the greatest enemy, after all, was carelessness.

I was raring for another target, but looking at the battlefield, it seemed like my moment had ended.

"That was brilliant, Lord Werner."

"It's only thanks to our intel."

This wasn't a show of humility; it was just the plain truth. Still, Sir Holzdeppe's expression seemed to say, "I accept you as the lord I serve," and I guess all's well that ends well.

***

The region I was now in charge of, Anheim, was as southwest in Wein as you could get. Across the southern border was the Kingdom of Triot, which had already fallen to the Demon army, and to the west was Salzanach, whose southernmost town had already fallen to the Demon army as well. Given all this, Anheim was literally the frontlines of the Kingdom of Wein's war with the Demon army. Still, monsters could show up anywhere, so it was best to consider the whole kingdom a battlefield.

Anheim had been within the territory of the martial House Kneipp, and as a border town, its garrison had been quite large at

most times. However, after the death of the previous Marquess Kneipp at Fort Werisa, the concurrent destruction of the knight brigade, and the incident caused afterward by his eldest son, the area had been beset by so many problems that preserving public order had ceased to be a priority.

Before heading to this land, I had the opportunity to greet the new Marquess Kneipp in the capital before he returned to his territory. Given that it was my actions that ousted the marquess from his land, I was expecting a cold reception.

On the contrary, the new marquess seemed to remember me from the refugee escort mission, so he treated me with sympathy. It seemed he had come to regard me as a hardworking young lad who had incurred the ire of a powerful someone in the capital and had been demoted. He looked at me the way a teacher managing a club might look at a student who just can't get the results they want and said, "I am sure the time will one day come that your efforts will be acknowledged." The total lack of resentment caught me so off guard that I couldn't respond.

Anyways, thanks to all that, I got up to speed with the current state of the region, which was bad enough to leave just about anyone depressed. To sum it all up, the Kneipps had lost too many of their forces at Fort Werisa and had their hands full dealing with the refugees that appeared in droves at their gates. The number of monsters had only increased, especially in Triot, and the bandits fleeing them had invaded the march, amassing in ever larger bands to

protect themselves. The Kneipps had been too busy to nip them in the bud, and they now brazenly preyed upon refugees and townsfolk.

The previous deputy must have been at his wit's end, given that he hadn't bothered telling anyone before he destroyed the trade bridge that crossed over into Triot. With refugees, bandits, and demonic beings alike now having a harder time crossing the river, the town had found some kind of peace, at least for the moment. Still, it was hard to say that the whole region had been attended to, and that's what we were left to deal with. The marquess had been amicable toward me, and thanks to that, I had received intel about the bandits. I was also able to double-check the terrain against the map Lily had drawn before I was appointed here. I was thankful for all that, but the situation was giving me a headache.

Having been given the heads-up before I took up post, I really couldn't just let things be. With the Demon army as our foe, and an unstable region as our battlefield, simply defending ourselves would prove dangerous. And the possibility of bandits pilfering our supplies while we were tied up with Demons was too high for me to even joke about. Even if it cost us some of our strength, we needed to deal with the bandits immediately.

And though we hadn't yet reached the region's main city, where I would be assuming my post, this was already the second bandit hideout we'd burned to the ground. I'd spread a lot of rumors before leaving the capital that I would eradicate the bandits once I'd set up

in Anheim. Looks like it paid off; the bandits probably hadn't been counting on us attacking in force before I'd settled in.

Sir Holzdeppe had actually been one of the men who insisted I needed to first accept my post in Anheim. I told him he could hang back while I took Neurath, Schünzel, Goecke, and his mercenaries to wipe out our first crew of bandits, and when he saw our results, he changed his mind.

To be clear, what really changed his mind was the idea of letting mere mercenaries win glory while a proper knight like him sat things out. Still, he'd come around in the end. This time, we subjugated the crew with proper knights and infantrymen as our leading forces.

"Once Schünzel returns, shall we head on to our next group of bandits?"

"Huh?" Not every bandit could be stupid. I was certain they would pick up on our movements sooner or later. Even then, it was still common sense that after destroying two bandit brigades, we'd cut a path toward Anheim. It might be best to outwit them, take the long road, and destroy just one more group. We had brought plenty of magic lamps, so a nocturnal assault would be a walk in the park. I could just ignore the face Sir Holzdeppe was currently making.

"Won't the civil officials complain?"

"We can hear their complaints once we reach Anheim. What shall we do, my lord?"

"I…shall accompany you."

Whether he came with me or not, I would have still headed out with just Neurath and Goecke and his mercenaries. But if he was tagging along, I'd need to put together a strategy with that in mind. There should be no need to take our troops on a detour. It'd only mean they'd miss the action.

Given my map of the area and what I had heard from the marquess, the next group on our list either put all their effort into raiding or simply hadn't been thinking about defense when choosing where to build their base. It would be a pain if we decided to leave them for later only for them to escape.

If we could eliminate that third group of bandits, we could fortify the trade route between Anheim and the region under Viscount Gröllmann. There was no reason not to. It would be a bit out of our way, but there were compelling reasons to take them down before heading to Anheim. I could just send a messenger to town to let them know we planned to arrive tomorrow morning.

As I confirmed the decision in my mind, I checked to see if Schünzel's soldiers had returned. That was when one knight ran over to me and Sir Holzdeppe.

"Report! There are some strange characters amongst the brigands."

"What do you mean by 'strange'?"

His report had Sir Holzdeppe and me exchanging glances. There was a woman and some children among them, meaning that they either traveled with the bandits or they were forced along.

"These bandits had families with them?" I imagined some refugees from Triot may have joined the bandits, but it seemed that I was wrong. In order to hear the details of their situation, I had Neurath and Schünzel come with me and commanded Sir Holzdeppe to use that time to dispose of the bandits' bodies and give the soldiers a rest.

Given his expression, he didn't seem too keen on the task. This could cause some trouble for me later on.

***

We reached Anheim the following morning, just as I had predicted. Had this merely been the arrival of the deputy count, this wouldn't have been such a big deal, but with the knights, civil officials, infantry, mercenaries, and captured bandits we had strung behind us, of course we drew attention as we entered town.

I personally hadn't wanted to stand out so much or pretend that this was some triumphant return like we ended up doing, but if we failed to make a strong impression right away, it would take too long to get the townsfolk in line before the Demon Commander attacked. Still, though I knew it was necessary, the whole ordeal left a bitter taste that I couldn't keep from showing in my expression. I played it off by hiding my face behind a helmet I had prepared in advance.

Incidentally, the final group of bandits we subjugated also had young women and children with them, but I left it to a mercenary squad to see to them outside of town. I gave a cursory look around as I thought to myself that I needed to deal with this issue quickly for their sakes as well.

People had gathered to see me—or rather, the new deputy count—but they were hardly enthusiastic about it. Perhaps after Triot had been destroyed, the people of this town knew that their home wouldn't have much time left either.

Anheim, a town in the erstwhile March of Kneipp, bordering Triot, had been built with an emphasis on fortification rather than trade. While Triot had been a friendly nation, it was still a foreign one, and ramparts lined the town just in case, offering protection should it ever come under siege. The population numbered a few thousand, which, by the standards of the Middle Ages of my old world, made it quite a large town.

The garrison was also what you'd expect of a border town. While there weren't that many guards, they were equipped with ballistae built into the ramparts, which they could use to repel enemies. I would have to double-check later on, but for the time being, it seemed I wouldn't have to procure any equipment for defending the walls.

In front of the government hall stood a group of people. It included a few town guards, a man likely representing the local government, and people who looked like Marquess Kneipp's subordinates, including a knight. I had to be confident and firm. I put on the face of a nobleman and brought my horse up to where they stood.

"Well met. I am Werner Von Zehrfeld."

"We have been awaiting your arrival."

The captain of the guards and the government functionary seemed to be appraising me, though they were careful to keep it courteous. This was only natural. I had to make sure they couldn't view me as just some uppity brat.

"And I thank you for your welcome. Put these brigands in the dungeons. Their leader shall be executed in three days' time."

"…Huh?"

The functionary seemed shocked, but I ignored him and kept talking. "Are you deaf? In three days, we shall execute their leader. Currently, these lands are not under the marquess's rule but under mine as deputy count. This outlaw will be sentenced in accordance with the laws of the kingdom."

I knew that the fiefdom of a marquess could have its own laws, and they may have taken different steps when under Marquess Kneipp. But now, things were different. I had to make it clear that this was no longer his domain.

"Spread word throughout the town, in such manner as is customary. In three days, understood?" I raised my voice so others in the vicinity could hear, and now, some of the townsfolk who had been watching on were cheering. Good grief.

Just as in old Europe, public executions here were a form of amusement. No, don't get me wrong. That wasn't the only purpose, but this part of it was undeniable. For example, in medieval times, on a certain day that two famous executions were to be held, tens of thousands had gathered to observe, and were so crammed that a crowd crush began. More than twenty died, and over seventy had

been wounded in this fatal accident. Though, there was admittedly at least something funny about someone dying when they themself had been so eager to see an execution.

Another example is more recent. On the day Marie Antoinette's husband King Louis VI was put to death at the guillotine, some people dipped their handkerchiefs in his blood to bring back as souvenirs. Others cut pieces of his clothes off for the same purpose, and these became hot items that sold out quickly. There were plenty of anecdotes to be told about executions.

There really just wasn't that much in the way of amusement. Well, I was sure not everyone enjoyed it, nor were they forced to. The same could be said in this world; I had no memories of Mazel expressing interest in watching one, nor had Lily ever seemed keen on it.

On the other hand, as an agent of the government, I couldn't ignore the fact that they were necessary. I would never go out of my way to witness one, but the town was currently being terrorized by bandits. Ordering the execution of one of their leaders would quell any rumors about where my loyalties lay, and going about it calmly would give me a strong start here.

"Before I meet with the council, I will avail myself of your baths. Take me there, and then see my men to their lodgings and prepare encampment for the mercenaries."

"Y-yessir!"

"U-understood."

I gestured to Neurath, Schünzel, Frenssen, and the head official who had accompanied me from the capital, Sir Behnke, to follow me inside the government hall. There would be simple lodgings to accommodate guests from afar and, therefore, bath facilities alongside them.

Not only was I too young, but I was among the rivals of Marquess Kneipp's martial faction. I wasn't even from the capital, yet they had entrusted me with these lands and sent me here as deputy. They might use the fact I had changed my planned date of arrival to punish me with a cold bath, but I was expecting as much. I had experienced wiping myself down with nothing but river water before.

And I wasn't about to face the bigwigs of this town without first washing off the dirt of the road and the grime of the battlefield.

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After cleaning off our sweat and dirt, Neurath, Schünzel, Sir Behnke, and Sir Holzdeppe and I entered the meeting room to find it full of middle-aged men staring at us. Most seemed to be simply sizing us up, but there were also a few whose glares made it clear they saw me as a brat to be brought to heel. Unfortunately for them, their glowering was nothing compared to what I'd endured when the head of the military demanded an explanation for ignoring my orders to pursue my own defense plans at Finoy. Besides, being in front of the crown prince alone was much scarier than being in front of the lot of them. Their attempts at intimidation couldn't hold a candle to it.

"Lord Viscount, congratulations on your new appointment." The old man at the end of the table spoke for all of them. He lowered his

head, and the others followed suit. Clearly, he was the one in charge here. I first finished introductions and then hit him with a jab. I gestured at my officials, and they took out the wanted posters we had prepared, each one featuring the portrait of a certain man.

"What is this?"

"I am sure you have seen this man before. His name is Mangold." Their reactions were mixed. Having heard that name, some looked once again at the portrait, while others kept their eyes on me. While it was doubtful they would forget the face of the lord of their fiefdom, there may have been some who would forget the face of his eldest son, or maybe even some who had never seen him before. There's no TV in this world, after all. For now, I ignored their reactions and continued on.

By the way, these wanted posters had been prepared by someone in the Ministry of Justice. It must have been tough work, given these were all drawn by hand, but that's their job after all. I certainly couldn't draw these myself.

"I am sure you all know the troubles the Kneipps' erstwhile scion caused in the capital."

"Do you mean to suggest that…Mangold is here in this town?" He appeared to choke on his words attempting to address Mangold without a title. Objectively, there was no merit in showing him deference. Still, he had been a member of the house that had ruled these lands for generations. The people here wouldn't be used to calling him by name alone. These customs and precedents could be surprisingly tricky.

"No, that's not what I'm saying. His whereabouts are unknown, but we can't overlook that if he tried to escape somewhere, a former Kneipp territory would be a likely choice."

"Just to be safe, I want the town to be searched to make sure he's not hiding here. If anybody is judged to be sheltering him, they shall be punished under the kingdom's laws as well," I said, emphasizing the word "kingdom."

There was an idiom here: "Let out only your voice from behind the flag." It was similar to my old world's saying of "a fox that borrows the authority of a tiger." I didn't care if that was the impression I left on them. I just wanted to emphasize that I had the kingdom backing me.

As I watched a man begin to whisper with the person by his side, I decided to review the situation myself, if only in my own mind.

***

My orders from the kingdom—to confront Demon Commander Gezarius, who hadn't even appeared in the game, near the border with Triot—was something that had to be prioritized. I still had the same doubts about this world that I did before being appointed here, but I didn't even know where to begin my investigations. It wasn't something I could talk over with anyone else, nor could I find my answers relying on the documents of a count's manor alone.

For one, I couldn't just shirk my appointment to Anheim just because I had a few doubts I wanted to put to rest. Working for the court sure was tough.

But I was also interested in Demon Commander Gezarius. Obviously, hindsight was twenty-twenty but if he was able to disguise himself as Pückler shortly after the Demon Stampede, he should have had quite a long time to move freely throughout the capital. It seemed strange that given all the time he had, he only used Mangold to let in the Demons.

I already asked my father to once again track Pückler's footsteps just in case, but I couldn't help but feel things would take a nosedive if we didn't deal with Gezarius quickly. For now, I decided to shelve my other doubts and prioritize dealing with the Demon Commander. We had plenty of time before Mazel would face the Demon Lord—or rather, the attack on the capital would come first. The looming threat of it left a yawning pit in my stomach.

On the other hand, the problems here in Anheim were quite complicated as well, and there was a possibility that they endangered more than this domain alone. It'd be nice if we could just cut through this Gordian Knot, but that would be impossible. Before I dealt with the problems that faced the whole fiefdom, I had to start with the town.

Anheim's economic prosperity was on the decline, and the reason laid in salt. The Kingdom of Wein was the largest on the continent, but it still had its weaknesses, one being its geography. To the east, south, and west, it bordered the lands of other states with nary a coastline to be found. While there was ocean at the northern border, it was a long way away from there to southern Wein. Even the royal capital, located in the kingdom's center, was far from saltwater.

There were also strong monsters that only appeared around the sea and the coast, making the creation of any saltpans a dangerous endeavor.

Additionally, there was strangely little rock salt in this world. I had no idea why. It was possible it was all in the vast areas that remained undeveloped due to monsters, or maybe it had all been used up during the days of the ancient kingdom.

Despite all this, what saved Wein from wanting for salt were the materials gathered from monsters. Salt Snails were larger than motorbikes and big enough to swallow a human whole. They were quite tame by monster standards and rarely attacked humans, but for some reason, there were large crystals of salt inside their shells. In certain regions, slaying them provided regular work for adventurers. Not that it really mattered, but I guessed monsters really were the only thing in this world that never went extinct no matter how much you hunted them.

It wasn't like these monsters were everywhere on the continent, but every government kept tabs on where in their territory these creatures could be found. Salt, after all, was a necessity. In Wein's case, Anheim had been one of those regions, and salt had been a major source of income for the Kneipps. Their stock hadn't just stayed in domestic markets but was shipped as far as Triot and Salzanach.

Now, the reason this was all in past tense was because the distribution of monsters had changed drastically after the return of the Demon Lord. Not only were there more monsters that were hostile toward humans, Salt Snails stayed deep in the mountains. Finding

them had become more difficult, and so had hunting them. Consequently, obtaining salt became more difficult as well.

On top of that, one of their main importers, Triot, had fallen to ruin, and while Salzanach in the west had been fortifying the area around their capital, the roads and towns near the border had not been so protected. As a result, House Kneipp could no longer source its main export and had no one to sell to either. Not to mention that with shipping supplies currently being such a hassle, the economy of the town of Anheim had stagnated as well. What a headache.

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I turned my thoughts to the issue of governance. Towns in this world were similar to those of medieval Europe in some ways, while different in others. The most pertinent similarity in this case was the existence of communes. If you considered me, the deputy, to be like the mayor, the commune was the town council, though they weren't appointed democratically.

To explain it roughly, let's say a guild is like a corporation. The head of the guild is the CEO, and normally, the CEO does his best to increase his company's sales and make a profit.

The commune was a collection of guildleaders, similar to a chamber of commerce. In medieval times, this organization would also act as town council. As the members of this organization represented their guilds in collectively pledging loyalty to the king, the group was known as a commune, from the Latin word "communis" meaning "common" or "shared."

For example, if someone in the town submitted a claim to the commune that a nearby bridge had grown rickety with age and needed to be fixed, the commune and deputy would discuss whether the project was necessary, how much of the expenses could be taken from the town's coffers, and whether they should temporarily raise taxes in order to cover the construction costs. This tax wasn't always monetary either; it often came in the form of forced labor.

The members of the commune would form small committees, each one with particular responsibilities, such as taxes, economic affairs, the courts, *etc.* If any crimes took place, two council members and four governmental officials would act as judges, create a judicial committee, and carry out a trial.

These city officials worked for these committees of council members and could be considered mid-level management, perhaps obvious considering they also fulfilled the role of the police in my old world. The system of the capital was more intricate, but this was largely how it worked in cities out in the provinces.

The scale of the commune differed by town, and the atmosphere of the city gave you a good idea of what their commune would be like. In towns near the mines, the head of their commune might be someone from the Miners' Guild, while in more agricultural towns, the commune might not have a representative from the miners at all.

Just like what you might expect from this world, the one constant in every town's commune was the presence of the leader of

the Adventurers' Guild. Of course, there was no such thing in the real Middle Ages.

One question I always had when reading light novels was just what in the hell the leader of the Adventurers' Guild was actually doing. Turns out they did things like letting the head of the Lodgers' Guild know when adventurers complained of dirty inns, or discussing with the Apothecaries' Guild when the latter wanted to get more eyes on their quests to gather medicinal herbs.

I bet some of them also had to apologize to the guilds whose members their adventures slighted. If your adventurer failed in their duties as a guard to a traveling band of merchants, the Merchants' Guild also suffered a loss.

The kind of power that came from being the head of the commune was probably quite important to the Adventurers' Guild, especially when it came to making reparations to protect their reputation. While it seems possible that the head of the Adventurers' Guild could be on the tax committee and collect taxes from the farming villages around the town's outskirts, I had a hard time imagining that actually happening.

On the other hand, the biggest discrepancy with the medieval ages was the position of the church. In Europe, there might be multiple churches in a single town. It wasn't like all the townsfolk could gather in just one building for weekly service after all, and there were also different orders like the Dominicans or the Jesuits. This meant that the head of each order had a seat on the commune, and it wasn't unusual to find multiple religious heads on the council.

But in this world, there was only one religion. While I had heard rumors of rival factions, each backing some high priest or another, there was no formal distinction. From an outsider's perspective, they remained unified.

Plus, in most towns, there was only one church. It really was kinda strange that this in particular was consistent with most games. In general, it meant that you could only find one priest in any commune.

For one, the church watched after the sick and injured. Being in charge of both medicine and faith might give them more sway in this world. Though personally, I hoped they would remain neutral.

Putting all that aside, there was something I couldn't quite grasp—I just had the vague sense that something was off, and it had only grown more persistent as I glanced around the hall earlier. I would have to explore further, but it couldn't take priority just yet.

My head already felt like it was about to explode just with having to deal with a new member of our enemies' management team—to say nothing of his mysterious absence in the game, which meant I had no prior knowledge to lever against him. Seriously, they're asking me to somehow hold down the fort until the knight brigade arrives without even Mazel being around when we're up against an enemy as strong as the one we fought in Finoy. Could this get any more impossible?

"I hear that you slew some rabble of bandits."

"I thought it would be best to do what we could now."

"We at the Merchants' Guild are thankful that you are working toward restoring public order. I hear you will execute their leaders."

"That's right. The others we'll use as laborers."

Having been addressed, I had no choice but to return to the matter at hand and respond. "Laborers" was a nice way of putting it, though as you might guess, they'd basically be prisoners forced into labor. They typically served out here in the provinces rather than around the capital.

Out here, we did have prisons, but they weren't large enough to hold inmates for long periods of time, and there weren't enough people to run them. Unlike in my old world, transferring prisoners elsewhere took considerable time and resources, meaning that unless the crime was incredibly serious, criminals were all dealt with locally.

As a result, there were only two options: Throw them in the town's dungeon long-term or clap them in irons and put them to work. There was no industrial machinery in this world, meaning everything had to be done by hand. Executing them would mean less manpower, and as uncouth as that was, it was an important reason to keep them alive and working.

This world treated their forced laborers comparatively well; unless they volunteered, it was quite rare they were pressed into hard labor. Laborers were probably closer in position to the slaves of my old world. Still, they were often released early depending on the quality of their work, making it more correct to describe them as criminals sentenced to penal servitude, rather than slaves. Working in the mines

was only a sentence given to criminals under supervision of the state, meaning the laborers in the provinces didn't get such a raw deal.

Not to say this would be a walk in the park for them. The work they were assigned to could sometimes shorten their lifespans. Monsters would appear around the towns even before the Demon Lord had returned, so working long hours in those conditions, without weapons to protect yourself, was a punishment in its own right.

Incidentally, there was no law dictating how long a laborer would serve before being released. Anyone pressed into service would only be freed once the commune's disciplinary committee decided, "Yeah, I think it's about time we let him go." I supposed there was an advantage to not prescribing lengths to sentences, since it prevented those who had yet to reform from reentering society. Of course, in some cases, the king granted pardon, or the deputy released a laborer. For the most part, though, it all depended on the whims of the commune—though that was all assuming it was peacetime.

"And how should we allot these laborers?"

"I shall leave that decision to you honorable men."

"My, my. I see…"

That answer garnered some looks of gratitude, as well as stares that seemed to be piercing a hole into my intentions.

Blatantly, laborers only had to be fed. Besides that, they only worked. There were many guilds who coveted them, and in certain province towns, the commune only employed their garrison for the sake of capturing more hands. In the light novels of my old world, a

bandit captured by the main character may have been forced into dangerous work outside of town just like this.

If a commune decided to suppress bandits, they often would decide how many of the prisoners would go to each guild beforehand. In this case, however, I'd acted on my own. And because I hadn't used any of the town's resources to do so, I would have had free rein to decide how to allot them. But instead, I decided to leave it entirely in their hands.

"There is still much I have to learn regarding the administration in this town. I'd like you to discuss amongst yourselves and bring me the most salient documents in order of precedence. I shall leave that order to you."

There were a few who made their displeasure clear. How could someone so ignorant of affairs here be appointed deputy? But since I had asked the commune to bring me the necessary documents, they couldn't sway the conversation toward their own guild's interests. There was really no letting my guard down around these guys, nor were there any chinks in their armor.

"I'd like to review the documents regarding governance of the Anheim region. That is my only concern for today, but are there any other urgent matters to discuss?"

"No, there are not. I thank you for your consideration, Lord Werner."

The old man who seemed to hold the highest rank bowed his head, bringing the meeting to a close. I nodded as well and decided to return to my office. Maybe it was just because they were also trying

to size up the situation, but it seemed like things were going in my favor. The first round went to me.

Best to move on to the next order of business before they could rally for a comeback and decide to teach this youngster a lesson.

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I took my leave of Sir Holzdeppe and made one more lap around the building before returning to my office. Frenssen was inside looking over some documents, but as soon as I entered, he stood up and bowed. After all this time, there was no need for such formalities, so I quickly got down to business.

"So, how is it?"

"They do appear to have struggled in dealing with the refugees."

"Sounds about right."

I took my seat behind the desk and let out a sigh. Had this been a mystery or suspense film, I'd have to be looking for any wiretaps right about now. A silly thought like that was perhaps proof that I was letting my guard down, but thankfully, that sort of magic didn't exist, so things should be fine…probably.

Even should that magic exist, there probably wasn't anyone who could use it around here. And I wasn't being sarcastic, either. We were way out in the sticks. Just why had I been entrusted with a place like this? Once again, I remembered my father's words that I needed to stay prepared for anything.

I would've given my life for some tea just then. If only Lily was here.

Before my appointment to Anheim, Lily herself had asked if she could be employed to stay by my side and attend to me. But given that the hero was a member of the Harting family, I couldn't just bring Lily out here. At the same time, I couldn't just say that to her face either.

This was also a matter of safety. While the raid on the capital remained a looming threat, the knight brigade was alive to oppose it, unlike in the game. And besides, that scenario wasn't set to happen just yet. For the moment, the capital was one of the safest places to be.

By contrast, the place I had been sent to was a far cry from having an elite military, had terrain that offered little protection, and was not a place where the people could live easily; not to even mention that Gezarius was expected to lay siege to it. Anheim was more dangerous, plain and simple. That's why I had decided to leave her behind.

While she understood the situation, Lily had looked so down about it you could practically see a puppy tail drooping dejectedly between her legs. Honestly, it made me feel like a bad guy. But as long as she was somewhere safe, I could accept that.

"Is there a library?"

"There is. It appears to mostly consist of documents related to the domain's governance, as well as court records."

"Makes sense."

I had wanted to be sure, but as this wasn't the actual fief of Marquess Kneipp, he wouldn't have left any personal documents

behind. So, the information I could gather about this area didn't amount to much. That meant that if I wanted to look into natural disasters, I would have to return to the capital. Seems like I'd have to try something else.

As I pondered the matter, Sir Behnke, who was serving as my chief advisor, stepped into the room.

"Was that all you needed from the meeting?" he asked.

"Yeah. Could you confirm how they decided to allot the prisoners later? I want to know who took the most, or where any who could cause us trouble were sent."

"Understood."

I wanted to see where each guild stood in the balance of power. Of course, I didn't think this incident would teach me everything. Nor would it shed light on how power was divided between the town and the neighboring settlements.

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"To discuss this domain's governance…" Sir Behnke began.

"First," I interjected, taking a moment to gather my thoughts, "Let's ascertain which of the nearby settlements are safe."

The settlements around the city could largely be divided into two groups. The first developed naturally and sought to use a town with proper walls for protection. During the Middle Ages, the goal had been to seek shelter from attacks by foreign tribes, but in this world, the main goal was to protect themselves from attacks by monsters or neighboring kingdoms.

In these cases, the village head was quite powerful, and it wasn't rare for him to be part of the commune. Such villages usually sought to partner with towns to get further protection, and the towns could hardly turn them away in such cases. In exchange, villages generally promised their protector town a favorable deal on their products.

There were also villages that the townsfolk created and cultivated themselves. For example, they might be created by the second and third sons of townsfolk unable to inherit their families fortune or find work. As the necessary funds came from the town, these were in effect the town's subsidiaries.

Still, farming villages meant labor, and they often had complicated relationships with the towns they neighbored. And there were veritably infinite variations on this relationship. During Japan's Warring States era, villages had their own militias. Similarly, villages in this world might lodge complaints through armed uprising. I'd have to get a firsthand look at the villages to get a real grasp of the web of relationships here.

"For now, we can govern the town through the commune. We'll deal with them after we've secured the domain at large. Have the officials from the capital look into the problems they had here when this was still the marquess's fiefdom."

"Understood. So, we will not be making any drastic changes to the town's governance?"

"I'm just His Majesty's deputy after all. We'll work on the problems, but I can't just make sweeping changes at my discretion."

"Indeed." Sir Behnke nodded in understanding. Perhaps that was only natural. He was probably trying to suss out what liberties I'd be taking in my decision making.

I, for one, wanted to return to the capital as soon as possible once the Demon Commander was dealt with. I didn't have time to start a revolution here. All I wanted was to research the problems that existed in the provinces and apply them to my family's own domain.

There was a knock at the door. Frenssen answered, then said, "Lord Werner, Sirs Holzdeppe, Kesten, and Goecke are here to see you."

"Let them in."

Now, my entire council of advisors as Anheim's deputy count was present. They were all of different positions, and while it did seem that Goecke, the famed head of the Mercenaries' Guild, thought highly of me, it was money that brought him here. I couldn't ask for any more than that, honestly. I was just happy he agreed to my six-month contract.

We had sixty mercenaries in our employ, including accountants, healers, and even cooks. Combining their strength with Goecke's, they formed the perfect commando unit, which I was incredibly thankful for. As I was his current employer, Goecke addressed me by title in front of others. But as he wasn't expressive in the least, I wasn't quite sure of his opinions on the matter.

As deputy count, I had drawn on the kingdom's coffers for all the funds needed to employ Goecke and his mercenaries. It was quite a bold move, but a blow to my reputation was actually good for me. I

took that money with no hesitation. My father didn't look too pleased about it, but once I explained my reasoning, he seemed to come around.

Sir Holzdeppe was the army's representative to the deputy count. In this world, people like him were known as attached generals. When a long-serving head of a noble house was assigned as a deputy, you could be sure he'd bring his own knights. I, however, had no forces of my own, and if the state appointed me deputy with no entourage to speak of, it'd reflect poorly on them. Thus, in order to make themselves look better, they provided me with some retainers. Given the muscle-brained nature of this world, I had already made sure they could do well enough in a battle; I had them participate in my missions against the bandits after all.

The state had placed Sir Holzdeppe under my command, and as such, it was important that he should know about the Demon Commander's impending attack, even if we had to keep that info from his subordinates. I'd have to earn their trust sooner or later.

Sir Kesten was probably older than my father and was an instructor meant to train the troops Duke Seyfert had entrusted to me. Despite being old enough to retire, he had the build of a man still active on the battlefield. I bet he could best even me in a fight. He seemed like the best option to put in charge of a detached force, and I was sure Duke Seyfert thought likewise. I had no doubt the duke filled him in, and I was thankful he seemed amicable toward me from the start. Duke Seyfert left me an additional five instructors, but Sir Kesten served as their leader.

Sir Behnke, the civil representative—who in effect was vice deputy—was someone I still couldn't quite figure out. All I knew of him was he'd been appointed to me through connections with my father, and that his beard was absolutely majestic. He seemed to be younger than my father, but he had to be in his late forties. Duke Seyfert approved of him as well, but when I looked into the posts he'd held before this one, I couldn't find any answers. Well, if my father and Duke Seyfert trusted him, he shouldn't cause me any problems. He might just be here to monitor me, and luckily I had nothing to hide. I planned to send a lot of work his way, so hopefully he'd be ready.

Being my direct reports, Neurath, Schünzel, and Frenssen were present as well. Though they were maybe receiving the short end of the stick here, especially considering what would soon be going down.

"Thank you, everyone. For the time being, I'll have you all take different posts, so I want to go over your temporary tasks and goals. First is Sir Goecke. I want you to survey the surrounding terrain. If you happen to hunt any monsters on your way, I'll buy the materials, so take out as many as you want."

"Understood. We'll take care to not get in the way of any adventurers."

"Thanks. Sir Behnke, for now, I'll need your help with administration. Governing both the town and the whole domain is too much for me to handle right now."

"Should you really be so blunt about it?"

"Saying it nicely won't change things." It was true. If I could put a task into someone else's hands, I would. I had to prioritize things, and right now, dealing with the Demon Commander was top priority.

"Sir Holzdeppe, I want you to maintain public order in the town, and while you're at it, build rapport with the garrison and townsfolk. See to it that anyone who acts high and mighty just because they work directly for the deputy is duly punished."

"Yessir."

"Sir Kesten, I want you to find anyone amongst the townsfolk or refugees who could be useful to us. We'll soon be launching a formal volunteer force."

"Certainly, but will it be all right to remove the townsfolk from their work?"

"Go ahead. What we need now is to increase our forces. We don't know how the rest of the bandits will react to us taking out three of their gangs. Taking that into account, it's imperative we expand our forces."

We'd use that as a pretext to gather hopeful soldiers and refugees. In actuality, they would be fighting the Demon Commander, but we couldn't just say that. Refugees or people from the slums were fine; for now, we just needed more trained combatants.

This world had no concept of human rights, and I was sure there were many organizations and individuals who exploited refugees as labor. That was pretty much their lot in society. But since they weren't criminals, there should be no grounds for complaint were I to rope them for my own purposes. I was sure there might be some

grumbling, but that'd be on them for not treating their people well enough for them to want to stick around.

"Also, I want a list of villages rich in hunters, wayfarers, or shepherds. Frenssen, I'll leave that to you."

"Yessir! You can count on me."

Sirs Kesten and Holzdeppe nodded at my orders. They did well to understand my intentions with just those instructions.

This only applied to this world, but people who hunted or spent most their time on the road despite having houses in towns or villages tended to be retired adventurers or mercenaries. Rather than be forced from the business by injury, these people were usually getting on in years and, tired of adventuring and having accomplished nothing grand, decided to establish their own households.

Monsters spawned outside the towns, and hunting dogs weren't enough to protect livestock from that sort of threat. People with experience fighting monsters did a much better job putting people at ease. Plus, after a lifetime of hunting monsters, it was hard for adventurers and mercenaries to suddenly trade their swords for sickles. Agriculture was no mean profession, and without the proper know-how, it was hard to have any success.

Plus, it would be one thing if you simply married into it, but it took time to cultivate a wasteland into a plot that could feed your family. Farming required a lot more time and effort than urbanites imagined.

Thus, many retired adventurers or mercenaries became hunters or bought some livestock along with their fields and made

shepherding and other pastoral practices their main occupation during their second lives. Not only could they utilize their experience against monsters that attacked their livestock, but they could also make extra income from the materials the monsters dropped.

Since former adventurers and mercenaries like those could be found all over, meat was plentiful in this world, and unlike in medieval Europe, you could get your hands on it quite easily. There were no freezers and refrigerators, though, so rather than the populated areas around the capital rife in farmland, it was actually easier to obtain meat where there was plenty of land to use for grazing.

As a result, the farther into the provinces you went, the more common it was for people to eat meat and live active lives. Many of them had physiques that exceeded the people of my old world. They'd set off on adventures trying to use their vaunted strength to hit the jackpot. It led to unique kinds of migration patterns, with those who fell short of success ultimately retiring to their hometowns, becoming hunters or shepherds and bolstering the meat market.

Perhaps the reason few famines are depicted in fantasy worlds like this one was because they had monsters to eat and plenty of people raising livestock.

Anyway, these former adventurers and mercenaries could be a reserve force for me. Experience was valuable when facing off against monsters or the Demon army, and they understood that when up against monsters, there was no room for compromise. If the battle reached Anheim's walls, I could enlist their aid on the walls, shooting

bows or hurling rocks. Better that than some promise to rebuild their livelihoods or their houses. But for that, I would need a list.

Thinking through all this, I sighed. That was when Frenssen spoke.

"By the way, Lord Werner. I have a message from some officials who came before you returned. They say the important men of the town will be holding a banquet to celebrate your appointment as deputy count."

So, the time had already come.

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At the banquet, you could sort the commune members almost evenly into three camps based on their attitude toward me. Honestly, it was kind of funny. One group was the "as rotten as he is, he's a viscount, so let's try to make acquaintances" camp. Another was the "can't he hurry up and get the hell back to the capital" camp, and the last was the "I can use this brat!" camp. Of course, there were people who treated me kindly as well, but they were the minority.

Among the "I can use this brat!" camp, there was someone who tried to get his daughter and me in bed together by urging me to drink to excess and urging his daughter to sneak into my room in the residence of the local lord while that was happening. I had predicted this outcome, so I put Sir Kesten on standby in my quarters. The girl had been captured before the event even ended.

Plus, I hadn't returned to my quarters that day but instead had joined Goecke's band of mercenaries outside the town, spending the

night in their encampment. Naturally, nothing could have happened between his daughter and me.

Sir Kesten caught the girl right in the act of unlawfully entering the lord's manor. Having foreseen these events, I'd emphasized that he shouldn't hesitate to throw her into the dungeon, even if she was a young woman. She was given a separate cell, of course, but beside and opposite her were the bandits we had captured. She spent the night surrounded by their shouts and cries. She must have been scared out of her mind.

The next morning, I returned to the manor, ate breakfast, and got to work when the girl's father made a shameless visit. He had come to apologize for his daughter's "rashness." Since he was a member of the commune, I agreed to meet with him, but after letting his pleasantries go in one ear and out the other, I asked if he remembered what my first orders had been upon entering Anheim, and the blood rushed from his face—it had been to execute the bandits.

In the end, I told the man that crimes were crimes and dismissed him. Punishing his daughter for her misdeeds would come after the bandits were dealt with, but as there had been no victims, I secretly decided that I would let her go with a fine. Still, she could spend a few more days in the dungeon. It might be hard for a criminal like her to find a lawful way of earning the funds needed to pay such a high fine, but that wasn't my problem.

I also ordered that the butler to the lord's manor be shackled to the front gate. He'd taken a bribe from the girl's father and guided her

in himself, and for that he was punished with public humiliation.

"But seriously? 'Please try to have compassion for a young girl who fell in love at first sight'? What a joke," I grumbled.

"I do believe it is quite common to make such appeals to emotion," Frenssen said.

I decided to turn it back on him. "How stupid. I don't remember her ever getting any good looks at me."

I had no memories of getting such attention from any of the girls at the academy. Mazel's popularity had eclipsed mine. As viscount, I didn't have the time to deal with people who were so indiscreet with their hidden agenda, anyway.

Perhaps my displeasure had seeped into my voice, since Frenssen suddenly decided to change the subject

"Where were you last night?"

"I knew the day of my appointment was when the most talk would go around. The pubs and streets were full of rumors about me."

As long as I wore a helmet to cover my face and concealed my distinctive hair, I could hide my identity. Though I doubted Mazel could say the same, given how famous he had come to be. I made use of my youth to pass myself off as a mercenary—or rather, their errand boy—then did the rounds through the pubs and listened in on the rumors being spread about me. Maybe this wasn't something a noble like myself should do, but I wanted to hear them for myself.

"Please avoid walking around unaccompanied."

"I will. I'm sorry."

True, we weren't yet certain that the town was safe enough for me to be out by myself. But at the same time, I was also quite sure any gangs lurking nearby would be lying low the day of the deputy count's appointment. Stirring up trouble would mean sullying my name, which meant picking a fight with a deputy whose first order on the job had been to put bandits to death. Thus, I concluded that they would wait to see how things went for a while. Still, it was true I had caused him some worry. It took some weight away from my apology, but hopefully he would look the other way.



Not to mention, there were plenty, even amongst the nobility of this world, who went about town by themselves or with just a few attendants. In fact, anyone who didn't was deemed a coward who sullied their title and rank. I wasn't quite sure if that was because this was a world of a game or because it was a world of muscle-brains.

With that in mind, I was looking over local government documents that I hadn't gotten to review the day before when Sir Holzdeppe, Sir Behnke, and Goecke arrived. I had called for them during breakfast.

"How are things?" I directed the question toward Sir Holzdeppe and Goecke, who would know I was interested in the cavalry and infantry, rather than the town. I had to be here in person to check on things like when the lodgings they were housed in had been built, how frequently they were renovated, and whether they were properly furnished. Unfortunately, we weren't quite free of deputies who'd ignore leaky roofs to keep more money in their pockets. If my men were living in unlivable conditions, I would have to deal with that.

"There don't seem to be any issues."

"Thank God. If anyone starts to feel unwell, let me know immediately. How are the mercenaries?"

"They are taking turns at the town's inn. I suppose you have the funds for that?"

"Yeah. Wait just a bit longer and we can get them their own facilities."

Until I got here, I had anticipated having to procure those using some other method, but now, it seemed like there was something we

could use. I wanted to discuss that with the others. Next, I inquired after the women and children the bandits had with them. And when that was sorted out, I took a deep breath, then spoke. "Let's get onto our next order of business."

The words were enough to cast a shadow over their faces. The room was equipped with a large table to accommodate guests, and I examined their faces as we headed there. Then, I had Frenssen spread out a map of the town on its surface.

"Where is it?"

"Here," Frenssen said, stopping to point at a large structure by the eastern gate. "This building is owned by the Salters' Guild."

Salt had been a regional specialty of Anheim, and the industry had been so large that those who sold it had separated from the Merchants' Guild. In fact, it was amazing they had so many facilities in a town as small as Anheim. But that was all in the past. Now, salt was hard to come by, and the sales routes had weakened. It seemed they had set their eyes on a new moneymaking scheme.

Sir Behnke hadn't been with us when we had taken out those bandits, so he asked about the details. "Then…there are those here who prey on not only the refugees, but citizens?"

"Seems like it." Looking over the town governance documents Frenssen had prepared for me, I began to explain. "While they're no longer appearing in droves, there are still refugees who make it here from the wastelands of Triot. In fact, since a few people were showing up every couple of days, it seems like the government couldn't keep up."

"So the Salters' Guild was put in charge of them?" Sir Behnke asked.

"Close, but not exactly," I answered, then explained what we'd heard from the women who were with the bandits—or more accurately, had been forced to be with them.

With their country destroyed by the Demon army and monsters running rampant even in broad daylight, of course the refugees had sought to escape. But the new Marquess Kneipp had been too busy rebuilding the army he'd nearly lost at Fort Werisa, so maintaining Anheim's peace had fallen into the hands of the deputy.

The deputy, in turn, left it all to the commune, so the one who ultimately seized the reins was the head of the Salters' Guild…or rather, that man's younger brother. That was the problem. This kind of thing would sometimes happen in my previous life too—someone who took a shortcut to power would totally fumble their newfound authority.

"The guildleader's younger brother didn't have a good reputation. Frankly, he was a criminal."

He'd offer work to refugees or people from neighboring settlements and then, on that pretext, take them deep into the mountains to hunt Salt Snails.

Even if slaying the Salt Snails was typically left to adventurers and mercenaries, it was within reason to hire extra hands to cart the salt back home. Of course, it would be ridiculous to expect refugees to have any money. If anything, with monsters and bandits running wild, they'd desperately need a way to earn it. And if underpaid work had

been the extent of the problem, I could have just put out some warnings.

"It seems that while the refugees' and villagers' men were away, they kidnapped their women and girls and had their ways with them. Mercifully, some were let free soon afterwards."

This wasn't new intel, but Neurath and Schünzel scowled upon hearing it. Goecke's expression remained the same, so there was no telling what he was thinking on the inside.

"Then I assume there were others who weren't?" Sir Behnke asked.

"Others have disappeared," I answered. "Though the younger brother and his men are playing dumb and claiming those who are missing must have just abandoned their families."

Sir Kesten spoke next. While his expression remained neutral, the look in his eyes had grown sharp. "Then you do not believe them?"

It was Duke Seyfert whose recommendation landed him here after all. I couldn't imagine that he appreciated such actions.

"Where would they run to?" I said. There were monsters roaming about. Without any weapons, where could they go? Not to mention some of the missing people were children. "No, what happened is that some of the captives were handed over to the bandits. The bandits kept them close not out of altruism, but so that they could leave them behind as bait if any monsters attacked."

We had heard all about it from the women we rescued from the gangs we'd taken out. As sorry as I was for this, I couldn't hold back my anger, and I accidentally scared them.

It had always bothered me. When we had surveyed the area for the map, we had heard from the adventurers that some of the villagers or members of the Merchants' Guild had been victims, but there were no rumors of anyone from the Salters' Guild being attacked. This explained it. The head of the Salters' Guild's younger brother must have reached an agreement with the bandits—they'd give the bandits some abductees to use as decoys, and the bandits would leave the Salters' Guild alone.

This was probably also the reason why, in the game, bandits always stayed safe even in the fields where monsters spawned. They used stolen livestock or human captives as bait for the monsters to ensure their own safety. It made me sick.

"So, what shall we do?"

"I was only just posted here. I'm sure they're waiting to get my measure. We need to act before they realize we have living witnesses."

I kept my answer short. Since this world had no concept of human rights, some might think that the families of refugees were of no concern. However, no one would think highly of a governor who turned a blind eye to crime, and that went for all times and places, even other worlds. Anyone connected to these bandits couldn't be allowed to go free.

Of course, that was logic speaking. On an emotional level, I had nothing but contempt for the kind of scum who'd throw defenseless captives to the wolves just to save themselves. It was time the axe fell on them.

"I'll have Neurath, Schünzel, Sir Goecke, and an operative force from the mercenaries accompany me. Sir Holzdeppe will take his men to maintain order and secure traffic in the area."

"Secure traffic?"

"That way, you can capture any conspirators who try to flee. The ringleader's related to a commune member and may well have bribed the garrison. Don't let them interfere until we're finished."

Sir Holzdeppe nodded at the explanation. "Understood."

"Sir Kesten will deal with the head of the garrison. Sir Behnke, I'd like you to stay behind."

"Yessir."

"On the day of our operation, we must be as ferocious as His Highness the Crown Prince was in slaying demons in the capital. Until then, review the location of the streets and buildings in town."

"Right."

Before we could smoke the wolves and foxes out of the commune, we first needed to exterminate the mice.

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Three days after I had taken up my post, the leaders of the bandits were executed just as I had ordered. My knights, foot soldiers, and mercenaries secured the perimeter in full gear. Even so, the

people of the town still gathered and let out jeers and shouts. The current state of public safety had probably given them some considerable grief.

The goals behind criminal punishments in this world weren't directed at the individual but were instead mostly to give a general impression of order. To put it in my old world's terms, the primary objective was to make a show of it to would-be criminals. This was similar to how it was during the Middle Ages, but it differed from how I used to view things in my previous life, so I still had a hard time getting used to it. I needed to be careful to fully understand that difference if I didn't want to lose sight of my goals.

After the bandits were executed before the deputy count, we headed straight for the warehouse-turned-lodging used by the Salters' Guild, still fully armed. As we moved through town, the people looked at us with some trepidation and more than a little foreboding, but they made no attempts to stop us.

After walking a short distance, the building in question came into view. Even at a distance, its size was readily apparent. It operated as a "warehouse," but those gates were huge. Still, they didn't exceed what might be expected from larger buildings in the provinces.

They were incredibly wary of us, perhaps because we were armed. Two gatekeepers—or really, they were more like bouncers—glared at us. Considering how calm they were, they had to be no strangers to a fight.

"I am Werner Von Zehrfeld, the new deputy count. I have business with the head of this establishment."

"What business?!"

Yup, they sounded like they wanted to pick a fight. We were right to come prepared for battle. I concealed my hostility, held Schünzel back from spouting the incendiary words he was clearly on the verge of shouting, and responded with the lordly tone of a deputy.

"During our trip from the capital, we hunted many monsters."

"Huh?" My words had clearly thrown the gatekeepers for a loop, which made sense considering this had nothing to do with the Salters' Guild. "We gathered too many materials. We need a place to store them, and it seems that this facility has plenty of empty grounds. I would like to speak with the man in charge. You may bring him to me here or let me inside, but I'll not leave until we've exchanged words."

The two gatekeepers looked at each other, unsure of what to do. They must have lowered their guard and concluded that this wasn't a matter they could solve alone, as they nodded to each other before one began to speak.

"Stay here, where we can keep tabs on you."

"Those don't sound like words for the crown's deputy."

"…Please wait a moment, my lord," he responded through gritted teeth. Then, one of them headed to the side entrance. I must have pissed him off quite a bit, since he shoved open the heavy door without so much as looking back. I used that exact moment to pierce the tip of my spear into the ground.

That was the signal. Neurath threw a kick at the man at the door and ran inside as he crumpled. A mercenary to my side kicked

his head in while Schünzel felled the other gatekeeper with a decisive strike. Goecke and a couple of his mercenaries followed Neurath inside, and soon, they had opened the gate from the inside.

"Charge! Cut down all who resist!"

At that, the mercenaries surged forward. The way they threw themselves into it, it was pretty clear they were no strangers to ransacking a building.

Screams rang out from everywhere. Our opponents weren't fools. They'd clearly been on high alert as soon as we showed up at their doors, armed to the teeth. Though it seemed they hadn't counted on a direct assault.

Plus, they were being stormed by mercenaries who normally fought monsters, not people. I hated to say it, but they weren't the kind of opponents the average town hoodlum could take on in a straight fight. The only problem was whether any of them had any skills.

One tricky thing about this world was that if a woman or child happened to have a skill, they could be quite the fighter. That's why the taboo against hitting women and children, so prevalent in my old world, didn't quite hold up here. If one turned to crime and happened to have a combat skill, there was a good chance they'd be able to take down the average soldier. We'd have to make our judgments based solely on whether they were armed and hostile.

That said, many soldiers—especially those who had families—often let their guard down when fighting women and children. That's why I decided to use Goecke and his men. They had seen real battles,

so I knew they'd be able to properly discern their enemies from the victims.

Neurath, Schünzel, and I remained outside, leaving it to Goecke to secure the interior. If this was my old world, we could have used walkie-talkies to coordinate our movements, but obviously that wasn't the case. When you had a commander to listen to, you had to know where he was. When you didn't, that's when accidents happened. A possible fire could be a real concern. I couldn't enter the fray myself.

Quite soon, a mercenary rushed over to us. It seemed they'd caught the boss. Given that Goecke hadn't even gotten involved, the boss was doubtless no stronger than the average thug. Not that it mattered. I ordered the mercenary to bring him to me. Soon, a man whose face and shoulders were covered in blood and dirt was dragged out of the building.

He must have been in his mid-forties. Under other circumstances, I might have been thinking to myself that he looked like an upright fellow, despite his hardened features. Given the malice in his eyes, though, there was no way this could be a proper, upstanding townsman.

"Ya think you can get away with this, you bastard?!"

"What a coincidence," I said. "I had no plans of letting you get away with this myself."

I was young enough to be his son, but he had quite the gall to talk that way to the deputy count. Maybe he was confident help was coming for him. I had no idea either way.

"I just took up office here, and I'm absolutely swamped. I don't have much time, so let's keep this short. I know that you were selling people to the bandits. We have multiple witnesses and testimonies." It hadn't just been the women we saved who had mentioned his name, but even the surviving bandits. If both victims and perpetrators were pointing to him, it had to be true. "Human trafficking is a serious crime. On my authority, you'll be put to death."

He hung his mouth open like a dead fish. "Huh?" Maybe he didn't understand me. I ignored him and kept talking.

"And since there's no time to prepare the gallows, we'll carry out your sentence here and now."

"W-w-wait just a minute!" He was in utter panic. He probably knew he had no chance at negotiations, much less threats. Should he be tried by the commune, there was a chance he'd be able to escape with only light punishment. "You sure you wanna do that? My brother runs the Salters' Guild!"

Yeah. I knew. Though, I didn't have to tell him that. Instead, I let out a chuckle. "Wow, that makes things tough. So, the Salters' Guild is implicated in this too. Seems like I'll have to punish them as well."

"What?!"

"Neurath, seize the Salters' Guild's headquarters immediately…"

"W-wait!" Now his face was white. He opened his mouth in a panic, almost as if he was going to let out a bloodcurdling scream. "It was me! My brother has nothing to do with this!"

"So, you admit to your crimes?"

That was all I needed. There was nothing left for him to say, nor did I have anything left to say to him. I leveled my spear and ran it through his throat. Then I called out to my men without even bothering to look at his now-crumpled corpse. "Display his body alongside the bandits! And capture anyone else you can! Our first order of business is to take control of this place."

"Y-yessir!"

The mercenary who had brought the man before me alongside Schünzel dashed off in a panic. I hadn't barked orders at the lower-ranking mercenaries with such force before, so I couldn't blame him.

"Was it all right to do that, Lord Werner?"

"Yeah," I answered curtly. Here in Anheim, I was at once an upstart far too young to be deputy, and an outsider from the previous lord's rival faction. That would make me a target of condescension, and compared to that, it was more advantageous to be feared. As long as I kept my blade trained solely on criminals, others would start to come around to me.

"What shall we do with the guildmembers?"

"Let's put that on hold for now."

It was true that the younger brother was the lowest of the low, but that wasn't necessarily true about his siblings. Just like noble houses could harbor wantons who abused their station, commoner families might be troubled by members who turned to crime. It was possible that the younger brother was threatening his elder brother.

As long as the head of the guild didn't harbor any ill will toward me, I'd prefer not to stir the pot.

"And if the guildleader is an accomplice?"

"If they're cut from the same cloth, taking out those bandits made it clear that we're his enemies. It'd just mean we pruned his younger brother first." In other words, the next step remained the same. I'd leave him be depending on what he did next.

Just as Schünzel returned, one of the mercenaries approached, reporting that a room clearly used as dungeon had been discovered deep in one of the safes in the building.

"Was anyone inside?"

"Two young women. According to one of them, there had been five until just recently."

"It seems like we'll have to question those who are still standing, or at least look over the documents kept here." There may have been other bandits they were in league with or crimes we didn't know about yet. I decided to leave any questioning for later and told my men to simply search the building for now. "Bring the women to the lord's manor for the time being and tell Sir Behnke to prepare treatment for them."

"Yessir!"

We took custody of the remaining gang members, and I ordered them to be held in the gardens of the lord's manor until we could question them. Outside of the dungeons, I figured, I could make an

example of them. Such thoughts were in my mind as Sir Holzdeppe, who I'd put in charge of upholding the peace, approached.

"What is it?" I asked. I'd been in the middle of answering other people's questions.

"The head of the Salters' Guild would like to see you. He's accompanied by a number of men bearing large sacks."

"Right." As disappointed as I was, I granted them permission to enter.

The figure who finally stepped into my sight was a middle-aged man with a countenance that could rival his brother's in malice. Given the way he carried himself, I figured he was no stranger to hard labor, though I doubted he had fighting capabilities worth worrying about.

"Lord Deputy! To think we'd be meeting at a place like…" When he opened his mouth, he wore a smirk that'd make you think he was about to start rubbing his hands like a cartoon villain. However, as soon as he caught sight of the bloodied body, he froze with his mouth open in shock.

I pretended not to notice his change of expression as I turned to the men with sacks. I then returned my gaze to the guildmaster. "The criminal before us admitted to conspiring with the bandits, so I punished him under my authority as deputy count." Seemed like he hadn't expected his brother to die while he was preparing a bribe to buy his freedom. He met my gaze, eyes seething with anger. "I see you had no connections to this, but he was trafficking women and children. I sure you have no objections to making an example of such a criminal?"

There was a long pause. Then, "Do as you wish."

His tone made it clear he was trying to hold back his wrath. I didn't really mind, though. For one, I was currently entrusted with the impossible task of fighting a Demon Commander, a leader of the Demon army. I had no intentions of claiming victory with the men under my command alone, but I'd have to hold my ground until the knight brigade arrived. Anything getting in the way of preparing for that event was nothing but a pain. While there were countless measures I could take against any blatant interference, the last thing I wanted was for these preparations to be sabotaged.

Of course, the ideal situation was one in which I had no enemies. Given my age and position, though, that would be impossible. I had accepted this state of affairs and decided it was best to let any malcontents play their hand now rather than later. I wasn't expecting this outcome, but if he did make a profit knowing his brother was compromised, I didn't mind using those profits for my own gain.

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Having turned away the master of the Salters' Guild, I once again returned to inspecting the building. I confiscated their documents and had them delivered to the lord's manor while we examined the building's interior. It was too small to hold all of Goecke's mercenaries at once, but it was more than big enough to house them on rotation.

Perhaps this was obvious, but there weren't enough rooms in Anheim's inns to lodge all of our mercenary brigade. Being a town on

the border, housing had been built for the soldiers there to protect it, but they were meant for attached generals and the cavalrymen and infantrymen that came with them. I couldn't use it for the mercenaries. Thus, I had thought long and hard about what to do with them, but the situation had changed. If we had control of this building, we might as well use it.

Having concluded our investigations, I told Goecke to set some men to cleaning the place and then left the rest to him. Then, I ordered my men under Sir Holzdeppe to return to the local lord's residence. The people watched us, and it was clear what they were thinking: "Getting on this young deputy's bad side can't be a good thing." I sighed internally, making sure to keep my face impassive. I didn't want to have to do this either.

The next morning, after I had returned to the lord's residence, the father of the girl who'd trespassed was waiting for me, ready to pay her fine. I checked the contents of the purse he handed over, rejecting the extra gold he had slipped inside. Sir Behnke had stayed behind during the whole ordeal, and according to him, the man had "come carrying the money with his face as white as a ghost's." He was probably afraid I'd decide to cut his daughter's throat on the spur of the moment.

I arranged that the whole sum of the money be spent on liquor and distributed to the townsfolk as a gift from the deputy count. It was a carrot-and-stick approach, with booze for a carrot.

Afterward, it was decided that the surviving criminals of the Salters' Guild would be exiled to Triot. On the day of, many of the

councilmen came to request that I show lenience. I was sure some of them had been asked to do so by family members, but that didn't change what these criminals had done. I wasn't about to go easy on them.

On the other hand, I returned the captive women and children to their families and ordered that a search be undertaken to find those still missing. I offered bereavement money to the families of victims, notified all that I would be providing a monetary award for those who could offer any information, and had the Adventurers' Guild put out a request for intel on the bandits. I also announced that if any who had abetted these crimes confessed, I would lighten their sentences, commensurate to the depths of their crimes. I doubted I would get to all the victims in time, but I took every measure I could.

After that, I spent a few days strengthening my hold on the town. While I had delegated the bulk of civil administration onto Sir Behnke, I prioritized maintaining public order and procuring provisions. Once the Demon army attacked, not only provisions, but all daily necessities would be hard to come by. I had to create a stockpile while I still could.

All the while, I also worked to improve sanitation. I paid refugees a daily allowance and had the garrison work alongside them to clean the streets and handle other tasks to promote public health. Europe's medieval towns were famous for being filthy, and the same went for rural towns in this world.

One of the reasons for this was livestock. Pigs and cows were raised in towns, and once their owners had branded them, they were

let out into the streets to roam. This world had no refrigerators, and salt wasn't cheap. That meant the best way to keep meat fresh was to keep it alive.

That was all fine and dandy—I mean, what else could be done—but their owners needed to do a better job keeping them in line. Just like dog shit littered the streets in my past life, pig and cow shit artlessly dotted the streets here. I couldn't stand it. No way was I gonna let a plague spread by animal dung make its rounds during a siege.

Ultimately, I had the entirety of the town cleaned and instituted a fine for families who were negligent in managing their livestock. The importance of public health wasn't common knowledge in this world, so I guessed I'd have to make it so.

I employed refugees and citizens of the town in equal shifts at the local lord's residence, but since servants were prone to starting drama, I limited them to older men and women. The younger people could do labor out in town, but more than anything, I didn't want any of the young women trying to make a move on me.

For some reason, that led to the rumor that "the count deputy has a fiancée back in the royal capital, so he has no interest in women." That wasn't true, but correcting the rumor would be a pain, so I let it be. I was just glad it kept any weirdos from approaching me, even if it was based on false pretenses.

Incidentally, nobles of Europe's medieval ages were always envisioned to be engaged quite early, but that wasn't the case in this world, and many found partners during their student days. Young

betrothals were usually made by parents or families to benefit themselves. Well, I guessed that was true in my past life too, but they tended to have more serious reasons for it.

For one, the mortality rate during the Middle Ages was high. The "Middle Ages" covered quite a wide time period, but to use a statistic from the middle period as an example, twenty percent of noble patriarchs died without an heir to succeed them. And that was just male heirs; another twenty percent had only female children. Plus, these numbers only applied to viable heirs; there were times both the head of the family and his wife would perish from illness, leaving only a three-month-old behind.

The results of this were as follows: In the year 1300, England had seventeen count families, but by 1400, only three count families had managed to maintain their lineage. It was much more common for a house's domain to end up under another count's rule, if not subsumed into their territory, after their family line perished.

Thus, the family was prioritized over the individual, and from the patriarch's perspective, the more grandchildren, the better. With that in mind, nobles were engaged when both partners were young. What's more, in some cases, as soon as a girl was of childbearing age, she'd be forced into bed under the watch of a guard. I felt like such a practice would only hurt the mother, but I guessed medicine back then was just so underdeveloped they failed to consider that.

But in this world, there were potions and magic that would have mystified the people of Earth. Sudden deaths were a different matter, but something like a fever caused by what was known as influenza in

my old world wouldn't kill someone here. Magic was GOATed. The infant mortality rate for nobles who could afford hefty medical fees was much lower than it had been in my previous world.

Thus, there was no need to marry people off young in order to have grandchildren early. As long as there were no problems with your family's status, you could find a partner as a student. That was the prevailing school of thought here. My older brother did have a fiancée, but that was due to the circumstances of Count Fürst.

Rather, the young romances of noble families could be used as bargaining chips. To put it plainly, it was something like "I hear your son is in love with my daughter and offered her his hand in marriage. Of course they can get married! But what is there in it for me?" Talk about twisted.

Because of that, I had no need to rush into any engagement, but while I didn't have a fiancée, would I ever actually get to return to school? I felt like that was near impossible. *Guess I can't do anything about it, anyway. And no, this isn't me just trying to escape reality.*

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I spent the half month after my appointment in Anheim taking preventative measures. With the intel offered to us, I was able to have Sir Holzdeppe take out more groups of bandits and rescue more of their victims. All were women and children, so I ordered that they quickly be returned to their families. Those without homes to return to, I hired to clean the warehouse Goecke's mercenaries were now using or to handle various other types of labor.Afterwards, I decided to prioritize the maintenance of trade routes to other provinces.

Throughout all that, the Anheim volunteer force had gradually begun to take shape, and we had managed to secure stockpiles in the villages. With this and my map, we had the beginnings of a network we could use to mobilize and sustain our soldiers.

"How's progress with the volunteer force, Sir Kesten?"

"They have grown quite accustomed to group maneuvers, yet they are still not ready for a real battle."

"And are they getting on with the garrison?"

"It appears that there are some disputes over turf, but I'll sort it out."

"Great. For now, focus their training on crossbows and slingshots."

"Yessir."

Some of the volunteers were people without any martial training whatsoever. Some had joined just to put food on the table, while others were out to avenge their slain kin. This meant some of them were raring for combat, while some of their comrades would have much rather been doing any other job. I wouldn't ask them to do the impossible. For now, if they could hold a crossbow steady and shoot monsters from atop the walls, that'd be good enough.

"And how are the documents, Sir Behnke?"

"The civil officials are glad that they have become easier to review."

"I bet they are."

As with the capital, provincial policies were rife with idiosyncrasies. To give an example, appeals submitted to the deputy by Guild A needed to be written in the following order: name of person who submitted the appeal, body of text, name of verifier, name of guildmaster.

The "verifier" was a witness who verified the person submitting the appeal had written under his or her own name, and the signature of the guildmaster was required to prove that he had given permission that the appeal be submitted under the guild's name. If the person who made the appeal was illiterate, the name of an amanuensis also had to be included.

However, Guild B's documents were written in the order of: name of guildmaster, body of text, name of person who submitted the appeal, name of verifier; and Guild C's documents would be written as: body of text, name of guildmaster, name of person who submitted the appeal, name of verifier. The order was all over the place. In other words, the writing style of each guild was prioritized over consistency.

I had thus ordered that all paperwork in Anheim be standardized going forward. Documents that didn't follow the prescribed format were returned without consideration. There was quite a bit of grumbling at this, but I ignored it. Once they got used to it, things would calm down.

"Have we heard anything from Sir Goecke?"

"I've summarized it here." Frenssen took out a paper outlining the rumors going around town. Goecke's mercenaries hadn't only been entrusted with hunting monsters around the perimeter; I also

gave the mercenaries some alcohol money so they could eat and drink around town and suss out the people's opinion of me.

I sifted through the documents. While they were quite critical of me at first, my efforts to maintain public order had garnered me some respect. Still, there were some unfavorable rumors being spread, seemingly with deliberate malice. There was definitely a group out there that viewed me as a nuisance.

"Still, why have you left investigating the matter to Sir Goecke's men?" asked Sir Holzdeppe.

"One reason is that I want them to have a strong grasp of the terrain and layout in and around town," I answered. This pertained to future strategic planning. "Another reason is that I want them to spread rumors about me in the capital."

"Huh?" It wasn't just Holzdeppe who was confused; Neurath, Schünzel, and even Frenssen seemed to think this quite dubious. I realized the reason was because none of them had been around me when *that* happened.

"Oh, this has to do with the Demon Stampede, but…"

I was a bit of a dunce to not have realized this until now. I convinced myself that it was better than never having noticed at all and gave a brief explanation of what had happened near the royal capital during the Demon Stampede.

"But thinking back on it, it's strange. Why had a seasoned group like Sir Goecke's mercenaries joined the battle with the Demon Stampede that so many people had dismissed the gravity of?"

"Wasn't it just for easy coin?" asked Neurath. Sure, just like in the Warring States era of Japan, freelance mercenaries would join battles willingly in order to make a name for themselves and receive rewards. I wouldn't deny that was how I originally saw things as well.

"It's certainly possible, but having mercenaries join His Highness the Crown Prince's first battle doesn't seem right. In most cases, the kingdom would have regarded them as hangers-on."

"Yes…you're right."

"Then you think they were wary of the Demon Stampede?"

"If that was the case, I suppose there was no need for me to join the battle."

Yeah, that might have been for the best… Schünzel's question had me imagining what could have been. I accidentally included "for me" in that statement in front of Sir Behnke and the others, but I hoped they would just ignore that.

"Rather, it's probably safe to assume that they had been employed as reserves by a noble who'd wanted to be ready for anything."

Sir Kesten seemed to be quite interested in my words, but he remained silent. Instead, it was Frenssen who spoke. "Ready for anything, you say?"

"Yeah. Just in case, he employed some famous mercenaries, and when the battle took a turn for the worse, he sent them to me, who had been specifically chosen for the battle. There are only a few nobles who could have that military knowledge and money to spare."

"Oh!" Neurath and Sir Holzdeppe gasped. Sir Kesten and Sir Behnke remained quiet, but I saw realization dawn on them as well. I continued, "Marquess Norpoth, the man leading the left flank. *He's* Sir Goecke's employer."

I won't deny that as a former Japanese person and someone bearing the skill of Spearmanship, my senses had been focused on the wrong place. Japanese rarely fought with a shield in hand, meaning there was little difference between the right and left flanks. But that didn't hold for knights. Most held their shields in their left hands, which meant that when fighting enemies from head on and to the left, they could defend from side attacks with their shields and keep fighting.

But if enemies were coming from the front and to the right, your options were to turn your body so your shield was oriented toward the front or use the sword in your right hand to fight those coming from both your front and your right side. In other words, the right flank had a harder time defending themselves.

That was why during the medieval ages of the West, veterans and elite soldiers were put in the right flank to protect the formation, and energetic and brave younger soldiers were put in the left flank so they could attack the enemy's right flank from the side. It was common sense.

Since an inexperienced soldier like me had been chosen as commander to our main force's right flank, I'm sure Lord Norpoth couldn't believe his ears at first. There was a good chance I wouldn't

be the best leader, and if I faltered and the right flank collapsed, it was possible that our whole army would be wiped out.

Knowing that danger, Marquess Norpoth most likely hired seasoned mercenaries that could carry out a reprisal should the right flank fail. He split them from the main force and put them under my command, but had Goecke determined I was unreliable back then, he probably would have acted on his own.

To take things further, there was even a chance the crown prince had predicted Marquess Norpoth would put Goecke into my forces. Since my family dealt with civil duties, the crown prince might have known Lord Norpoth would back me up and specifically chosen him as my partner. It was kinda scary, considering His Highness really might have seen that far ahead.

Another possible battle formation was the echelon formation, where troops were arranged diagonally. In diagrams depicting this formation, the right flank was usually put in front since in places like China and Europe where shields were used, the right flank consisted of seasoned soldiers who could jump into battle at the drop of a hat. Diagrams where the left flank were put in front were limited to countries like Japan where shields weren't used nor diagrams written in peace time. Not that all this had any bearing on the topic at hand.

In this instance, my main reason for hiring the mercenaries was that I wanted a group I could use freely, but I also wanted to create some rumors. If my predictions were correct, Goecke would also become an indirect spokesman for me.

"The master of a Mercenaries' Guild who has been recognized by a marquess could have friends and acquaintances anywhere after all."

Given my current position, it was advantageous to cultivate an ambivalent reputation, trending more toward bad than good. Still, if my reputation was too bad, people in the royal court might begin to see me as a liability to be cut off. Even if the crown prince and Duke Seyfert viewed me fondly, there was a limit to what that could do for me.

Information that came from below couldn't be ignored. I was sure the crown prince and ministers listened to the rumors spreading around town and considered them when making decisions. With that in mind, it was important to have allies who had influence over the mercenaries fighting on the front lines. Ugh, what a pain.

With that being the case, I had plans to put another measure or two into place, but I'd leave that for later.

"Anyway, that's how it is for Sir Goecke. Him being more aware of my reputation than me is exactly what I want. By the way, have there been any developments with the bandits?"

"As we executed their leaders with no hesitation as soon as we arrived, it seems that they have begun to gather in groups," reported Neurath.

"Sounds better for us. Chasing small groups of ten or twenty around wastes more of our provisions." That was one of the reasons why I had given them time to regroup. I had already requested to Viscount Gröllmann and Baron Zabel—deputies of other provinces—that they simply chase off any bandits that arrive there. Though given

the way people in this world often were, there was a good chance they were hunting those groups down, anyway. As long as it restored public order, I didn't care much either way.

After placing pieces on the map to get a full view of the situation, there was just one group that looked like it could prove troublesome. They were situated on a single hill among flat lands. To put it frankly, if I was gonna set up an encampment for battle, I would have picked the exact same place. This was one of the worst places they could be.

"As for our enemies over the border?"

"From what we can see of the opposite shore from here, there are no obvious movements." Schünzel was in charge of border reconnaissance. As the bridge connecting Anheim and Triot had fallen, there was a wide, perilous river separating the two territories. Thinking back on it, there was only a river in the game toward where Triot was, and you couldn't actually get to Triot itself. That was convenient, given the story.

But that didn't hold up in real life. There was no longer a bridge, but if the refugees were desperate enough, they could still cross the river. Nor would that be impossible for monsters, given their strength, which raised issues in creating a defensive line there. Damming up the waters and then unleashing when the timing was right was a common tactic, but that wouldn't work against the Demon army.

As I was considering all this, a warning light began to flicker in a corner of my brain. I pondered what it could be, then asked Frenssen, "What's the recent situation with refugees from Triot?"

"While they may have slightly increased in number, there are no considerable changes."

With that, I knew what was off. In the game, the Demon army underestimated even Mazel sometimes. There was no need to spell out how they felt about humans in general. Given their overconfidence and the presence of Demon Commanders in Triot, it wouldn't be strange for the Demon army to begin an invasion right about now. In other words, it was strange that things had remained uneventful for this long.

I was thankful, seeing as I had yet to properly prepare for them, but there had to be a reason the Demon army was biding their time.

I folded my arms and pondered for a moment, ultimately deciding to rethink what I'd concluded before my appointment. I couldn't just leave things to the bigwigs in the capital. I'd have to report this to them myself. I doubted the kingdom was ignorant of the Demon army's plans, but they may not have realized their sheer scope and magnitude.

"Frenssen, I want to deliver a letter to my father in the capital. I'd like you to prepare three groups of adventurers for the task."

"Yessir."

Given the monsters that spawned in this world, the best way to send a letter was to prepare multiple squads with significant strength, each bearing a copy along a different route. Adventurers contributed vital reserves of martial strength, so I wasn't too happy about losing them, but I needed this letter to reach its destination. Skywalk Boots could ensure the letter's safe arrival, but we only had so many.

I turned my attention to a different matter. “Wait, Frenssen. I have another request regarding the adventurers.”

“Yessir. What is it?”

“I want you to summon the worst behaved group of adventurers in Anheim.”

“Huh? The worst behaved?”

It wasn’t just Frenssen; Neurath and Schünzel were giving me a look as well. But during a siege, adventurers like that would only get in the way. Plus, the troublemakers in Anheim were those connected with the Salters’ Guild, and there was a good chance the townsfolk and garrison hadn’t been able to deal with them. In that case, it was clear that removing them from town would be for the best, given what lay ahead.

I explained that, and while the others were taken aback initially, they did come around. If we needed to get rid of them anyway, we might as well use them.

“But won’t this anger Lord Ingo?”

“Oh…I guess. But I’m the one he’ll be mad at.”

My mother would probably be even more livid. Still, taking actions like this would be useful for getting me back to the capital, so they’d have to deal with it. With that in mind, I stood up and headed to the kitchen so I could write my letter.

***

“Lord Werner,” Frenssen said early one morning, “you have visitors from the capital.”

"I have what now?"

We only just sent off the first two groups of adventurers the day before: one in the morning, and one in the afternoon. I wasn't expecting any visitors quite so soon.

"You have visitors," Frenssen repeated. "The Iron Hammer just arrived alongside supplies sent from the capital, and it seems they would like to speak with you."

Given the timing, they had probably just missed the adventurers I had sent. Still, I was a bit surprised to hear that name. I mean, adventurers could be anywhere, but I wasn't expecting to find the Iron Hammer here in Anheim. I had to accept the supplies anyway, so I decided to meet with them for a change of pace. There was something I wanted to check, anyway. With that in mind, I stepped outside the manor and decided to make a detour to survey the supplies.

The second supply group brought plenty. It consisted of forty percent lumber, twenty percent provisions, and twenty percent metal, along with various other items that were more of a waste of space. I confirmed the shipment and had Sir Holzdeppe and some of the civil officials direct them to our storage area.

Foodstuffs and weapons were certainly useful during a siege, but lumber and metal could prove surprisingly handy as well. If the gate was about to be compromised, it had to be fortified with nails and lumber. Even in the confines of a town, wood and metal could also be used to repair weapons, armor, and horse tack, or to fashion arrowheads and spear hafts. You needed lumber to cook food and

melt iron as well. Of course, we needed to be able to light bonfires too.

When castle towns broke under siege, even when sufficiently garrisoned and provisioned, the culprit was, surprisingly often, a lack of lumber for making repairs. Though in this case, I had another use for it in mind as well.

I was looking over the supplies with all that in mind when Sir Holzdeppe approached. "All the supplies were safely delivered this time, but what are we going to use the catapults for? They are quite small, but they're typically used to attack castles, not defend them."

"There's plenty we can use them for."

I had heard of instances where those under siege launched loads of gravel from the walls to cause a rain of pebbles to fall on the attacking army. Humans would find it intolerable, and while the use I had in mind was probably atypical, we couldn't win against a swarm of demonic beings in an open battle—especially one where a Demon Commander was present—with just the men under me alone. I needed my volunteer force to use the catapults to help defend the town.

But unlike bows or swords, catapults weren't often put into use, meaning few people had worked with them before. Of course, I had never seen one put into action in my previous life either if you exclude instances I had seen on television. It seemed worth trying to use them in a real battle.

"There should be more lumber on its way, so make sure we have a proper place to store it."

"Understood. And how should I deal with the *other* matter?"

"Throw him in the dungeon for now. I'll meet with him later."

"Understood."

After giving those orders, I headed not for the governance hall but the local lord's manor. I supposed I'd have to speak with the head of the Carpenters' Guild to process the lumber. Given the poor economic conditions of the town, handing the Carpenters' Guild some work would, I supposed, improve their opinion to me to neutral, if not favorable. *I should be able to at least get enough time from them to convince them to lend aid.*

I also had to talk with the head of the Blacksmiths' Guild, since they were the ones who could process the metal. *Maybe I should tell them I'm building a fort to keep an eye on the border.* The need for surveillance, at least, was true enough. My order would be complicated, so I wanted to pay them a visit myself; however, if I did, Sir Behnke would say I was being too hasty. This was difficult.

As I pondered all this, I found my way to the local lord's manor. It now served as my private residence, so it was typical that I meet personal guests, rather than political guests, here. This was also where I would meet any guests traveling undercover.

It seemed like calling the house of the deputy the "local lord's manor" was a custom in this world. I guessed all the average person really needed to know was that it was the building some higher-up lived in, so I tried to ignore it.

The manor was built to house the deputy along with their family, so it was too big for just me. In addition to some of my men, like

Neurath and Schünzel, I also had some of the refugees I hired as servants living here, and because of that, I managed to fill up some of the rooms. This was all because I received some complaints that seeing the lights off in the windows of my residence was depressing.

For nobles, it wasn't rare to keep rooms lit even when no one was inside, and ignoring the risk of fire, it was effective at staving off any intruders. Still, that felt wasteful to me, so if I was keeping rooms lighted, I at least wanted people using them too.

Many of the servants had jobs like "safe keeper" or "chef" that were self-explanatory even just with knowledge from my old world, but there were also some jobs like candleman or distiller that were harder to figure out.

The candleman was in charge of managing the types and numbers of candles in our possession. Lighting them or putting them out was a job for lower servants like maids.

For one, candles weren't manufactured in this world. Cheaper ones let out copious amounts of smoke, so they needed to be used outside, and smaller ones with little smoke were used for guests. Someone had to keep track of which ones to use when and where, and given how many types there were, it constituted its own profession. Some made from beast fat smelled beyond rancid, so you didn't want to use that in the wrong place. On the other hand, candles made from the fat of famous demonic beasts were a top-class item too expensive for the average citizen, so they could become targets for theft.

Now, given the existence of magic lamps, this all might sound strange. But candles could be much cheaper than the magic stones used in magic lamps, making them a necessity if I wanted my servants to have light to work by. They also were single use, so lighting an expensive candle and putting it in a magnificent silver candlestand could appeal to nobles. I wouldn't deny that they could be a prop for such theatrics, but you also couldn't forget that a single one of those props could feed a common family for days.

The distiller, put simply, worked in the wine cellar, but a detailed account of their job would be lengthy, so I'll keep it short. Basically, glass is expensive in this world, so wine is usually stored in barrels. However, wooden barrels can sometimes leave too much of a barrel smell in the wine, so the person in charge manages not just the temperature and humidity, but also the fermenting process and aroma of the wine, transferring it into glass bottles when the time is right. To put it in terms of my old world, he was basically distiller *plus* sommelier.

A second round of fermentation once the wine was transferred into bottles usually didn't happen in this world…at least I didn't think it did. It wasn't like I knew the process inside out.

Incidentally, wine bottles weren't just old; in other areas, they were often recycled. One reason was that glass was expensive, but also, any bottle could do if it was only being used as storage. During parties, you could just use a decanter. Needing to be aware of that was just another reason the distiller was an important job here.

As I thought all that over, I found some familiar adventurers drinking tea deep in the room. They were the five members of the Iron Hammer, and I was glad to see they were doing all right.

"Hey," I said. "Long time no see."

"If it isn't the viscount! Congrats on your appointment as deputy."

"Enough of that, you morons," I responded on reflex. I was silent for a moment, and then we were grinning at each other. Thank god we could chat so casually. I hoped Mazel was doing all right.

"Your name's been getting dragged through the mud back at the capital. They're calling you the Wastrel Viscount and the In-Debt Deputy."

"It's true after all." Or rather, it'd be more correct to say I needed people to think that was the truth. I couldn't tell them that though.

They say that where there's smoke, there's fire. Since I did have to borrow money to employ Goecke and his men, there were definitely some flames. Now, I just had to let things be so those flames could grow into a conflagration.

No matter how much the crown prince or Duke Seyfert tried to keep their support for me discreet, the shipments they were sending me were fuel aplenty for the rumors about them giving me special treatment.

Still, even if I was using money I borrowed, there was nothing strange about what I was doing as long as I was buying supplies for

the domain under my rule. Rather, I could be as bold as I wanted about my purchases, even if I had both borrowed my money and bought the supplies I needed through some preferential treatment. Publicly, the only blow was to my reputation. Getting my name dragged through the mud in the capital was better than losing this battle because we lacked the supplies.

Still, I did feel some shame knowing my parents were probably being lambasted for having such a wasteful son. I'd have to make it up to them somehow.

"I've got a few things for you. But first, here." He took out a magic bag and a letter. It was from my father.

"What's in the bag?"

"I hear they're documents you'll be needing."

Oh, I see. That mark meant this was sent not by a count but from a duke. That must be why it was delivered in something as expensive as a magic bag. With that in mind, I scanned the letter and was shocked by its contents.

"Mazel came to the capital?"

"Seems so, though we didn't get the chance to meet him."

After defeating the first of the Four Fiends, he returned to the capital and took a brief trip to the Zehrfeld domain. That had been the day after I left the capital. What a shame. I had just missed him. Well, since it seemed like he was able to reunite with his family after so long, I was happy for him.

Hm…something was strange. In the game too, old Uwe had joined the party after having met them when they defeated the first of the Four Fiends, but why did he want to meet with me? Had I done something? Nothing came to mind.

As I read through the letter, I could hear the members of the Iron Hammer chatting, saying, "I really wanted to meet the Hero," or "Ain't it a bit late to be saying that now?" I couldn't help but grin. Mazel was as popular as always.

"The count asked me to deliver this letter from Mazel, *this*…and also a box with *that* in it."

When he said "this," he handed over a bag with skywalk boots inside. There were only five or six pairs, but it was much to be grateful for. I couldn't use them just yet, but I was sure I'd find a use for them later. If you didn't have to be outside of town to use them, they'd be a bit more useful, but I had to take what I could get.

The Crown Prince had actually entrusted me with a few pairs as well. I was supposed to use them to send a messenger in an emergency, so I was sure I'd use at least one pair eventually.

Still, if word got out about what these boots could do, I was sure some would be worried that us leaders would use them to escape ourselves. Or maybe they'd come to demand I let them use them to escape with their families. I had no intentions of using them to run, but figuring out the best use for them could be difficult. Seemed like I'd need to discuss it with the others.

Leaving that aside, I looked towards "that," which was leaning against the wall. It was a new spear, and it seemed like an excellent

one at that. Given that it had gone up for sale just after the first of the Four Fiends was defeated, it had to be the Champion's Spear. The game never had a graphic for it, so I couldn't tell just by looking at it.

That's right. This was also about the time in the game where you had to start buying new gear. Instead of grinding just to level up, you would end up at a higher level just trying to get the funds to buy the best new equipment. I was grateful, but I did wish Mazel prioritized his own party's gear.

"I'll look over it later. Could I get you guys to stay in town for a while?"

"Got some pain of a quest for us?"

"I've got that too, but as adventurers, I also want you to keep an ear to the ground to get word of my reputation."

"If that's all you need, sure."

There was no doubt I'd be giving them a slog of a quest later on, care of the Adventurers' Guild, but they didn't need to know that just yet. I could read Mazel's letter later.

Mazel had an odd tendency to share the truly important things by word of mouth rather than letters or notes, probably because paper was valuable in Mazel's hometown of Arlea. Basically, it was safe to assume his letter was nothing important. He was easy to understand that way.

For now, as long as he was safe after defeating the first of the Four Fiends, I had no problems, even if I did want to see his face. If

things were going well for Mazel and his party, I'd have to move things along on my end as well.

Afterwards, the Iron Hammer filled me in on their journey here and the rumors going around the capital. When they had stood up to leave, saying they had another place they needed to stop by, I wrote them a letter of introduction to the local inns in my capacity as deputy count.

Once they had left, I looked over the goods they had delivered. First was the spear Mazel had given me. It was a bit heavier than the one I had been using, but that just made it more deadly. I'd have to get used to it, but it really was a fine spear. While the one I currently used was comfortable in my arms, it was also worn out. I wanted to give this new one a whirl in actual combat before the Demon Commander attacked.

I checked over the other goods and found a small bag. Unsure what it was, I picked it up and found a letter, a handkerchief, and a painting. They were all from Lily.

The crest of House Zehrfeld and a flower had been embroidered on the handkerchief. I didn't know she had started to practice sewing. She had a good sense of design, and I wondered if that had come from her experience with art. This would fetch a fine price even back in my old world.

The painting was small for noble standards, measuring thirty by twenty centimeters to use units of my old world. She had used a quality frame and expensive paints. My parents must have prepared

them for her. It depicted a vase and some other small trinkets in my room, and inside the vase was a bouquet of roses.

It was too small to use to decorate one of the guestrooms, but it was perfect for my own. I didn't really think flowers suited me, but it was an excellent painting that any noble would be proud to adorn their room with. Quite honestly, I thought it was amazing.

It seemed like this went for both Europe's medieval ages and this world, but decorating with live flowers required both money and time. Everything had to be done by hand, and greenhouses were a rarity. Thus, noble houses tended to use paintings of flowers instead. A lot of families would use live flowers only when throwing parties. All of this was one of the reasons that back on Earth, plenty of flower paintings from the Middle Ages had survived to be displayed in art museums.

Her letter mentioned that she had met with Mazel to report on recent events. It seemed she'd gotten close to the lady knight that was assigned as her guard. Besides that, she just worried about my health. She made no mention of the rumors about me spreading in the capital. She must have been trying to be considerate. If she knew what I was going to do next, I was sure she would have tried even harder to be nice.

Did this town have any good gifts for Lily? As I recalled, they traded with Triot for silverware. That was obviously no longer the case, but there still might be some items on the market. I'd have to take a look later.

Next, I looked over Mazel's letter. Yup, the defeat of the first of the Four Fiends went down just like it had in the game. It was probably safe to assume the rest of it would follow suit. I was a bit curious to know if the map had been the same, but…I could live without knowing for sure. I passed over his message of thanks to my family; I hadn't personally done anything, anyway.

Still, while there might be a hint to find somewhere in this banal letter, there really was a limit as to how much info a letter could contain. I did want to meet with Mazel, but given the circumstances, that would be near impossible.

Wait… If the stationing of our enemies matched that in the game, the dungeon of the final of the Four Fiends—the one set to attack the capital—should be to the city's west. Couldn't we use this to narrow down the list of areas around the capital we needed to fortify? At the very least, it meant we'd probably get mileage out of setting a trap at the western gate. I'd have to look into it later.

Seemed every day put a new entry on my to-do list for when I got back to the capital. I'd have to do all I could here in Anheim if I ever wanted to get around to those. Ugh, I was starting to get a stomachache.

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I summoned Neurath and Schünzel and headed for the dungeons. The bandits we had captured en route to Anheim had already been executed, and the girl who trespassed on my residence had been released in exchange for her fine. The Salters' Guild's cronies had also been exiled to Triot, meaning the man who we'd imprisoned earlier in the day was the only one inside.

The two didn't look happy about it, but they agreed to accompany me. I wasn't all too happy about this either but plastered a wry grin on my face as I loomed outside the cell framing the prisoner's silhouette. He looked at me, his mouth agape.

"To think I'd be seeing you here," he said.

"Can't say I wanted to see your mug either. How are you, Rafed?"

The Lesratoga spy in my memory had been pudgier. *I suppose the capital's dungeons had helped him stick to a diet,* I thought snidely.

He opened his mouth with an expression that made it clear he was trying to shake the answer out of me. Evidently, he didn't know what I was here for. "I suppose you're the man who is to execute me?"

"If that's what you want from me, I'd be happy to oblige. But first, I have some work for you."

Rafed blinked vacantly at me. I obviously didn't have eyes on my back, but I didn't need them to know that Neurath and Schünzel

were both dumbfounded and angry by what I had said. Hopefully, they'd hold themselves back for now.

"First, let me say this. After trying to put your hands on Lily and the others, I've got no faith in you."

"You put that quite plainly."

"That also means that if you refuse, I really will just execute you."

Rafed was still on the ground, but he looked up with a clink of his chains. *If someone's going to glance up at me, beseeching me with puppy eyes, I wish it were at least some pretty girl.* Getting it from a middle-aged crook sure wasn't doing anything for me.

"We're on the front lines, and it's likely that the Demon army will attack soon. If you refuse to cooperate, I'll just kill you. That being said, if I lose to the Demon army, they'll rampage through this town, and you'll die anyway."

"I can't be a spy for the Demon army, I suppose. They'd just eat me before I could extend an offer."

"It's not safe outside of town either. Even if you tried to run, there's no guarantee you'd survive."

"I see. So if I wanna live, working with you is my only choice," he said with a sigh. It seemed like theatrics, but whatever. I didn't think he was stupid, and actually, if he had served as a spy, I was sure he was naturally quick at judging his circumstances.

Plus, he was once a member of the second prince's faction. With the groundwork now laid for the first prince to take over, I was sure

he'd have some difficulty returning home. However reluctant he might be, he needed to throw his lot in somewhere new.

After a moment of consideration, Rafed at last spoke. "And the esteemed viscount will assure my safety if I cooperate?"

"I will, though I'm not clearing your slate when the job's done." That wasn't a lie. I mean, why would I bother lying, anyways?

"What would you have me do?"

"First, a question. You're a merchant and have some familiarity with poisons, correct?"

"Yes, that's correct."

That's all I needed. His knowledge would help me win. During Japan's Warring States era, Takeda Shingen once said, "You do not use people, you use their talents," and I planned on using Rafed's talents as much as I could.

"I suppose I could have you work with numbers as an official, but I'd rather make use of your knowledge. First…"

I explained myself. In the beginning, he seemed to be in disbelief, but as I spoke, his visage became drawn. It was true that the methods I was proposing were underhanded, but if I was fighting the Demon army, I sure wouldn't be fighting evenhanded.

"So, that's how far you'd go?"

"It is. I'll afford you a living wage. Oh, and I won't limit your movements, but I will post a guard to watch over you."

"Understood. In that case, I will have to prepare myself accordingly."

I would have to do something if he somehow managed to escape, but I was pretty sure he'd first decide to take some time to gather information about the town's current state of affairs and its periphery. Even if was planning something, he'd be obedient for now.

First, I'd introduce Rafed to the others. Then, in order to work some stress out of Neurath and Schünzel, and maybe get some exercise myself, I figured I'd get used to my new spear. Failing to adjust to its new weight could lead to mistakes. I'd have to get the hang of it before things got busy.

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During the afternoon of that very day, Werner introduced Rafed, former Lesratogan spy, to his other men.

Afterwards, he ignored the dissenting opinions of the others in attendance and left with his retainers to practice with his new spear. Behnke and the others remained seated as they watched them depart. Even in the end, Behnke was opposed to employing Rafed, but Werner had insisted that, "Our kingdom has, in the past, enlisted foreign knights who slew our own." With that, the others sensed the intent behind Werner's actions and decided to drop their opposition.

After that, Goecke returned to his mercenaries and Rafed left, saying he needed to acquaint himself with the Apothecaries' Guild and review the medicinal herbs the Merchants' Guild had for sale. This left only Behnke, Kesten, and Holzdeppe.

"Did you know of this, Sir Behnke?"

"I knew he sought leave from the capital to have a criminal serving under his watch, but I had no idea it was a man who once

served as a foreign spy."

Behnke answered Holzdeppe's question with a wry smile. Werner had used a specious argument, but it was the truth; he had said he would keep Rafed under his watch, but he had never promised that Rafed wouldn't be allowed to act autonomously. He knew that Werner must have decided on this before they had voiced their dissent.

Kesten folded his arms. "I do wonder if His Majesty is aware."

"Who could know? At the very least, the crown prince must have granted permission to someone at the Ministry of Justice." Behnke regained his composure and continued, saying, "But there is still room to wonder why he has kept it a secret."

Holzdeppe voiced his doubts. "That still doesn't explain it. Whether it be making use of this man or encouraging his moniker of the In-Debt Deputy, the viscount seems to be deliberately ruining his reputation here and at the capital."

"Good grief." Kesten nodded in agreement. The three worked directly under Werner, and from their perspectives, he was working too hard, even considering they were likely facing an attack by the Demon Commander.

In this half a month, he had entrusted Kesten with training new recruits and offloaded the entirety of governing the domain onto Behnke. Still, he paid attention to what the townsfolk were saying about him and also had created jobs to deal with the supplies sent from the capital. While he had cracked down on crime, he'd cultivated a reputation in Anheim as a strict but friendly deputy.

At the very least, he distanced himself from luxury and excess, and given his age, it wouldn't be strange if people held him in higher than average esteem. It may have been an exaggeration to say he was living fast and recklessly, but it was clear something had lit a fire under him.

They weren't mistaken in their judgments. From Werner's perspective, he had the issue of the Demon Commander's assault right before his eyes but also a pressing need to return to the capital before the Demon army attacked it. There certainly was something driving him.

"What do you make of it, Sir Behnke?"

"Hm…" Behnke stroked his beard as he thought it over. He cracked a conflicted smile, and said, "For one, he seems to me to be preparing to return to the capital."

"He's doing all this in order to go back?" asked Holzdeppe in disbelief.

"As you yourself know, we foresee an attack from the Demon Commander. But what will happen next?"

"Huh?"

"Should his sound governance win the day and revive the town, what will become of him?"

"People might say it would be best that he remains here to rule Anheim… I see."

Holzdeppe and Kesten shared a glance and nodded. Next, Kesten offered his thoughts. "But if his reputation at court is in tatters,

they may recall him."

"Rather, if Lord Werner defeats a formidable foe like the Demon Commander, further efforts against the Demon army shall go over smoother. Considering that, there may be some who'll wish to seize his current post," added Holzdeppe

"I suppose a province like this could get boring for a young viscount," responded Behnke with a bitter grin. Anheim did have a red-light district, but its overall atmosphere was depressing. Whatever liveliness now coursed through it was just the restless wartime energy. It really wasn't suited for young folks.

Still, they knew well that Werner was no playboy. Behnke's words were nothing but an ironic joke.

Kesten unfolded his arms and turned to Behnke. "You said, 'for one.' Is there anything else?"

"Well simply, if he has a poor reputation, fewer proposals of marriage will be coming his way."

"Is it true that he's already betrothed?"

"I've never heard of any girl."

The three exchanged glances. They had all sensed that rumors of Werner's engagement were contrived, but they each had their own suspicions as to who had spread them.

Kesten cleared his throat and returned the conversation to the topic at hand. "I wonder if he truly has any other reasons."

"We cannot know if Lord Werner has considered all this. I am perhaps overthinking things. I do ask that you keep my musings to

yourselves.”

With that, Behnke opened his mouth and shared his own predictions. As the conversation continued, the two began to scowl.

To a noble house, family name usually reigned supreme over blood. Carrying on the family name was a priority, and establishing branch families was a preferred method of ensuring that.

In other words, if Werner became head of the new branch of the family with his rank of viscount, that would be seen as a boon for the Zehrfelds on the whole. Of course, that would also mean that Werner’s abilities had been deemed worthy of heading a house, despite his young age, so it would be an honor for him too.

However, Werner was also the heir to a count family. Should he begin his own branch family, the head family would have to adopt a new heir. Of course, there were many candidates of suitable age, but few were suitable for the noble Zehrfelds, a family decorated with their own crest.

Still, there was one person suited for the position. Of course, that relied on him proving successful in eradicating the Demon Lord, but at the very least, none would raise objections given his accomplishments. The Hero, Mazel Harting, could be named the adopted heir to Count Zehrfeld by imperial decree.

Should he prove victorious against the Demon Lord—and therefore prompt such a royal decree—it would be a distinct honor for the Zehrfelds. With his achievements as Hero, many houses would see his worth, and his rank might even be raised to marquess. There was even a chance he’d be wed to the second princess.

With that, the kingdom would be able to bind Mazel in both name and blood, and House Zehrfeld would receive the honor of adding a princess to their family. On the other hand, "Mazel Zehrfeld" would be unaccustomed to the ways of nobles, limiting the political power held by the Zehrfelds.

At the same time, even if Werner's branch family earned him an independent viscountcy, he would lack necessary years of governing experience, and vassals to support him. Raising such a group would take ten years.

In other words, the Zehrfelds would gain outward power through accolades. However, it would simultaneously be divided into a branch house with a renowned lord lacking in influence, and a main house with achievements, honor, and considerable holdings, but a patriarch ignorant of the machinations of nobles. They would be quite compromised.

But this had a condition, and that was Werner being suitable to act as head of his own family branch. With the great debts he had incurred and his decision to welcome a foreign spy into his crew—especially one that had subverted his own kingdom—could he really be considered worthy of such a privilege?

While an extreme example, a troubled child like Mangold capable of raising his voice at another count would have still been able to take over a count house if he hadn't conspired with demonic beings. No matter how poor his reputation, Werner was still fit to inherit his father's station, though not without eliciting criticism.

But given his reputation, there was sure to be resistance if he was named head of a new branch family—that is, deliberately made the head of a *new* noble family. Establishing a house under a lord who drowned himself in debt and consorted with criminals would set an unspeakable precedent.

If anyone had plans of splitting House Zehrfeld, Werner hiring Rafed as his underling would put a hitch in their plans. It was nowhere near sedition or rebellion, but it would send the message that he was playing on his own terms. And his tactics would be quite a shock to those who saw him as just a manipulable brat who would follow any orders from above.

"Few targets are easier to exploit than a branch family with the lofty rank of viscount, still dependent on the protection of a main house led by a neophyte. There may have been some noble families moving with the goal of using Lord Werner for their own gain."

"This truly should be a shock to those who thought they succeeded in demoting him. It'd be one thing if he was the head of a viscount house, but the heir to a count can't just be left out in the provinces forever, however poor his reputation is. He'll be called back to the capital sooner or later."

Behnke purposefully kept his words vague with the pronoun "they." He skirted the subject, making it sound like it both was possible noble society hadn't been planning to split House Zehrfeld and that Werner's actions hadn't been in consideration of that plan. The others followed suit, speaking in subtleties.

Holzdeppe tilted his head and said, “Does he want the title of count?”

“Rather, I believe he is keeping such a dubious reputation so he can shield the Hero in the realm of politics.”

Should, for example, Mazel become the heir to a noble house—for example, that of Count Friedheim, who had fallen and left an empty seat after the battle to defend Finoy—Werner could support him in court if he had the title of count behind him. No matter what Werner was aiming for, the three had seen plenty that made them think he was working more for the sake of others than himself. Hearing Behnke’s words, the others nodded.

Knowing who stood at his back, the three shared glances. Finally, Kesten began to whisper with a wry grin. “Still, it is clear our lord viscount is quite the odd one.”

“Indeed.”

“I do wonder what he has in store.”

Werner was most likely the first noble in this world who had so little regard for his own honor. Behnke and Holzdeppe concurred, and with that, the three erupted into laughter.

Chapter 2:
Subjugating Bandits
~Appointed Lands and the Capital~

EARLY THAT MORNING, A GROUP OF ADVENTURERS carrying a letter from Werner arrived at the Zehrfeld manor in the capital.

Usually, when adventurers delivered a letter to a noble, they'd hand it over to the manor staff in exchange for proof of receipt. They would then turn that over to the guild to claim their reward. These receipts could be considered a form of currency circulating in the guilds.

However, the adventurers in this instance claimed that they had a verbal message for the count as well, which was attested to in another letter written by Werner and addressed to Norbert. Thus, they were allowed to meet directly with Ingo in the presence of some guards the kingdom had appointed to him as a gesture of concern.

Ingo heard their message and received the letter. If his expression while reading it was quite incomprehensible, well, that much was understandable. Afterwards, he ordered that a separate reward be prepared for the adventures, drawn directly from the house's coffers.

Then, after first having his wife, Claudia, and Norbert read the letter, he summoned Lily to the drawing room.

"Excuse me," Lily said upon entering.

Claudia and Norbert watched her carefully even before she entered the room. This was a place of learning, after all, for if nobles had the duty to hire workers, they also had the duty to train them.

"This is what I called you here for," Ingo said, presenting two sheets of monster skin parchment. "It's a letter from Werner. I would like you to read it as well." Ingo took out two sheets of monster skin parchment. Lily turned to Norbert, confirming that she had permission to take the letter, before doing so.

Lily then addressed the count, "Is it all right if I read this?"

She knew it was a tacit order, of course, but asked anyway. Claudia and Norbert nodded in approval.

"Of course," Ingo said.

Lily bowed before opening the letter, and she too scowled at its contents.

It was true that the letter had been addressed to Lily, and while the monster skin parchment that had been used was top quality and befitting of a noble, the contents of the letter were not so praiseworthy. It was full of complaints about the lack of delectable teas or alcohol and how the poor economic conditions had made the town boring. The fact that stains of meat broth and wine covered the letter was another problem.

"What do you make of this?"

"Please wait just a moment." Lily bowed once again before reading the letter for a second time. Finally, some quiet words managed to trickle their way out. "That can't be right…um…"

With Ingo, Claudia, and Norbert watching her, she muttered those words. But finally, she lifted her face and turned toward Norbert. "My deepest apologies, but might I also see the letter that was sent to Lord Ingo?"

Norbert looked to Ingo, who silently nodded before Norbert took the letter out of his hand. Lily took this from Norbert, but she didn't read the contents. Her thoughts seemed focused on something else. After a short time, she appeared to have come to an understanding.

"It's the documents tied together by a blue string in the drawer second down on the right in Lord Werner's desk. He would like you to review those, Lord Ingo."

"Norbert." At a single word from the count, Norbert left the room. Ingo gave but a passing glance to his retreating figure before turning to Lily. "How did you figure that out?"

"R-right. Lord Werner once taught me a way to communicate from afar using a blinking light."

She had actually used the method when Rafed and some other Lesratogans came for Mazel's family, though it was true that back then, it only served as a signal to commence their operation. Knowing this, Ingo nodded silently and used his gaze to ask that she continue.

"Lord Werner thought of a way to use longer and shorter flashes to send brief messages."

He had based it on the so-called Morse code that had existed in his old world. Still, while he knew the concept, he had no experience using it. He had to create something like it from scratch, so even Werner himself didn't think it was yet at a level that could have real-

world uses. While lamenting the fact he couldn't complete this code before his appointment in Anheim, he had asked that Lily make a cipher even should it be incomplete.

"I see. So?"

"At first, I thought we were meant to read only the letters that were dirtied or only the letters that were clean, but neither made sense. So, I thought the stains might have meaning themselves."



"So, that results in a meaningful message."

"If you read the wine stains as short blinks and the meat broth as long blinks, and then read the two letters from top to bottom, you get the words, 'take out, blue, in, right.' I think he made the letters dirty on purpose."

The idea to read letters usually written from left to right from top to bottom was impressive itself, but to think that the stains were a method of encryption was even more perceptive. Hearing all that, Ingo nodded.

Ingo was actually already aware of all this. The fact that the stains had been intentional, along with the message they contained, had already been verbally relayed to Ingo by the adventurers. Had a copy of this letter reached the capital via an "alternate route," its readers would assume it was nothing but Werner's complaints and grumblings.

Rather, Ingo had shown this letter to Lily to test whether she could properly discern Werner's intentions, and he was satisfied with the results.

"What do you think of its contents?"

"I do not think there is any way Lord Werner would have written such a letter." Her response was instant. Werner had truly tried to make the letter sound pathetic, but if he was able to witness how much trust Lily had in him, he might have chosen his words with a bit more restraint.

Just then, Norbert returned with the bundle of documents. Ingo took them and silently read them over. Claudia was beside him,

scowling wordlessly. She probably wanted to ask Werner if he really couldn't think of a better way to send the message. She knew it had all been a part of his plan, but she couldn't have been happy about receiving such a slovenly letter.

Seeing her displeasure, Lily began to wonder if she should back him up. That's when Ingo nodded, having finished reading the documents.

"Did you find anything?" asked Norbert.

Ingo stroked his beard and began to speak. "It's nothing but a draft. Disjointed paragraphs with notes filling the margins. He must have half written these documents, then set them aside for later." They all must have wondered why Werner had asked them to read such a thing. However, Ingo didn't offer an answer. Instead, he looked toward Norbert, his expression grave. "I shall depart shortly. Gather some servants to accompany me and send word ahead to His Majesty. Tell him I need a moment of his time to discuss an urgent matter."

"Certainly." Norbert bowed, his expression unchanged.

"Is it truly something so grave, dear?" asked Claudia.

"If Werner is truly in danger, I'm sure it is. See to it that Max is here by the time I return from the palace."

"Yes, I will."

Lily regained her composure and bowed at his words alongside Norbert. Afterward, while things had not changed outside the manor,

Ingo was a tad tardier than usual in boarding his carriage to see the king.

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Before the king, the crown prince, and the chancellor, Ingo explained Werner's letter and its intent, before submitting the documents in question with a bow. "That is all."

"I see. Your son is quite sensible," Chancellor Falkenstein said with a curt nod.

"Viscount Zehrfeld's plan would be effective," King Maximillian added. "As to the documents that have been submitted to us…?"

"I believe they require some amendments, but for the most part, they are sound," Crown Prince Hubertus said. It was clear from Ingo's expression that even he could not follow the conversation, and Hubertus offered him a slight grin. "Lord Werner's plans appear to place the Zehrfeld domain on the battlefield."

"It appears so, though I believe it's no more than a tentative proposal."

Written was an off-the-cuff list of evacuation plans or the areas they could use to their advantage—or to impose a disadvantage—if the domain saw a battle. Any noble with such documents would conceal these as a matter of security, leaving aside the fact that they were too shoddy for outsiders' eyes.

Despite this, Ingo had brought them before the king because he suspected that Werner's plans were hidden within them. If they weren't, he would have never sent that letter from Anheim.

Hubertus nodded at those words and shared his own inferences. "Most likely, he has written his strategy predicated on the presence of the Hero's family within your estate and the presence of Demon army spies within the capital. Should the Demon army attack your domain, you would send forces from your estate in the capital if you were able, which would allow the demons to target the Hero's family. These are a contingency plan for such an event."

"I believe it is just as you say." Ingo nodded.

At that, Hubertus continued. "What Lord Werner wishes to state in submitting these documents to us now of all times is this: The Demon army may be attempting to draw the knight brigade from the capital by launching attacks on various other targets at once."

"Indeed." Ingo nodded once again.

Hubertus looked once again at the bundle of documents before speaking. "Should the knight brigade be called away for several battles in succession, the relief force for Anheim won't reach it in time. That is what he fears."

"Of course Lord Werner would worry of such," agreed Chancellor Falkenstein with a nod. Werner's forces in Anheim boasted neither numbers nor quality. Under those circumstances, Werner had to do all he could to avoid a confrontation with the Demon Commander before reinforcements could arrive.

"The reason Lord Werner chose not to send his message in plain speech is because it would cause unneeded strife if the adventurers let slip the possibility of the Demon army appearing throughout the

kingdom. At the same time, the message clearly needed to reach the capital somehow."

Hubertus stifled a laugh as he added, "Though one group of adventurers safely managed to carry the message home. I do look forward to seeing how the third letter will be delivered."

"What an ill-natured thing to say, Your Highness," added Chancellor Falkenstein with a laugh of his own.

The king gave a curt nod before turning to Ingo. "You are Minister of Ceremonies, Lord Zehrfeld. I grant you permission to transfer your knights in the capital to your domain. Should our enemies have any intention of upsetting the deputy in Anheim, it is possible that your domain shall become a battlefield."

"My humble thanks for such kindness."

"For the time being, we shall also strengthen security at your capital estate. Do you have a man in mind, Chancellor?"

"My apologies, but I believe we should leave it to the Minister of Ceremonies. Otherwise, he would fear he was being watched," Falkenstein said with a chuckle.

Ingo responded soberly. "I would think nothing of the sort. Once more, you have my deepest gratitude, Your Excellency."

To those who believed Werner had been demoted, the king granting the count permission to carry out military maneuvers with his knights in the capital and a man with the rank of chancellor offering to help secure the estate was a big deal; it was proof that their faith in the Zehrfelds had not wavered.

It was late in the night when Ingo at last returned to his estate, having spent a long time in discussion with the king and crown prince. He ordered Max, Orgen, and Barkey to prepare the Zehrfeld domain for a state of emergency. At the same time, he also ordered that they prepare for what he surmised was soon to follow.

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"Viscount Zehrfeld's actions in Anheim are strongly indicative of anomalies. I insist that he be properly be investigated."

"I am aware."

A few days after Werner's letter had been delivered to Ingo, a meeting was held before the king. A viscount who served as the office chief of the Ministry of Justice spent an exorbitant amount of time making this case to the king and crown prince, since a group from Anheim's commune had delivered a bill of indictment to the capital.

There were two particular points this noble found issue with. One was that men connected to the commune had been punished without proper trial, and the other was that Werner had hired a foreign agent to work under him without seeking proper permissions. However, the chancellor and king had the man stand down without offering any direct words.

"I still believe that the actions of Viscount Zehrfeld are too heavy-handed

"Perhaps they are heavy-handed, but as deputy, that is his prerogative. There is no issue in forestalling this matter's resolution until we have received a report from the deputy himself."

Another noble had tried to criticize Werner, but Audenrieth, Minister of Domestic Affairs, shut him down. It was true that the deputy had the authority to carry out judgments himself using the authority awarded to him by his title should he judge the issue too urgent to wait for trial. While it was rare for a deputy to exercise that privilege, nothing was strange about his actions, given he was dealing with men who conspired with bandits.

"Even had judgment not been carried out by the commune, it is within the deputy's judicial authority. There are no problems at this time. Next."

With the king reaching that conclusion, they moved onto the next matter of discussion. One noble who had chosen to participate in this meeting raised his hand with a cry. "Lord Chancellor, my apologies, but I have something to say!"

"What is it, Count Gahmlich?" asked Falkenstein, all the while thinking to himself, *Ah, here it comes. Just as we predicted.*

"I do not believe Viscount Zehrfeld is fit to serve as deputy count in Anheim."

"Why is that?

Gahmlich turned to the king and crown prince, gauging their reactions. They said nothing, and the count confidently retrieved a letter from his breast pocket. "Please review this letter. It is addressed from the viscount to his father, yet it is filled with his want for money and alcohol and complaints about his maids. Its contents are truly deplorable! I do not believe he is befitting the title of viscount, much less deputy!"

"I understand your opinion, but first, let us read the letter." One of the vassals who had until then been waiting beside the wall approached Gahmlich, took the letter, and delivered it to Falkenstein as if he had been lying in wait for this moment. He quietly read over its contents before presenting it to the king. Knowing its contents, the king read it in silence, and seeing that he was done, Falkenstein asked a follow up question. "How did you come into possession of this letter?"

"While slaying bandits in my own domain, this letter was discovered amongst the items surviving a messenger from Anheim," Gahmlich proclaimed, brimming with self-satisfaction.

"Lord Zehrfeld." Falkenstein had the letter passed on to Count Zehrfeld.

Ingo looked over it before responding coldly. "While the handwriting may be similar, this is a fake."

"Huh?!"

Gahmlich went pale and clearly had something more to say, but before he had the chance, Ingo responded calmly. "Unfortunately, I, Minister of Ceremonies Ingo Fathi Zehrfeld, have not educated my son so poorly as to deliver letters stained with meat juices and wine."

With that proud declaration and glance from Ingo, Gahmlich was lost for words. The other nobles nodded along. Over the years, Ingo had earned their trust. His response and demeanor were enough to convince the nobles who were less well-versed in such matters that it was preposterous to think he would rear his heir so poorly.

With nothing more to say, Ingo silently handed the letter to the king. After watching the letter pass from the king's hands to the crown prince's, Minister of Domestic Affairs Audenrieth spoke.

"I hear that your son is an honor student at the academy. I doubt he would send such a tarnished letter even to family."

"B-but rumors that he squanders gold and acts like a hedonist spread even here in the capital. I wonder if his reputation as an honor student is truly…"

"The royal family has eyes in the academy. The viscount has proven his worth there," said Hubertus, speaking to Gahmlich. His eyes were still lowered to the "fake" letter as he continued. "I too have read plans and reports submitted by the viscount. None were in such deplorable condition. I cannot believe that he would send such a letter, even if it was meant only for his family's eyes."

With that, he submitted the letter to one of his servants and commanded it be removed from the meeting room. Count Gahmlich, his evidence thus dismissed, bore a frantic expression as the king then began to speak.

"Viscount Zehrfeld has acquired a position of honor despite his young age. I am sure some resent him for it. Count Gahmlich?"

"Y-yes, Your Majesty?"

"This matter shall be discussed no further. Do you have any objections?"

"N-no, Your Majesty." Even if he did object, it would be difficult to say as much after all that had happened. His evidence was already

out of his hands. For a mere moment, his expression soured, and then, he was silent. The court moved on to their next matter of business.

Once decisions had been reached on multiple issues and the king announced that this meeting had come to a close, most nobles were quick to leave the room. With the return of the Demon Lord, monsters had become much more active both at home and abroad, causing no end of trouble for the nobility and the kingdom at large. It created business for upstanding nobles and civil servants that would not come to an immediate close. They had little time to investigate what the crown or other noble houses were up to themselves, and some instead created factions or used their servants to gather intel. While a few nobles remained seated, once they had grasped the situation, they returned to their offices.

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Now, all who were left were the ministers who had been ordered to stay behind. The king waited for them to once again be seated before speaking. “Viscount Zehrfeld has picked quite the interesting method to get his message across, even if it was to make sure it reached its intended recipients.”

“Indeed,” Falkenstein said with a chuckle. While the adventurers had in the end succeeded in delivering their letter, if the goal had simply been to ensure that the letter be delivered to the capital, the copy Count Gahmlich had submitted was another surefire way to succeed in that task.

"If we assume the viscount seeks to ruin his own reputation, he must have wanted to show that dastardly letter to as many as possible."

Laura, the second princess, was one of the candidates to be Werner's eventual wife. Should a letter like that get in the hands of those who wanted to prevent such an outcome, it would certainly make it to the capital. Werner must have assumed as much, purposefully picking an unreliable group of adventurers to get the letter into the hands of his enemies, who wouldn't be able to resist showing it off at the capital. The spawning habits of monsters had changed after the Demon Lord's return, and Werner must have used that knowledge to properly predict that his messenger would be attacked.

Hubertus put on an amused smile. "It feels like we are being tested as well."

"Who could believe the contents of such a letter?" said Falkenstein, purposefully feigning ignorance. It was impossible to say for sure that testing them hadn't been part of Werner's intentions.

The royal family had chosen Werner believing that the Demon Commander would attack. They would never lend their ears to Werner's grumblings and pretend hedonism, much less in front of the nobles who sought to mire him in slander. Still, it was only natural that Werner would fear their reactions.

"With the crown making it clear that such libel will not influence us, it has become harder for the viscount's detractors to act."

“So that was your aim.” Equord, Minister of Foreign Affairs, nodded. He couldn’t keep the grin off his face, amused not just by the whole ruse of the self-incriminating letter, but at the idea of Werner composing those words himself. Ingo had also been brave to declare it a fake despite knowing that.

“Minister, I would like you to spread these unfavorable rumors about Lord Werner to those abroad.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Would you like to make sure it becomes a topic of discussion in foreign courts?” the minister confirmed.

“Yes,” the king said curtly. “Do what you must.”

Hubertus was the next to speak. “There is no guarantee that demonic beings do not lurk within our own capital. The same can be assumed for those abroad. If word reaches the Demon leaders that Anheim’s deputy is nothing but a sybaritic playboy, it would work in Lord Werner’s favor.”

If the Demon army heard from foreign demons that the deputy of Anheim was nothing to fear, they may let their guard down or dismiss him, giving Werner time to build up the domain’s defenses. They may even dedicate fewer forces to the attack on Anheim. Having confirmed the crown’s intentions, Equord bowed. At the same time, he realized they had another goal as well; they could expect other results from countries who lent credence to those rumors.

For example, if a foreign country tried to lure Mazel into working for them, what would happen if they told him, “I hear that Lord Werner is a terrible hedonist”? Mazel would see it as nothing but a

scheme to provoke discord in Wein. It would only worsen the hero's impression of that nation.

"It is also crucial that you spread rumors abroad that Princess Laura is a strong candidate for his future wife."

"Yes, I see." The king nodded at the chancellor's suggestion. Spreading information that his reputation was both that of a poor fool *and* that of someone respected by the king would sow chaos. Information wars sought to throw countries into disarray, but telling the truth as it was could also prove a tactic to accomplish the task.

"I see that office head of the Ministry of Justice was a position befitting him," said King Maximillian with little emotion. The others in attendance nodded.

Chancellor Falkenstein responded coldly. "We are lacking talent amongst the mid-level nobles."

"Let's gradually expand the scope of their duties and see how that progresses. Would that be all right, Your Majesty?"

"Yes. Divide the duties among as many nobles as possible." The king agreed to Hubertus's proposal and ordered it be carried out, concluding that matter.

Without him knowing it, Werner had become something of a standard by which the kingdom's highest authorities judged other mid-ranking nobles: "How do they deal with this young lord?" The current ministers needed to consider how they could *utilize* a noble's treatment of Werner when making their judgements.

Should the noble and Werner's goals align, they would either treat the noble as an associate or maneuver to make him an underling in order to use his skills. Should their goals be misaligned, they would either try to win him over or try to assign him somewhere in the kingdom where his interests wouldn't cause any friction. In the worst case, the noble might prove to be their enemy at court, in which case they would have to consider setting him against another political enemy to tire them both out.

In the eyes of the top brass, the more skilled a noble was, the more important it was that they find out how to leverage them for the benefit of the kingdom. Similarly, someone who failed to consider such things would be unfit to be a minister of such a great country. Putting aside defamation, nobles who sought to get in the way of those they feuded with were seen as unbefitting of any government post exceeding an intermediate level.

Considering this, an office head who failed to comprehend Werner's reasons for employing a foreign spy like Rafed and then, moreover, tried to bring the young lord down, was in effect failing the test. In the near future, it was quite possible that nobles such as him would be transferred to work in the provinces. The ministers also had to consider how to reform such nobles.

A country had to have many people of talent, seeing as an unfortunate accident or illness could cause claim one's life at any moment. If maintaining the family line was a noble's duty, cultivating talent for the country was a minister's duty, and none in attendance

took that lightly. The king's eye for choosing his ministers was praiseworthy.

Just as Werner had realized, the Kingdom of Wein was already considering a possible loss of Anheim. Should the land fall into enemy hands, they simply needed to recover in another way. They couldn't realistically keep all their territory intact. Choosing which lands to protect and which to abandon was just another part of politics.

The crown prince put on a slight grin. "He's made quite an interesting move. To think he would employ that spy."

"Even though his targets had been the Hero's family, he did fail to capture them."

As he failed in carrying out his crime, his treatment could be adjusted accordingly. To provide an extreme example, if Rafed offered Mazel's family an apology and they accepted it, the kingdom couldn't force the matter. They could, of course, still punish him for targeting the Hero's family to the full extent of what that entailed.

"If he wins this battle, he'll win the reputation of someone who can manipulate even the agents of our rival states. If he loses, none will pay mind to how he treated a single criminal. And yet, this appointment will put a check on noble society. The viscount exceeds expectations."

"You seem to be quite happy about it, Your Majesty," said Lord Audenrieth.

"A firm grasp of strategy is an admirable quality," the king replied. Some people's personalities didn't lend themselves to political

maneuvering. It was difficult to make such people central to the nation. It wasn't a matter of ability, but aptitude.

But if they proved they could make the right call when it counted, then things were different. That kind of ability proved them suitable for key positions. Nobles often strategized against the country for their own gain, and thus, it was not enough to offend the king. While it did not improve the king's opinion of Werner, it was enough to maintain his current one.

However, the royal family had another reason they considered Werner so important. He was valuable simply for being a talented noble with close ties to the Hero. The king didn't hold absolute power, and should the majority of nobles decide that a hero capable of opposing the Demon Lord was a threat to be eliminated, the crown would have to consider it—or at least, make it appear as if they did—no matter how important the hero was as a figurehead.

There was a latent danger that a majority of nobles could eliminate a powerful individual like the Hero, but Werner had stifled that possibility. Their relationship as best friends was well-known, and if anyone attempted to eliminate Mazel, Werner may seek asylum in a foreign country. That would spell a hefty loss of talent. A minister's son and heir to the seat of a count fleeing his country would bring shame to Wein, and the foreign country lucky enough to take him in would benefit from his talents. Even if certain parties were wary of the Hero, they couldn't openly move against him.

On the other hand, if Werner came to harm as a result of conspiracy, the Hero would likely see the kingdom and its nobles as

enemies. This kept any nobles from carrying out such a plan. Mazel had shown himself strong enough to defeat two Demon Commanders and one of the Four Fiends. Any noble house that went up against him faced certain defeat. Getting rid of Werner posed such a threat that no one could make that choice.

Because the Hero stood not on his own but alongside a noble—even if that made some dissatisfied or jealous—nobody could slight them by trying to eliminate them or getting them executed through false charges.

The crown was exploiting this stalemate. The king had faith in Mazel, which he made a point to demonstrate publicly from time to time. Meanwhile, the crown prince praised Werner and made it clear he had high hopes for his future. Between the two of them, both young men had a royal backer.

This meant that even should some noble fear the two friends would rebel, they couldn't speak of it openly as it would mean questioning both the king and crown prince's judgment. That noble would lose standing in court. If they wanted to protect their position, they'd have to abandon such ideas.

But as a result, there were others who had, unexpectedly, risen to prominence in their own rights.

"By the way, Count Zehrfeld," said the king, "how is the Hero's sister?"

"I actually intended to discuss that matter with you, Your Highness," responded Ingo with an unchanged expression. He explained the most recent issue, leaving the king looking glum.

"I see. I shall issue a warning as well."

"I am ashamed I could not be of more service to the crown."

"It is not a matter a single family could solve on its own. Do not fret. What of other matters?"

"As of now, there is no need for the kingdom to act."

The king nodded. Next to speak was the crown prince. "And what of the Demon army?"

"A small group appeared on the western border, but our forces there have suppressed them. There are no other signs of their activity."

"Stay vigilant. Make sure our that our agents abroad are not lax in gathering intelligence."

"Yessir!"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Next…"

It wasn't just in Werner's territory where monster numbers were on the rise. In order to properly determine where and how to mobilize the kingdom's forces, it was important to stay abreast of developments in other lands. They had to consider those alongside the issues of managing refugees and succoring victims of the Demon army. But most importantly, they had to prepare for their next attack.

The Demon army was humanity's ultimate foe, but there was no guarantee foreign powers wouldn't make a move should battles with the demons leave them exhausted. There was a never-ending list of things to consider.

Their meeting continued a while longer.

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I was making the final preparations for an attack on Anheim when Schünzel and Neurath asked me about the letters I had purposefully dirtied. It wasn't like it was a pressing issue, but seeing as I had no reason to hide it either, I gave them a quick explanation.

That day, I had asked some adventurers leaving in the afternoon to take with them a report regarding Anheim's governance. I had to submit those things by public route, so I decided I'd send it separately from the one addressed to my father, which I would send directly to our estate later on.

However, I had the adventurers of ill repute leave in the morning with instructions to follow a detour that would take them through several noble domains. The reason I gave for the detour was to ensure that at least one group made it to the capital, in case the main route was impassable. In truth, I kept the adventurer groups separate so they could do as they saw fit on the job—like selling the letter to a noble, for example.

I wanted to remove from Anheim any adventurers suspected of ties to the Salters' Guild, and this proved a good excuse for sending them far away. If they failed to deliver the letter to the capital, they probably wouldn't come back here. They might have been thinking they could come back once I had been overthrown, but I had no plans on giving them that opportunity.

The one worry I had was that all three letters might be intercepted, and none would reach my father intact, so I decided to

use Morse code. However, I couldn't deny that I was at least a little afraid that they wouldn't be able to decipher the letter. Still, even under that worst-case scenario, my father would probably get mad and send someone with a reply, so I only had to wait for that person to get here.

"I've got loads of guys envious of me after all."

"And you deliberately had the letter carried through those nobles' domains?"

"Yeah. Made sure to tell the adventurers we weren't on good terms too."

It's true I was half just venting about them, but it was also true that those nobles harbored some envy for me that I couldn't be bothered to care about. Being the son of a count family left my hands full already. I didn't want any other rank. I had no plans on getting in the way of anyone else's promotions, and I actually *wanted* them to just overtake me and get their fancy new titles.

"This is just my prediction, but I think that group is going to go missing in either Count Gahmlich's domain or Marquess Cortolezis's. Probably the latter." Though I didn't know if that was because they were going to sell me out to a noble or because they'd be put to death just for being a messenger from Anheim.

Marquess Cortolezis had a large fiefdom in the southeast of Wein, and he was from a notable military lineage. Still, I heard that his family had problems. Not only was the head currently recovering from illness, they also were getting some strange looks because he was out in his domain when, as a marquess, he should have been in

the capital. The family was so powerful they didn't have to worry about such things.

"Still, what led the marquess to so despise you?" Neurath asked.

"Hm… Well, I think there are two reasons."

"And those are?" Schünzel pressed.

I paused, putting my thoughts together in a way that would satisfy both their curiosity.

"First, they have something to say about my position in noble society. The simple reason for this is that I'm at the right age to be a candidate for Princess Laura's partner."

It was extremely annoying. Mazel and Laura were a much better match. I had no intention of inserting myself into the picture.

Still, because people viewed me as one of Laura's possible suitors, few were opposed to her journeying with Mazel to defeat the Demon Lord. In that light, the royal family's silence regarding rumors surrounding me and Laura allowed Mazel's quest to continue undisturbed. Just as the crown prince had asked of me after the Demon Stampede, it seems like I'd have to take the hits for Mazel.

"So, those who are vying to be the second princess's husband see me as a nuisance."

Still, they couldn't just assassinate me. Even if it wasn't me specifically, should any of Laura's potential partners be murdered, the first suspect would be another candidate. And that was not even counting how big of a deal it would be for a minster's son to be killed.

An incident like that would merit a full-fledged investigation. The risk was too great.

Plus, this kingdom's royal family was quite adept. One wrong step, and your head would roll too. Thus, it was easy to assume that all they could do to keep me from marrying the princess was to sully my reputation until I was deemed unworthy.

"But I doubt that'll go well for them."

"And why is that?"

"Because His Highness the Crown Prince already knows all this."

I already let him know that I would be spreading bad rumors about myself in the capital. Even if a noble tried to hinder me by spreading them, it would just get swept up into the rumors I was spreading myself. Plus, if there was anyone stupid enough to believe those rumors and try to use them against me, I could just reveal their plans and ruin their reputations. All of this was good for me.

I was sure my father couldn't be too happy, but I'd just have to apologize for that later.

"I'm the son of a count and minister. Any half-assed attempts would just backfire, and unless they came from a great house as well, there would be hell to pay. That means there's a limit on who we can assume might try anything on me."

Since Marquess Cortolezis and I belonged to different factions, I didn't have all the details on him, but I'd heard he didn't have the best relationship with the king. If the heir to a minister and deputy

chosen directly by the king was a playboy, that would indirectly hurt the king's reputation as well.

I explained all this to Neurath, who pondered it for a moment before responding. "So that's why the adventurers will disappear in Marquess Cortolezis's fiefdom."

"Probably. I'm predicting this based on the fact that during the refugee escort mission, he didn't warn us of impending danger."

He had kept us in the dark on purpose, but back then, I wasn't enough of a big shot to be directly targeted by a marquess. Even now as a viscount, I was basically just part of the masses in the eyes of a marquess. That was how big the difference between the two ranks were, even if they were both nobles. Given the muscle-headed nature of this world, he might just be looking down on me for coming from a rank full of nothing but civil officials.

"Back then, I think Duke Seyfert was his real target."

Marquess Cortolezis and his faction had probably been thinking, "Why has a great military family like ours been thrown aside for an old geezer who's supposed to be retired?"

Although creating a mob of monsters was outside of his means, he could still ignore a neighboring domain's request for aid or any victims from lands outside those he ruled. Thus, if refugees from the growing Demon threat in Triot were to suffer great losses under the duke's command, that would ruin the duke's reputation. He may have even perished in the battle.

Even if they weren't expecting that much to come of it, a crack in Duke Seyfert's reputation might have had people considering

elevating more martial houses back into the limelight, possibly replacing the duke. I was pretty certain that was why Marquess Cortolezis had left us in the dark back then.

"Marquess Cortolezis and Marquess Kneipp are both parts of the martial faction after all."

Still, even if they were in the same faction, they could still be competing for power among each other. With Marquess Kneipp out of the running, it was only natural that they would each want to increase the scope of their influence. Conversely, the royal family would want to avoid the rise of a new powerhouse. I thought it was very possible that the king had chosen Duke Seyfert for the refugee escort mission with that in mind.

"But I hear that Marquess Cortolezis is ill."

"Both his first and second sons are older than me." I casually dismissed Schünzel's statement, but then I realized that might just make him more dangerous. Both his sons were of a suitable age to marry Laura.

This could be especially problematic if the second son planned to oust his brother and become the next marquess. That might spur him to take some, shall we say, assertive actions, if not run amok entirely. Still, I lacked the intel to judge any of this.

"But why would they move against you, Lord Werner?"

"Hm… To summarize, the king and a small group of nobles are vying for power."

The Kingdom of Wein had no absolute monarchy, no autocrat. While this may sound sarcastic, in a world that had been teeming with monsters even before the Demon Lord's return, networks of communications just hadn't been able to keep up with the kingdom's size. If you didn't grant nobles a certain degree of authority, they'd be unable to solve problems that would eventually destroy the whole country.

While I didn't even have the slightest wish to marry Laura, I was still an eligible option, and one who enjoyed close ties with a duke on the prince's faction. While I was mostly just a puppet on their strings, other would see me as one of their favorites. Considering my father was also a minister, people likely assumed I was in the same faction as the king.

"Plus, if my reputation sours, that'll be a roundabout way of proving that the people who praise me are poor judges of character." Having to think so far ahead was one of the pains of noble society. I forced down a sigh as Neurath began to speak.

"In that case, why are you purposefully spreading bad rumors about yourself?"

"Well, I do feel sorry for my father for doing this." My mother too. I didn't think most parents would be too happy about their son's wanton appetites becoming talk of the kingdom. As for what the rest of the country thought, well, it didn't really matter to me. *I'm sure they can manage. They can forgive me for that much.*

"Will it not become more difficult to return to the capital with such rumors flying about?"

"It shouldn't be."

I had the words and actions of the crown prince and duke backing me. The only reason I was here was to fight the Demon Commander. If I succeeded in defending Anheim, I was pretty certain that even those in the capital could be convinced that I had spread those rumors myself. I was sure it wouldn't be everyone, but those people would never work with me anyway. I was just distancing myself from them in advance.

On the other hand, if I failed, they'd decide that I couldn't be trusted with lands neighboring those occupied by the Demon army, and I would be called back to the capital anyway. If things turned out that way, I hoped they'd give me something easy to do. Then I'd have all the time in the world to research the questions gnawing at my mind.

Still, my loss would mean great casualties. I could never forget the tragedy in Valeritz, and at the very least, I had no intentions of letting something like that happen where I had anything to say about it.

Thus, I planned to do everything I could, but I didn't want anyone sabotaging me. It would suck if someone blocked the shipments of goods we could only get from the capital. If people thought I was just a hedonist racking up debt to fulfill my whims, it was unlikely people would bother interfering.

"I'm sure the kingdom will take care of the rest."

Honestly, I didn't have the time to worry about what came next. The Demon Commander was a boss-level foe, and it was taking every

ounce of my power to come up with strategies to resist his onslaught. The rest was just the rest. I deliberately stopped myself from thinking about anything that came beyond spreading those rumors and focused entirely on the issue now before me.

***

A few days later, I left Anheim with my thirty knights, sixty foot soldiers, and all sixty of Goecke's mercenaries. Accompanying us were thirty porters and a few guides familiar with the lay of the land. Our forces were more than enough to take on brigands and bandits, but honestly, moving like that for too long would drain our supplies faster than we could afford.

Naturally, the larger the army, the better. However, larger armies required more supplies, and unfortunately, it was too early to send our volunteer forces into battle.

To be safe, I had our forces leave from multiple gates, rather than sallying forth from just one. In our absence, Sir Behnke would be handling governance, and Sir Kesten, the volunteer force. Frenssen would be assisting them as well.

"I pray for your safe return."

"Please do be careful out there. Make sure you lay the groundwork for some construction and keep an eye on the border."

"Got it," I said as they saw us off.

Rafed and the head of Anheim's garrison would also remain in Anheim. The only forces mobilized were those directly under my command, and I had personally procured all their provisions as well.

The commune provided no budget, but that also meant they had no say.

The captain of the garrison asked if we didn't trust his forces, but because I needed the commune's permission to deploy them, it would just have been a pain. I'm sure the councilmen would come complaining soon enough, and it was about the time I expected the Salters' Guild leader to run out of patience for keeping quiet. We had to deal with the bandits before that happened. We were giving the Demon army too much time to prepare, though I supposed the same went for the bandits too.

Right now, they were largely divided into three gangs. Or rather, I had baited them into splitting themselves up that way. I had Sir Holzdeppe and Goecke take out the smaller squads so the others would unify. I purposefully made sure to keep them in large groups while ensuring they didn't all band together.

Exterminating the bandits would take more time if smaller groups were spread out all over the region, but gathering them all in one place also posed a bigger risk for us. The larger possibility of bandits escaping would also make things difficult.

I had wanted to divide them into two groups, but one of the groups had dug their feet in precisely where I was hoping they wouldn't—and they'd up and built a fortress while they were at it. Calls for help had flooded in from the nearby villages they were exploiting. Still, I couldn't help but feel pillaging was much more a bandit's style than "exploiting."

In any case, I sent a knight to scout the place out, sent some messengers to the neighboring domains, and filed some quests with the Adventurers' Guild before leaving Anheim. There was no way the majority of the councilmen would fail to see the threat the bandits posed, and it wasn't like they weren't cooperative. But still, as they sent me off, they seemed at once satisfied and displeased. I just hoped they stayed out of my lane—I came here without insurance after all.

"Lord Werner, we have determined our enemies' locations."

"I see. Where are they?"

It had been two days since we left Anheim, and my scout had returned with intel on the bandits' hideouts. Sir Holzdeppe really knew how to handle scouts. Oddly enough, Neurath seemed like he might be a dab hand at it too. This was the perfect opportunity, so I had him work under Sir Holzdeppe as an aide.

"I'll demonstrate on the map. One group, those in the high grounds, have held their position thus far. Another group is located here, and the third is headed this way."

"I see."

Those under my command had rarely seen a map, much less an image capturing the terrain in three dimensions. They were shocked at first, but they quickly realized the convenience of having both a map and image that represented the topography. While the technique had yet to spread, I was sure it soon would. I could spread contour maps as well, but that would have to wait until Mazel defeated the Demon Lord.

I stopped thinking about next steps and studied the pawns on the map. There was a basin near the group that was staying put. It was more likely they were hoping we'd miss them entirely, rather than planning an ambush in that spot. The group in motion was heading toward Baron Zabel's lands. All three groups were about a one-to-three-day's journey away. I guessed that made sense, considering we were trying to keep them away from each other. Now, what to do?

"Let's take out the group that's trying to hide, first. The cavalry will flank the basin, and the infantry will descend from this hill."

"I heard it was you, Lord Werner, who devised the strategy used in the Hildea Plains."

"So I've got rumors like that spreading about me too."

It was a knight who had spoken, an aide to Sir Holzdeppe, far as I could tell. Thinking back on it, I had asked that the incident be credited to Duke Seyfert, but I guess I never asked that it be kept secret… Wait.

While I hadn't instituted a gag order, there shouldn't be many people who knew about that in the first place. There wasn't any reason to bring it up. That meant Sir Holzdeppe probably wasn't just some assistant to the deputy, but someone with close ties to a person of power. Well, as long as he did his work, it didn't matter either way.

"Could we use that here as well? They're nothing but bandits. We may as well completely exterminate them."

"Like that'd prove successful again," I said. The others were speechless, but I was only speaking the truth. During the Battle of Canae, Hannibal had been able to completely surround his enemies,

but when Hannibal's younger brother had tried to recreate that feat during another battle, he utterly failed.

In order to completely encircle your enemies, you needed the right terrain, a commander skillful enough to direct two flanks, and a frontline leader with keen judgment, among many other factors. To put it plainly, the crown prince had managed it, but I had no chance. However, I had my own fighting style.

"What shall we do about the bandits who have made camp far away?"

"We leave them alone for now. They found a base that works in their favor, but that also means they're stuck there."

I was sure it would have been a pain for them to climb that hill after joining up with other groups. They probably were having trouble getting supplies, among other things. While I couldn't judge that for now, Sir Holzdeppe's intel suggested they were waiting for other groups to seek an audience with them. It seemed that bandits quibbled over power as well.

That group seemed like it might be a bit of a mismatch, but if they weren't moving, we could leave them for later. It was time we hurried up and began to take some of these bandits out.

"Sir Holzdeppe, take the cavalry on a long path and lead them to the opposite side of the basin. I'll take the footmen toward this hill. Neurath, accompany Sir Holzdeppe and wait for a guide and my signal: two long, two short."

"Understood."

"Yessir!"

I ordered Schünzel to quickly make the rest of the necessary preparations and gave my orders to Goecke and his mercenaries. Then, I started the footmen on their path to the hill, all the while watching the ground at my feet. There were some perfectly sized stones, so I ordered the others to collect them as we went. I wanted to take these guys out as quickly as possible.

***

Upon hearing that the punitive expedition led by the deputy count had departed from Anheim, a certain bandit named Dagover moved his gang to a basin far from the road in hopes that the expedition would pass them by.

Dagover had once been the rough and rowdy head of a bandit gang in Triot. However, when the kingdom fell to an onslaught of monsters, he began to attack refugees from his motherland, taking not only treasure and food, but also human lives. Based on his actions alone, he was not so different from a monster.

However, the monsters in Triot only grew more frenzied, and creatures previously unseen in the area grew in numbers. Thus, he escaped to the Kingdom of Wein, where the monsters were weaker, in order to ensure his safety. Now, he carried out his attacks there.

Targeting Triot refugees was a cunning move. They often carried valuables with them, and some in Wein would buy precious metals even from bandits. The Kingdom of Wein was also in no position to counter their actions. With Marquess Kneipp's knights in ruin, what

scant forces remained had deemed the bandit attacks a low priority, given the victims weren't people of Wein.

For a while, Dagover had been able to act unopposed. He gradually swelled his ranks with other bandits fleeing to Wein and even some refugees who were willing to join. But with his crew so large, their takings couldn't meet their needs. With his men now numbering in triple digits, he began to lead them on forays to pillage Wein's villages to make ends meet.

"The deputy's only been here a month. He doesn't know the land like we do. I'm sure he'll either be headin' for Seghers, who's easy to find, or Granach, who's always out and about." Dagover laughed as he bit into a piece of meat he had stolen from one of the villages. He was the type of man who hoarded all the best spoils for himself. Seghers and Granach were the leaders of other bandit groups who had come to Wein from Triot, just as Dagover had. As far as he was concerned, it'd be best for him if the deputy just got rid of them.

That was especially true of Seghers. He was able to get his hands on a good hideout and had started demanding that the other groups bow down to him. A battle between Segher's crew and the deputy's lackeys would leave both sides exhausted, and Dagover could swoop in and claim Segher's bounty before the deputy could finish the job.

"There's not a lot of water here. We'll have to move tomorrow."

"Just suck it up for—"

"Gwah!"

Just as Dagover was about to finish his sentence, a scream rent the air. He looked around to try to find the source and watched as several more men fell to the ground.

"Boss! Up there!"

One of his henchmen pointed up the hill. Standing along the ridgeline were about ten men throwing rocks down on them from above with slings.

A master of the weapon had an accurate range of up to two-hundred meters, and even a novice could use it to expand their range. The shots were effective against lightly armored foes and could prove fatal to the bandits if they struck the right place. And for an expert shot, striking someone's head at a hundred meters away was no great challenge.

With countless stones pelting them from above, several bandits had already been incapacitated. While shields were standard issue for soldiers, few bandits carried one. And with the terrain giving their assailants an advantage, the bandits were practically helpless against them. Another few men were hit by rocks and fell to the ground.

"Those bastards!"

"Don't screw with us!"

The fact that their crew came from a hodgepodge of smaller gangs only spelled disaster. Before Dagover could bark any orders, many of the brigands were already halfway up the slope, swords drawn. And that meant they had nowhere to take cover. Without shields, to say they were reckless was an understatement.

Hit with a new round of rocks, those men fell like dominoes as they screamed. Those who had been hit in the shoulders and rolled down the hill while writhing in pain were the lucky ones; those who had been hit in the face lay lifeless on the ground with their eyes pointed at the sky.

"You idiots!"

"It's fine, boss. Those guys don't have any real weapons on them."

Urged by his underling, Dagover took another look at their assailants. It was true. While they carried slingshots, they had no bows or shields. A careful look revealed there were discrepancies in their armor. One of them wasn't carrying anything at all.

"You think one of the villages we attacked hired some hunters?"

"Maybe."

If they were hunters working in this area, it'd make sense that they'd have such a good grasp of the land. Dagover cursed under his breath as he reached a decision. He had always been a hot-blooded man, and not only did he have superior numbers, their opponents couldn't come hunt them down if they were stuck attacking from up on that hill. He drew his sword and bellowed to those around him, "Let's slaughter those flies!"

With that, he took the lead, rushing up the hill with his underlings following a step behind. At the same time, the unarmed man atop the hill held up his hand toward the opposite direction. The metal plate he held glinted: two long, two short.

As if to hide themselves from the bandits running up the hill, the group of slingers scurried down the opposite side of the ridge. The next moment, countless spears appeared where they had just been standing, bristling over the ridge like a hedgerow. The bandits had run halfway up the hill, but now, they froze in place.

A voice from Dagover's right rang out. "There's cavalry! It's a knight brigade!"

After hearing that, it was only human nature to turn toward the knights rushing down the hill, kicking up sand in their haste. They began to scream. The group of spearmen who had concealed themselves over the hill's ledge passed over it in an instant and rushed down the hill with a battle cry.

In a moment, countless cries and screams began to reverberate from the hill's slope as the men dressed in thin leather armor were beaten, punched, and stabbed, dying the ground below them in red. A spurt of fresh blood had spooked one of the bandits beside Dagover, but when he tried to run, he was ruthlessly run through with a spear. He crumpled to the ground without a single sound.

From atop the hill, foot soldiers with spears ran down, chasing the bandits back into the basin. Right on their heels, cavaliers rushed into the basin like an avalanche, running the brigands down with hooves and weapons. In an instant, the pandemonium gave way to a one-sided rout.

"How could this…"

"You simply lacked focus," said a cold voice.

A man stood right before Dagover, and while he was not a knight, he had a bearing like a sharpened blade. He felt a shudder run down his spine, but still, he took a battle stance.

"Wh-who are y—"

He cut his words short as he desperately parried an incoming blow. As his men fell one by one with tumultuous cries, it was all he could do stave off the darting blows of his opponent's sword. As a bandit, he was used to violence, but a mercenary more accustomed to battle was too much for him.

He swung his sword in a frenzy, but when his opponent slashed from below, his sword was forced from his hand. It flew through the air. As soon as he realized he was now weaponless, Dagover turned to flee, but the moment he did, one of the countless flying rocks dug itself into his thigh.

Dagover collapsed to the ground with a throaty groan. With that, Schünzel motioned for the slingers to stop and ordered that Dagover be captured.

"Excellent work, Sir Goecke."

"It would have been easier to just kill him."

Had Goecke wanted to, he would have easily been able to slay his opponent. The difference in ability between them just meant he had been able to capture Dagover alive. No matter his origins, Goecke was currently a mercenary. He had no need for pleasantries like stating his name before engaging in battle, and as long as he couldn't turn in the bandit for a bounty, it was easier to just cut him down.

Goecke looked down at the bandit leader bound and immobilized before him and spoke. “Lord Werner was right to assume we’d be underestimated if we attacked with stones alone.”



"Though armies still make plenty use of such tactics."

Still, it was true that most would assume that knights or soldiers working under the crown would fight with bows instead. And for a brute who ruled by strength alone, being bested by a few stones—not even a rain of arrows—would erode his standing in the eyes of his followers. Werner's plan to first attack with slings had beautifully hit the mark for a multitude of reasons.

"And where is Lord Werner?"

"He's leading the spearmen, hunting down the stragglers. He's driving them somewhere with no plans of letting them surrender."

"Then all is going to plan."

Goecke commanded his men to prepare their equipment, and Schünzel informed him that he'd follow as soon as he finished finish off the bandits who had lagged behind. Then, the two men departed.

***

Even as Granach, the head of another gang of bandits, moved his forces, he couldn't decide whether he should leave Anheim or launch a counterattack against the deputy's army.

While they were both bandits from Triot, Granach was a bit different from Dagover. He knew that acting too brazenly would only spur the kingdom to move against them, and so he'd picked targets carefully, mostly dairy farming villages. He rarely attacked people, and when he did, it was usually to collect a bounty.

It was only after he came to the Kingdom of Wein that he had become more blasé about taking lives, and that was only because his

new recruits had a penchant for violence. Gradually, Granach fell into the habit as well.

Granach was well respected for his strength, but he didn't have a firm demeanor. Thus, while he had begun to move his men after hearing Anheim's deputy had begun to target bandits, he wavered over whether to move as far as possible or to find advantageous land to launch a counterattack. This time, things had gone into motion before he could reach a decision.

Unlike the deputy's army, Granach's forces had been sleeping outdoors huddled around each other. That night, their leader awoke to a guard's scream. The eastern sky had taken on a pale glow, and it was late enough in the morning that it was easy to distinguish faces.

"Boss!"

"What's all this ruckus?"

Even leather armor was hard to sleep in. Still, monsters roamed about even before the Demon Lord had made his return. While it was a pain, his men all slept with their armor on.

They had a sentinel on duty to keep watch, but that didn't mean they wouldn't suffer losses if monsters attacked. They weren't nearly as deadly as the ones in Triot, though, so Granach planned on staying in this land.

Granach yelled at the underling who had approached him, startling the nearest brigands out of their slumber.

"I-it's Dagover…"

"What about him?"

For a moment, Granach considered the possibility that he had come to attack them under the cover of the deputy's campaign, but then, that doubt immediately was replaced by a new problem. His henchmen spoke loud enough for all to hear. "That damn Dagover lost! The survivors from his gang came to us and are asking for our help!"

"W-wait. What?"

"Like I said, Dagover lost, and the rest of his men…"

Granach yelled over him. "You dumbass! Wake everyone up! Grab your weapons!"

"B-Boss?"

"Our enemies won't be far! Hurry and—"

"We're under attack!" The shout rang out before Granach could finish. Holzdeppe and his knights had urged what remained of Dagover's men here and used them for cover to storm Granach's men.

The survivors from Dagover's crew didn't just rush in and ask the sleepy faces of Granach's crew for help. They knew that the knights were right at their heels, and in their fear, they ran further and further into Granach's encampment in a mad dash to find safety among the other gang. Whatever their intentions, the result was chaos.

Unable to grasp the situation, some of Granach's men joined them in running about, while others reached for their weapons. The group lost whatever cohesion it had as they scrambled to respond to the situation.

Seeing their moment, the knights rushed in and unleashed havoc upon the bandit masses.

"Stay vigilant! There's just a few of them!" yelled Granach, but in the uproar, even he could no longer hear his own voice. Screams of terror, startled shouts, frantic footsteps, and the cries of those cut down completely took over.

Amid the confusion, the bandits frantically swung their weapons, heedless of whether they struck foe or friend.

The knights pushed into the center of the bandit camp, never faltering in their advance. The confusion had turned to pandemonium, and it was then that Werner's infantry arrived and joined the fray.

"Show no mercy!" Werner barked. The soldiers divided themselves into groups of three, each singling out a bandit, then simultaneously stabbing him through with their swords, reducing him to nothing more than dead weight. The soldiers who had tirelessly pursued the survivors of Dagover's crew traded their heavy spears for their lighter swords, making it easier to attack. The only one still equipped with a spear was Werner.

However, for the soldiers who had used the surviving bandits as a decoy to rush into this free-for-all, using swords was both more convenient and advantageous than using spears. Swords were more suited for such a scuffle, and the soldiers brandished them without qualms as the bandits' bodies piled on the ground.

The bandits had been lax in caring for their weapons. Their blades shattered and their hilts broke as their blood spurted into the air. Men who had been trampled by hooves writhed on the ground,

while others screamed as their shields fell to the ground with severed arms still holding onto them. The follow-up stroke would silence their cries.

The bandits had numbers on their side, but in their confusion, they instead prioritized their escape. While a rare bandit would offer a counterattack, they had nothing going for them but their own courage. There was no organized resistance. Just as Werner had said during their efforts to reclaim Fort Werisa, no group could act under orders in the midst of chaos.

The pandemonium only grew, and when Goecke and his mercenaries arrived, they rushed into the largest group of bandits and mowed them down. The bandits were completely torn asunder, and now, all they could do was run about like headless chickens. Granach had been in a stupor, but he admirably sidestepped an enemy as he boiled with anger.

"You bastards!" Granach attempted to counter with his sword, but it only rattled against the haft of his enemy's spear. The man who came into view looked to be no older than a student; it was Werner, and he wore a fearless grin that ill-suited his young age.

Granach swung once again, but Werner used his spear to keep him at bay and out of reach. If he shortened the distance between them, he'd be in reach of Werner's spear, and thus, he had no choice but to step backwards. He tried to lop off the spearhead from the hilt, but instead, Werner drew in his spear and thrust it forward.

"You damned coward!"

"An interesting insult coming from a bandit," Werner retorted snidely. He made a few more stabs with his spear, advancing as he thrusted, and varying the speed of each strike to mess with his foe. With Werner having closed the distance, Granach knew he could no longer run. The moment he turned around, Werner would run him through from behind.

As soon as Werner retracted his spear, Granach rushed forward in a frenzy. Had he been thinking straight, he probably wouldn't have fallen for this trap. However, he had been at his foes' complete mercy ever since the early morning, and the screams he heard had driven him to his wits' end. Remaining calm given the circumstances would have been impossible.

Werner saw Granach try to shorten the distance between them and drew back his spear to hold it in its center as he swung its blunt end forward in a scooping motion. It hit Granach right in the jaw, sending him stumbling backward.

Next, Werner lifted his spear into the air and swung it downwards with all the strength he could muster. There was a dull sound as the impact shuddered up the haft to his arms.

The blow had pulverized Granach's shoulder. Unable to resist the stabbing pain, he crumpled to the ground. Neurath had been watching the surrounding enemies to make sure they didn't interfere in the fight, but now, he rushed to tie Granach up.

"Good job, Lord Werner."

"No, I'm sure this guy is better than me with a sword." Werner wasn't trying to be humble. Granach's current mental state and

circumstances had left him agitated and unbalanced. In other words, Werner had already won the moment they had forced him into enough of a corner to prevent him from making full use of his abilities.

"Shall we finish them off, Lord Werner?"

"Let's first get our soldiers in order. We need to treat those who are injured. We've had them running the whole day."

"Understood."

Soldiers walked often and a lot, meaning their daily exercise far surpassed that of a bandit. Professional armies were called as much precisely because they trained to push themselves beyond their limits. For this campaign, Werner had mixed an army with mercenaries, and if the situation called for it, he had no qualms about marching them to their limits.

Still, he couldn't ignore their fatigue forever. Werner had already created a situation that made it impossible for the bandits to run, and thus, he feared the potential damage of forcing his army into a counterattack. Their real enemies were the Demon army. He didn't want to risk losing any men to the bandits.

And, while it may have been quite harsh to say, a few escaped bandits were nothing but monster feed. Even should they try to hunt them down, sending only a small group after the bandits would prove more dangerous than the bandits themselves. That was just how this world worked.

It wasn't until later that night that Werner would learn an army led by Baron Zabel—whom Werner had contacted in advance—almost

completely wiped out the remaining scattered bandits.

***

"Wonderful work, Viscount Zehrfeld."

"Sorry for all the trouble, Baron Zabel."

Baron Zabel had only just turned thirty. While that might have earned him some criticism for being too young to serve as deputy, Werner's existence drew attention away from him.

But what stood out more than the man himself was his halberd. It was three meters tall, and he had a skill that let him swing it about with ease. This combined with his build gave him quite an intimidating air. He was so large that he had even been scouted by the Adventurers' Guild while walking through town undercover, and as a knight, he preferred to fight one-on-one. It was safe to assume he preferred military affairs to governance.

Amongst the three men who served in the former fiefdom of Marquess Kneipp, Viscount Gröllmann had held the most authority, while the other two were equal in position. Werner was of a higher title, but Baron Zabel surpassed him in terms of age and experience. Given both this and their personalities, Baron Zabel spoke more casually.

When they had first met, Werner had been asked to battle. It was a pain, far as Werner was concerned, but it paid off with Baron Zabel recognizing his skills. The baron treated him kindly, and they could be considered friends with a bit of an age gap.

"It's no trouble. I just had the easy job of stamping out the ones who ran. I'm sure your work has yet to end."

"The one group that's left has few fighters, but they're positioned in quite the tough spot." In his mind, Werner added, *though they're not going anywhere, so they shouldn't pose any trouble.*

"Shall I lend you some men?"

"No, but thank you for your concern. How have things been for you?"

"We've gathered provisions, arrows, and horses just as planned. We should have no shortage of supplies, even if the knight brigade from the capital comes emptyhanded."

"I'm relieved to hear that. How are your forces?"

"We've been able to put together squads of nobles and soldiers who managed to escape Triot. Viscount Gröllmann should be making similar preparations. Still…" He looked at Werner as if to try to judge what he was thinking.

Werner managed to maintain a smile. "You are the one who will end up on the front lines. You'll need the soldiers. Are things really fine?"

"Of course. We won't be participating in any maneuver warfare."

If he had veterans of Triot in his ranks, he wouldn't have had to spend as much time training them. Werner had also considered forming a force comprising nobles and soldiers who had come as refugees, but adding nobles to an army under siege could interrupt

the line of command, even if they were from foreign nations. He had therefore decided against it. He wanted to avoid anyone ignoring his orders and acting on their own since it could cause the whole formation to collapse. To put it bluntly, anyone who was likely to be a liability, he'd thrown into the second unit, under Viscount Gröllman and Baron Zabel's command.

Afterwards, they filled each other in regarding a few more matters. Keeping in contact with Viscount Gröllmann, who oversaw the former base of operations of the Kneipps, would prove important later. They made sure the basic plans hadn't changed and discussed how to distribute the supplies since they were somewhat lacking.

Regarding Rafed, the baron had simply laughed it off, saying, "I understand, but make sure he doesn't kill you in your sleep."

Werner forced a smile. Then, he handed off the letter he had prepared for Baron Zabel and asked him to deliver it to the capital. "I hope I've finished ridding Anheim of its filth, but I can't be certain yet."

"So you don't want them to know you've delivered a report," Baron Zabel said. "Understood. I'll have it delivered to the capital."

"You have my deepest thanks."

"Don't sweat the small stuff like this," Baron Zabel responded with a hearty laugh. Once his chuckles had subsided, he lowered his voice to a whisper. "That map you made is truly excellent. I'd like to hear about it from you, if I could."

"You'll have to wait a bit longer for that," Werner said, dismissing the inquiry with a wry grin. It was actually just a copy of

the map that had been made earlier, but it was still quite the excellent product by this world's standards. Werner knew that if he said too much, it could cause trouble for him.

The baron nodded. "Then I'll head back and take care of some of the bandits on the way. Be careful on your return trip, Viscount Werner."

"You too, Baron Zabel."

With that, the baron returned to the head of his army. Seeing that their discussions had concluded, Neurath and Schünzel approached. Neurath watched the baron's troops move into the distance with perfect form and muttered, "What brilliant leadership."

"They'll be our reinforcements if we need them," responded Werner, but he secretly thought it was more likely that they would be waiting as a secondary force should they fail to buy enough time in Anheim. Werner couldn't help but shrug.

The kingdom probably wasn't so optimistic as to assume that everything would turn out fine as long as Werner was there. Or rather, they simply weren't foolish enough to think that way. It was safe to assume that they had prepared another force or two to handle any contingencies. Of course, Werner planned on stopping the Demon army before they could move on to the others.

"Right, then. Once we're rested, we'll move and take care of the bodies."

While no one had ever witnessed a corpse turning into a zombie firsthand, it was commonly believed that abandoned bodies would turn into such a monster. Even if that wasn't the case, there was no

guarantee that monsters wouldn't be lured by the scent of a body if it was just left to rot. It could also spread pestilence.

Since a pursuit and multiple battles had followed their initial assault, the bandits' corpses littered a fairly large area. And they would have to deal with it. Unlike in Werner's previous life, monsters roamed the land, so it wasn't a job that could be left to those who couldn't defend themselves. Cleaning up after a battle was another job for the army.

"Gather up any metal equipment. Only collect armor if it's in good shape, though I doubt there's much of that. And get as much as you can of anything that's well-maintained. Once we've accounted for all the bandit's property, we'll divide it amongst the soldiers as an award. The rest can be burned along with the bodies."

"Yessir."

Cleaning up would be harder than the battle itself had been, especially mentally. Werner heaved a heavy sigh before heading over to pitch in.

***

After spending a few days to rest and clean up after the battle, Werner led his men to a village just in sight of the final crew of bandits. There, they met with the adventurers who had arrived before them and secured the supplies Werner had sent in advance.

It was only natural that the soldiers who took up these supplies made a face. Werner left them with the message to treat it carefully and began walking through town to check on the buildings. He rushed

through pleasantries with the village head and other such characters before finally sitting down with the adventurers.

"I've had enough of your quests, Lord Werner."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." said Werner with a slight grin. The adventurer group had taken up lodgings in the village. His attitude was hardly one for a noble to show in front of others, but given that that the quest he dealt them was harder than simply slaying some monsters, he thought he deserved to hear their complaints. He first handed them the gold as their reward and then asked for the intel they had gathered during the days they had spent in the village.

To start with, he asked, "Are there any bandits here?"

"There's twenty adventurers here. The bandits haven't come close."

Even if the bandits were able to gather water from elsewhere, they wouldn't be able to secure food. There might be some edible wild grasses they could gather, but it wouldn't fill their stomach. Hunting monsters was an option, but there was a limit to what they could do as mere bandits. Werner surmised they would soon begin to starve and was relieved that he was lucky enough to arrive before they went on their rampage.

"We went to check out the hill they're using as their base. They've set up a fort up there."

"Don't be doing anything too rash now," responded Werner with a shrug. He himself had been wanting to use that hill to their advantage. He didn't want the bandits to step too far out of bounds.

"Call for Neurath, Schünzel, Sir Holzdeppe, and Sir Goecke."

"Got it."

"And sorry, but I want you all to continue protecting the town."

"Sure. We'll leave the wars to you."

Leaving the protection of the town to the adventurers shouldn't cause an issue. Dealing with the supplies would prove a bigger problem. He didn't want the bandits messing with them any more than they already had. Not wanting the animals he had procured to tire themselves out, Werner decided to start their preparations.

Once Seghers heard that it wasn't just adventurers in the nearby town and that knights and soldiers had arrived as well, he immediately called for Eickstedt, his second in command.

"Hey, Eik. Looks like they've dug in nearby just like you thought they would."

The summoned man was pale and seemed rather exasperated. "Sure does."

Seghers took one look at him and laughed. "Ain't you the one who predicted this? I'm sure we'll get outta it somehow."

"It's because I predicted this outcome that we should have left here quickly," responded the man who was casually referred to as "Eik" by their gang's leader. Gaining control of such favorable land and using it as a temporary base had been a good thing, but after coming out on top of a few skirmishes with other gangs, Seghers had decided to lay down roots here.

It wasn't just that. There had been other failures in communication. While Eickstedt had wanted to join forces with some other crews and move to a new land, Seghers had sent some messengers to those very crews demanding they submit to him. It resulted in their complete isolation. Eickstedt's current circumstances were all due to the fact he thought he could use this simple man. Seghers had been *so* simple, however, that it proved fruitless.

Their lack of foodstuffs also contributed to Eickstedt's pessimism. With the adventurers in the nearby village, they couldn't steal their food. He knew their starvation was imminent. Even so, Seghers refused to leave. He'd become a sticker for this hill and the way it let him look down at the world around him.

The most unfortunate thing for Seghers and Eickstedt was that their attitudes had worked against them, resulting in the surviving members of Dagover and Granach's men not coming to them for aid. It had left them cut off from news of their surroundings, though they had no way of even knowing it.

"The deputy's soldiers are approaching, boss."

"So they're here already."

Seghers abandoned a scowling Eickstedt as he left the building to peer over their makeshift walls. He glared down at them curiously. "What's with that green plate? And what's that towerlike thing behind it?"

"I don't know," responded one of his henchmen. No one else ventured an answer. As bandits, they had never even heard of

catapults before. With the machine's lower half hidden from view, they had no words to describe it with but "some wooden thing."

Still, once a boulder the size of a child's head came crashing into their fort with a *BANG* right when the soldiers began to move, their words poured out in an uproar.

"What the hell is that thing?"

"That's a catapult… They had one of those?!" Hearing the noise, Eickstedt rushed to examine the situation and was shocked by what he saw. A second rock made an impact just outside the fence, leaving a crater in the ground.

"That was close…"

"B-but it seems like they're not having an easy time aiming."

"Hey, Eik. Do we rush out and try to burn that thing to the ground?" asked Seghers.

While catapults had a range of only two hundred meters, the range of a longbow was over four hundred. But that only applied to skilled bowmen with well-kept weapons. The kind of bows bandits had wouldn't reach the catapults.

Eickstedt shook his head. "We can't. They have crossbows hidden behind those plates. We'd lose too many of our men before we could make it."

"Damn it!" cursed Seghers. But eventually, he seemed to relax a little. No matter how many rocks flew their way, they suffered few casualties. While the bandits had been rushing about inside the fence when the rocks first started to fly, the panic had subsided; now they

waited and watched for the moments just before the rocks made impact.

"Seems we're safer than I thought."

"They're meant to destroy castle walls. If they had more than one, it would be one story, but there's little they can accomplish with a single one." Given that, Eickstedt wondered why that had gone to the trouble of bringing one all the way out here. That was when a new shadow appeared overhead. It landed right in the middle of their fort along with the snapping sound of breaking wood. The next second, a loud buzzing filled the air.

A few of the bandits realized what it was and began to scream. "B-bees! It's beeeeees!"

Even Seghers and Eickstedt were frozen. The bees' nest had been inside the barrel that had smashed into their fort, and now, the bees swarmed into a black mass that began to attack those around them in anger. In a single moment, the surroundings became a vision of hell.

"Ow! I-it hurts!"

"Somebody save me!"

They swung their blades but to no avail. Nor was their leather armor of any use against the bees that engulfed their whole bodies. They were stung in their faces, and a burning pain ran through their exposed arms and feet. A man's legs had become their prey, and he collapsed on the ground with a scream. Some of his comrades approached to help, but that only led to them falling victims to the bees as well. They writhed around on the ground.

These bandits had no qualms about taking human life, but they now ran around in a panic, flinging aside their weapons as they dashed about. The walls they had built to protect them had become their cage.

"H-how could this…?"

Neither Seghers nor Eickstedt could think of a way to deal with the sudden change in the situation before them. Still in a daze, they noticed the swarm of bees approaching them. Their faces contorted in fear before they could even grasp their situation.

"There's no point in leaving any. Let's throw them all in," directed Werner.

"What a shame," responded Schünzel. "Honey is quite the delicacy." He signaled to those manning the catapult. Their faces were stretched taut into grimaces as they put the buzzing barrel into place.

The soldiers operated the catapult as if they just wanted to get the bees away from them as soon as possible. With that, a new barrel was flung right into the center of the bandits' fence. They felt like they could hear their screams all the way from where they stood, but that may have just been a trick of the wind in their ears. With the barrels full of beehives now far away, the soldiers let out a sigh of relief.

"I've never heard of launching beehives before," muttered Holzdeppe in exaggeration.

"You haven't?" Werner was surprised. In his old world, even corpses had been thrown over town walls to spread diseases. From his perspective, he wasn't doing anything quite so strange. He quickly

dismissed it, realizing it was probably not a method of choice in this world that so valued personal valor.

Still, the adventurers who had taken on the quest to put those beehives in barrels had the right to complain. Even seasoned mercenaries like Goecke's men wore forced smiles. They surely sympathized with the adventurers.

It should be noted that even honeybees could sting. The Japanese honeybees of Werner's old world were quite docile and rarely attacked humans, but even they would use their stingers to protect their hives. To Werner, the honeybees of this world seemed quite aggressive, but that may have been influenced by his bias that things of this world were invariably belligerent.

"I didn't know that smoking hives could keep the bees docile."

"I had only heard about it myself. It seems that the smoke doesn't kill them."

In exact terms, he had only seen it on a beehive extermination special on television during his past life. Even so, it was quite a dangerous task. But this world had potions and healing magic. There was no denying that he had an odd conviction that adventurers couldn't be killed by beestings.

"If the entire hive is put in the barrel, the rest of the bees will return to be with the queen. All that's left is to put the cover on when it grows dark."

"I doubt that's really all there is to it."

Werner was relieved to see that things worked out nicely despite his vague recollection of the process. He turned back to watch the fence the bandits had built. Schünzel had simply tried to ignore it. Werner himself knew that his tactics weren't very befitting of a noble, but he didn't need another reminder of that, so he decided to change the subject.

"I didn't realize preparing catapults required so much time."

"I think the fact the soldiers are new to it is contributing to that."

They couldn't expect accuracy with a target the size of a human. It was also quite heavy and, depending on the size of the cart and the terrain, moving it could prove a difficult task. Preparing the projectiles also took time. Even when making allowances for the fact that this was the first time any of the soldiers had operated a catapult, Werner's honest impression was that while it seemed cool, catapults were difficult to use.

While Werner quietly surmised that it would be better to use ones that were fixed in place, the bandits had opened the gate and begun to descend the hill.

"Prepare the crossbows."

"Crossbows ready!"

"Shoot!"

There was no need for Werner's orders, as Neurath was on the front line and had already ordered them to shoot at the fleeing

bandits. The bolts formed a curtain, and Werner watched the bandits fall as he commanded torches to be prepared.

"Cleaning up after this is going to be tough."

"I wonder if there will be any honey left."

"If there is, you're welcome to have it."

They had no choice but to burn the bees. That would likely take more time than dealing with the bandits, but as long as Werner's men were vigilant, they wouldn't suffer any losses. Werner commanded the nearby soldiers to stay on high alert. Then, he decided that while waiting for the bees to tire themselves out, he would turn his thoughts to matters ahead. Rather than the bandits which were all but destroyed, Werner was more concerned about how to compensate the villages that had been their victims.

A few hours later, they entered the bandits' base to eradicate the bees. They took a few survivors as their prisoners.

***

While Werner was leading his crusade against the bandits, ten men had gathered for a clandestine meeting in a room deep inside Anheim's church-run hospice.

The hospice was operated by the church as a first-aid station for the poor. Usually, travelers who had fallen sick during their journeys, destitute townsfolk, the elderly, or others who had no one to care for them gathered here to receive treatment, rest their bodies, and live their lives together. Such places were altruistic facilities funded by philanthropists from across the land. Thus, it wasn't rare for the

town’s most influential personages or their subordinates to pay the occasional visit.

However, those gathered here today had a completely different agenda.

“He’s completely ignoring us!”

“Letting that youngster roam free has gone to his head!”

One after another, the men voiced their complaints. Those who had gathered had mostly received the cold shoulder from Werner, the new deputy. There were councilmen, others who had influence in the town, and even some minor government functionaries who had received the short end of the stick. Amongst them were a man whose daughter was treated like a criminal by Werner, and even the leader of the Salters’ Guild. More precisely, the latter of those two was the one who had gathered everyone for this meeting.

The vice-captain of the garrison was also there. The garrison’s captain had completely yielded to Kesten—a man that the new deputy had brought to town—but the same couldn’t be said about the vice-captain. The fact that Werner had clamped down on them harshly was the source of his dissatisfaction. More than anything, when he had underestimated Kesten and challenged him to a duel thinking that his large build couldn’t amount to much given his advanced age, he was met with utter defeat. After that humiliation, he could only voice his complaints in the shadows.

“I just can’t stomach the fact that he dispenses judgments all by himself!”

It was only natural someone in attendance would bring that up. Most crimes in this world were punished with fines. One reason was that there were no prisons meant to hold inmates for long stretches of time, but even more importantly, there was a lot for the deputy to gain from carrying out trials.

For example, if a wrongdoer was fined for a hundred pieces of silver, the victim would receive ten to twenty percent of that, those who carried out the trial would receive a piece or two for their efforts, and the rest would go right into the pockets of the deputy. It wasn't rare for him to take more than seventy percent for himself.

Naturally, the deputy was passionate about charging aggressors for crimes, and the councilmen who ran the trial would receive a bonus every time they tried someone in court as well. Not only did those criminals have to pay a fine, but they were also put to work, meaning they became cheap labor for the bigwigs to exploit. It was a sweet deal for the councilmen.

There was also another unique reason for this. When the domain had been Marquess Kneipp's fiefdom, a law offered an allowance to those who participated in trials.

As the city was situated on the border with Triot, there were many cases regarding the smuggling of goods. It took time from the councilmen, and even after Triot had fallen and Marquess Kneipp perished in battle, that law remained. The deputy appointed by the marquess wasn't an irreputable one, but he allowed the right to a bonus for participating in a trial to apply to *all* crimes, not just the

ones related to illegal goods. As a result, Anheim carried out more trials than was typical across the kingdom.

But now, Werner had gotten rid of this allowance on the pretext that Anheim was no longer the marquess's domain and instead carried out trials swiftly using his own judgments. For more minor crimes, he dispensed with the trial altogether, and instead sentenced offenders to forced labor. Since verdicts handed down by the deputy alone rarely went to trial, those appointed to the judicial committee were missing out on money they once earned.

Of course, the deputy had the privilege to carry out trials this way, but it was rare that one of them exercised it. It was hard to argue against the fact that Werner was ignoring the influential men of this town. Of course, though, that hadn't been his goal.

"Let's give him some trouble."

"It'll hurt us as well if he fails to eradicate the bandits, but he does need to taste a little hardship."

"Supplies arrive late all the time, anyways."

"Is it really all right to do this?" came a worried voice, but a middle-aged man dismissed him with a laugh.

"There's nothing to worry about. He's not here, but the head priest is letting us use this facility because he's on our side. The deputy can't interfere with the church."

"No, that's not quite right." All in attendance turned their gazes toward the sudden voice. There, they found a relaxed man with the look of a merchant. Arrayed behind him were countless armed men.

"Wh-who the hell are you?"

"Sorry for being late to the introductions. I work for the deputy, Viscount Zehrfeld. The name's Rafed." He bowed before them, but he was polite in attitude only. He lifted his face to reveal a sarcastic grin. "I heard all you had to say. Of course, the head priest gave me permission to be here."

Silence filled the room. Some faces remained unchanged while others turned red or white. Amongst them, one barely managed to reply. "W-wait. We haven't done anything. It might've sounded like we had some complaints about the deputy, but…"

"That's not what I'm here for," said Rafed with a shrug. "In the papers the viscount was reading in the capital before he got appointed here, he found something about donations to Mangold. I hear there were quite a few names on that list."

The guildmasters on the council went pale. What Rafed said was true. One among them raised his voice conspicuously. "And what would be the problem with that?! Back then, Lord Mangold was just the son of Marquess Kneipp!"

"That's true, but it's also true that he ignored the king's orders and gathered forces for a planned assault on Fort Werisa. It's quite the serious crime, so we've got to figure out the source of his budget."

Information was different between here and the capital. Anheim was a town on the border, and if a patriarch died in battle, it was only natural for his son to succeed him. Of course some would want to make a good impression on Mangold, the "next Marquess Kneipp."

While Mangold was rough-spoken and rude, that wasn't all that rare among the nobility.

Still, it was true that the money coming from donations and offerings of the powerful men in town had different implications than simple taxes, even if it would be a stretch to charge them for crimes on that alone. Still enough to possibly detain them for a few days to determine if they knew that Mangold was using that money to gather troops without permission. During that time, they wouldn't be able to mess with anything else.

Basically, the goal was to keep them quiet for a few days, and since it had been the goal from the start, any reason could have been used as a pretext. It didn't take much time for the councilmen to realize that they had been beaten to the punch.

Rafed once again bowed—not an empty gesture but the flourish of an actor who'd played his part. Though unfortunately, he didn't have the looks for the profession. "Oh, and we'll be investigating a few of you for another matter. I hear that under the confusion that followed after the marquess passed away, some of you might have falsified guild profits to commit tax fraud."



"Wh-what? Where did you hear such a—"

"I've got faith in my ability to find those who've got complaints. The guilds aren't a united front, you see."

Rafed's words suggested that some whistleblower who had a vendetta against his guildmaster had tipped Rafed off, and it had the blood rushing out of some of their faces. With one motion from Rafed, the soldiers piled in. The meeting's attendees went quietly, perhaps because they knew fighting against such numbers was futile. Once they were gone, Kesten and the head priest appeared to take their place.

Rafed bowed. "My greatest thanks for cooperating with us."

"It was nothing. You had a letter from the holy woman herself asking me to come to the viscount's aid," responded the priest with a smile.

One of the reasons the Iron Hammer had come to Anheim was because they had taken on a quest to deliver the letter from the Adventurers' Guild in the capital. Ultimately, though, it was what got them stuck on beehive-collecting duty. Later, their members were heard grumbling, "And we thought this would be an easy job just delivering some supplies and a letter from the capital."

After exchanging small talk with the priest, he left. Now, it was Kesten who turned to Rafed with a snide look in his eyes. "I see you are quite passionate about your work."

"I'm just trying to protect myself. Besides…"

"Besides?"

"I don't want to make any more of an enemy out of a man who's not just the Hero's friend, but one the holy woman would directly command others to help." Then, in a tone both impressed and sorrowful, he added, "It would mean making an enemy out of all the churches on the continent."

Kesten could only respond with a bitter grin and a nod.

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Just as Werner was leading his army against the bandits, back in the capital, Hubertus was meeting with Schündler, Minister of Military Affairs, to review a report. Hubertus nodded as he looked over the documents, but that was when Seyfert entered, bearing with him their plan to defend the capital. Seeing it as a good opportunity to discuss the plan further, the three proceeded to Hubertus's office.

Seyfert was the first to speak. "What is it?" he asked, seeming quite interested in Hubertus's expression.

"Our opponents are amateurs," he said, handing Seyfert the report. Seyfert swiftly cast his eyes over the contents, and Hubertus continued. "It seems that Count Mühe, who was sent to Valeritz, and Count Schanderl, who was tasked with keeping the Salt Road safe, have both safely neutralized a horde of monsters."

"So the monsters were lured north to separate them from the knight brigade headed to Anheim."

"It seems that the battle happened just where we predicted it would."

Currently, Valeritz was being rebuilt to serve as Marquess Kneipp's new fiefdom. It was still a strategic point connecting trade between the capital and the temple of Finoy. The road connecting Wein to the island of Zallois to the northeast also opened the capital to the ships plying the path between the island and the port town, making it an important road for the salt trade. It was an obvious target for an attack.

"I hear that Marquess Norpoth is also quite wary of the watering hole on the road to Marquess Kneipp's erstwhile fiefdom."

"We were attacked there as well, but it was nothing outside our expectations," said Hubertus, his eyes still on the plan the Minister of Military Affairs had prepared.

Seyfert nodded. "Just as Viscount Zehrfeld had feared, it appears that their goal is diversion and to stop the knight brigade's approach."

"Our enemies must certainly have someone at the helm," Schündler said.

Hubertus answered coolly. "That, too, is as we predicted."

Both Seyfert and Schündler nodded in agreement.

The plan that the Demon army's strategist had created was not itself off the mark. However, they failed to step outside of the box with their targets. All three of them surmised that their opponent was little accustomed to battle. But at the same time, the Demon army still had someone strategizing for them. At the very least, they had to stay

vigilant, as their enemies were not just wild beasts that could be cowed with brute force alone.

"Still, it is quite difficult to maintain our supply lines when the battle stretches to so many lands."

"Though we are currently preparing to deploy the knight brigades directly under Viscount Reinisch, Viscount Degenkolb, and some others to the important cities in both the east and west," muttered Schündler.

Seyfert nodded. "Indeed…though I doubt this situation will last much longer."

"You truly think so?" asked Schündler.

Seyfert responded with a nod. "Our enemies are making moves in Anheim. It is hard to surmise what a man like Lord Werner may be planning, but he is not so daft that he'd fail to understand the situation."

The letter he sent told them of the possibility of an assault on the count's domain and an attack inside the capital. He could of course have been considering that the Demon army would create a diversion, but if he thought so far as to consider that demon spies may have once again made their way inside the capital, Werner would try to make a move himself. At least, that was what Seyfert had concluded.

"Even should he have a plan, there are those who are critical of him in Anheim. It would make sense for messengers to reach us via either Baron Zabel or Viscount Gröllmann."

"I see. I wonder if it will really come to such."

"I would not mind being wrong. As we have been able to preserve the knight brigade, at the very least, all is currently moving according to plan," said Seyfert. That was when a servant entered the room with the message that a letter had been delivered from Baron Zabel. Schündler glanced at Seyfert, but in response, he only grinned.

Chapter 3:
The Fight for Anheim
~Strategy and Reunion~

JUST AS IN THE MIDDLE AGES OF EUROPE, EVERY town in this medievalesque world had a plaza at its center. Summer festivals were held there, and when merchants came, that's where they'd set up shop. At times, it was host to crowds that gathered for political action, or sometimes the backdrop for a show, and occasionally, it was the scene of a crime.

One big difference between this world's plazas and those of my old world was that religion wasn't what towns here revolved around, so the biggest churches weren't built facing the plaza. Some plazas had fountains and some didn't, though that was probably because fountains required a magic pump to operate.

"Execute them!" With my declaration, the three soldiers who served as executioners severed the heads of the men on the block. Dagover's head flew especially far, earning a cheer from the audience.

The heads were stabbed through with pikes, and each soldier carried one off as if it were an offering. The townsfolk crowded around them and followed them off. They looked a lot like the processions that would carry portable shrines back in Japan, though it was quite a grotesque sight, considering they were carrying decapitated heads rather than gods. This time, there were friends and families of the victims in town, so the crowd was especially large.

Usually, criminals from the higher classes were executed by decapitation and the rest were hanged. It was kind of similar to the medieval ages of Japan where samurai would commit seppuku and the rest would be decapitated. It seemed like using status to decide execution method was a constant in any world.

Still, I had decided to use decapitation this time. When you hang criminals, their bodies get left there to send a message, but I decided to put just their heads on display. I had a platform with chopping blocks built for just that purpose, based on the *gokumondai* or "prison platforms" of old Japan. I had only ever seen them in period dramas, but the fact that using them was so rare in this world had drawn my attention.

Maybe it was because I still had my memories of being Japanese, but I watched the merry crowd coldly. Still, I made sure to keep that off my face. I couldn't forget that executions being a form of entertainment was normal in this world, not an aberration, even if it never really sat right with me.

According to the natural sciences, all human life was equal, but from a political or military perspective, you couldn't place the same importance on the life of your enemies as you did on the life of your comrades. Unfortunately, I had to view things from the latter perspective.

Even if it was to protect those near and dear to me, I couldn't honestly say I had no qualms taking my enemies' lives. But since this was the course I had chosen, I couldn't let others see that. I didn't want to forget that feeling. Maybe this was the difference between

reason and emotion. Humans have always been full of contradictions after all.

I collected myself and returned to my office to have a discussion with the councilmen. I gave my thanks and promised rewards for those who had cooperated with me. I also entrusted them with more work and asked that they prepare more jobs for the refugees. It wouldn't be long before we'd need all hands on deck, so I wanted as many people as possible on the simple jobs.

Conversely, I made sure to deal with any malcontents accordingly. Sir Behnke had already gathered the evidence of their tax evasion, so I slapped them with appropriate fines, which seemed like they'd yield some pretty huge stacks of coin. When it came to Mangold, I let them off with a reprimand.

I was pretty sure that the reason the councilmen had been so tame was because of the display of decapitated heads they'd just witnessed—a novel punishment for people of this world. They were wary of me. I had punished them like high-class men but treated them like the lowest of the low. Of course they wouldn't know where they stood.

Once we'd all finished probing each other, I sent messengers to all the domains close to the capital to gather intel. "While I was at it" might be a bit of a poor way of saying it, but I also had the Iron Hammer deliver a letter and some goods to my father at the Zehrfeld's manor in the capital.

When I was done with that, I dealt with the spoils of the bandit mission. It wasn't an issue I could ignore, so I hurried to finish the

job.

"…I do not see any issue," Sir Kesten said after reviewing the tally of loot and my proposal for distributing rewards.

"Great. In that case, have Schünzel take care of handing out rewards," I said. "Neurath, I want you to deliver the rewards to Sir Goecke and his mercenaries instead before the day ends."

"Yessir."

"Frenssen," I went on, "pack these documents in a crate. They regard reparations for the bandits' victims, so don't let me forget about them."

"Understood."

Some of the soldiers would be getting weapons, while others got gold. Some of the knights would even receive horses. In my old world's terms, rewarding them with horses was like rewarding them with top-of-the-line bicycles, so very few would get them.

When I'd read stories about the Warring States Era of Japan in my past life, sometimes I'd see items that made me think "how the hell is *that* a reward?" Things like shoes or rags. But once you held command yourself, you started to understand the importance of recognizing people's service not just with words, but with material rewards.

While it was rewards of honor and not gold that really grabbed people by the heart, you still had to offer them something tangible. In that sense, a plate or even just a glove received from the deputy directly appointed by the king had more value than money. I was

wrong to make fun of those items. I apologized to all the warlords of my old world.

So, while I did understand the necessity of these things, it was still obnoxious work. Being unfair in my rewards would only lead to more complaints. So, with a litany of complaints running through my mind, I went over the documents and signed them, piling them up on my desk.

Sir Behnke watched this and nodded, seemingly moved. "I see you are quite skilled in the practical aspects of this business as well."

"Thanks to you putting everything together for me. I'm only used to battles."

In reality, Sir Behnke was much better than me at handling the bureaucracy of internal affairs. I was getting by because all the papers had been prepared for me, and I had plenty of knowledge about previous ways spoils had been divvied up in other cases.

Plus, I had done the job of reviewing battle records after Finoy as well, and it wasn't like dealing with documents wasn't something I had to do in my previous life. Of course I knew the basics of how to do this type of work efficiently.

With that in mind, I continued my work, but that's when Sir Behnke's next statement had me almost choking up. "No, most people your age would twist their faces at the thought of dealing with such papers. I see the count has educated you well."

"I'll tell my father you said that."

That's right. I was still young enough to be a student. I felt like I'd had a similar conversation before, and I realized that what I was thinking of was the time a classmate said I knew how to study effectively. Mazel was an exception, but I had boys and girls alike asking me for studying tips back at the academy.

Had it been my previous life, they'd have paid me back by buying me lunch, but that didn't really make much sense for a noble in this world. Instead, they'd give me intel about the best products from their domains or rumors going around the court. I knew that the time you spent as a student became precious once you grew up, and I wondered if I would ever get to return to the academy.

No, that didn't matter right now. This was no time for reminiscing. I turned my thoughts back to reality. That was when there was a knock at the door. Frenssen answered it and turned back to me. It seemed like dealing with the bodies took more time than we were expecting. It made sense considering the crowd.

"Lord Werner. Rafed, Sir Goecke, and the other man you called for have come to see you."

"Let them in." Rafed and Goecke entered alongside a man who had been involved in the execution. He dressed in the armor of a lowborn soldier and was older than me, but I doubted we were more than ten years apart. I put my papers to the side.

"Is it over, Lord Eickstedt?"

"I thank you deeply for your kindness, Dear Lord Viscount." He suddenly got down on both knees and bowed his head to the floor. I wished he wouldn't. Being called "Dear Lord" was enough to have my

skin crawling. I had already filled in Sirs Behnke, Kesten, and Frenssen, but I once again introduced the man before us.

"Formality like that is only going to make it harder to talk. Everyone, this is Lord Eickstedt, from one of the counties of Triot."

"I'm merely a refugee who has escaped death."

"I didn't call you here to listen to you debase yourself. Stand up." Secretly, I wasn't quite sure this was the attitude I should be taking, given I was talking to someone who surpassed me in age and rank, at least until his house had fallen with its kingdom. He had also been a bandit, and given how he had kowtowed before me, I could hardly take any other tone with him. Now, he might be comparable to what would have become of me had I run away from defending the capital.

"I'm sorry this is all I could do for you," I continued.

"No, there are no words that could properly convey my gratitude."

While a bee sting didn't spell certain death, he did well to survive all that. It must have been tenacity alone that kept him alive. While that impressed me, I was also taken aback at how potions had completely healed him.

"I'm sure you can't say you're feeling completely cheered up, but at least it's all over."

"Indeed. Now, I can face my wife and daughter."

I didn't know what to say, so instead, I silently nodded. The reason we had kept Lord Eickstedt alive in the first place was so we

could question him about how they had managed to gather water up on that hill. I couldn't deny that just about anyone could have served that purpose.

But as we spoke, I ended up asking why he became a bandit. After hearing it, I decided to help him out. Or really, I just couldn't help myself.

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When Triot collapsed, Dagover (or whatever his name was) would attack his own countrymen as they attempted to flee. The group of refugees that Lord Eickstedt belonged to had met that fate. In the encounter, his mother was killed, and his one-year-old had been literally kicked to death.

Eickstedt's wife had been captured by Dagover's men as well. When she was found, she tried to tell her rescuers what had befallen her but instead collapsed to the ground in tears. They never heard of her fate, but it wasn't hard to imagine that it hadn't been anything good. I was just listening, and even I had been lost for words.

His father, the count, had been at the palace when Triot fell. He probably hadn't made it out alive either.

He had become a bandit so that they would lower their guard around him. Then, once he came across Dagover, the plan was to get him wasted and stab him to death. Lord Eickstedt wasn't particularly strong, so that was the only method he could come up with. Had the people I cared about met similar fates, I'd set my mind on revenge too. I couldn't blame him.

After recounting all that, he addressed me with tears rimming his eyes, "I am prepared to be executed, but I want Dagover to go first. I want to see him die before it's my turn." As such, I had decided to let him be the one to execute Dagover. That was probably the main factor behind my decision to execute them all by decapitation. By the way, Seghers, the leader of Lord Eickstedt's gang, had been turned into a porcupine by our crossbows, so I had executed another bandit in his place.

"Considering that you decided to build your base on that hill, I have something to ask of you."

"I will answer anything."

"If you're going to die anyway, will you lend us a hand?"

He didn't quite seem to know what to make of my words. It was only natural, considering he had been told that I showed bandits no mercy. Still, I was lacking knowledge when it came to the matter at hand. I needed more allies, and he seemed perfect for the job.

"I don't think I need to spell it out for you, but it was the Demon army who destroyed Triot. You could consider them responsible for what happened to you."

"I…I suppose I could."

"Don't you want to get revenge on them too?"

Lord Eickstedt was silent for a moment. Then, he shot me a curious stare. "What is it that you plan to do?"

"You want to know my plan? For now…" I took a deep breath. It hurt, but I couldn't just keep my plan to myself. "We invade Triot."

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Silence filled the room. They were probably trying to make sense of what I just said. The first to speak was our resident voice of reason, Frenssen. "Lord Werner, what did you just say?"

"We're going to invade Triot," I repeated. *I could kill for some tea or coffee right now.* Thinking about coffee beans was probably just me trying to escape reality. I mean, even if we had beans, I doubted I could roast them. In my past life, outside of cafes, I only ever drank instant or canned coffee. I had no clue how to make it myself.

As these silly thoughts went through my head, Sir Behnke turned to me with a resolute expression, probably thinking he needed to stop me. "That would be impossible."

"Don't get ahead of yourself. I said we'd invade them, not that we'd take over," I said, raising my hands to quell him. I knew that what I wanted to say was complicated, so I needed to explain properly. But the order was tricky. I decided to start by summarizing what we all knew to be true.

"First, even if Triot wasn't as big as the Kingdom of Wein, it was still a proper kingdom. At the same time, I'm no leading aristocrat. I'm just some deputy. If we wanted to gain control of Triot, we'd need a hundred times the men. We wouldn't be able to maintain the necessary supply lines either."

Given the monsters roaming about, we might have needed more like a thousand times the men, rather than a hundred. In any case, we were severely lacking. Still, I never had my eyes set on conquest or occupation. I thought over my next words before speaking.

"Even if we did attack, no one would have any complaints, and that's not just because the country has already fallen. We're not trying to occupy the area, so chasing criminals is enough of an excuse."

"Criminals?"

"At least on paper," said Goecke with a wry smile. Maybe it was because he was a mercenary, but he picked up on things pretty quickly.

"I see. So that's why you made those opening moves when we reached Anheim."

"That wasn't my only reason, but I suppose so."

I executed the younger brother of the head of the Salters' Guild on the spot, but I had only exiled his cronies to Triot. We just needed to say that we had continued our investigations and realized that there was a need to arrest them for a different matter. At least, that's what we would say. It was also entirely plausible that we'd just run into some battles with monsters while we were searching their lands. Yup, made sense.

"Don't forget our final goal—dragging out the Demon Commander and beating him to a pulp."

"A Demon Commander?" asked Lord Eickstedt in surprise. I'd have to individually fill everyone in on things later. For now, I stuck to

my original outline.

"But the terrain poses an issue for us. Anheim is a city built with the Triot border in mind, and there's a river to the south." I took out the map I had a specialist prepare and pointed to Anheim, which was situated on the river's northern bank. "This would suffice if we were fighting a human army, since we'd be able to use the river to the south as a moat to defend ourselves. But the Demon army are much stronger than humans."

"So you're saying the river has nothing to offer us."

"It's not nothing, but we can't expect much from it. Given how strong demons are, they can cross it easily."

Seriously. Monsters had been crawling about in this world even before the return of the Demon Lord. The kingdom's soldiers trained for battles against monsters, but during the Demon Stampede and Finoy the losses had been great. We couldn't underestimate their strength.

"I see."

"But what poses an even bigger issue is that the Demon army could choose to attack only from the opposite coast."

Sir Behnke didn't seem all too knowledgeable when it came to military affairs. Frenssen didn't seem too acquainted with the ways of war either, so I decided to explain things step-by-step.

Even if we wanted to beat the Demon Commander, if the Demon army stayed on the opposite side of the river, any attempt we made to cross over to them would leave us open to attack. In other words, our

enemies would be able to use this river—which was originally intended to protect the town—against us. Even if the knight brigade arrived as reinforcements and succeeded in crossing the river, it was possible that the Demon army would retreat before they could surround the Demon Commander and hide themselves somewhere in Triot.

"Our army won't be able to chase them deep into Triot. That means we're sitting ducks until the Demon army decides to attack, and that would only put us at an ever greater disadvantage. Not to mention that monsters could crawl out from damn near anywhere."

"Indeed," replied Sir Holzdeppe.

I had accidentally cursed, but neither Sir Holzdeppe nor any of the others seemed to mind. They were probably working hard to try to understand the situation.

"That's why we need to lure our enemies to this side of the river and, ideally, the northern town wall. That would make it easier for reinforcements from the capital to surround them as well."

"I understand all that, but I don't quite get what invading Triot will accomplish," said Lord Eickstedt. Hey, there seemed to be a bit of fire back in his eyes. Maybe fighting the Demon army had given him a sense of purpose, or perhaps it was just something he'd been wanting all along.

"Let's consider the Demon army's ecology. That might be a bit of a weird way of putting it, but let's consider it. First, in general, they don't fear humans."

That didn't seem to apply to Mazel, but he was more of an exception. In the game, monsters would sometimes run away from

battles, but in real life, I'd rarely heard of any monsters fleeing. And now that the Demon Lord had returned, they'd come charging at us even if there were a hundred men as their enemies. My experience at Fort Werisa and with the refugee escort mission had taught me that well.

"Also, monsters generally never leave a specific area. They most likely have some sort of territory. The exception to that is when they're led into battle by a Demon Commander."

"Indeed."

In the game, crossing a single river could mean an extreme change in the enemies that would spawn. Though in the game's case, that was mostly just because that's how the software had to run.

The reason I called this their "territory" was because I couldn't think of a better way to put it. While this was still only a hypothesis, if monsters appeared in this world in place of natural disasters, then the monsters that normally appeared in an area were like small earthquakes. To put it another way, it was only human nature to build cities where there were few natural disasters. Or in this case, where there were weak monsters.

That was why strong monsters didn't spawn around the capital while the area around the Demon Lord's castle was full of tough ones. It was a personification—or in this case, demonification—of a land whose environment was too harsh to support human life. At least, that's what I had begun to think. It was possible that the reason monsters were so weak at the beginning of the game wasn't because

the Demon Lord underestimated Mazel, but because it was just how things naturally had to be.

Thinking back on it, the field around the Demon Lord's castle in the game was full of untraversable mountains, and in this world, the area around the Demon Lord's castle was full of volcanoes. Even if there weren't any monsters, I wouldn't want to live in a maze like that.

I decided to put aside the issue of the Demon Lord's castle for the time being. Going back to whether monsters were comparable to natural disasters, in polytheistic societies like Japan, natural disasters were the domain of the gods. Fūjin and Raijin, the gods of wind and thunder, were symbols of weather, and while I didn't know how catfish became a symbol for earthquakes, they still similarly represented natural disasters.

My hypothesis was that the "energy" behind natural disasters had been influenced by the Demon Lord and materialized, but at the same time was influenced by animals, which served as their models. In the case of natural disasters, it didn't make sense for the environment to completely change just by crossing a river, but the logic would stand if natural disasters had been demonified into living beings with thoughts and feelings and were influenced by the concept of animal territory.

In this world, I had never even seen the words "natural disaster," and given that the religion here was monotheistic, they lacked even the concept of personifying nature. In my old world, there was a culture that believed that lunar eclipses were caused by a

magical wolf eating the moon, but this world had no such legends. Basically, if I tried to explain these things, it'd just distract from my point. I only needed them to understand me, so I decided to just use animal territory as an example.

But thinking like that meant that the Demon Commanders or Four Fiends were just demonifications of large-scale natural disasters with many victims. I shouldn't think too hard about that, though. Taking out the Demon Commander would have to come first.

"What I'm really afraid of," I went on, "is our enemies doing to us what I'm trying to do. Basically, if they attack other domains in small numbers back-to-back."

Werewolves and other similarly powerful monsters could wipe out our villages, even in small numbers. If attacks like that happened in succession, the number of victims would be far beyond acceptable limits. However, they hadn't tried that. They probably thought we were easy targets they could take out at any time.

Rather, what I really feared was the possibility of demons once again infiltrating the capital. That's why I had the capital use almost all the Monster Repel we had.

No word had come from Hubertus and the others, so I'd just have to trust they had things in hand. I thought one or two monsters might try to sneak their way into Anheim, but honestly, without Mazel here, they wouldn't go so far out of their way for me, considering I wasn't even the kingdom's main force. If they fought us head-on, it was objective truth that the demons would come out on top. Wait,

were Werewolves more like animals or people? I guess it didn't matter.

"Any leader has to consider their standing. The same goes for a Demon Commander."

"Really?" Sir Holzdeppe asked.

"For the Demon army, strength is everything. It would be embarrassing for weak humans to encroach on their territory," I explained. The lizard magicians who wanted to make a deal with me back in Arlea had left a strong impression, at least in regard to how little they thought of humans and how willing they were to make childish bargains. I had concluded that we'd be able to bait them.

"First, we invade their land in order to humiliate the Demon Commander. We do that, we can get under his skin."

Honestly, the Demon army was strong. Their combatants surpassed Anheim's in both quality and numbers. I wasn't so optimistic as to think we'd be able to win in a frontal attack. Mazel and his party were the only ones who could ever defeat a Demon Commander surrounded by his army.

Thus, I announced that I had no intention of engaging in any field battles in Triot and instead wanted to use the town walls to our advantage in a battle. But if that's all we did, we'd be ruined.

"First, we send a single squad into Triot in order to intimidate our enemies. Next, we lure them into Anheim, and finally, we wage a defensive battle while using the walls to protect us. So, first." I pointed to the map, and their eyes followed. I placed a copper coin on the river a short way away from Anheim. "We build a fortress here.

Typically, this would serve as an occasional command post, but we'll use it as headquarters for our mobile force. That's so we can bait them into attacking it."

"You're going to make them attack the fort?" Neurath asked.

"Like I said, we need to bait the Demon Commander. But if he went straight for Anheim, we'd have to attack around our southern gate. So we build a fortress on the river basin."

On a surface level, it would be like the defensive setups found in feudal Japan, where a castle's primary keep would be defended by secondary buildings. In this case, the fort would draw the enemy's focus to it, while being able to defend against them from the sides and rear. The main battlefield—or really, just the first of a few battlefields—would be used to lure our enemies to this secondary keep.

"What do you mean by headquarters?" Schünzel said.

"I'll be staying there. I won't be returning to Anheim." Everyone stared at me in shock. I mean, who else would the Demon Commander come after besides me? Mazel wasn't here.

"U-um, Lord Werner?" Sir Behnke started, but I cut him short.

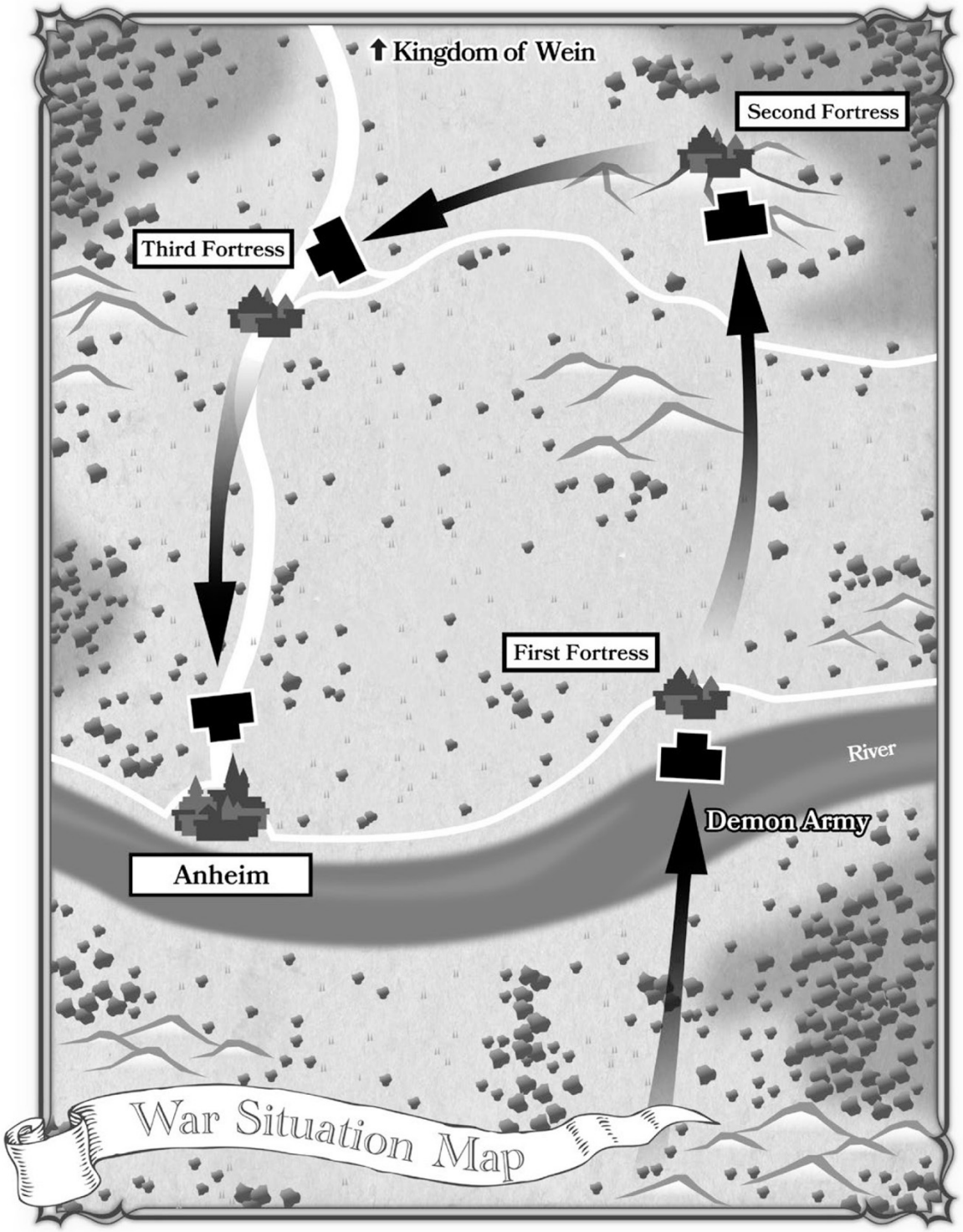
"Right. I don't plan to hold the line at that slapdash fortress forever." I took out a silver coin and a gold coin and placed them on the map. If you traced a semicircle from the copper one to the gold one, you would get from the river basin to Anheim's northern wall. The silver coin was over the fortress Lord Eickstedt and his men had built on that hill in the center of the plains. Ever since I had Lily draw

up that map in the capital, it'd been a place I wanted to use in my plans.

"We'll build forts in these three locations. If we can get our enemies to attack them in order, we'll be able to lure them to Anheim's northern wall."

"Will it really be that easy?"

"I'm confident we'll succeed as long as we can get them to attack where the copper coin is."


Kingdom of Wein
Second Fortress
Third Fortress
First Fortress
River
Demon Army
Anheim
War Situation Map

I'd always been good at provoking people. I'd be able to rile up our enemies. It was the only thing that I could beat even Mazel at, though I wasn't sure that was something to be proud of.

Our enemies didn't think much of humans, so I was confident that all they'd see was that we were building a fort on the river. They wouldn't be able to conceive that we'd build more forts further in. They might even think that they'd be able to kill me at the first one.

Also, I was pretty sure that attacking a walled city like Anheim would be a pain even for the Demon army. That's exactly why me holing up in the fort would prove beneficial.

"If I move from one fortress to the next with them on my tail, they'll follow. We'll need to piss them off good so we can use me as bait." With that, I answered Sir Kesten's question. He was scowling, probably because he realized protecting Anheim during the time I was away would fall on his shoulders. I hoped he knew I wasn't just trying to force it on him.

The reason I had put him in charge of the volunteer squad was so that I could leave protecting Anheim to him in the unlikely case of an attack. He'd have to protect the town from any internal conflicts too.

Lord Eickstedt turned toward me. "Isn't the third fortress, marked by the gold coin, in a precarious position? The first has the river as a moat, and the second is up high, giving it the land advantage. However, the third fortress stands on flat grasslands. Should our enemies come between it and Anheim, our forces would be divided."

"Leave it to me. I've already got a plan for that."

I was glad he'd gone and said it so bluntly, though it seemed Sir Holzdeppe and Sir Kesten had already realized it too. If we failed to lure our enemies to the third fortress, there was a chance they would attack the eastern gate. But if we succeeded in leading them to the northern gate, the town of Anheim itself would become a wall that encircled our foes. We couldn't have the Demon Commander holing up deep in Triot, so we absolutely had to pull this off.

"First, we invade to provoke our enemies, encroaching on multiple parts of their territory. Then, we'll send groups of twenty to thirty each over the river, have them butcher some monsters, and then immediately pull back to the first fortress. There will be no need for them to engage in any battles they can't win."

Each squad would stay in Triot for two days at the shortest and three at the longest. If things took an exceptional turn, they might even withdraw within the first day. Basically, we'd just send them into enemy territory and have them raise a ruckus our enemies couldn't ignore.

If the Demons were driven by animal instincts, they'd first try to stamp out the invaders on the spot. But they'd eventually get tired and come to attack the fort.

It was still a mystery how long it would take for their animal instincts to boil over into monstrous fury, so while our invasion forces —or really, taunting forces—were drawing our enemy's attention, we'd need to get our decoy forts up in record time.

"Lord Eickstedt, I want you to create our plan for the invasions into Triot."

"Huh?"

"You'll be strategizing against the Demon army that destroyed your home country. Don't you think it'll give you some satisfaction?"

Quite a few in the room looked like they wanted to say something, but a look from me stilled their restless tongues. In all honesty, I had already put together a basic plan using the geographic information I got from nobles who had fled Triot and diplomats from Wein. Since I had Rafed listening in on the merchants in town, I even had some of the freshest info you could get. Thus, if Lord Eickstedt had a problem with putting together our plan, I could go without hiring him.

The reason I had left it up to him was because after losing his family and carrying out revenge, he had lost any reason to live. I just couldn't leave him alone. Purely for my own satisfaction, I wanted him back on his feet.

"The only requirements are that the plan feature repeated incursions into Triot. Each squad shouldn't spend long in Triot either. There should also be multiple points along the river they can enter from. I suppose that's it. The rest is up to you."

"Along the river?"

"For our enemies, it's easiest if they just lie in wait to ambush our soldiers when they cross."

If his plan was complete enough, I wanted to use it alongside my own. My own idiosyncrasies must have made their way into my plan. If our enemies saw through that and planned an ambush, our invasion forces would suffer heavy losses.

However, if the person who put together that strategy changed halfway through, those idiosyncrasies would also suddenly change. The Demon army wouldn't be able to keep up. It was perfect for messing with them. For that, I was thankful to have someone who thought completely differently from me. Leaving it to someone who hadn't observed my tactics before would help us ensure victory, and even more importantly, Lord Eickstedt was familiar with Triot's geography. He was the perfect man for the job.

"I'll leave the strategy to Lord Eickstedt. Sir Holzdeppe, Sir Goecke, Neurath, and Schünzel will serve as unit commanders."

"Us too?"

"Yup. I'm counting on you two."

When it came to battles, neither of them was the reckless type. I was confident that they would avoid any casualties they possibly could. If it was me, Sir Holzdeppe, and Goecke taking squads in, we'd only be able to attack so many places. To taunt our foes, I'd also have to check our stock. I could feel a stomachache coming on.

But if we went with that plan, we wouldn't have enough commanders on the frontlines, so I needed them to do the work of three. I spoke my next statement sternly. "Listen up, all of you—this may be stating the obvious, but our enemies are here to fight. It's just

like valeo. Our enemies will be thinking through their moves as well. Don't expect things to all go to plan."

"Valeo" was a game in this world that was a lot like chess. I'd expect nothing less from this world, but in addition to pieces called "knights," there were also "lady knights." It threw me for a complete loop at first. Not that it really mattered.

"Our ultimate goal is to defeat a Demon Commander, and as long as we reach that goal, we can change our course as many times as it takes. If you have any ideas for how to adapt to any new info about our enemies' movements, I want you to speak up."

During a battle, things were always in flux. Forgetting that spelled defeat. To put it another way, we could always change our plans halfway through. To use mountain climbing as an example, we could always change our route as long as we eventually reached the top. I wasn't so confident as to think my plan was perfect.

"Don't fixate on the current situation. Don't just stick to our first plan. Always keep the goal in mind. I want you to act on the best decisions you can make in order to lure out our target, the Demon Commander."

"Yessir!"

That was just the response I wanted to hear. I watched them all nod before bringing my speech to a close. "You might have differing opinions about the particulars, but this will be our general direction. I'm counting on all of you."

They say that making the first move in shogi is more threatening than any other move you could make. I'd grab the Demon

Commander by the nose and lead him like a dog.

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The following day, I explained to the councilmen that according to top-secret intel from the capital, there was a chance a Demon Commander would attack. The response was discord and chaos. When they asked for evidence, I just hit them with, "Ask His Majesty and His Highness the Crown Prince." That shut them up.

Of course, it'd be a bit hard to believe, but I still essentially threatened them by telling them that if it was true, they better shut up and listen if they didn't want to all be eaten alive. Thanks to that, I was able to keep the conversation moving forward.

"Viscount Zehrfeld is close with the holy woman. It wouldn't be odd for a prophecy made known to only the crown to be leaked to his ears," said the head priest, backing me up. I sent a look of appreciation his way. When I had gone to thank him the other day for assisting Rafed in wrangling up all the voices of dissent on the council, he simply told me to give the holy woman his regards. *I guess that checks out.*

"And so, I have something to ask of you all."

"What is it?"

"I'm going to build a fort here," I said, pointing to the place on the map that would serve as the location of the first of our fortresses. They didn't give much of a response, but I supposed that made sense, given they weren't really experienced with military affairs. "However, I can't explain to you why. Just know that this fortress will

not stay standing for long, and when it's attacked, that will be the signal to move on to the next phase in my plan."

"Your plan?"

"Yup. If this fortress is attacked, I want you all to evacuate those living in the villages around Anheim and keep them safe."

With that, the councilmen finally changed their expressions. I couldn't blame them for caring more about the people in the nearby villages than a city-slicker deputy who had suddenly arrived from the capital like me. All I could do was bitterly grin on the inside. I decided to feign ignorance and continue the conversation.

I told them about what happened to Valeritz in Count Friedheim's fiefdom, which was destroyed before the battle at Finoy. There was no need for sugarcoating, so while I didn't want to remember it either, I gave it to them straight. Their faces turned white. Yeah, I could understand that feeling.

"I want to save all the people I can, even if all that amounts to is one person. For that, I'll need you all to work with me." This time they all nodded. "We'll use a smoke signal. However, I can't tell you now how much of the domain will become a battlefield. That means that as soon as you see the signal in Anheim, you need to evacuate everyone."

"Everyone? As much as we'd want to…"

"Evacuate *everyone* in the surrounding villages to Anheim. I've already talked to Baron Zabel and Viscount Gröllmann, who have agreed to handle the neighboring domains. They can shelter evacuees for up to ten days."

"Ten days?"

"If we can hold out for that long, reinforcements will arrive from the capital." That seemed to shut them up. Or rather, they probably had no choice but to agree to my plans after hearing what had happened to other towns that were attacked by Demons.

"Won't some refuse the evacuation orders?"

"Spread word that if anyone refuses, their whole village will be taxed five times as much as they were last year."

That caused a bit of an uproar but no actual opposition. In a medieval world like this, villages worked like a unit. Every villager was deeply connected to one another. If refusing would affect the entire village, their only option was to follow orders. We didn't have the time to explain the danger to each and every village in the vicinity, so some aggressiveness was in order.

I'd need a heavy hand if I wanted to limit casualties. Though if I did succeed in minimizing harm to the villages, the records wouldn't speak of the threat, only of my harsh measures. When was the last time my stomach wasn't turning? It was getting tiresome.

Using the map, we worked out the details, identifying where each village's residents would evacuate to and how many people would be at each evacuation camp. We also discussed what to do with their livestock and how we could insure them. For example, in one area, the average shepherd's family kept some seventy sheep for wool, and we had to determine whether it was more feasible to move the animals or compensate the family for their loss.

Speaking of which, the farming villages in this world resembled those of the middle period of Europe's medieval era. Dairy farmers and the like separated their houses from their animal pens, but the average farmer raised their livestock in their homes. Few farmers had two-story houses, so it wasn't rare to find homes where people lived right beside their animals.

That didn't just go for chickens and ostriches either; even pigs or donkeys would be kept inside the home. I had some thoughts about that from a sanitary perspective. They even said that one of the reasons the Black Plague spread so easily in farming villages was because the animal excrement inside people's homes attracted rats.

Well, maybe it wasn't right to reduce it all to calculations of pandemic risk, but given I knew the dangers, I couldn't just let it be either. That was a problem for another day, though. We had no time to spare for such matters just then.

***

I concluded my meeting with the council and returned to my office to issue directions for the siege. While I was making adjustments to the allotment scheme for magic pumps and bows, I got word that Rafed and Sir Kesten had come to visit and let them inside.

"I humbly beg your pardon, your lordship," Rafed said as he entered. "Would you honor us with a moment of your time?"

"Of course," I said.

"Thank you, Your Lordship."

Rafed's attitude felt forced. The best—and perhaps somewhat odd—way of putting it was that he had the air of an average joe trying to put on an act for a theater audience. Sir Kesten, by contrast, had the perfect air of a soldier. The gap between the two was striking.

"Hard at work as usual, I see. How is the volunteer force, Sir Kesten?"

"I have done all I can given the limited time. While they may not quite handle your usual maneuvers to the standard you've set, they should suffice to defend our base."

He only had a month after all. He did well to train them so well in so little time.

When he said "your usual maneuvers," it seemed like he was referring to the small squad skirmish tactics I used instead of fighting in large battalions. I never really viewed it that way, but I must have left that impression with the way I chose to take out the bandits. Conversely, I was hardly confident I could lead a large army.

"How are things on your end, Rafed?"

"I've prepared what you asked for, but they're limited in number."

"Nothing we can do about that."

I was just happy to hear that he had gotten them together.

In this mission, I was nothing but bait to lure out our enemies, an instrument by which we would buy time for reinforcements to arrive from the capital. We lacked a standard military force, but since

we didn’t need to slay our enemies ourselves, neither were we bound to standard military tactics.

I gave Rafed some orders and left it to him to divvy up the supplies. He used to be a merchant, and I was honestly glad to have someone who understood the importance of shipments and supply lines.

Once Rafed took his leave, Sir Kesten turned to me. He had a sarcastic grin on his face that looked a bit like Duke Seyfert’s, his boss. They did say birds of a feather flock together, though it might have been a bit of a rude thing for me to think.

“Is it all right to leave all our supplies in Rafed’s hands?”

“It is, as long as our enemies are Demons.”

Rafed had a good nose on him. I was pretty certain that the moment things turned against me, he’d slip out. I guessed that also meant as long as Rafed hadn’t run off, then my prospects in battle were still looking good. Who was I, Matsunaga Hisahide?

Sir Kesten dropped the matter, apparently satisfied with simply having heard my thought process. He said, “May I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Why is this the method you’ve chosen?”

I wasn’t quite sure what he was talking about, so I instead flashed him a questioning look.

Sir Kesten continued. “If our goal is simply to defend Anheim, we only need wait for them to launch a siege on the town and await

the arrival of the knight brigade. There is no need to go out of our way to take out the Demon Commander."

"Oh. So that's what you meant."

"There is no need for Your Lordship himself to become bait to lead them to the northern gate, either."

He'd caught me. If all I needed to do was lure our enemies, there were other ways of doing so. However, I wanted to put an end to the Demon Commanded here, and so I needed to taunt him into a frenzy. It was a surefire way of keeping him busy until the knight brigade arrived. It would be easy for him to give up on attacking Anheim, but he wouldn't be quick to release a human who'd made a mockery of him. His pride would be the end of him.

While it didn't really matter, "Your Lordship" wasn't an odd term of address considering my title of viscount, but it left my skin crawling. I think my memories from my past life made me feel like it should be reserved for those more distinguished than myself.

I decided to put that aside and answer his question. "That doesn't change how the townsfolk will feel. Even if it takes just a few days for the knight brigade to arrive, I want to keep the Demons away from our walls for as long as possible."

"You have rather a unique way of thinking."

It was hard to say whether my thinking was truly just "unique." I still had my memories from my previous life, and so, I had the awareness to want to keep civilians as far away from a fight as possible.

On the other hand, I knew that in this world, keeping civilians too far away would mean we wouldn't be able to maintain our organization. There were no trucks, so every single shipment had to rely on manpower. We couldn't go without townsfolk to handle that sort of labor.

At the same time, nobles needed civilians. A fiefdom without people was nothing but a desolate field. As the Confucian scholar Xunzi once said, "The ruler is a boat; people are the water. The water can carry the boat; the water can capsize the boat." On that note, I wanted to avoid using any strategies that would drag any citizens into the conflict. Though that was just the logic behind my feelings.

"I suppose I can only perform well when I'm fighting the way that suits me. I don't think I'd be able to proudly declare victory if any civilians got roped in and died."

"I see."

And who would I proudly be declaring this to? I didn't have an answer for that. I changed the subject before he could ask any questions.

"By the way, Sir Kesten. There's something I'd like you to do for me."

"What is it?"

"I'm sure you know about Skywalk Boots. Once we're certain our enemies have attacked the first fortress, I want to send a messenger to the capital. I'd like you to pick the man for the job."

"Certainly."

"I'd also like you to teach your most skilled men how to use these. This will be a secret."

I handed over the magic item which I had snuck in along with the Skywalk Boots using a magic bag; this was under the pretext that what was inside were important documents. I was already certain that this item could be put to practical use, so all that was left was to try it out in battle. However, this item would serve us better in the hands of an elite soldier than in my own. If I could, I'd like to see how they'd use it and learn from them.

I showed him the item in question and explained how to use it. It left him dumbfounded. They must really be useful if they left a seasoned veteran making a face like this.

"We'll start constructing the fortress tomorrow. I'll leave protecting the town to you."

"Understood."

Once our plan was put into action, we'd probably have about twenty days until the Demons attacked. I supposed Mazel and his party should be near the dungeon of the third Demon Commander right around now.

I'd have to give a performance that could stand next to theirs.

***

The lionlike countenance of Demon Commander Gezarius contorted in utter disgust as he looked down at the corpses of his Werewolf underlings.

For a Demon Commander, losing a few men of the lowest rank didn't cut deep; it wasn't even a scratch. However, while he was disgusted that it had happened in his own territory, what truly appalled him was…

"Them again…"

In his hands, Gezarius held a collection of wooden objects that were, in effect, calling cards. They had been discovered by the underlings who had dragged the Werewolf corpses to Gezarius from where they had been murdered. And scorched onto each one was the crest of House Zehrfeld.

In recent days, Weretigers and Werewolves falling prey to humans in Gezarius's territory of Triot had become commonplace. In nearly every attack, those pieces of wood were left behind next to the corpses of monsters whose magic stones were stolen. They knew exactly who was responsible.

"At the hands of a mere human! Unacceptable!" He kicked a corpse that had once been one of his underlings, sending it flying. The corpse slammed into a tree, and both collapsed in a tangle. This accomplished nothing, but he had nowhere else to direct his anger.

Unbeknown to Werner, one of Gezarius's officers, who had disguised himself as a noble, had been slain by the knight brigade during the Demon attack on the capital. The magician-officer's death would mean an even more dull base from the Demon army, but Werner had no way of knowing that.

Right then, Gezarius's demonic underlings lifted their noses to the air and began to sniff. A moment later, Gezarius came to the same

realization they'd already had. He cursed under his breath. His anger had caused him to revert back to the form of a beast, his human clothes lying in shreds beneath him.

"There's no helping it. I need some replacements."

With that, he turned into the form of his stolen body. Or rather, he simply reverted. Disgruntled, he changed into new shoes and clothes. About half of his underlings followed suit, changing into human form and dressing themselves.

Their clothes generally consisted of whatever they stole from corpses. They made sure to select only those that lacked bloodstains in noticeable places, but still, they could hardly be considered flattering. They looked like fugitives.

"Human movements never cease to be awkward."

"Indeed."

He didn't require a response. Half ignoring the voice, he ordered some of his troops who had taken human form to follow him. He wanted to hide the Werewolf corpses.

For a short while, Gezarius followed a trackless path, still grimacing with disgust. When he discovered the presence he had sensed earlier, he was the first to speak. "So, it was you."

"G-greetings, Lord Mangold."

"No need for greetings. The Zehrfeld brat is in the fortress, correct?"

"Y-yes. Recently, all his orders have been issued from there."

The man before Gezarius had been exiled from Anheim. Last time, he had only the clothes on his back, but he appeared to have expanded his wardrobe since then. Gezarius concluded that the man must have affiliates in Anheim and laughed with Mangold's mouth.

"I-I propose that we first attack Anheim…"

"They would cross the river and attack us from behind if we did that."

"I-it's true that the Zehrfeld brat has said so, but if we opened the gates from inside, then…"

"I'm not expecting that much out of you."

A demon in a man's body is one thing, but a real human? Utterly unreliable, thought Gezarius. He now knew about the fortress Werner was using as his seat of command for the battle. What good would it do them to attack Anheim?

"Even should the foundation be strong, the walls are nothing but planks. The Demon army shall destroy such a fortress in an instant."

"A-about that, Lord Mangold, can we really fight alongside the Demon army?"

"Don't worry," the being in Mangold's body sneered as he raised his hand. Two Werewolves appeared before him, drawing a squeal from the man. "See? I have the Demons on my side."

"H-how brilliant of you, Lord Mangold."

"If we bring them the brat's head, the townsfolk will change their minds. Stay hidden in Anheim until then."

"Understood. When you do, we will be expecting a reward."

"I know," barked Gezarius, silently bemoaning the incorrigible nature of humans. The only future that awaited this man was getting eaten alongside everyone else in Anheim once the Zehrfeld brat was dead.

However, Gezarius hid those intentions. Using the body of Mangold, which he had stolen for himself, Gezarius put on a superficial grin. "I have faith in you."

"Yessir!"

***

"Seems like it's about time."

"Is that why you took those measures?"

"I guess so."

It took five days for the hastily built fort to come together. Werner's team had bought all they needed from the surrounding villages and turned it into their base of operations. On an afternoon half a month later, while a turncoat met with the Demon Commander, Werner sat nonchalantly in one of the rooms.

Werner gave his predictions for what would come next, all the while thinking that his enemies had been later to respond than he had been expecting. Neurath and Schünzel traded looks, and Holzdeppe opened his mouth, an exasperated expression on his face. "When exactly did you realize this?"

"Ever since Sir Pückler's body was found," Werner said, though that wasn't the truth. His doubts began during a discussion with the

crown prince, when he first surmised the game's Demon Commander had returned in the guise of the Hubertus's knight captain.

If the chosen corporeal form influenced the power of the Demon Commander, Werner didn't think that that he would accept staying in the body of the impoverished townsperson he had used to escape. Once he figured out that, Werner began to wonder if the missing body of Mangold was being kept as a vessel for the Demon Commander.

Currently, Werner had also delivered two cores thought to be the source of the Demon Commanders' returns to the capital, one from Demon Commander Dreax from Fort Werisa and one from Demon Commander Beliures from Finoy.

Even if his hunch was mistaken, that would be fine. If he was right, an insurrection might break out in Anheim. Knowing that danger, Werner designed his strategy with the assumption that the Demon Commander was using Mangold's flesh.

When Werner first arrived in Anheim, he had Mangold's wanted posters spread throughout the town. That was to make sure even the town's small fry could recognize him. This was also his goal when sending followers of the bad actors in town to Triot.

It was unlikely that a Demon Commander would once again try to sneak a Demon into town. They were certain that they'd be able to win in a head-on battle, and they must have realized that a method for piercing their disguises had been discovered in the capital. It was natural to assume they viewed such a ploy as too risky.

At the same time, Werner couldn't assume that his enemies were too stupid to make use of new information. If they still

remembered what happened to Pückler, they should have a basic understanding about how powerful intel could be.

This was why Werner had simply pardoned the councilmen with grievances, instead of letting them off the hook with fines or a simple reprimand. He knew some among them had connections to the malcontents he'd banished.

If one of the exiles ran into "Mangold," he would try to sneak back into Anheim and exchange this information with one of the malcontents on the inside. Werner concluded that they may also try to sell information to Mangold since he was the firstborn of their previous lord.

In fact, to make sure that his dissidents would leak the information, Werner had purposefully spread the word around Anheim that he'd be in the fortress, even going so far as to reveal its shoddy construction.

Of course, even if all those ploys missed their marks, the whole thing took so little time and effort that it was no skin off their backs. If the Demon Commander was foolish enough to ignore intel, he would probably attack the fortress anyway. If this worked out, it would merely be a bonus in Wener's favor.

The predictions that Werner shared in that strategy meeting would end up being quite close to the truth, but he had no way of knowing that.

"I wonder which way it'll go this time," said Werner as he took out the plan and some dice. He seemed to be awfully amused. Neurath grinned mirthlessly as he watched.

Eickstedt's and Werner's plans each had their own hallmarks, and quite surprisingly, Eickstedt's proposal was much more aggressive. On the other hand, he had a much better lay of the land and also contingencies for any counterattacks, so Werner eagerly chose to adopt it. But he had quite a unique way of deciding what he would take from each plan.

"Odd, huh? Guess it's mine then."

"There is no need to use dice to decide our strategies."

"I don't want them to see through my methods."

That comment garnered some stares that implied, "You just wanted to roll dice, didn't you?" but Werner feigned ignorance. He was currently deciding whether they would invade the lands listed in his plan, or those listed in Eickstedt's, so the questioning stares were only natural.

While their plans of attack were quite different, they were both well thought out. Using dice to decide which one would be deployed would prevent the Demon Army from predicting their moves. Back in Triot, Gezarius would be a puppet dancing on the palms of their hands.

"The mercenary squad currently in Triot should be back today. Once Sir Goecke returns, send word to Sir Holzdeppe to—"

"My apologies, Lord Werner." Eickstedt, who was currently treated as their guest, entered the room. He had a stern expression on his face. It was clear that something had taken place.

"What is it?"

"A messenger has arrived from Sir Kesten in Anheim. Exiles returning from Triot have hidden themselves in the town. They appear to be unarmed."

"Oho." That was Werner's only reaction. Neurath and the others exchanged glances and asked for clarification.

"Is it the Demon Commander's doing?"

"Probably. It's fishy enough that they weren't attacked by monsters after being banished to Triot." The others nodded. "We'll need to make preparations once Sir Goecke returns from Triot. Lord Eickstedt, head for the second fortress and meet with the troops on standby there. Make sure they are well stocked."

"Understood."

"Sir Holzdeppe, check the panels. Schünzel and Neurath, continue with your preparations as well. The battle's about to begin."

"Yessir."

"As you say."

Given how little their enemies thought of humans, they shouldn't mind them concentrating their forces. Werner ordered defenses on the fort to be reinforced and sent a messenger to Anheim.

The first skirmish of the battle to defend Anheim would take place two days later at the second fortress.

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Gezarius watched the fortress from over the river. Flying above it was a flag with the same crest of House Zehrfeld that he'd seen burnt

into wood time and time again. He could see an embankment just over the river as well. The walls of the fort were nothing but wooden planks. Against a Demon's power, they would break in an instant.

Gezarius snickered. A fortress like that would fall in less than half a day's time. He couldn't help but mock the foolishness of humans for relying on such a structure.

His troops in the Demon army wore similar sneers tinted with ferocity. Gezarius let out a laugh and raised his voice. "Devour every person in that fortress!"

The Werewolves and Weretigers surged forward with a war cry. In a flash, they were over the river. The inside of the fort was silent, and Gezarius was confident it was because they were shaking in their boots. Still snickering, Gezarius put one of his feet on the embankment, ready to launch himself inside the fortress. As a lycanthrope, he had that power.

Suddenly, the ground crumbled beneath his feet. He had stomped right through what he thought was an embankment.

Despite their initial appearance, the embankments were nothing but a veneer of dirt spread over wood repurposed from the villagers' emergency shelters. The wood was weathered by the rain and wind and propped up against poles before being covered with a thin layer of sand and mud. They weren't strong enough to support a monster's bodyweight.

Beneath the false ground was nothing but thin air. One of Gezarius's legs was stuck inside the plank all the way to the thigh. Trapped, the Demon army were stopped in their tracks.

"Volley!"

Countless arrows flew from the fortress and buried themselves in the flesh of the Demon army. Gezarius tried to remove his foot from the trap, but each step led to the same outcome. His legs could find no purchase. His movements had been stymied.

With their legs stuck in the planks covering the pit, the Werewolves and Weretigers were defenseless as arrows rained down on them. Demonic beings could withstand an arrow or three, but with enough shots, even they would perish. Even now, some had collapsed lifeless in the wooden trap.

"They tricked us!" Gezarius's voice roared louder than the flying arrows. And then, the hum of the arrows swelled in volume as if determined to drown him out.

"They fell right into our trap," Holzdeppe said, impressed.

"I had heard they were good jumpers," Werner said while watching the battle unfold from atop the wall—or rather, just a pile of planks leaned against pillars. He then looked behind him, watching the smoke signal that would warn Anheim and the surrounding villages that the battle had begun. "Once you see something you can use, that's all you can think about."

"This certainly seems to prove your point."

Werner had built a fake embankment that looked like the perfect stepping stone. Ever since Werner had heard from the crown prince

that their enemies relied on powerful leaps, he had been thinking of ways to disable their legs.

The mud and sand that was slathered onto the planks to make them look like ground had been hardened by a grain glue made from käthe wheat. Oddly, glue made from boiling käthe wheat wouldn't be eaten by bugs or animals, so it was prized for its ability to be used outdoors. That might have something to do with the fact that it becomes incredibly spicy once fermented, but Werner wasn't interested in the details.

"I'm surprised they didn't hide themselves during the day," said Holzdeppe in exasperation.

"That's just how lowly they think of us. It's why that trap was so effective." Werner gave a wry smile.

"The secondary force approaches!"



"Don't worry. As long as they don't jump right into the fort, we have nothing to fear." Werner could hear the soldier's panic, but he responded coldly.

Then came a thump. A few monsters had struck the fortress walls. Even if they were lycanthropes, one or two hits wasn't enough to break the walls. They had been built to be stronger than they looked, but the monsters had come close enough to attack with stones rather than arrows. Werner calmed himself and spoke as if it was nothing.

"Are we set to abandon the fort?"

"We are ready."

Werner nodded at Holzdeppe's answer. Ideally, he would've liked to trap them here for another few days, but this fortress was made to be abandoned, anyways. Hanging onto that ideal would mean adopting a poorer plan.

The Demons thought little of humans, and thus, they had attacked head on. Dillydallying would get them surrounded. The difference in power was greater than Werner had imagined, and even he was shocked by how easily they had crossed the river that served as the country's border. He concluded that there was no need to adjust the base plan for the moment and issued his orders. "All right, let's get ready, beginning with the infantrymen. Watch out for fire and water."

"Understood."

Werner watched Holzdeppe head inside the fort. Then he turned his eyes back to their enemies and ordered Neurath to prepare to

launch the rocks.

***

Lycanthropes had the countenances of beasts. It was rare to see confusion on such faces, but they were nonetheless confounded. They had brought all their strength to bear against what was, to all appearances, a simple wooden wall, but for some reason, it held strong.

In their bewildered state, the monsters were easy targets for stones lobbed down from atop the walls. Some were incapacitated, while others perished. As they were attacked, one Lycanthrope ripped off one of the wooden planks and discovered why the wall seemed so impervious.

The fort's walls weren't simply made of planks. Between two layers of wood was a layer of Alligator Warrior hide, which the Wein forces had gathered in great volumes during the battle of Finoy.

Alligator Warrior hide was strong enough that it took all the effort of an average soldier equipped with an iron sword to simply leave a scratch. Since it was surrounded by two layers of wood, it made the walls appear unremarkable, while the hide absorbed the shock of any blows strong enough to snap a normal plank. While it wasn't as resilient as stone, the fort's walls were much stronger than thin sheets of iron.

The Demons that had attempted to jump over the walls were attacked by a squad of bowmen led by Schünzel. Despite their best efforts, they couldn't break down the strong walls. If they stood idly by the bulwark, they were met with a rain of stones and even sullied

by waste that was thrown down with it. Ironically, Lycanthropes had superior senses of smell, meaning that getting showered with waste was more effective than any unskilled attacks with a weapon. Some monsters were so unable to stand the stench that they ran away from the walls and toward the river.

A few lycanthropes managed to launch themselves over the walls, just barely landing within the fort's confines. The knights were waiting for them, however, with weapons at the ready. So each monster that got in found itself badly outnumbered, which was precisely how Werner had trained to fight. It only led to more casualties on the side of the Demon army.

The Demons were divided between those stuck in their tracks and those at the walls. The predicament had Gezarius's lion face contorted with anger. However, he couldn't deny that they had been outmaneuvered. He loosed a roar thick with frustration, and the Demons, like well-trained soldiers, fell back from the walls.

"Lord Werner, our enemies are retreating."

"They'll regroup and get over the walls in an instant. Prepare to retreat immediately."

"Yessir."

As Werner watched, he found something odd about his enemies. *And I thought I could push them a little harder,* he thought. Then, a possibility dawned in his mind, and a sardonic grin spread across his face. *Man,* he thought, already reworking his plans in his head, *I was stupid to not realize this till now.*

Gezarius's next roar came immediately after the demons had crossed the river and regrouped. He had spotted the Zehrfeld flag flying above the fortress. All the advantages had been stacked on his side, and he was still reeling at having been forced to retreat. Perhaps that idea had just been inherited from the memories and wisdom he had stolen from Mangold and Pückler.

At Gezarius's signal, the Demon army rushed across the river and toward the fortress. It would take time to surround it. Gezarius led the charge, this time ignoring the embankment. He checked his footing and tensed his legs, gathering his strength.

Then, with an easy leap, he soared over the wall which had been insurmountable when soldiers had still been around to protect it. The sound of footsteps echoed through the fort, and an odd, black mist filled the halls. It was like smoke, and the moment the Demon army jumped in, it left them blinded and befuddled. Inside the fortress, a dozen or so pigs wildly dashed throughout the halls, kicking up a black powder that littered the floor, filling the air with clouds of it.

Those with powder in their eyes screamed out in pain, and those with powder in their noses sneezed, further spreading it in the air. Foolishly, the monsters first to jump into the fortress stopped in their tracks upon landing, resulting in the next wave landing on top of them.

The fortress's doors were still sealed shut, and thus, the only place the powder could go was up. The air grew thicker and thicker with the stuff. Before long, the walls couldn't even be seen.

The next moment, fiery arrows whizzed into the hall, and the yard the Demons were in burst into flames.

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Werner called for a full-speed retreat the moment the arrows were loosed, not even pausing to watch the fortress burst into flames more yellow than red. They dashed through the plains astride their horses. Neurath and Schünzel called out to Werner, half-yelling over the thunder of their desperate gallop for their lives.

"What was that just now, Lord Werner?"

"Was it magic?"

"It was a simple dust explosion, not magic," Werner responded while clinging to his horse. When flammable materials hanging in the air are lit on fire, they burst into flames in an explosion. It could even happen to flour and sugar, and in Werner's past life, they were occasionally the cause of some deadly accidents.

"With the force of those flames," Neurath mused, "our enemies should suffer quite the—"

"Oh, that won't do much," Werner cut in.

"Huh?" Neurath and Schünzel gawked. Dust explosions were dangerous when they happened in enclosed spaces like tunnels or the insides of buildings, but without a roof over the fortress, it looked more impressive than it really was. The energy of the explosion dissipated into the air, meaning there wouldn't be much damage.

As the fortress was beside a river, the humidity was high, which further dampened the impact. Even if their enemies were humans, it

would have only left them with light burns. The substance they used—coal dust—was more resistant to the humidity than flour, but even Werner was secretly surprised that the flames had been so dramatic.

"Th-then why did you…?"

"When something like that happens but you don't understand what caused it, you have to pause for a bit. Plus…" Werner laughed as he galloped on his horse. "I'm sure our enemies will just dismiss it and think, 'human traps may be flashy, but they lack impact.' They won't be afraid of us, so I'm sure they'll pursue me."

If the goal had simply been to maximize harm, a simple attack by fire or a pitfall would have been more effective. Werner had purposefully chosen a flashy dust explosion to make sure the Demons continued to underestimate them.

Werner remarked that this probably convinced the enemies that the walls of Anheim were more of a threat than their traps and that they'd want to hunt him down before he could escape to the city. Then, he waved the flag of House Zehrfeld in the air and declared, "The second fortress is the first of many turning points! We ride there with all haste!"

"Yessir!"

At Werner's word, the group spurred their horses on, deliberately urging them to pound hoofprints into the ground as they galloped to the second fort. The sudden burst of heat and light had dazed Gezarius, but he forced the doors open with sheer anger, tearing the walls down with them as he burst from the fort. But by the

time he stepped into the open, Werner's forces were nowhere to be seen.

***

The top of the second fortress, situated on a hill, was jam-packed with people. Many brought with them supplies, while others were assigned to this post from the start. Preparing for a long march or pitched battle took many hands and lots of work.

In Werner's previous world, the famous Knights Templar once brought four thousand men on campaign, but the Werner had merely two hundred knights among his forces. Of course, they had a few infantry, but the rest of those numbers were laborers.

There was a lot of work to be done that those in military service were seldom accustomed to, and giving one person multiple jobs often ended in a lot of unsatisfactory work. Thus, the only orders given to farmers, who'd only ever worked their plows and fields, had to be simple instructions like building as strong a fence as possible.

But dividing the work up like this required many hands, increasing the number of required men. This could pose issues for foodstuffs and other supplies. Balancing this out was a necessary part of the calculations involved in leading an army.

This would have been beyond tiresome for anyone handling all of it, but Werner had avoided losing sleep by tasking Rafed with logistics and having Eickstedt manage the laborers. Considering that Eickstedt's presence allowed Kesten to completely focus on protecting Anheim, Werner had clearly gotten lucky when it came to personnel.

"I see you've worked hard, Lord Eickstedt."

"It's of no matter, as long as you are well, Your Lordship."

"Well, the real threat comes now."

The Demon army made light of humans, and thus, the Anheim forces' trap had proved effective at the first fortress. They had planned the trap from the start. However, at the second fortress, they would have to enter battle, and it was sure to prove a fierce one.

"The planks and the other materials have been prepared according to your orders. All that is left is for you to check it."

"Understood. Take the laborers and return to Anheim. Bring some adventurers as guards and some support forces from among the mercenaries."

"Yessir."

He seemed somewhat disappointed, most likely because he wouldn't be able to participate in the battle against the Demon army for himself. His feelings were understandable. However, they would suffer their heaviest losses at this fort. As Eickstedt was hardly accustomed to battle, Werner wanted to keep him far from the battlefield.

"We'll take the Demon Commander's head at Anheim, not here. I'd like you to return before us and make the necessary preparations."

"Understood. But will they truly pursue you?"

"Probably."

Despite his response, Werner was almost certain. At the same time, it was true that their pursuit introduced some unknown variables. While Werner anticipated this to ultimately benefit him, he

needed to keep a level head and account for the chance it would swing things in the Demons' favor. It was quick judgment and adaptability that had seen him through this far.

"At the very least, they won't return to Triot without trying something. If they choose to attack Anheim now, we have a backup plan, but you leave that to me."

"Understood. I'll return to Anheim once I check the third fortress."

"I'm counting on you."

After sending Eickstedt off, Werner made sure he had the materials he needed in order. Then he summoned Holzdeppe and Goecke, alongside Neurath, Schünzel, all the mercenaries, and the rest of his army.

"Listen up! The battle here will be key to our victory!" He stood on a podium as he called out to his men. Almost everyone in his line of sight was older than he was. Werner told himself that worrying about it wasn't typical of him before continuing his speech. "This battle will be fierce, but we need only last until nightfall. If we do, the battle will turn in our favor." He couldn't yet explain his concrete reasoning. Instead, he explained the general course of the battle and left explaining the details to each squad's commander. "The Hero and the holy woman have taken on the entire Demon army with smaller numbers than we have here! What we face today is but a part of that army, but our battle will surely prove some help to them!"

At times like this, a commander needed to put on a show of confidence. A hint of ambivalence or a twitch of worry on a

commander’s face could lead to their army’s collapse before the battle had even begun. The same was true of saying too much.



"We will win and advance to what comes next! You shall return to your beloved families with pride! In the days after, we will say that although our battlegrounds may be different, we fought against the Demon army right alongside the Hero! Victory is on our side!"

Werner sent up a silent apology to Mazel for using him as a front, but when his men's voices rose in a ferocious battle cry, Werner raised his fist alongside them. Then, he alighted from the podium and gathered the battle's commanders to explain their orders in detail.

After Holzdeppe and Goecke left with nerves clearly strained, it was only Neurath and Schünzel who noticed that Werner seemed to be weathering a stomachache.

***

Led by their Demon Commander, the Demon army rushed into battle as soon as they saw the fence above the hill and the flag of House Zehrfeld flying above it. For humans, it would be near impossible to run hundreds of meters and join the battle without even a moment's rest. For monsters, it was a walk in the park.

Once the soldiers on the hill saw the monsters' approach, they launched a counterattack. The land worked in their favor, the fortress's elevation extending the range of their missiles, though the distance impeded their aim. Some of the Lycanthropes deflected the spherical shots with their arms, but this only made them break and splatter on their faces. The creatures then fell to the ground screaming in agony.

Several other Lycanthropes stopped in their tracks, stunned by the sudden turn of events. Others, however, continued their rush

toward the fortress. As some advanced and others held back, their forces split, and their formation came apart.

These projectiles were ceramic vessels filled with poisonous grasses and spices that acted as a blinding agent. Rafed had used his knowledge of poisonous plants to create them, and the Anheim soldiers would lob the resulting projectiles with slings. They were proving quite effective.

Each of the Demons kept going at their own pace, some running and others writhing in pain, and this had gradually spread their forces. Then, something else rained down on the Demon army from the fortress with a low hum. They were spears, and their size and weight lent them significant force. They pierced the hide and fur of the monsters, causing blood to spurt into the air alongside their screams. Sometimes, they looked right down at the heads of the spears. Even the ones which missed the Demon army stuck deep into the earth, hampering their advance.

Atlatl were not sophisticated tools. Conversely, they appeared quite simple. But by utilizing the principles behind levers, they allowed even untrained users to launch spears over a hundred meters away with several times the strength of their arm. Some reports state that depending on the thickness of the spear, they could have as much as four times the force of an arrow. Depending on the circumstances, they could be much more effective than having a novice shoot a bow.

However, they were slow to launch and required several spears to be readied in advance, which made them rather impractical. Werner had only used them himself because he had heard that one of the

basic tactics of the Roman army was throwing javelins, and once he made his first orders to launch the spears, he immediately instructed his men to switch to weapons more suited for hand-to-hand combat. Still, the heavy spears were lethal, and some Lycanthropes who had been hit head-on by the javelins had already been stilled by fatal wounds.

"Here they come! Do not engage them alone!"

The soldiers let out a roar. The Demon army's formation had been spread thin, and so they ascended the hill in staggered groups. Meanwhile, Werner and Holzdeppe had their soldiers form up into small squads. Cheers and screams reverberated in the air, along with the clamor of metal and the hiss of spraying blood. But before long, the voices of both humans and beasts drowned out all other noise with their screams of hatred and wrath.

Werner used the lance he was most accustomed to as he pierced through one of the Demons, letting Neurath and one of his orderlies land the finishing blow. Then, a large shadow obstructed the sun that shined above Werner.

"Disperse!"

After barking orders to the nearest soldiers, he too jumped back. The next moment, a large body slammed onto the ground, and a massive arm swooped down as if trying to scoop Werner into the air. He dodged the blow calmly and regained his stance. The look on his face suggested he knew this was coming.

He looked up and met the lion visage of his towering foe with an apparently confident grin. "So you're Gezarius."

"Indeed. You have proven quite the obstacle, you brat."

"I couldn't just stay quiet and let you do as you please," he said, shrugging his shoulders with a sneer. Werner knew why the Demon Commander was here personally. He readied his spear and said in a sarcastic tone, "Just as I expected. Once you meet Mazel, it'd be best if you did so with my face."

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As the battle raged on around him, Werner wasn't feeling as confident as he looked. Even from his position higher on the slope, he was dwarfed by the Demon Commander and keenly aware of their difference in strength.

Cold sweat ran down Werner's back. His opponent was too strong for any human but the Hero to face. One direct blow from Gezarius's arms could be a fatal wound.

At the same time, he was oddly composed. The way Werner saw it, if the Demon army stole his body, they probably wouldn't be able to use it if it were too damaged.

Their conversation only made him more certain of that hypothesis. Had the Demon army continued a full-frontal attack, he would have been dragged right into combat. The fact that Gezarius entertained their short conversation convinced Werner that his opponent had been trying to judge the right distance to put between them.

Gezarius rushed forward and swung his arms. Werner sidestepped at the last moment. His new spear may have been able to

withstand the attack, but the old one he had long used would've snapped. Plus, this one was lighter, aiding him with his agility.

Werner ducked under the next swing and stabbed his spear forward while in a crouch. He thrust it upwards, aiming under Gezarius's chin, but the Demon twisted away to the side. The Demon Commander spun on the foot he dodged with and, using its momentum, swung his arms down. Werner dodged, and Gezarius's fists cratered the ground where he'd been a split second earlier. Werner put a few steps between him and his foe, keeping his eyes trained on him all the while. Now, neither one stood higher on the hill than the other. They faced each other on even ground.

Werner went on the offensive, launching a few sharp stabs with his spear. They found their mark, but they were too light to wound. Gezarius began to laugh, and Werner quickly retreated a step. Gezarius moved in, maintaining distance, and Werner swung his lance as if to cut the Demon's legs from under him.

Gezarius hadn't predicted this. The blow landed. It left him slightly unbalanced, but there was not nearly enough power in the blow to sap his strength. He swung his arms to the side in a large arc as he tried to fling Werner away.

Werner dodged this attack before running further downhill and gathering himself. This left Gezarius uphill, looking down at Werner. At the same time, Werner had to look all the way up to the sky to see Gezarius. For a moment, they simply glared at each other.

But the next moment, a dull sound reverberated as a strong blow hit Gezarius's back. He felt his body rise into the air. Barely

managing to look up above, he noticed small ballistae mounted inside the fortress. It left him shocked. They hadn't been there until just moments earlier. They launched not bolts but large, cudgel-like clumps of metal. The weapons were so close that the shot had slammed into Gezarius at full force.

Caught off guard by such a strong blow, even Gezarius couldn't maintain his stance. Werner watched the Demon Commander fall to the ground and ran from the scene, not to avoid an attack, but to avoid getting roped into what was coming next. He wore a serious expression.

When Werner had planned to utilize carroballistae, he hypothesized that they had never been invented in this world because a large supply of magic bags let anyone carry regular ballistae anywhere. Thus, Werner thought that even ballistae could be transported so long as they were single-shot types.

That was what had prompted Werner to request a large supply of magic bags from Duke Seyfert. Once he accepted his appointment in Anheim, he could initiate the loan properly. It wasn't just the supplies inside the magic bags that were munitions but the bags themselves.

Werner filled them with ballistae and handed them to Schünzel, leaving him with the orders to conceal the weapons until the Demon Commander turned his eyes from the summit. Then, Werner became a decoy in the battle to create an opening for Schünzel and his men to attack. Once Gezarius had turned his back to the hill and was focused completely on Werner, they pulled the trigger.

The mass of the shot was enough to send Gezarius rolling downhill. The Demons in the surrounding battle looked on with shock. The Hero hadn't been at this battle; a mere army of humans had their commander tumbling down the slope. It left them astonished.

"Blind them! Hurry the ballistae for the next attack!" barked Werner. The next moment, the hunter launched countless blinding ceramic bombs. Gezarius was still crumpled on the ground at the foot of the hill when the bombs fell, and he raised his arms in a desperate attempt to shield himself. The ceramic stood no chance against his strength. A broad sweep of his fist broke two of the bombs, filling the air with blinding powder. Gezarius's nose and eyes were overloaded with the stench and pain of the spreading powder. More bombs collided with Gezarius's body, their contents filling the air and covering his face and body.

Gezarius ran, all the while screaming in pain. He may have just been trying to escape the range of the blinding agent and ballistae, but that didn't change the fact that a Demon Commander had turned his back to run from an army of humans. It left the Demon army rattled with disbelief.

"Force them back!" At Werner's command, his men raised a battle cry. The shaken Lycanthropes were helpless as a wave of swords and spears crashed upon them, cutting and stabbing, tearing flesh and dyeing their fur red. A Werewolf was kicked off the hill, and he tumbled to the ground below. The moment their commander had fled the battle was the moment their spirits broke, and the moment

their foes cast aside their fear of the Demon army. The Demons were thrust from the hill with a force unimaginable from mere humans.

"Everyone up on the hill, prepare the stones!"

After dispersing the Demon army, Werner didn't pursue. Instead, he turned once more to the rocks they had catapulted onto the bandits' hill when routing them. This time, they had been secured by ropes at the hill's ridge. And now, as the defenders cut the ropes, they came tumbling down all at once.

The Demons were now downhill, and the sight of the large stones barreling towards them had them fleeing as fast as possible. As if driven by herd mentality, the moment one turned to run, they all did. They may have just been trying to chase after their commander, but from the perspective of the kingdom's army from up on the hill, it was a clear retreat. Jubilant cheers tinged with disbelief reverberated through the air.

"Lord Werner!"

"We did it!"

"Don't get too carried away. Hurry and treat the wounded, then prepare for retreat."

Werner's stratagem had sent the Demon Commander running, but he was quick to issue orders to Neurath and the others, who were still caught up in their moment of triumph. Then, he released a heavy sigh and wiped the sweat from his brow.

The ballistae were of an old type left in Anheim, and while they could be adjusted up and down, they lacked a turntable, meaning it

was hard to aim them left or right. Had the monsters dodged to the side with their inhuman speed, there would have been nothing Werner and his men could do. The success of a second-round volley was incredibly unlikely. That was why he had used a blinding agent to steal Gezarius's sense of sight and leave him oblivious to his surroundings.

This was also the reason they hadn't launched arrows. Had a single blow been able to defeat a Demon Commander, that would have been an option. However, their goal was to wait for the knight brigade to take out the Demon Commander. Given that a second round of arrows wouldn't have hit their targets, the visual effect of expelling the Demon Commander off the hill better aligned with Werner's goals. Thus, he had them launch heavy projectiles that would make an impact.

His gambit with the rocks had also expended all the boulders they'd used to storm the hill fort. The jars filled with blinding agent were almost completely exhausted as well. They wouldn't be scoring another victory with those tactics again.

"Make sure our preparations are completed by evening. We march once the sun is down."

"Will he really come after us?" Holzdeppe asked.

"Well, a nocturnal assault would better suit their instincts," Werner said.

He commend Schünzel once more for his perfect ballista volley, then ordered that the magic bags be put away. If monsters were influenced by territorial instincts, Werner figured that they would think

much like the animals they resembled too. Thus, they prepared for the night ahead.

"Be careful with the magic lamps we'll be using in our retreat."

"Understood."

After ordering Holzdeppe to send a scout, Werner took out their most detailed map and asked Neurath, Schünzel, Holzdeppe, and Goecke for their opinions. After some discussion, they all reached a mutual conclusion.

"Here, huh?"

"That's what I thought as well."

"It's the best place for a hunt."

Holzdeppe and Goecke nodded along with them. After confirming the best place for an attack on their way to the third fortress, they decided to make their way there with all haste. Werner ordered that they hurry their preparations to retreat.

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By the time night fell, Gezarius had recovered his sight and smell. He headed for the fortress, but he was shocked by what he found there. The fort had been set on fire. He first investigated the surroundings. For monsters, searching the ground wasn't difficult even at night. They found hoofprints and immediately knew their enemies had headed west. It was the opposite direction from Anheim. They likely had another base there, Gezarius surmised.

Normally, when beasts hunted as a pack, they divided themselves between those who would pursue their prey and those

who would lie in wait for an ambush. Thus, they fought their battles in groups as well. However, Werner had already left the fortress, which meant they had no time to divide themselves. Gezarius followed after them with the group already with him.

Luckily for them, human armies were slow when carrying supplies. It was a moonlit night, and a Zehrfeld flag billowing in the wind would be easy to spot. The land was flat, giving no one the advantage, but the Demon army had night vision that far exceeded that of humans. Given that the terrain left no room for tricks, the Demon army concluded that they could rush straight into battle. Still, they approached with caution.

It was true that Werner was currently on the move, but he was already anticipating his enemies' pursuit. Werner had an idea of what direction Gezarius would attack from as well, and he'd positioned many of his knights there. This wasn't because they were superior in strength, but because horses were easily spooked. While they were trained not to lose their senses during a battle, Werner believed their animal instincts would allow them to sense if any hostile forces approached.

And the horses did just as he hoped of them. The Demon army wasn't exactly far away, but they noticed their careful approach faster than a human could. One began to whinny, and with that, the entire army turned around.

"Onward!" barked Gezarius, realizing they had been discovered. The Demon army rushed forward. The knights of the kingdom's army galloped forward as if trying to run away. Once they did, what entered

the Demon army's sights was a line of infantry backed by a metal plate like a shield.

"Get down! Lights!" Werner shouted those orders more seriously and sharply than he ever had before. At his command, the foot soldiers dropped to the ground, revealing a row of magic lamps in the double digits that had been hidden between them and the metal plate. The men who controlled the lamps stayed upright and hid behind the large sheet of metal.

Next came an explosion of light.

Magic lamps had enough power to last up to twenty days when used conservatively. While they shined brighter than candles, you could make them last longer by shining them no brighter than what it took to light a room. Now, they let the magic in all those lamps burst forth to shine for only a few minutes, creating a truly exceptional burst of brilliance.

When Werner had asked Vogt, the captain of the mage squad, about this tactic, the latter was reasonably skeptical about the plan. Magic lamps were not normally used this way. However, a light this bright was also normally impossible at this time of night. The metal plate acted as a mirror, reflecting the light toward the Demon army. They were hit with almost all of it.

The blazing flash bleached the night sky. People as far as Anheim witnessed its brief spark and some, convinced the stars were falling from the sky, whipped themselves into a frenzy.

The monsters' night vision was their downfall. A flash like that in a well-lit area during the day would be disorienting, but amid the

darkness of night, it had them writhing on the ground in agony.

"Don't turn around! Charge!"

Backed by this flash, Werner's army rushed into battle. The Demon army couldn't open their eyes. The pain had many of the Werewolves covering their eyes with their claws, blind to the blades that fell upon them. Those writhing on the ground were pinned there by spears. Alongside the footsteps and clinking armor of the men under the commander for the kingdom's army, the cries of Lycanthropes filled the night.

"Push through them and head west!"

"Leave the ones who can't move behind!"

"Don't engage! Head for the third fortress!"

The kingdom's army broke through their enemies while occasionally yelling out such commands. Their thoughts were focused wholly on cutting through the Demon army, piercing them, stabbing through their windpipes, and cutting their stomachs open with swings of their swords. Sometimes, they would kick the monsters over in anger as they ran them by.

The battlefield was filled with terrifying screams and shrieks of agony as blood dyed the soil red. Gezarius was doing all he could to endure the pain in his eyes when he heard a familiar voice.

"What do you think, Demon Commander? Do you finally understand how much of an imbecile you are?"

His arms moved before he recognized the voice to be Werner's. Spurred by anger, he struck out with such force that it would have

doubtless been lethal had it found its target. However, he was blinded, and amid the clamor of battle and the stench of blood, he couldn't judge the distance between them. Instead, his large swing knocked him off balance. He was at Werner's mercy.

Werner's spear stabbed through Gezarius's right eye.

Gezarius swung his arms in a frenzy, roaring in pain and fury. Werner dropped his spear and widened the gap between him and Gezarius. His beloved spear was so worn out it was nearly unusable, but the size of his spearhead was perfect for finding small targets in the dark of night. Targets like an eye.

"You can keep the spear. Next time, I'll be taking your left eye as repayment!" he yelled at Gezarius. Then he ran. Once the kingdom's army had succeeded in breaking through to their enemies' center and disappeared, all that filled the night were the cries of the Demon army. There was doubtfully any instance, from the fall of the last Demon Lord until now, that the Demons had suffered such a defeat. The battle had even occurred under the cover of night. The advantages were stacked in their favor. It had been a night of impossibilities.

"That brat…! Remember this! I shall show you pain that will have you wishing for death!" Still shaking with fury, Gezarius pulled the spear from his eye socket and snapped it with his hands. His spiteful cries faded into the night sky.

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Gezarius looked with open curiosity at the structure as it came into view, clear upon the open plains.

Seen from above, the third fortress appeared as a large triangle. At its peak were what looked like watchtowers, and from certain angles one might see three sets of walls connecting them. In all the knowledge he could draw from Mangold's and Pückler's minds, Gezarius found nothing regarding fortresses of such shape.

But it wasn't the building's shape that worried Gezarius. It was the things spread around its vicinity. There were the corpses of wandering monsters, the remains of animal waste, and oddly shaped wooden stands. Together, they formed a ring around the fortress. It looked like they had been left behind after a ritual.

Of course, Gezarius was on edge. He was more than aware that Werner was a cunning opponent. Worried about what he might have in store, he had his men surround the fortress from afar. From the center of the fortress flew a flag Gezarius knew well, which he was beginning to wish he'd never encountered—the flag of House Zehrfeld. However, there were no movements from inside.

Gezarius waited for nightfall. The magic lamps had been a bitter experience for them, but it was still true that they had better nocturnal vision than humans. Even should their opponents have some sort of trickery at the ready, their poor vision would make it difficult for them to carry it out. By waiting for night and besieging the fortress from all sides, Gezarius sought to annihilate them before any could escape to the city of Anheim.

While he waited, the dull clanging of metal could be heard from inside the fort. It seemed to be a signal of some sort, but there was no other activity. Gezarius stayed cautious right until he launched his

attack. He still hadn't let go of the feeling that his opponents could make a move against them at any time.

The Demon army hid themselves until the sun set, but once they heard Gezarius signal from afar with a howl, they rushed the fortress from all sides. There was no response from within. The Demon army launched an all-out attack. Some hurdled the walls with powerful leaps, while others knocked the defenses down.

Those who leaped over the walls found themselves dislodging ropes that'd been hung in their path. Bags came crashing down to the ground with them, bursting open and filling the air with powder. Countless monsters began to scream both in the air and on the ground.

Those beating down the walls were unaffected by the powder bags, but once they succeeded in knocking the walls inward, more powder was knocked into the air. The watchtowers supported by the walls came crashing down, sending up huge clouds of dust and powder. It was late into the night, and the dust left them blinded. The monsters ran around, wracked by coughing as they choked on the dust.

So went the Demon army's attack. They lunged at the silhouettes of humans in leather armor, striking at targets darting through the white dust. They bit into their enemies, ripping off their skin with their claws. Then, the monsters began to scream. Their fingers fell, severed, to the floor.

The battle was short, and once screams of agony began to fill the air, Gezarius let out a scream of anger that filled the whole

fortress. “Stop!”

This demand from their commander left them confused and halted the frenzied Lycanthropes. Once they realized their situation, they stood with mouths agape. Some just sat on the floor.

“That bastard…!”

Not a single human had been injured. The third fortress was abandoned.

To use a term from Werner’s old world, it was the Empty Fort Strategy. Werner’s instructions to head west during the previous nocturnal battle and his men’s mention of a third fortress being their destination had been a trap to lead the Demon army here. Werner and his men had passed right by and headed for Anheim.

The triangle shape was a trick to make sure the Demons would notice moving targets the moment they entered the deliberately small space of the fort. The display around the fortress had little meaning, but the stench numbed their sense of smell, and the paths the soldiers trod as they set up the display had made an indecipherable mess of their tracks around the fortress.

Of course, flying the flag over the fortress had been another performance to convince their enemies that Werner was inside. This was the reason Werner had been so careful to make a show out of flying his flag even at the first fortress and had flown a different flag when they were constructing this sham of a building.

Then, when the monsters jumped into the fortress, goaded by anger and bitterness at their earlier defeat, they were blinded by powder that had no other effects. Its only quality was that it was easy

to hurl into the air. Once again furious that they had met with such artifice, they ruthlessly lashed out at anything that moved around them.

Setting up scarecrows dressed in the leather armor the bandits had worn was another ploy to trick them into thinking the fort was occupied. Having been slept in night after night by their erstwhile owners, the armor would reek of humans to a Lycanthrope's keen nose.

But Werner had laid another trap. He had requested the capital to manufacture iron threads thinner than those used in chainmail, and he stretched that thread throughout the fort. They weren't as strong as the piano strings of his old world, but they were still metal. If a monster swung his arm full force into the wires and it caught his finger rather than a claw, it would slice right through it. Since the entire weight of some of the monsters had been suspended on the wires, some had even lost legs.

Their all-out attack under the cover of night had been another reason their command had failed them. Taking all these factors together, the battle had ended in a decisive loss, even if their casualties had been few.

And—while they had gone unnoticed and been of no effect—wooden cat toys had been set up throughout the fortress halls. Werner was just trying to tease Gezarius, but if the Demon had noticed, being treated like a cat would surely have thrown him into a fit of rage.

The Demon army was completely dumbfounded by the pointless casualties they suffered, but once the sun rose, they were able to search the inside of the fortress. That was when they discovered the source of the ringing coming from the abandoned fortress. It was a tool constructed from a thin pipe and a large water bucket. Once the bucket filled with water, a drop would fall into the pipe, creating a sound. Had Werner been present, he might have introduced it as a *shishi-odoshi*, a bamboo contraption found in Japanese gardens that served a similar function. It had been the basis for this idea.

Amid the investigation of the fort, one of the Werewolves called out. Letters were found carved into the flagpole. Gezarius followed the voice and beheld the simple message: "I'm off to have a meal in Anheim."

It was the kind of idle chatter you might tell a friend, and it left Gezarius boiling with rage. He yelled so loud it had some of his men cowering in fear. "Just how much of a fool does that brat have to make of me before he is satisfied?!"

Gezarius ordered an immediate march on Anheim. The monsters, given no chance to recover from injury or exhaustion, headed directly south.

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Just as Gezarius was screaming in anger, Werner was crawling out of his room with sleep still in his eyes. Neurath and Schünzel had just awoken as well, and they looked like they had barely dragged themselves out of slumber.

After making sure the third fortress reeked of humans, was crisscrossed with footsteps, and that the bucket was filled with water, Werner had returned to Anheim. He first gave some barebones orders to Behnke and Kesten, who had held the proverbial fort, and then rolled right into bed in his room at the local lord's manor and fell deep into sleep. He had been nearing total exhaustion.

After mitigating his desperate need for sleep, he exited his room and headed for a meal. Etiquette wasn't currently on his mind, so when Frenssen and Behnke came to greet him, he answered with a yawn. The two let it slide with wry smiles.

"Ugh, I'm exhausted…"

"You do have the stench of sweat on you," said Frenssen

"I'll go bathe soon," responded Werner with another yawn. After returning home, he had simply stripped off his armor and collapsed into bed. Even he knew he reeked, but he had been at his limits both mentally and physically. Though he did regret dirtying the bed sheets.

"I want to get some things straight."

"What things?"

Werner's commands related to what needed to be done if the Demon army broke over the walls. If the town turned into a battlefield, they would need to evacuate its citizens. For that, he ordered for the recruitment of evacuation personnel, related training, and the distribution of guards across the town. He gave just an outline and left the details to Behnke.

"In any case, we need to limit the possibility of civilian casualties as much as possible. It would be best-case scenario if they never got over the walls, but I want you to operate under the assumption that they will." After giving his orders, Werner sipped his lukewarm tea and took out what he had prepared for them. "And Sir Behnke, Frenssen?"

"What is it, Sir?"

"I leave these to you." Werner handed each of them a pair of Skywalk Boots.

They looked at him confused. "Um, Lord Werner?"

"Don't think about it too hard," he responded, dismissing them with a wave of his hands. "I don't plan on dying in the battle and losing. Think of this as my duty as deputy count."



If Anheim fell, someone would need to report it, and that report would need to be sent to both the kingdom and Werner's father, the head of House Zehrfeld. Thus, he had given out two pairs of boots. Werner had no intention of facing defeat, but he also needed to prepare in case something happened to him.

The two exchanged glances before accepting the gifts. "Well then, I shall accept."

"Thanks. Oh, and if we haven't caught sight of our enemies yet, call Sir Kesten here."

"Understood."

After Werner had downed another cup of tea and finally gotten a moment to relax, Rafed and Kesten entered the room. They exchanged simple pleasantries, then, Werner spoke. "Sir Kesten, I have something to confirm. Have you contacted the capital?"

"Yes. As soon as I saw the smoke signal, I had one messenger leave with Skywalk Boots and sent another just a few hours later."

"Got it. Thanks."

While they wouldn't be assaulted or meet any accidents during their journey, it was possible they could be attacked by monsters once they entered the capital's vicinity. Thus, sending two messengers at different times was the right call. Werner nodded in approval.

Werner checked up on various matters, giving his approval as needed. Topics included the distribution of personnel, weapons storage, and the securing of supplies. He also ordered that they prepare the catapults.

"What do the townsfolk think of me?"

"They view you as neither good nor bad, I suppose."

"That's good enough."

If they won this battle, the townsfolk would think more favorably of him. Though obvious, there would also be others who were more critical. They did predict an attack by the Demon Commander, and Werner did inform the commune of such, but some of the commoners would criticize him and claim that the Demon army only attacked because Werner had marched forces into Triot. However, Werner was prepared for that.

"Success will bring envy, and failure will bring criticism. You truly are in an unfavorable position."

"Keep talking like that, and I'll get depressed."

As a noble and commander, Werner was prepared for this outcome. Still, criticism never made anyone happy. Kesten's words had dampened his spirits. His exhaustion may have also been playing a part, but his attitude now was not the type to display to others.

Rafed cleared his throat. "Still, you yanking the Demon Commander around on a string has become the talk of the town."

"I do need to depend on my popularity after all."

If their enemy appeared before them as Mangold, the son of the town's old local lord, some of its citizens might betray Werner. He was thankful for his favorable reputation, since it might keep in check anyone who sought to leak intel. Kesten had already apprehended those who'd been too vocal about their dissatisfaction, but in a long

and hard battle, there was still the risk that someone might try to take matters into their own hands.

"When can we expect reinforcements?"

"No clue. Though that's also our key to deceiving our enemies."

Gezarius would already be under the assumption that messengers had been sent to Anheim from the capital, and he would have accounted for the time it took to get there and back. But since the Skywalk Boots had allowed them to arrive in the capital and deliver their report on the same day they left, Gezarius would foresee things happening later than they actually would.

By moving from fort to fort, they had already succeeded in wasting the Demon army's time. The rest relied on the coming battle to defend Anheim.

"Though I must say, you're quite rank, Lord Werner," Rafed said.

"So I've been told."

All Werner could do was flash him a wry grin. Reflexively, he brought his nose to his sleeves and sniffed.

Seeing that, Rafed quipped, "You're gonna drive away your little fiancée acting like that."

"I don't have a fiancée."

"It's not Miss Lily?"

That question had Werner's throat close up. He let out an awkward cough and looked at Rafed. "Why would you think that?"

"Really? I was convinced. She may be a commoner, but there are still ways you could end up together."

"Sure there are, but that's not the kind of relationship we have between us."

It was true that he had no fiancée. Partly because he had too much currently on his mind to consider such things, but also because he had been deliberately avoiding the whole matter.

"You might not want to say that outside this room."

"I know." Werner responded to Kesten's sarcastic remark with a bitter grin. He may have been demoted, but Werner was still the heir to a count family. Of course there were women after his money and status.

And in this world, it was the strong men who enjoyed the most attention. While harming a Demon Commander probably had yet to factor into his reputation, he was known in Anheim as an official who was tough on crime. Put plainly, Werner was a target for the ambitious parents and proactive women in Anheim.

Lamenting the fact that such strange rumors could cause trouble for him, Werner stood up to head to the baths. He didn't know if his avoidance of the subject was due to the multitude of things on his mind or his own desperation to escape reality.

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One of the preparations they made for a siege on Anheim was surrounding the town walls with countless vessels of water. In China and Japan, these containers would be either jars or buckets, and in Europe, they tended to be troughs. However, the idea behind them was the same in both the East and West.

"Do you think we can use these against the Demon Army?" Holzdeppe asked.

"We don't know what they have up their sleeves. It's best to be careful," Werner answered. These vessels would be used if their opponents tried to tunnel into the city, or if they tried to hollow out the ground beneath the walls to cause them to come crashing down. If the ground was being dug near the buckets, vibrations would appear on the water's surface, telling them that the ground was shaking as well. It could be considered a rudimentary vibration detector.

"With a Demon's strength, they'd get right to the town walls as soon as they started digging."

"True."

"Your Lordship." Eickstedt came running to Werner and Holzdeppe. Seeing him, the two stopped walking and waited for him to catch up. He reported that the catapults were set and ready to fire.

"And the projectiles?"

"They're all ready, though I do wish we had more."

"This is no time to be wishing for what we don't have. More importantly, I want you to secure all the lids we'll need today."

If they had abundant Monster Repel, they would be able to buy time just by launching it over the town walls. But a lack of important provisions was part and parcel of being on the battlefield. They were just lucky they had all the arrows they needed.

"As long as the gates are safe, we'll get by," laughed Werner while pounding his fist on the town walls. He didn't want to think about what would happen if the monsters overwhelmed the ramparts before reinforcements got there. He'd just have to hope for the best.

Incidentally, in Japanese, the word *jōheki* (literally "castle walls") refers to walls that protect the outside of the castle, while the word *iheki* (literally "surrounding walls") refers to walls that protect the town. Another word written with the characters for "town" and "wall" is rarely used, but when it is, it denotes walls that encompass the whole town below a castle.

"Lord Werner." It was Neurath. The signal from above the town walls had been sent. Werner nodded and ordered Eickstedt to launch the catapults whenever he saw that signal. Then, Werner, Neurath, and Schünzel ascended the wall themselves.

As a border city, Anheim had robust walls with wide ramparts. There was ample space for ballistae and stones, and a section of the walls even had a moat fronting it. If Werner had more time and resources, he may have been able to utilize it, but since he didn't, it was left as is.

Kesten came to greet them atop the walls, and Werner acknowledged him with a curt nod. Then, he stuck his head from a saw-shaped parapet that hung over the wall's edge. He could see the Demon army descending on them, kicking up dust and sand as they went. Their numbers were scarcely diminished.

"Whoa. They're really gunning it."

"Just what did you do to them?" Kesten asked, throwing Werner a bemused grin. He was brandishing a metal club in his hand the size of—to put it in terms of Werner's previous life—a plastic bottle.

"Oh, well, nothing much," Werner demurred. His attention was on the preparations. Both the volunteer squad and the garrison had climbed up on the walls and were watching their approaching foes.

Most Anheim residents had never seen a Lycanthrope, so it was only natural that most of those watching from the walls had gone stock-still with fear. Werner, on the other hand, was pleased to see that he had enraged Gezarius enough that the Demon now charged them at full pelt; he wouldn't come knocking on the gates as Mangold, demanding to be let in. It was the kind of trick that might've turned things around after his series of defeats, but it seemed a bold display of power was more a monster's style.

Werner watched the Demon army's mad dash from atop the town gates. He was impressed to see they stopped just out of reach of their arrows. It would have been nice had they simply rushed in, but Werner knew that was too much wishful thinking.

A voice rang out. "Are you there, brat?!"

His voice was so thunderous it shocked even Werner. The Demon Commander was truly furious. His howl sent a gust of wind that blew back Werner's hair and rattled the air. Those like Werner and Neurath managed to shake it off, but some of the garrison and volunteer soldiers were so terrified that their legs gave way beneath them.

Kesten just seemed exasperated. “Really, what did you do, Lord Werner?”

“I…taunted him?”

“That’s a question, not an answer.”

But Werner had no other answer, and Kesten knew it was no time to probe further. With a shrug of his shoulders, he left Werner’s side and headed to his post. Gezarius seemed beyond furious, but with his forces scattered, he couldn’t simply advance. For an odd while, they simply glared each other down.

Finally, the Demon army had gathered sufficient numbers. They made their move. As soon as Werner caught sight of this, he raised the flags and commanded the catapult squad to shoot. As Werner watched the Demon army’s mad dash, the catapults sent boxes arcing over his head and into their massed enemies.

The boxes twisted as they flew, and their contents rained down on the ground below. They weren’t stones but round balls of metal. Had the Demon army continued uninterrupted, they would have fallen upon the gates in mere moments, but as the balls scattered across the ground, their metal reflected the sun’s light. The ground glittered with them, and viewed from the walls, one might forget that it was a battlefield.

The Demon army came to a sudden halt. They had learned from Werner’s trickery. They approached the metal balls to take a good look at them. That’s when they exploded, filling their fields of vision with white.

As tools, these balls served the same purpose as magic stoves, though in this case, “magic kettles” was probably a better term. However, to keep the lids closed, large covers made from monster hide had been put on top and then plastered down with glue. Then, another adhesive made from monster materials was applied over that. It adhered them so well together that they could no longer be used for their original purpose.

They sent the heating element in the magic kettles into overdrive so that the hermetically sealed contents spiked to alarming temperatures in an instant. The water inside boiled into steam, causing the kettle to erupt and a hot mist to blast into the air, obstructing the Demons’ visions.

But that was it. The vapor was hot, but there was nothing else remarkable about it. The Demons stepped back, and once the white mist had blown away, they were none the worse. The metal balls lay on the ground where they had burst open, glimmering idly in the sun.

Once they confirmed that the eruption was over, the Demon army once again began to rush for the town, kicking up the burst open shells of kettles in their wake. They kept their momentum right up to the gates, but suddenly, a few of the Lycanthropes let out screams as they tumbled to the ground. Gezarius, who had been heading the pack, was amongst those numbers.

What they faced was the most rudimentary of traps: soft ground covering a pitfall with stakes driven into the earth beneath. They had never seen a steam explosion before, but its quaint effects had led them to lower their guard. They had bolted straight for the gates with

little care to what lay out their feet. Werner never had any intentions of harming them with the steam explosion anyway.

The Lycanthropes whose feet were stabbed by the stakes were stuck. They writhed in agony. The stakes were affixed with barbs, making it hard for them to free themselves. Gezarius's large frame worked against him, driving his feet deep into the ground. He had no way of freeing himself. His shame for falling victim to such a simple trap would not easily leave him, but panic clouded all else from his thoughts.

The monsters who had headed for elsewhere on the wall were also trapped. The moat had been obvious, but they had not been paying attention to the ground leading to it. Their legs got stuck in small pitfalls only twenty to thirty inches in diameter, and the force of their dash caused them to pitch forward, bringing their charge to a stumbling halt.

With their strength, any monster could have easily cleared a moat or a pit, but it would take time to lay those traps, and effort to conceal them. Thus, Werner instead decided to dig small holes to make it more difficult for their enemies to determine where the traps were. He laid them out like mines in a field.

Stuck inside the pit, Gezarius was unable to take command. The monsters' formation fell apart. While some scattered groups made it to the walls, others were trapped, and the confusion caused many more to simply stand still. Their forces were spread before the walls.

"Volley!" ordered Kesten. With that, the soldiers on the wall began their assault. Crossbows launched bolts, and slings flung metal

bullets like tiny rugby balls. The missiles rained down upon the Lycanthropes.

The damage they caused exceeded Werner's expectations. In an experiment carried out in his old world, trained soldiers launched the same fifty-gram lead balls the Roman army once used. Their kinetic energy and force rivaled the shots of a large rifle. They carried enough force to render leather armor meaningless. This storm of bullets would bring about large numbers of causalities even against monsters.

However, that wasn't what surprised Gezarius. The monsters who had made it to the walls and gates were such the brunt of this focused attack that it turned them into porcupines, causing them to collapse on the ground. Seeing his men attacked outside the walls, even Gezarius froze. His expression made it clear that even he had no idea what was going on.

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Up on the walls, Kesten bit back his fear as he barked orders. The impossible had become possible. He maintained his outward composure as he searched for his next target.

He held a club in his hand, and when he found an approaching monster, he slid off its top, revealing a red light which he shone on the monster. Once he did, the bowmen under his command loosed countless arrows. The monster crumpled to the ground. As he watched the battlefield, he kept his terror well hidden.

This device was a club-shaped magic lamp fixed with a thinly cut gemstone that would shine colored light, which he used to pick out

the archers' next target.

During defensive battles, bows could be used in two ways. Either skilled shots would snipe their enemies, or volleys of arrows would be shot in a line to prevent enemy soldiers from approaching. Broadly speaking, those were the only two strategies. It was one of the disadvantages of fighting on the defensive. Put simply, you couldn't bark orders at the entire archery squad.

Battlefields were filled with screams, war cries, the metallic clanking of swords hitting armor, the twang of archers' bows, and the thumps of both stones and people tumbling to the ground. Should their commander order them to shoot, only the few bowmen in his vicinity would hear. Thus, there had been no way to focus attacks on a specific individual down below from atop the ramparts.

This posed a significant problem. Targeting your foes' commander was the quickest way to collapse their battle formation. For efficiency's sake, it was best to target leaders or other enemies in the vanguard. However, a talented archer wasn't necessarily a talented strategist, and even a skilled bowman might not realize the ideal target.

This rang especially true for mages. Those ill accustomed to the battlefield would give general commands like to pick targets with the toughest armor, or to unleash the strongest magic they had all at once. An eye for strategy came from long experience, if not rare talent.

But Werner's invention of this laser pointer allowed leaders to pick out individual targets from atop the walls. Archers were briefed in

advance to prioritize targets picked out by the light, so even soldiers outside of earshot and those who had yet to nock their arrows could focus their attacks on a single target. It drastically increased the number of archers who could be coordinated against a specific target. Until that point, there had been no way to focus an attack from afar, but that was rightly in the past tense.

Werner's innovation allowed his soldiers to eliminate even the toughest, most enduring enemies, even as they kept to the walls for protection. With the elderly serving as shot-callers, and novices wielding crossbows and catapults, even common folk could muster the power to fight against Demons.

For a while, this tool and method remained clandestine, but two decades later when it was used in a border skirmish to turn the commander of the besieging army and younger brother of the crown prince into a porcupine, it became known as "the Zehrfeld Beam-Guided Barrage."

***

It was the night after the first attack. Anheim's defenders had staved off their foes' advance, and after issuing a few orders to his troops, Werner went to take a nap. But it wasn't long before a quiet thump and vibrations in the ground roused him from sleep. He made fun himself for being so on edge that something so minor could wake him up, but as he did, he ordered his men to armor up.

Werner exited the local lord's manor with spear in hand, flanked by Neurath and Schünzel. A soldier stood on one knee in wait for them. Werner immediately addressed him. "What is it?"

"The Demon Commander is attacking the northern gate. If you, um, could come with me…"

"Right." Werner glanced at Neurath and Schünzel before commanding Frenssen, who was preparing his horse, to have the head messenger gather all his troops at the northern gate. Then, he galloped with haste. As he approached the gate's vicinity, that mysterious occasional thumping sound grew louder.

The area around the walls was lit, which Werner assumed Eickstedt had ordered as he had the night watch. However, he was shocked at the thunderous thumping sound and the shaking it caused. He hurried up the wall.

"What is it?"

"Over there." Eickstedt gestured at a point in the distance.

What he saw caught Werner off guard. Gezarius was bombarding the wall with logs so huge no human could've even lifted one on their own. To put it in terms of Werner's previous life, they had the diameter of a motorcycle wheel. Gezarius held the logs with both hands and threw them at the gate like spears.

Werner had predicted that Gezarius would use long-range weapons, but the force and scope of the attacks went beyond what he had imagined. The force shook not just the gate but the entire length of the walls.

"He's using a battering ram by himself?! What a monster."

The night prevented Werner from seeing too far, but it seemed like Gezarius had prepared multiple logs in a heap beside him. As far

as Werner could tell, they had been broken off crudely by brute force, rather than cut cleanly. A cold sweat ran down his back. They weren't branches he was hurling but whole trunks broken right off their roots. This was more than Werner had expected. He cursed under his breath and checked the surroundings.

Other than Gezarius, there were no monsters in sight. The thump of a log colliding with the wall occasionally reverberated throughout the town, but that was it. Werner watched them curiously.

"Did our enemies set all this up in a single day?" Eickstedt exclaimed.

"They may have held off on attacking by daylight in order to prepare," Schünzel said, similarly agitated.

Werner didn't linger on their musings. He turned to the Eickstedt. "You stay on watch here. Bring in more men from the garrison. If they suddenly launch an assault, buy time with the blinding agent."

"Understood. Do I have permission to operate the ballistae?"

"Yes. You take care of the rest. Neurath, Schünzel, let's go."

Thunder shook the air every time a log collided with the wall. There was no time for discussion, so with a gesture of his hand Werner ordered Neurath and the others to hurry up. They descended the wall and found around ten messengers waiting for them.

"What is it, Lord Werner?"

"We don't have much time. Tell Kesten to take the volunteer forces on night duty to protect the eastern gate. Tell Holzdeppe to

take the remaining volunteers to the western gate and tell him that the infantry and knights assigned to the deputy will now operate directly under me. Go and wake every one of them."

"Lord Werner, is something—"

"They haven't thrown anything directly into the town yet."

After shutting up the questioning messenger and giving his orders, he sent them into the town. Once their horses had left, he looked up to the night sky.

Neurath and Schünzel shared a glance and began to speak. "Do you think they're targeting the walls specifically?"

"Is it a diversion?"

"I didn't expect the Demon Commander to use himself as bait either."

At that exact moment, the gate trembled wildly. Werner once again cursed under his breath, unable to tell if the Demon Commander was intentionally modulating the strength of his attacks. Then, he turned to the soldiers gathered before him.

"The first through third squads of infantrymen are under Neurath's command, and the fourth through sixth under Schünzel's! The Demon army has yet to make their move, but they may be underground. Neurath, you check the water vessels at the western walls, and Schünzel the ones on the east and report back to me. I will remain here."

"Yessir!"

"Understood, but what about the south?"

"I'll leave that to Sir Goecke. I'm sure he'll make the right call."

Shortly after sending off Neurath and Schünzel, a messenger arrived from Kesten at the eastern gate, alerting them that their enemies had begun their attack. However, the Demons' best shot at avoiding Werner's focused bow attacks meant dividing the enemies' archers. As an attack had not been launched to the west, Werner concluded that their enemies were after the underground.

Having regained his composure, he nodded. "What did Kesten say?"

"He says that they should be able to hold out for now."

"Got it. Sorry, but I'll need you to tell Rafed to gather what's left of our blinding agent at the northern gate."

Amongst the garrison members who rushed over to answer his call, Werner sent half up on the wall with orders to wait for Eickstedt's command and toss anything they could find over the wall. He took the other half with him and pointed at some objects a short way away from the gate.

"First, we push those catapults against the gate. Let's go."

They may have been small, but they were still catapults. They had some weight to them. He attached a board to the bottom half of the catapults' fronts and covered it with Alligator Warrior hide to create a simple armored plate. By pushing them against the gate, he could support the doors from behind. He hadn't predicted that their foes would utilize a battering ram, and thus, he hadn't foreseen this

attack. Still, he ordered the soldiers that rushed to his aid to move the catapults.

All the while, the vibrations and clamoring continued, but Werner maintained a facade of composure as he gave his commands. He used logic to push down his fears and anxiety, telling himself that no proper commander let such things get to them. But on the inside, he was going through it.

While the catapults were equipped with wheels, their mass made them hard to move. When the soldiers finally had them bracing the doors, Werner ordered logs to be wedged behind the wheels to fix them in place. Once that had been completed, Werner ordered the infantrymen to head to the eastern gate and follow Kesten's commands.

It was around then that all the soldiers under the deputy had been gathered. Werner made sure those who had been on daytime duty had freed themselves from sleep's grasp before calling the roll and verifying the chain of command. That was when one of the soldiers approached.

"Lord Werner, it's the first infantry squad. Lord Neurath has—"

"Got it. Send one of the knights to Schünzel with the message to bring all his men to the west as soon as he can."

"Yessir!"

"You over there! Head to the lord's manor and have Frenssen prepare lamplight to bring to the west. And you! Stay here and tell anyone looking for instructions that I'm at the western gate. Everyone else, follow me!"

With that, Werner took to his horse and set off with haste. He never thought the town was too big, but with the frontlines spread to every edge of the town, movement proved a hassle. The western gate was still sealed when they arrived, but Werner confirmed that the tops of the walls were lit up around where Neurath stood. Holzdeppe had arranged it. Werner was thankful for his astute measures and walked over to Neurath.

"What's the situation?"

"The buckets here, there, and over there are—"

"So there's two places—no, three. Got it."

Usually, they would have been able to refill the land that had been dug, but they lacked the time. They had no choice but to meet their enemies with military force.

Had their foes been fellow humans, they wouldn't have been able to tunnel under the walls and into the cities so quickly. With a grimace, Werner realized his half-joking remarks before the battle had proven true. Then, as if struck by some realization, he ordered his troops to retreat.

"But Lord Werner," they said, confused, "if we attack right as they come out of the ground, we'll be able to fight back with superior numbers."

"I've considered that. But if we do, they might just dig deeper into the heart of the city next time. If that happens, we won't have any idea where they'll emerge."

Thus, he would have his enemies come to the surface as soon as they crossed the walls. Werner needed his men to wipe the monsters out right at that spot, and he gave those exact orders. Fighting monsters posed very different dangers than fighting humans did, and he had to account for those. He succeeded in convincing his soldiers, and they concealed themselves in the shadows of buildings as they wait for the ground to be dug through.

Just as the defenders were reaching the end of their patience, three holes opened up before them. Then, the Lycanthropes emerged. They didn't seem wary of their surroundings. For better or for worse, their infiltration squad lacked numbers. As soon as Werner determined that all his foes had reached the surface, he gave his orders.

"Light the lamps! Charge!"

All the magic lamps laid out by Frenssen came on in a flash. The soldiers rushed on the Lycanthropes with a battle cry, and soon, a bloody battle was waged.

***

The invading foes consisted of Weremoles, Werewolves, Weretigers, and even Werebuffaloes. For a moment, Werner reminisced about the game and how Werebuffaloes had been a variation of Minotaurs. He quickly banished such useless thoughts from his mind. Exterminating these monsters came first.

"Don't let the moles escape!"

Werner's soldiers answered his command by turning their swords and spears on their enemies. The Lycanthropes fought back fiercely, but they had been caught off guard by the light and sudden

charge. It soon became a free-for-all, and a few monsters were pierced with blades, cut down, or lost their limbs. It rendered them helpless. One Weretiger pounced on a soldier's windpipe, but his surrounding allies stabbed the monster's back over and over until the life bled out of it.

Werner used his hefty spear to stab a Weremole in the leg, hindering its movements so that his soldiers could rush in and finish it off. Around the other tunnel mouths, Neurath and Schünzel led their men in similar tactics against the Lycanthropes, sending them to their graves one after another.

Unlike the town's garrison or the hastily assembled volunteer squad, the soldiers under the deputy's command had been trained as members of the kingdom's army. They were also the core members who faced bandits time and again in fortresses and on open fields. Over the last few months, they had garnered experience that turned them into seasoned forces. They knew the advantages of fighting in teams, and together, they would butcher a foe before immediately going to a neighboring squadron's aid, further bolstering their advantage of numbers.

However, the Lycanthropes were no feeble foes. Rather, they were a small squad of elite monster soldiers. Their goal was to open the gates from the inside, or at the very least, set fire to the town to sow chaos. Gezarius didn't think it was an easy ask.

But they had been beaten to the punch and dragged into an ambush by Anheim's seasoned defenders. The Lycanthropes would

not have lost to humans in one-on-one battles, but they couldn't outmatch the squad tactics that Werner employed.

Some monsters tried to escape. If they could hide themselves in the city, they would be able to cause a disturbance that would turn the tides back in their favor. However, as soon as they did, movement began atop the silent walls. The former adventurers in Holzdeppe's volunteer squad unleashed their arrows on those who tried to run, blocking them.

When Holzdeppe saw Werner and his men suddenly fall back from the tunnel mouths, he rightly guessed the reason why. It allowed them to keep watch for any others approaching from outside the western gates while also monitoring the monsters who tried to slip past the bloody melee and infiltrate the town.

Despite being at a complete disadvantage, the Demon army fought fiercely. They may have been driven by fury at Werner's repeated ploys, or by their fear of Gezarius's wrath. No matter the reason, those who dug tunnels to infiltrate Anheim fought until their very last breaths.

"Fill the holes. That should buy us some time."

"Yessir!"

The soldiers immediately got to work. When castles were infiltrated by tunnels, those tunnels would sometimes be filled with water to render them impassable, and other times, they'd be used to launch a counterattack outside the castle walls. However, there was something else a besieged army could use to fill the tunnels, which was always close to hand—corpses.

They would cram the tunnels with all the bodies they could before plugging the holes with jars and barrels. Finally, they would fill the containers with sand or water, if not human waste. Then, they would close the lids, blocking off the tunnels from the inside.

If their opponents wanted to make the tunnels usable again, they would first have to deal with the mass of dead bodies, which was both mentally and physically taxing. Plus, once they finally removed the bodies and broke the jars or barrels, their contents would come flooding into the tunnels. It made using the same tunnels quite difficult, in effect shutting them down.

That was how it worked with human armies, though it wasn't yet clear how effective those methods would prove against Demons. But doing something was better than nothing. Werner himself joined in to expedite the process. Soon after, a stifled howl reached their ears.

"Lord Werner."

"…There may have still been some monsters in there."

Or perhaps, Gezarius realized his plan had failed and was sending a signal. Werner moved quickly. He tasked half of his troops with finishing the task, then took the other half to the northern gate. Considering he was running all throughout the town in the middle of the night, it was only natural that he inwardly demanded some overtime pay.

As soon as the northern gate came into view, Werner realized the situation had changed. He could see a log sticking through one corner of the gate. He cursed before ordering his men to reinforce it

from the inside using their remaining supply of wood. The log had lodged itself into one of the catapults positioned behind the gate, sparing the town any damage. Still, the catapult had probably been rendered useless.

The next moment, the force of a fired ballista shook the night air. The tremors reached as far as Werner and his men, who could only barely see the gate. He rushed over and climbed the walls to find countless rocks raining down on the town.

One of them must have hit a crevice in the stone walls. The rock crumbled to pieces and tumbled down the stairs to where Werner was. Those that flew over crashed through the roofs of people's homes. In a monster's hands, each stone had the same destructive force as one launched by a catapult. Now, the defenders realized they were no longer the only ones dishing out damage.

"So our enemies have finally begun long-range attacks," Neurath mused,.

"I never expected the Demon army to use such methods," Schunzel added.

"We've likely left them no other choice," Werner said.

The three of them ascended the stairs and found themselves in the midst of flying rocks and fallen soldiers. They looked on in shock as one of the ballistae situated to the northwest crumpled with a loud snap. Werner found the man he was looked for and called to him. "Eickstedt! What happened?"

"I'm glad you are safe. As soon as the logs opened a hole in our gates, our enemies shifted to new tactics. A group hidden behind the

Demon Commander approached and prepared to launch themselves over, so we engaged with bowshot."

"What happened to the ballista?"

"We noticed that the Demon Commander was preparing to launch another log, so we unleashed on him from both the left and right. One of the arrows hit his shoulder, but in retaliation…"

"So that's it." Werner scowled at what once had been a ballista. The weapon was one thing, but seeing that its operator was on the ground left Werner distressed. But then, he suddenly came back to his senses.

"One of the arrows landed?"

"I hear that you took out one of his eyes. This is just my assumption, but when we shot from both directions, I believe he failed to properly judge the arrows' distance."

"So it wasn't fatal?"

"My apologies."

"It's nothing to be sorry about."

For one, it definitely had roused Gezarius to anger. Just as Werner was considering whether irritating his opponent to protect the gate was a worthwhile tradeoff, the number of flying rocks increased. They were still safe behind the parapet, but carelessly sticking his head out would be dangerous.

"This is unbearable."

"Shall we match their volley?" Neurath suggested.

Werner considered it. Werner knew that his skill was Spearmanship. Commanding fire when under siege was not his strong suit. It was one of the reasons he had left the laser pointer to Kesten. However, he couldn't let his enemies reach the wall while he was hiding from enemy shot.

As soon as he reached his conclusion, some figures appeared from the stairs. Werner looked at them with shock. "You're Sir Kesten's men."

"Yes, he ordered us to come to your aid."

"I see veterans are quick with their judgments," muttered Werner. He meant it.

Once he had heard Gezarius's roar and noticed that their foes had dialed back the intensity of their attacks, Kesten commanded training personnel he had brought with him to the capital to head to the northern gates as reinforcements. He had noticed that the Demons were trying to focus their forces there.

It had only been a few men who had come from the eastern gate, but they would be a big help if they could act as commanders.

"We launch a counterattack! Fight back! Don't let them near the gate!"

In the middle of the night, with no sign of dawn approaching, a fierce fight began in Anheim.

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Once the Demon army noticed their fellow soldiers' heads were flying after getting hit with rocks, the soldiers up on the wall dumped

hot oil over them. Some Demons fell to the ground. The stench of blood mixed with the odd smell of stone hitting stone filled the soldiers' nostrils, and the clamor, the plucking of bow strings, battle cries, and even the howls of the Demons assaulted their eardrums.

While the long-ranged battle had begun in the dead of night, it was still raging when the dim light of dawn began to glow.

With the catapults broken, the wild magic kettles seemed to no longer have a purpose. However, Eickstedt decided to use them as heat sources. There was no longer an upper limit to their heat, and they reached a few hundred degrees Celsius. With the lids open, he would heat sugar or oil, and once they boiled over, he'd dump them over the wall. The contents that rained down did unbelievable damage to the Demons.

"Keep at it! We're not the only ones suffering!" shouted Werner. His soldiers answered. Being on the battlefield was one of a noble's duties, but to fight on the frontlines was something else. And their chief commander, a boy still in his teens, was right there shouting his throat raw. This was no time for fear.

Werner's perseverance during this battle was deserving of special mention. He brought his injured men to the safest places possible to administer first-aid and sometimes even joined the defenders on the walls in throwing rocks. He watched for where supplies dwindled and restocked stones, arrows, and oil. He was still barking orders, but he was too busy to even feel exhausted.

"It's like they came here to laugh at us!"

"I mean, I guess so," responded Werner. No one but him would have recognized Neurath's accidental anime reference. Neurath responded with an expression half-glum and half-grimacing as Werner threw another stone over the wall.

Now deep into the battle, Werner began to think that Gezarius's destruction of the ballistae had been effective. If he was still throwing logs, Werner's men wouldn't have been able to stave them off for this long. It seemed that even a Demon Commander couldn't throw logs one-handed for too long, and that was one of the reasons why he was working to maintain the war front. He was also probably thinking that if he landed a projectile on Werner and killed him, it would ruin his plans.

Still, when a stone thrown by the Demon Commander hit a human head on, it killed them. Many more lost their lives to rocks thrown by other monsters. Werner's men were tired, but their foes' onslaught was so relentless that it left no room for switching with the reserves. Werner cursed under his breath; he had underestimated the Demons' ability to fight drawn out battles.

Just as Werner was beginning to think they were in real danger, Schünzel pointed to something behind their enemies. There was a flickering light. For a second, even Werner didn't recognize it was their agreed upon signal, but as he returned to his senses, he quickly ordered a response be sent.

"Send the signal to the south too. It's about to begin."

"Yessir."

Schünzel reflected the light to its source. Then, a member of the garrison at the southern gate used a metal plate to reflect that light and send the signal back. Shortly after, the Demon army sensed a presence from behind. They turned around to see beautiful armor glittering in the light of the sun.

Before the Demons could even scream, the Kingdom of Wein's knight brigade rushed into battle, glinting in the early morning rays. The clomps of hooves were all that could be heard, but from within the clamor came Grezarius's angry roar of "Impossible!"

The kingdom's army arrived on the battlefield as swiftly as possible, which they managed by bringing minimal supplies and making early preparations for the battle.

The knight brigade had left all other battles to the knights of noble houses and marched for Anheim in peak condition on the same day the capital had received Werner's messenger. They had already heard the crown prince's orders and the plans for battle, and thus, they knew for certain that they would find a battlefield waiting for them when they arrived. They had made a "pre-planned" emergency march.

Count Volger was the one who supplied the knight brigade. Not only did he have the geographical advantage of having a domain located adjacent to the former fiefdom of Marquess Kneipp, but he also had experience relocating over five thousand refugees from the same fiefdom to the capital in just a month without letting a single one starve. He already knew where to allocate supplies and how to ship those munitions to prevent the knight brigade, noble house

armies, mercenaries, and squads of adventurers from starving, even though they had marched from the capital with no provisions and minimal armaments.

Just as had been planned, the knight brigade had brought no supply packs, instead securing supplies, provisions, and arrows while en route. They even got horses that were pre-emptively shipped to the lands of the former fiefdom of Marquess Kneipp that were now under Baron Zabel.

The knight brigade rushed for their enemies with astounding bravery. The battlefield was not Triot but the old domain of Marquess Kneipp, and their enemies were none other than the invading Demon army. To them, it was a fight to defend their motherland. Given their inhuman foes, they had no need for restraint.

Knights were always skilled with field battles. The fact that the Demon army had intentionally waged the battle in the plains worked to the knights' favor, and the fact that the Demon army had already brought Triot to ruin only stoked their hostility. Having seen the refugees from Triot in the capital for themselves, it was pure anger that drove their assault.

Werner watched from atop the ramparts, but what most surprised him was that they were equipped with a squad of carroballistae. Werner had thought that shooting while moving would be impossible, but that was only because he underestimated the power of this world's skills.

A driver with the Coachman skill almost completely eliminated vibrations from their chariot, and an archer born with Marksmanship

could easily hit targets from atop the roof, even while the vehicle was moving. Werner gazed in wonder as they hit shot after shot while driving the carriage.

The kingdom's engineers hadn't been playing around. Not only did they miniaturize cranequins, they half-automated the carroballistae through the use of magic stones. Every time it launched a bolt, the cranequin would restring the line, allowing for the next round of arrows to be fired just by setting them in place.

Crown Prince Hubertus had taken the lead in improving the design until they had achieved their goal of producing ballistae that shot with blinding speed. The kingdom had used its power as a large-scale organization to assemble the necessary personnel, and as a result, carroballistae became powerful missile weapons whose squadrons surged through the battlefield like this world's version of tanks.

The knights pierced through the monsters with their lances and caved in the Werewolf and Weretiger heads with their swords. With one volley of the carroballistae, the arrows went right through one monster and stabbed straight into the one behind them. The galloping horses broke the Demon army's lines, reducing them to a disorganized Demon mass.

While one or two tried to fight back, they posed no threat once battered aside with maces and cut down by battleaxes. Marquess Schramm acted as their supreme commander, and he spread out the knight brigade into two wings. Once he did, seasoned mercenaries cut the Demon army to pieces, plunging them into chaos.

"Jeez. I see the knights have arrived."

No one criticized Werner for dropping to his knees. The attack on Anheim had come to a sudden halt. After running around since the middle of the night, Werner was finally able to take a breather and a sip of water.

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The sudden appearance of new foes had shaken the Demon army, and they split into two groups, one headed east and the other west, both trying to make a break for the south. However, the kingdom's knights came to meet them with ferocious war cries. It caught them off guard, stopping them in their tracks. At some point, forces that clearly exceeded all of those in Anheim had appeared from the *south*.

"Take this!" Baron Zabel met the paralyzed Demon army near Anheim's eastern gate, and he rushed into enemy lines while flailing his halberd, cutting down his foes as if he were merely counting on his blessings. He was a brave general, and he rued the fact he had only now seen action. But now that he had the chance to swing his weapon, he displayed his full power. Following his valiant example, the men under him—along with surviving knights and soldiers from Triot—joined the battle.

On the opposite side, near the western gate, Viscount Gröllmann's army charged into the Demon ranks, Goecke's mercenaries taking the vanguard as they mowed the enemy down. Viscount Gröllmann had participated in the retreat of Fort Werisa, and the core of his knights had trained with the Zehrfeld's forces in squad

tactics. They were among the few so-to-speak veterans of organized group combat in the kingdom's army.

Viscount Gröllmann was also swift with his orders. Commanding several of his troops to isolate and surround enemies, he managed to pin the enemy between Anheim's walls and his massed forced. There, he annihilated them.

While both armies had long camped out in the area, they had yet to see battle. Now carried by their momentum, they crushed their enemies and gradually forced them back north to where the knight brigade was.

The Demon army was completely surrounded.

Before the battle to defend Anheim had begun, Werner set fire to the second fort when he withdrew his troops. That wasn't to inform Gezarius of their retreat but to convey by smoke signal to Baron Zabel and Viscount Gröllmann that the Demon army had taken Werner's bait.

Their scouts who had already entered Anheim saw the fortress erupt into flames and returned to their domains to report the incident. Upon hearing the news, Viscount Gröllmann and Baron Zabel deployed their armies. This confirmed to them that since the Demon army had taken Werner's bait, they wouldn't be advancing on either of their domains. As such, they didn't hold any of their forces in reserve.

The survivors of Triot in both armies led them over the river far from Anheim to invade Triot. Then, they hid their troops south of the river and waited for the knight brigade to arrive.

On Werner's side, once he arrived in Anheim after passing the third fortress, he first ordered that the wood they prepared be delivered to the river's southern bank. They were assembled into rafts, which would make it easy for Viscount Gröllmann's and Baron Zabel's armies to cross the river. Only then did Werner allow himself the luxury of sleep.

Then, to keep the Demon Commander from discovering the blockading army, Werner sent Goecke's mercenaries—who among their forces were the most capable in close combat—to act as a commando unit in the south, severing communications between Triot and the Demon army.

In order to arrive in Anheim alongside the knight brigade, Baron Zabel and Viscount Gröllmann worked with Goecke's men to build the rafts and cross the river. They then headed north to drive the Demon army away from the south.

Werner had always worked under the assumption that he wouldn't use Goecke's mercenaries in the defensive battle. That was why he had created the laser pointer and volunteer squad. He had put together a plan that would stave off the Demon army with ranged attacks alone.

Thus, the Demon army pressed deep into Wein territory, striking at Werner's seat in Anheim while completely oblivious to the kingdom armies that had been deployed to the south, ready to cross the river at a moment's notice. They fell victim to a pincer movement, assailed on one side by the knight brigade, who'd arrived early than they

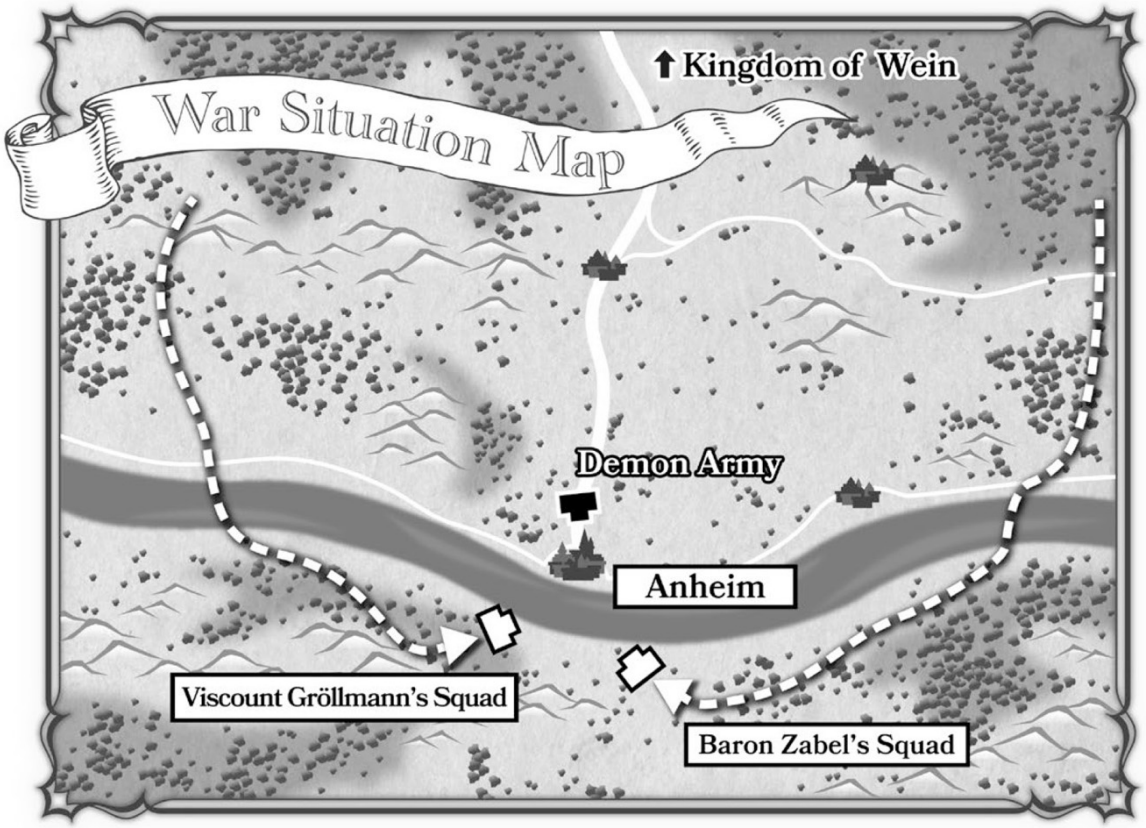
accounted for, and on the other by the kingdom's armies who attacked from Triot—their own territory.

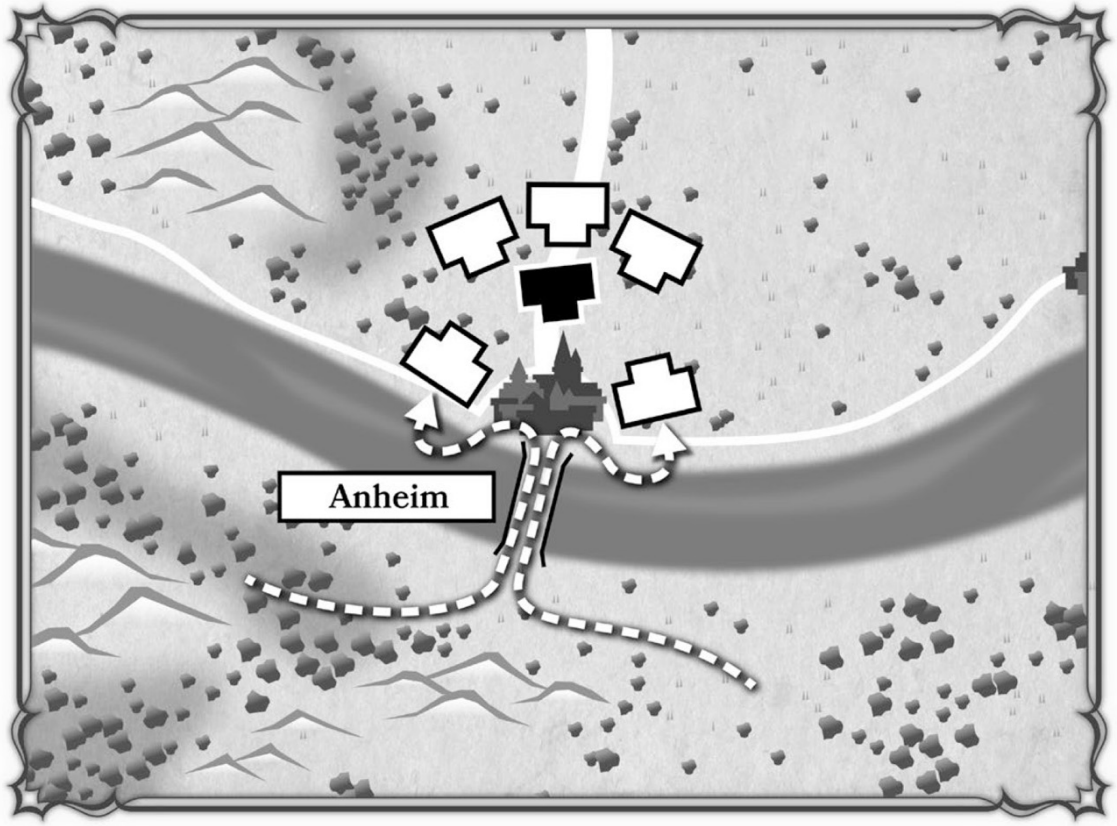
The appearance of these forces seemed impossible, and it left the Demon army so shaken that all they could do was run around in circles. All the while, soldiers rained arrows upon them from atop the walls, and the soldiers from Triot swung their weapons with palpable hatred. On both the eastern and western sides of Anheim's ramparts, the ground was paved with roads of monster corpses and blood.

To the north, the first and second ranks of the knight brigade toppled the Demon army's formation as they cut them down. Bolts from carroballistae took the lives of several Demons, and the mercenaries slew the rest without mercy.

But just as the monsters' defeat seemed all but inevitable, a voice thunderous beyond belief roared through the battlefield. Humans stopped in their tracks, and even trained warhorses were so spooked they froze. Even some monsters stopped in their tracks. Then, the Demon army rushed the knight brigade as if possessed.

In the single moment that Werner and the rest of the garrison had lowered their guard, a large mass rushed and slammed into the gates. The whole northern wall let out a loud grating noise as a section of stones tumbled to the ground. Gezarius had crashed into the wall at full-force. Werner and his men had enforced them, but they now crumbled to pieces at an alarming rate.


War Situation Map
Kingdom of Wein
Demon Army
Anheim
Viscount Gröllmann's Squad
Baron Zabel's Squad


Anheim

"You've got to be kidding!" With that shocked cry, they threw the rest of the stones and blinding agents down, but it wasn't enough to stop Gezarius. He slammed into the gate with enough force to destroy the catapults behind the door. Werner looked on in shock from atop the walls, but he couldn't just let Gezarius carry on unopposed.

"It's dangerous, Lord Werner!" Neurath called out.

"You need to hide!" Schünzel said.

I would if I could, Werner thought. But if Gezarius broke down the walls and wreaked unchecked havoc in the town, there was no telling how many people might perish. If they couldn't hold him at the walls until the knight brigade arrived from the battle outside, there were sure to be civilian casualties. He would never be able to forgive himself.

Werner climbed down the walls' stairs. It was hard to say if he was truly of sound mind, but he was certain that an effective way to buy time was to appear in front of Gezarius himself.

The Demon Commander was covered in blood as he smashed the catapults sealing the doors and strode inside. The townsfolk's screams and cries reverberated through the air, but Werner spoke loud enough to cut through the noise. "I see you were kind enough to bring me your second eye yourself!"

"So that's where you were, brat!" Gezarius dashed right for Werner, closing the distance between them in a flash. Werner dodged —where he'd stood a moment ago, there was a crater in the ground. Cold sweat began to trickle down his back.

"I shall suffer this no longer! Your life is mine!"

"Ooh, how scary! You're freaking me out, so how about you just go home?" Werner teased him, but he didn't actually have the composure he pretended he did. However, he didn't expect a verbal response, and the Demon didn't plan to give. All of Gezarius's blood had rushed to his head, and now there was no holding back. Neurath and Schünzel ran to Werner's side and unsheathed their blades.

Gezarius had already suffered many wounds. He had exerted himself past his body's limits, careening into the gates. At first glance, Werner seemed to have the advantage, but he too was at the edge of exhaustion. Not to mention that at their best, the difference in strength between them was vast. Werner's only aim was to buy time until the knight brigade arrived, but Gezarius was strong enough that the odds of Werner holding out were in doubt, even if he fought with all he had.

Gezarius dashed forward. He knew the reach of Werner's spear. Werner parried the swing of his foe's arm with his spear. The force rattled his arms, but his new spear was able to withstand the Demon Commander's blow. Gezarius's injured shoulder probably made that easier.

Werner moved to Gezarius's blind spot. At the same time, Neurath and Schünzel launched simultaneous attacks from both the left and right. They were strong. Blood spurted from the fur on his back.

"Out of the way!" Gezarius once again swung his arm with all his strength, but the two dodged. They were swift—though really, they

just barely managed to get out of the way—but in that moment, a leg hit from Werner knocked Gezarius off balance. While the shadows of the people on the sidelines finally began to disperse, a much larger shadow approached Werner, Neurath, and Schünzel. The one-eyed lion completely ignored the humans around them as he shot Werner a furious glare.

The next moment, Gezarius let out a tremendous roar just as he had when he launched his attack on Anheim. If there were any glass windows in the vicinity, they would have surely shattered. Hearing such an intense noise up close sent Werner, Neurath and Schünzel's heads spinning. Some of the soldiers around them even cowered on the ground.

"Does that have a debuff effect?!" Werner barely managed to get away before Gezarius lashed out unexpectedly, gouging the earth with his good arm as if it were a backhoe, and then launched a heap of earth at Werner. It rained down on him like an avalanche.

"Huh?!"

"Lord Werner!"

Having been completely buffeted by the mass of earth, Werner couldn't stand up straight. Gezarius lunged at him with enough force to cave in his head. Werner put up his spear. Rather than try to protect himself, he was simply demonstrating that he wouldn't go down without a fight.

Then, everything past Gezarius's elbow fell to the ground.

Neurath, Schünzel, Werner, and even Gezarius himself didn't know what happened. But then the only man who could so easily cut

off the arm of a Demon Commander stood before Werner and faced Gezarius. He turned his head around and flashed Werner a haughty grin. “That’s one less debt I owe you, Werner.”

“Mazel?!”

The Hero, Mazel Harting, stood before him.

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Mazel was right in front of me, that much I could understand, but I couldn’t quite wrap my head around how it all added up. I opened my mouth without thinking. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, that’s complicated. For now…” He turned his gaze back to the Demon Commander. I still couldn’t believe he could stand before such a monster without any hint of fear. “We better take care of this first.”

“Right.” As soon as I stood up, Neurath, Schünzel, and I were bathed in light. Another figure appeared, and while I was glad to have her here, I didn’t understand why she’d arrived either.

“Your Highness.”

“Just call me Laura.” The holy woman flashed me a glowing smile. Maybe I should have just shut my brain off. Sharing a battlefield with the Hero and his party was crazy talk.

Still, what she cast on us must’ve been full-body healing magic. I had never experienced such high-level magic before, so I couldn’t say for sure. I was still exhausted, but my body felt much lighter. My wounds must’ve been disappearing, but I didn’t bother to check.

Next to Laura was an old man with a dignified air about him but also a hint of eccentricity. “So,” he said, “you must be Werner.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Sir Almsick.”

He was none other than the old mage of the Hero’s party, Uwe Almsick. It was my first time meeting him, but I knew him well—in the game, of course. But what was making him look so disapproving of me?

“You may call me Uwe. I have much to ask you, but that shall come later.”

“Hyaaa!”

That voice made me jump. I turned around to find Luguentz swinging at the Demon Commander. He didn’t cut off an arm like Mazel, but his strike left quite a mark. Fresh blood spurted out of Gezarius’s lion body and rained down on the ground.

It was on a whole other level compared to the single hit I was able to get on him—or really, just *happened* to get on him. The Demon Commander couldn’t even dodge. He was crazy quick considering his giant sword.

Erich and Feli followed Luguentz’s attack. Could I even win against Feli right now? With his speed, his opponent was putty in his hands.

Erich was…that’s right. Monks were stronger when fighting barehanded. Since this was a game, I thought that made sense to me, but I really didn’t want him tossing a four-meter-tall Werelion

around with his bare hands when they weren't even a stone's throw from me.

"Lord Werner!"

"Are you all right?!"

"Neurath, Schünzel, I'm fine! Take our men and close the gate!" The two stood a bit aways from me, and I ordered them to seal the doors to prevent any Demons from slipping inside.

The smashed-open gate and the area outside was currently an empty void in the battle, but there was a chance monsters would run through it in an attempt to escape the knight brigade. We couldn't just leave it as is.

Neurath and Schünzel must have heard my orders. They called out to those around them and headed for the gate. Wait, weren't those the members of the Iron Hammer with them? Huh? Oh.

"Skywalk Boots, huh?"

"Indeed."

Skywalk Boots could only carry so many people, so the Hero's party had the Iron Hammer divide into two groups, and then each group moved to Anheim with half of the Hero's party. The Iron Hammer had visited before, so they knew how to get here.

The knight brigade had collided with the Demon army in a free-for-all melee. Since Gezarius had pushed himself inside the town, the area around the walls was oddly empty. Thus, they would've been able to hop over the Demon army and knight brigade to the area around the town and then rush into the city with their own feet. That

must have been how Mazel and his friends were able to enter the town alone despite having traveled with the knight brigade.

I had just figured all that out when Uwe cast some kind of spell. With a thunderous roar, a fireball the size of a compact van crashed into the Demon Commander and burned him. But for real, how could I be perfectly cool over here with something like that around? Magic really was pure fantasy.

"The Demon Commander truly is a tenacious—" I couldn't hear the rest of what the old man said. Werner had landed another blow on the staggering Demon Commander and flashed me a smile. "It's been a while since we last fought together, huh?"

"…Yeah, it has."

As students, we fought together quite a lot, like in group warfare class or monster hunting drills. Damn, it felt like so long ago.

Honestly, I didn't think I needed to be in this fight, but if my best friend was inviting me, I couldn't say no. Fighting alongside the Hero's party was an experience hard to come by. I took my stance with my spear and stood by Mazel's side. Mazel spoke to me as if he was having a blast, which was kind of crazy, considering there was an injured Demon Commander standing right in front of him.

"What are we gonna do?"

"I'll match you. Just do what you always do, Mazel."

"Roger that!" As he spoke, Mazel stepped forward, leading with a cut. I saw that Feli seemed to notice that Gezarius was blind in one

eye and was moving to that side. Erich was focused on knocking him off balance. That meant that I…

"I'm right here!" I deliberately stepped into Gezarius's line of sight and sent a low stab at his leg. Gezarius dodged my attack, immediately following into the next as he approached me and swung down his fist. That was a close one, but it was also exactly what I was hoping for.

"You've got openings all over you!"

He was now in range of Luguentz. Not to mention, Gezarius had only one hand now, and he couldn't block and attack with it at the same time. Luguentz's blow lodged into Gezarius's shoulder as he bellowed his rage. Once the Demon Commander turned to face him, Feli made his move. He stabbed his sword right into the wound left by the ballista, opening it further.

To prevent him from targeting Feli, I thrust my spear toward his face, making it look like I was after his other eye. Given my position, he had no choice but to fall back. But that put him in range of Erich. His blow slammed straight into the Demon Commander's side, stunning him for a moment. Mazel took the opportunity to swing down his sword. The sound of splitting meat reverberated in the air.

The moment the outline of the Demon Commander switched with that of a human, Laura used debuff magic to fetter his movements, restraining him in shackles of light.

It was fun fighting next to such reliable comrades. Maybe it wasn't quite the time for it, but I couldn't stop myself from grinning.

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The battle was relatively short. Mazel landed the finishing blow. His swing was sharp, quick, and hit the mark. With that fatal strike, Gezarius let out an anguished scream and dissipated like smoke into the air.

Finally, all that was left was the tattered corpse of a man. I'd need to check his face later, but I had something else to do first.

"We need to find the black gem. It's dangerous."

"You may leave that to me. I understand there are more important matters demanding your urgent attention."

After briefly considering Oldman Uwe's suggestion, I decided to leave things to him. He was right. I instructed Neurath and Schünzel to keep up our defenses and ran to the top of the wall. Eickstedt's men ran toward me with cheers.

"You did it, Lord Werner!"

"It's not over yet. Shout it out loud as one. The Demon Commander is dead!"

The soldiers atop the wall understood what I was getting at. Together, they repeated, "The Demon Commander is dead!""

"Victory is ours!"

They shouted the news from the wall, their voices carrying into the town and out onto the plains. Their words reached the soldiers outside the walls, who raised a cheer that boomed all about the city. The monsters, upon hearing it, lost heart and tried to flee, but they didn't have anywhere of note to run to.

When I could tell the sound of clashing swords was moving further and further away, I finally knew that the battle was over. I fell to my knees. I had to deal with the aftermath, but right now, I couldn't think. I was too exhausted.

At least, that's what I thought.

"First, I have some questions for you."

As soon as I returned to the local lord's manor, it was a one-on-one showdown with Oldman Uwe. He even made sure to drive everyone else away. Just what did he want?

"To be honest, I've got some work to do, but...what is it?"

"There is much I have to ask you, but there is one thing I must first clarify. I have heard that you showed a map of this continent to Laura and Mazel."

"Oh, well, I think so." Now that he said it, I was pretty sure I did. And while it was none of my business, was he seriously calling the second princess by just her first name? I guessed that was what she herself would want, but still.

As I pondered that over, the old man fixed me with a stare so intense it could kill a man. His words were sharp. "No matter what kingdom, maps are held in secrecy for the sake of protecting the realm. Most are unaware that even maps of individual countries exist, and even those are kept safe by the crown except for a countable few. Just who are you to know not just the location of foreign towns but the geography of this whole continent?"

Welp… Seems like I really screwed up.

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When he put it that way, there was no denying it. Since maps were top secret, I never got to see one. I had to struggle to pull out every last memory of my past life to make that map. Even if I was just dealing with Mazel, it was a mistake to operate using my common sense as a Japanese person.

Right, so how do I answer? The only thoughts I could get through my head were "I'm sleepy" and "I'm tired." I guessed I'd just have to try to talk my way out of this.

"Did Mazel inform you?" Oldman Uwe asked.

"Inform me of what?" I asked.

"Of the other Demon Commanders."

He must have been referring to Dreax and Beliures. I heard that he defeated them, but I was never too interested in hearing about the details.

But seriously, why was this old man staring me down like that? Well, considering I was trying to hide things, I guessed he had good reason.

"When the other Demon Commanders perished, they left no bodily remains. Gezarius alone left behind his human form. It was why he made an attempt to urge you away."

Oh, that was right. When the other three Commanders were defeated in the game, they didn't leave any corpse behind… Wait, what did he just say?

Hold on a second. That's right. It was strange that Gezarius never showed up in the game. It was possible that being able to turn into a human like he did with Pückler made him different from the other three. Which meant…

"Then he's no ordinary Demon Commander?"

"Demon Commanders are beings shrouded in mystery. How familiar are you with the previous Demon Lord?"

The previous Demon Lord? Well, uh…

I had always known that the Demon Lord would return, so I was never too interested in the one that came before, and I never thought to look into it either. The game just suddenly began with the Demon Lord's revival. They never even mentioned the previous Demon Lord.

Before my appointment in Anheim, I started to have suspicions about the connections between monsters and natural disasters, but since I had no means of investigating the matter, I'd put it on the backburner. In that sense, I knew next to nothing. Just the stuff I heard from fairytales when I was a kid.



"In the time of the previous Demon Lord, there were the Four Fiends, but there were no beings known as Demon Commanders. At the very least, no records surviving from the days of the ancient kingdom mention such a thing."

"Huh?"

Wait, what? So then what are Demon Commanders? Hold on a second. I always thought it was weird that Demon Commanders could resurrect when the Four Fiends couldn't. What if it was like I thought, and the "Demon Lord" isn't some sort of being, but a position? Either he never had any intentions of reviving the Four Fiends in the first place, or he viewed the Demon Commanders as more important. Both cases led to the same conclusion: "The Demon Commanders are the current Demon Lord's retainers."

"Hmph…"

Huh? That was it? Just a "Hmph"?

"So then, you lack knowledge of the ancient kingdom."

"What do you mean?"

"In the days of the ancient kingdom, they knew the shape of the whole continent. I assumed you had that same knowledge."

"How old do I look to you?" With my focus fraying and my mind scarcely there, I accidentally blurted out those words. He ignored me. Happy that he did, I added another question. "Do you know a lot about the ancient kingdom?"

"I once researched their magic devices."

That was right. I kind of recalled that being his backstory. He might know a lot about their techniques too. If that was true, I had a lot I wanted to ask him. At the very least, if he had any documents from the ancient kingdom, I wanted to take a peek.

Oldman Uwe was once the king's tutor. He might have gotten to read the royal family's top-secret documents. I didn't even know if those existed in the first place, but now, I was dying to know. Still, if I asked about it, I had a feeling I'd have to cough up some things about me as well.

"You have already shared some of your thoughts," Oldman Uwe said, pulling me out of my own thoughts, "but did you find an answer as to why that Demon Commander left a body behind?

I did, at least, have an idea. It was a bit different from my first guess, or really, that was still half the right answer if you were going easy on the grading. Basically…

"That body was a trap."

"Indeed. I do believe it is best if I keep that black gem from your hands."

That'd really help me out. If I had it, it'd either explode or possess me, and both those possibilities had me shivering. I knew that I was Gezarius's target, but now I saw that he was willing to try to get to me no matter what it took.

He must have really lost it during that last attack. The Demon army—or maybe even the Demon Lord himself—probably didn't think that humans could toy with a Demon Commander to that extent. They might have jumped to the conclusion that I was strong enough to

defeat a Demon Commander. Well, maybe not that last one. My head really was feeling fuzzy.

"Hubertus instructed us to simply observe if the knight brigade proved strong enough to defeat the Demon Commander, but once he broke down Anheim's gate, we simply had to join the fray."

"I…see." *He even calls the crown prince by just his first name? Well, he probably has permission.*

"I do believe the Demon army but recently set their eyes on you."

"Right…"

"If not, that Demon Commander would have surely targeted you sooner. He must have returned to the Demon Lord for a short time. It would be there that he devised his ploy."

It was true that I also had my doubts that I had perhaps given them too much time and wondered why they hadn't interfered sooner. So that was part of their own strategy.

But that meant the Demon Commander was okay with losing. Could a vassal to the Demon Lord really have that kind of attitude? Something wasn't adding up. Was I missing something?

"Then let us return to my first question. What are you, that you should know the map of this continent and be a target of the Demon army?"

"Well…" I was pretty sure the biggest reason was that I was good friends with Mazel. Up until now, I hadn't told anyone about my memories of my past life. So just how should I answer?

"Lying is futile."

"Do you have that sort of magic?"

"Currently, it is only the Demon army who knows the whole geography of this continent. I must be wary of you. If you have no knowledge of the ancient kingdom, then what are you?"

Ugh. I really did seem suspicious. I didn't know exactly why the Demon army was after me, but I didn't have anything I could use as evidence to deny that the Demons were just pretending to target me if that was what Oldman Uwe was suggesting. He was literally asking for the devil's proof.

Even if lying didn't work, he might just think I was spewing delusions. Well, whatever. I was too tired to think. "You might not believe me, but I have the memories of someone else."

I wasn't quite speaking proper English, but I didn't feel like fixing that. Still speaking in slang, I explained the parts of my memories that pertained to this world. He probably wouldn't understand the word "video game," so I instead just called it a "story" and explained that's how I had heard about Mazel's journey. I told him that I had shared the map because I feared an attack on the capital—or really, as I clarified, that such an attack was inevitable.

"But things are definitely a bit different from what I remember. There was no Demon Commander Gezarius in the story I know."

"Did you appear in that story?"

"No."

"Hm…"

He was pondering something. Wait, was I one of the reasons the story changed? I didn't regret anything, but just how did we get here? When did the story change?

"What was the name of that tale?"

"Huh?"

"I wish to know the name of the tale you read of Mazel's journey."

The name? Huh? Wait.

Just what *was* the title?

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I must have been still for a while. Oldman Uwe looked me in the eyes and began to speak. "You do not remember?"

"N-no, I don't."

"Hm, well then…"

Wait, he was just gonna let it slide? I guessed the lapse shocked me more than it did him.

While those thoughts went through my mind, he looked at me and spoke so calmly he almost sounded sarcastic. "I myself cannot determine whether you were unaware from the start, have forgotten it due to some outside force, or if it has simply slipped your mind."

I mean, I guess I might just have forgotten, but what was with that attitude?

"If you have simply forgotten, there is nothing I myself can do until you remember."

I was at my wit's end, but I supposed hermits and sages in fantasies were always like this. I had already lost interest, but he was completely apathetic to my struggle to pay attention. I really wished he wasn't such a faithful rendition of the archetype.

If this was how things were going to be, I'd force the information I wanted out of him. My sleepy brain had fallen into mere insults, but I slapped myself awake.

"What do you mean by an 'outside force'?"

"Did you never think this world was odd?"

"I think that depends on your frame of reference." I turned the question back on him.

He took a moment to think before speaking. "Indeed. Then let us start from the end. Why do you think defeating monsters makes you stronger?"

Why? Because in games, slaying monsters gets you experience points, and once you get enough of those, your level increases. But how would the actual setting of the game explain that?

"The turn of phrase is of little import, but let us call it 'protomagic.' The flora, fauna, and even minerals of the natural world contain a certain amount of protomagic, and it is believed that through absorbing that, we become stronger."

"It's even in minerals?"

"Yes, but it is easier for some to absorb the protomagic in minerals than others. Perhaps you will understand better if I mention

that there are some monsters that have an easier time absorbing protomagic through minerals than by other means."

I get it. They say Iron Toads grow bigger by eating iron too, not just humans. I understood that much.

"It is also protomagic that allows us to cast powerful magic we were once unable to use and the reason one can gain the power to cut through the skin of beasts which were once impenetrable."

"So, you absorb it when you slay enemies?"

"It is one of the ways of doing so."

So, humans absorb this protomagic and grow stronger. Wait, but doesn't that mean…? "Is it the same for those of the knight brigade?"

"Of course."

So it wasn't just their equipment that allowed them to take on a Demon Commander in the capital. It was through fighting and winning against the Demon army during the Demon Stampede and the battles at the Hildea Plains and Finoy that brought them to the level to challenge a Demon Commander. If they still only had the strength they had during the Demon Stampede, they could have proved powerless against the attack the Four Fiends were bound to launch.

Just as that thought occurred to me, Oldman Uwe's next line brought my thinking down a completely different path. "But on the other hand, it can also degrade the mind under specific circumstances."

Huh? What did he mean? "The mind?"

"Being sound of mind is a phrase with many meanings. A good memory, quick understanding, and prudent judgment all fall under the phrase."

"Yes, I know."

"Monsters who have been heavily impacted by protomagic will charge humans without fear. I am sure you have experienced so much yourself."

I had indeed, both at Fort Werisa and at the worksite of the new aqueduct. I had put together all my strategies on the pretext that monsters would attack humans without fear. *Wait a second.* "Then do humans also forget about danger and caution when they absorb too much protomagic?"

"Adventurers just barely strong enough to defeat a foe will use their minds to find every advantage. Those who are too strong instead rely on power alone. Though it is easy to forget this fact."

That was true, but how the heck was this world so accurate to games? It even reflected how players whose characters were high level just fire off big magic attacks to try to finish the fight faster.

No, this being a video game didn't matter right now. I summarized what Oldman Uwe had told me. "Then you're saying that the influence of protomagic has grown stronger since the days of the ancient kingdom, and from that influence, humans have gradually stopped thinking about the things they need to?"

"Was that in your other memories?"

"No." It was just my guess based on the assumption that the ancient kingdom had advanced technology in things like astronomy and architecture. Once I explained that, Oldman Uwe began to look like he had improved his opinion of me.

"Oho, I see you are a man worth exchanging ideas with. Let us liken a human to a sheet of cloth. When it absorbs protomagic through usual means, it is dyed. There is nothing better than a beautiful result."

"Sure."

"But, if it is dyed in contaminated water, the cloth may instead be ruined."

The parts dyed with dirty water become unusable. That could mean one thing. "Then there are two types of protomagic?"

"I believe there may be protomagic that originates from the Demon Lord, but that is but a hypothesis at this point."

Hearing this, I began to think. Didn't that make it sound like there was no protomagic that came from the Demon Lord during the days of the ancient kingdom? Just what the hell *was* the Demon Lord? The mystery was only growing deeper.

"It is possible that your lapse in memory is caused by such protomagic."

"If that's the case, will it ever heal?"

"I do not know."

Hold on a second, Oldman. I get there were few cases similar to mine, and this wasn't something to be telling others lightly, but

without any evidence or tests you could use on me, that info could take on a life of its own. My supposed poisoning by Demon Lord protomagic could become an excuse to eliminate me.

Of course, I couldn't run a half-assed experiment either. It would look like I was trying to create dangerous monsters. Follow that path, and I'd be branded a mad scientist.

"However, it affects individuals differently. Even should an epidemic kill some, others will fall ill but eventually regain the strength to stand, and others will weather the plague entirely unaffected."

"So, some people would have retained their ability to think?" Still, that led to a scenario in which, as a whole, people would only be able to think things through at a simple level. The more people turned away from studying anything they found difficult, the more primitive technology would become. What was this "protomagic," a virus that destroys brain cells?

"Are His Highness and His Majesty aware?"

"I have told them of my hypothesis that some protomagic originates from the Demon Lord."

So, they did know. Though this was, of course, not the sort of thing you could just carelessly announce to the world.

"I am indeed quite certain that those of the ancient kingdom faced such a threat. At the end of their days, after the Demon Lord attacked, they conducted experiments to transfer their knowledge and memories to the future."

"To transfer it?" Was that even possible? Wait, he did say they only "experimented." "So then," I said, "they failed?"

"There are no records of their success. However, I believed it was possible you obtained a Record Stone that succeeded in transferring those memories."

Oh, I see. Wait, huh? "A Record Stone?"

"It is the name I have tentatively assigned the stone-shaped objects that transfer knowledge and memories."

Huh? Hold on. That means… "Are the cores of Demon Commanders…?"

"It is possible. I regret that I believed them to not exist."

"Then does that mean the Demon Lord is using ancient kingdom technology?"

"It is impossible to determine whether it is based on the same techniques."

True. We couldn't say for sure without studying them. But that still meant the Demon Lord who destroyed the ancient kingdom might be using their technology, right? It was possible that through their knowledge and technology, he was able to utilize both these Demon Commanders and the memories of their vessels.

Wait, I felt like there was a contradiction in there somewhere, but right now, I couldn't think. I was reaching my brain's limits.

"This is all just theory, huh?"

"Indeed. Ah, this is perfect." Ignoring my discomfort, he began writing something on a piece of paper, which he then thrust, still

open, into my hands.

"What is this?

"I would like you to deliver this to His Majesty. As you appear to be the perfect candidate, I wish to entrust you with investigating the ancient kingdom at the capital."

He wanted me to do what now?

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It was rough going after that. The Oldman wouldn't listen to a single word I said, and after just a short nap, the two of us met with Laura to fill her in on the basics. Somehow, it was decided that the old man would be the one explaining to the king. But then, I got all panicked because Laura was the one apologizing to *me*.

According to her, Oldman Uwe had always been pushy and unreasonable with his requests. On the day he disappeared, the king worried for him and sent a chamberlain only to find a letter stating he had left to investigate some ruins of the ancient kingdom on his own. Laura followed this up by telling me that "he wasn't a bad guy," but in all honesty, I thought he was quite the troublesome old geezer.

Still, it wasn't like there weren't any oddball nobles in my previous world who displayed that kind of obnoxious personality. There were guys like Pierre de Craon, who after embezzling funds from his master, fled to his home country only to fail an assassination attempt on one of their generals. Then you had guys like the self-proclaimed "Count Cagliostro," who was probably but a fraud. The noble society of my old world always had people like them coming in and out of the picture.

Truth really was sometimes stranger than fiction. An extreme example was how Hannibal crossed the Alps with elephants in tow. If it wasn't historical fact, people would say it was too crazy for even a light novel.

However, *that* was still tripping me up. If we assumed my memories of this being a game were true—even if that pretext was maybe beginning to crumble—it posed an interesting question.

It was strange for a man who had served as a monarch's teacher to enter a dungeon alone and with no guards. If it was true that he'd always been like this and would often make wild, off-the-cuff decisions like Laura claimed, then I could regard that scenario as a result of his actions. On the other hand, if the game came first and this world second, it was possible that the Oldman was characterized this way in order to *create* that scenario.

It was a chicken-and-the-egg situation, but I had the feeling that figuring out which came first in this instance would be the piece of the puzzle that told me whether my memories were true or not.

In any case, once the matter with Oldman Uwe was settled, Marquess Schramm, the supreme commander of the reinforcements, asked to speak with me, so it was back to my duties as Anheim's deputy count. In our discussions, he warned me that the laser pointer posed such a grave danger that he asked that it be kept a secret.

When I told him I was fine with that, since I had invented the device with the intent of using it against the Demon army, he drafted an edict in his name proclaiming it a matter of grave secrecy. He even got Laura to sign off on it too. If the holy woman herself, the second

princess, was asking it to be kept secret, I definitely couldn't go running my mouth. This was getting out of hand.

Since a report had to be made to the capital and honors had to be conferred on the deserving, the marquess asked that I accompany him back to the capital. I jumped at the invitation. He had no ulterior motives, and the only reason I'd used such a flamboyant strategy in the first place was because I wanted to go back there.

Afterwards, I handed over the duties of deputy, concluding my stint with a ceremony to honor those who died in the battle. Since they had died under my command, I thought it was only right for me to do it. I had done my best, but there were still casualties. I never wanted to forget them.

It was my duty as deputy to provide for them, but still, the town had a lineup of guests you'd never expect way out in the province, what with the hero's party, including the holy woman Laura and Mazel, along with Marquess Schramm and the captains of both the first and second orders of the knight brigade.

Even as I carried out the ceremony in Anheim's church, I was still beguiled by the same sense that something was off that I had felt ever since my appointment in Anheim; the church was the only place of worship here.

To be completely frank, it was a pain for the church to have to drive out all the commoners every time a high-class noble visited. It was the reason why in Europe, there were prayer rooms built inside noble manors or in public facilities inside the castle. They did their

daily prayers there, and it was more convenient for members of the clergy to visit those prayer rooms for rituals and ceremonies.

But in this world, noble manors didn't have such rooms. There wasn't one in the local lord's manor either. For a monotheistic religion, they rarely offered prayers, and if high-class nobles had business with priests or bishops, they had to visit the church themselves. I had just ignored it up till that point, but what did it mean? Did the existence of magic mean there was little use for prayer?

Who knew? I sure didn't, and no amount of thinking would change that. I had so much to deal with there wasn't even time to think anyways. I could dismiss it as just the way the world was.

I spent the next few days making ready for Sir Behnke to take over as interim deputy. Thankfully, the civil servants Marquess Schramm brought with him—or rather, the ones who had chased *after* Marquess Schramm—decided to help out, so we were able to get it done in just a few days. Still, I had been crazy busy. I was absolutely pooped.

"Ugh, I can't take this anymore."

"I see it's tough being a noble. I thought you all were supposed to be more majestic."

"It hurts that you're not dying to take my place."

Currently, I was headed for the capital along with the knight brigade, the army under Marquess Schramm, and Mazel and his party. Marquess Schramn probably allowed Mazel and them to come with us out of kindness, since this was merely an escort, not an arrest.

Mazel smiled bitterly and remarked that politics really wasn't for him, but I knew he was going to be a noble soon enough. He better prepare himself.

Neurath, Schünzel, and Frenssen were also with us, but in a show of deference, they had chosen to ride in a separate carriage. I supposed that with Mazel and his friends, I had no need for guards. Rafed and Lord Eickstedt were also in our convoy.

Lord Eickstedt would probably receive a reward for helping me out. Or maybe it would simply cancel out his punishment for banditry. I wasn't quite sure what to do with Rafed either. He really was quite capable.

"You seem more worn out now than when we met in Anheim, Big Bro."

"You might be right about that." The only response I could manage to Feli's teasing was a wry grin. These past few days, I'd been running on fumes. I had even passed out cold in the carriage yesterday, and I must have been making quite the face while I slept. When I woke up, even Laura and Erich were giggling. It sucked.

"But you've really gotten stronger," Mazel said. "I don't think I could win against you anymore."

"I think I'm even less confident in my ability to beat you, Big Bro," Feli added. "How do I put it…? I feel like even if I won the battle, I'd lose what came after."

"That's exactly what it's like," Mazel agreed. They really thought too highly of me. Just when did their opinion of me grow so grand?

"You fought quite skillfully, Viscount Zehrfeld," said Erich. I didn't really think so, but apparently, I had done great in averting Gezarius's gaze. I'd managed to pin Gezarius down by timing my attack right before Mazel's and Luguentz's, while also drawing his line of sight away from the ones behind him. Or so Erich said. He commended me for giving the others such an advantage, and quite honestly, it left my skin crawling.

"His foot was injured by that stake, his shoulder injured by a ballista, and one of his eyes was gone," Mazel said. "The Demon Commander was already on the brink of death. I feel like all I did was come in at the end and take the honor of the finishing blow from you."

"Don't worry about that," I demurred. It didn't matter who actually slew him, and it was true that I felt like we needed to take out Gezarius as fast as possible. I was just happy Mazel hadn't come too late.

"So what's next for you guys, Mazel?"

"Well, we'll be headed to Bauan Island to find the armor of the first Hero."

I couldn't help but think, *Oh yeah, that's right,* but I kept it off my face. I was half-surprised he was already so far into his quest and half-distracted by how much of a pain that quest was.

Bauan Island was located southeast of the continent, in the lands of the Fahlritz Kingdom. From what I remembered of the game, it was exactly as Mazel said; there was a dungeon containing a suit of

legendary armor—the sort you expected to find in pretty much every RPG—that had belonged to the first Hero.

I debated whether to tell him he would come face to face with the Demon Lord there. There wasn't a boss battle or anything, but right before he reached the treasure chest, the Demon Lord would come out and spit hackneyed villain phrases that—while I didn't remember for sure—sounded something like, "I didn't think you would make it so far. I give you credit," and "This place shall be your grave," before teleporting away.

Instead, Mazel would battle a dragon summoned by the Demon Lord. It was a hard fight, and I didn't think I was the only player who yelled at the screen, "How is this thing not one of the Four Fiends?!" This was probably the first spot in the game where even the players who had breezed through the earlier sections had to restart from their last save.

In games, you could get past anything by reloading your save, but did that apply to this world? What would happen if he couldn't get past it the first time? My conversation with Oldman Uwe had confirmed to me once again that while this world seemed like a game, it wasn't one.

"An island, huh? If it was me," I mused, "I'd set up a trap or an ambush."

"You would?"

"There's not a lot of places you'd be able to run if it came down to it."

"You're right. Hm…" Mazel scowled as he began to think. It seemed like he had become more wary of this leg of the quest. I decided to give him one more push.

"Plus, you're actually in the most danger when it looks like things are going well."

"Did you learn that the hard way?"

"Yup." My glum expression earned a laugh from Mazel. Given what Gezarius had pulled right when I thought I had him cornered, I couldn't share in his amusement. If Mazel hadn't shown up, I'd probably be dead.

For a moment, I considered sharing my memories of my past life with Mazel, but for some reason, I couldn't do it. I just had a feeling—a feeling that I couldn't open up just yet.

"Yeah, I better be careful."

"Make sure you don't let your enemies see any chinks in your armor."

"So basically, if we want to get rid of you, Werner, we better hurry and take you out on the battlefield."

"Hey now. Don't just go killing me off."

As I was debating the merits of sharing my knowledge from my past life and consumed by foreboding, a line from Luguentz jumped into my ears. He had been carrying on the earlier conversation while Mazel and I carried out our own, and I responded to his teasing with a bitter grin on my face.

Still, just what would happen next? I now knew that the Demon Commanders were after me. With that in mind, I guessed I'd be safe from the Demon army in the capital—for now, at least.

Laura responded to Luguentz with a grin. "I'd be quite mad if you killed Viscount Zehrfeld, Luguentz."

"Oof. Just the thought of it gives me chills."

"Wouldn't it make Big Sis Lily cry?" added Feli, knowing they were joking around. Luguentz had been gleefully giggling beside him. I wondered why Lily had been brought into the conversation, but then I remembered that she had met with Mazel in the capital… Hold on a second.

"That's right. You met with my parents in the capital, right, Mazel?"

"Yeah, the count was kind enough to let us stay the night."

Huh? "You stayed at my house?"

"Yes," Laura chimed in. "Lily and I stayed up the whole night chatting. I have few acquaintances my age, so I really did enjoy it."

Was this for real? "Laura stayed too?" I was too afraid to ask Laura herself, so I'd turned the question to Mazel.

"Uh-huh." He nodded like it was nothing. But how could it be nothing? A princess spent the night at a noble family's house! Even if I wasn't there, it was still crazy talk!

"There's nothing to worry about. His Majesty and my brother granted their permission."

There was no need to say it so casually! I mean, did she understand what she…? No, I supposed this was His Majesty and the crown prince's doing. They weren't just expressing their trust in House Zehrfeld. They probably had something else up their sleeves too. Ugh, I'd had it with these stomachaches.

"I mean, no matter how you look at it, Big Sis Lily is definitely in love with you—ow!"

"I don't care if it's obvious. That's not the kind of thing you spread around." Luguentz pushed his knuckles into Feli's head. Wait, what had Feli said? I looked at Mazel, but all he did was grin. But, huh? Wasn't it just the suspension bridge effect? I did hear that was only supposed to be temporary.

"What do you think of her, Lord Werner?" asked Laura. Wow, that was a question. She really seemed to be enjoying herself. Girls her age were supposed to be into love stories and gossip, but I didn't think that would apply to her too. I would kill for Feli and Luguentz to stop snickering like that.

Seeing all that would be in store for me when I arrived in the capital, I couldn't help but escape from reality and into my own mind.

Epilogue

BEING ALONE IN THE MANOR WITH NONE BUT THE knights and servants for company had put Hermine in a dour mood. So, as she always did in these situations, she headed to the training grounds.

Her father, Bastian, had yet to return from Count Teutenberg's domain. She had received a message from him saying he couldn't leave the fiefdom as there was no one else to take charge of public order within the domain and its surrounding areas. Her brother, Tyrone, had returned to their domain for a short while for the same purpose, but had just departed once more for the capital, while her sister, Judith, attended appointment after appointment with others outside the manor.

Currently, Hermine was beset with a sense of foreboding that went beyond words, but she was in no position to act on it. Depression overwhelmed her.

She'd only been exercising for a short while when one of her friends called out to her.

"Good work out there, Mine."

"Annette. It's been too long."

The two were close. They abridged typical formalities and brought the topic of conversation straight to the exchange of information. In doing so, they confirmed that multiple knight brigades of noble houses had been sent from the capital to ensure the safety of roads and to exterminate monsters, though the groups of monsters

that spawned throughout the lands of the kingdom posed no major threats.

"I heard that Count Jhering returned from his domain just a few days prior."

"It seems that he has been working to maintain public order as well."

Mine had also heard that Count Hering and his heir, Anshelm, had led their knight brigade back to their domain and eradicated monsters there. However, she also knew it took much more time for Anshelm to return to the capital than had been anticipated. To be exact, she heard her brother Tyrone curiously ask, "Anshelm isn't back yet?" once he had returned to the capital.

When she shared this intel with Annette, she appeared to find it odd as well. The house of Count Jhering was a military one, and thus, she couldn't imagine it would take much time for them to simply wipe out monsters. Still, it was the first she was hearing of this, and thus, she couldn't offer much of a response. Instead, she took the conversation in a new direction.

"Then your family is well?"

"Yes, my elder brother back in our domain just secured our roads the other day."

Both Count Fürst's and his neighbor Count Zehrfeld's knight brigades had recently returned to the royal capital. Annette informed her that the latter forces had used the terrain to their advantage to successfully purge the nearby monsters while limiting casualties.

The next topic of conversation was Mazel.

"From what I hear, it appears that the Hero who participated in the battle at Finoy defeated the Demon Commander's army in Lesratoga."

"I have heard the same." Mine nodded at Annette's words, but in reality, they were both behind on intel. Mazel had already entered the Kingdom of Fahlritz to Lesratoga's south. Faced with Demons running rampant, Fahlritz had readily allowed the Hero's party into their country with permission to act freely and as they pleased. Their efforts went smoother than even Werner had imagined. As a result, they had been able to not only secretly return to the capital of Wein but even visit Anheim.

Still, Mine wasn't especially ill-informed. Intel was becoming harder to come by in all countries, not just the Kingdom of Wein. The effects of the Demon Lord's revival were growing more pronounced and monster attacks more frequent. It had become more difficult for all travelers, including merchants, to move from one location to another. The Wein Kingdom had reacted relatively quickly to this change of circumstance, yet even they had to dedicate a portion of their forces to maintaining the safety of their main highways; there were countries where even traveling to the neighboring town had become infeasible.

"The Hero truly is the pride of our kingdom." Annette praised Mazel's efforts with a grin.

Seeing this, Mine was reminded of something. "That's right. You're a guard for one of his family members, aren't you?

"I am. I protect his younger sister." Annette had always been the serious type, and there was pride in her words. Being entrusted with attending to the Hero's sister Lily when she went to town was something she considered a great honor. Mine was quite envious of her, but she quickly carried on the conversation to rid herself of such feelings. "What is she like?"

"Hm… Had I been a man, I would have certainly asked her out," answered Annette after taking a moment to consider her answer. It was rare for her to joke, and for a moment, Mine was stunned. But in the next, she burst into laughter as well.

"I see. If that's what you think of her, I'm sure she's a wonderful girl."

"Yes. She is not without her faults, but on the whole, she's quite the good girl." Lily was still inexperienced in manners and customs, but Annette knew that time would fix that. "But recently, we've had more visitors asking to see her without prior appointments."

That had Mine frowning. Those visitors were far too forward. The more word spread of the Hero's exploits, the more those with ulterior motives would approach his family. Both Annette and Mine understood this, but still, they thought more like knights than nobles, and thus, they couldn't help but find it disagreeable.

Mine shook her head. "If Count Zehrfeld foresaw as much, he really is quite amazing."

"He is."

Even if it was just a pretense, Lily being in the care of a count's house made it hard for others to lay their hands on her. Annette

agreed with Mine, but she couldn’t help but find the fact to be a bit of a shame. Maybe it was because she knew that while Lily lived in Count Zehrfeld’s manor as a maid, she seemed to yearn for his heir, Werner.

She knew that Werner had taken the initiative against the Demon Stampede to protect the crown prince and was well regarded by Duke Gründing for his valiant efforts during the battle to defend Finoy. However, there was a segment of nobles who despised him.

Those nobles spread rumors about him. Talk of how he brought wood with him from the capital to build places for carousing, how he went into debt to hold a banquet, and how he had adventurers carry liquor and foodstuffs from the capital to Anheim to provide for that very banquet, was spreading throughout the capital. There were even those who claimed that they had seen a group of women headed for Anheim, or even lines of carriages filled with jewels headed for the city.

As these rumors found their way to Annette’s ears, she began to have misgivings about the glances people sent Lily’s way. Still, it was true that squandering funds wasn’t rare in noble society. She didn’t think there was a need to inform Lily of such things, and thus, she kept her mouth shut.

Mine, on the other hand, had her doubts and suspicions about the rumors. She often had occasion to speak with Werner, and thus, she had a hard time believing he was a womanizing wastrel. Even if he was, she had an odd sense of faith that he’d be skilled at hiding it

and avoid doing anything that might beget rumors. If Werner himself heard all this, he'd certainly be taken aback.

After exchanging information on another two or three matters, Hermine bid Annette farewell and returned to Count Fürst's manor. There, her butler informed her she had a guest, and a rather surprising one at that. Her elder sister Judith had been waiting for her for quite a long while.

She was instructed to visit her as soon as she returned, so Mine hurried to change before entering the room where Judith waited. She was greeted by a cold stare.

"I see you are as fond of exercising as always." Despite her words, she held martial arts in high regard, as any woman of Wein would. Her remark was simply the sort of complaint you gave voice to when someone was late.

"My deepest apologies for keeping you waiting."

"I think little of it. I assume you have not forgotten your manners as a noblewoman?"

"Of course not."

Judith nodded and casually flung a controversial statement her way. "You are to be betrothed to Lord David, second son of Marquess Cortolezis."

"Huh?" Mine was at a loss for words.

"I have sent Father a messenger. Ah, that's right. Once he joins our family, he will be offering his aid to not just the knight brigade of Count Fürst but that of Count Teutenberg as well."

Mine knew that as a noble, this sort of thing happened. Rather, it was more common for shared interests to be the main deciding factor in an engagement. But just why had her sister been the one to deliver such news?

Mine was still and silent as she swallowed down her doubts.



Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH TO EVERYONE WHO PICKED up the fifth volume. My name is Yuki Suzuki.

This volume of *Tataura* (I think that's the abbreviation that's stuck here in Japan) featured the popular deputy arc. I'm sorry it took so long to deliver it to you.

During the wait, I received many kind messages from readers on X (formerly Twitter) and other social media platforms, along with a lot of fan letters and fanart. I was so happy to receive second place for the *Tsugi ni Kuru Light Novel* award and to have so many people visit the pop-up shop at Shosen Book Store. Thank you so much for all the cheers and support.

Finally, I'd like to offer my deepest appreciation to all who have supported me, purchased this series, or read the web novel. I'd also like to thank my editor Kawaugichi-sama, my illustrator Sanshouuo (who always provides the coolest illustrations), the manga adaptation artist Rampei Asio (who drastically brought my work to a higher resolution), and Uchida-sama from the editorial apartment.

Yuki SUZUKI

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