



# REINCARNATED INTO A GAME AS THE HERO'S FRIEND

RUNNING THE KINGDOM BEHIND THE SCENES

WRITTEN BY  
Yuki SUZUKI

NOVEL

3

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
Sanshouuo



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**“Now it’s  
one-on-one.”**







"I am honored to meet you for the first time, members of the Harting family."

"...!"

HERO'S LITTLE SISTER

Lily Harting

ARISTOCRAT SIDE CHARACTER


Werner Von Zehrfeld

I abruptly got down on one knee in front of Maze's family—a show of utmost respect ordinarily reserved for royalty.







Mazel is a young man with short, spiky red hair and bright blue eyes. He is wearing a dark, intricately detailed armor with a red scarf draped around his neck. He is holding a large, dark sword diagonally across his body. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with stone structures and trees.

Mazel watched calmly  
through narrowed eyes.  
He readied his sword and  
declared in a voice no  
louder than a murmur:

**“It ends here,  
Demon  
Commander.”**







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**Yuki SUZUKI**

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*Seven Seas Entertainment*





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Running the Kingdom Behind the Scenes (Light Novel) Vol. 3  
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AS THE HERO'S FRIEND

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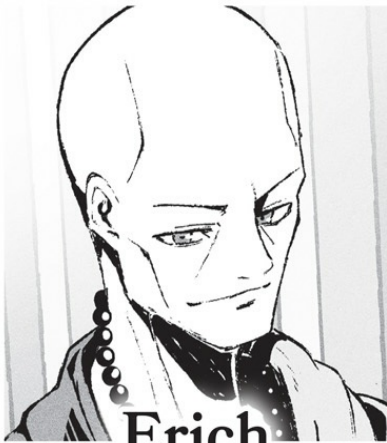
## AFTERWORD











**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.



**Frenssen**

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



**Max**

Veteran knight who commands the protagonist's knights as his second-in-command.



**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.



**Schünzel**

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



**Neurath**

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



**Orgen**

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



**Barkey**

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





## Characters



**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. Fights his own battles without his best friend, the Hero.



**Lily**

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



**Laura**

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

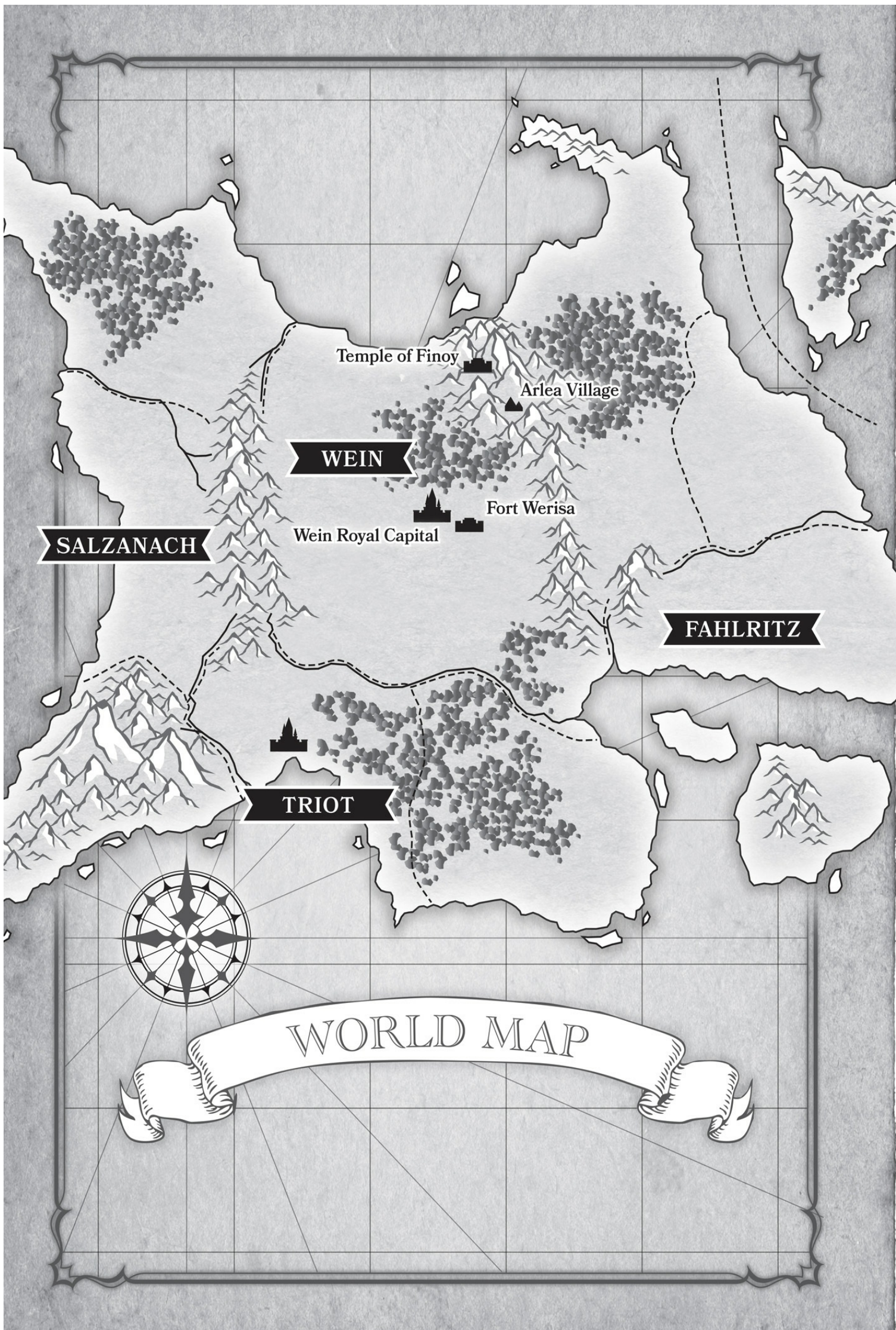


**Hubertus**

Crown prince of the kingdom the protagonist belongs to. Has a high opinion of the protagonist.







# Prologue

**“G**ROUP THREE, GROUP FIVE, CIRCLE AROUND FROM the left!”

“Yessir!”

From some distance away, my troops responded as I commanded them with flag and flute to intercept a group of monsters. The terrain was rather hilly, but not enough to risk losing your footing. I didn’t see the need to caution my knights and squires about it.

At that very moment, the House Zehrfeld troops—myself included—were under orders from the kingdom to protect the worksite of the new aqueduct being built on the outskirts of the royal capital. After the return of the Demon Lord, even the capital’s immediate surroundings were seeing a sharp uptick in ferocious monsters. Though it was an unglamorous job, it was important, nonetheless.

That said, it struck me as terribly boring...that is, unproductive...to just sit there on guard duty. I decided to shake things up and take the opportunity to engage in some group training.

After explaining the purpose of the exercise, I split my house’s knights into four main teams. The first would follow my direct instructions and actively hunt the monsters. Orgen would take the third squad and patrol the area around the aqueduct. Barkey and the fourth squad would be on night duty tonight. The second squad, operating under Max, was spending the day at rest, having done the rounds the other night. Rest days were indispensable, after all, if we wanted to keep up our stamina. The squads would switch jobs on a rotation, which meant that my squad would patrol the vicinity the next day.

Was it Oda Nobunaga or Tokugawa Ieyasu who said that falconry was perfect for training the samurai? Whichever warlord it was, he was right. Only field experience would tell whether your voice could carry orders to your distant allies.

The simple act of hunting in an open field presented a lot of learning



opportunities for commanding a group. Nothing could beat firsthand experience when it came to coordinating the timing between knights and squires. Given that I was a student and all, this felt like a good introductory course to me. Not that I had much sympathy for the monsters who served as the objects of my studies.

None of the private nobleman armies would receive any particular reward for taking initiative to hunt the monsters, although they were free to help themselves to whatever was left on the carcasses. It was hard to say whether this was broad-minded or stingy on the kingdom's end.

Having anticipated that their escape route was cut off, the group of Hunter Wolves chose not to flee. Instead, they ran full pelt toward us. There were about eight of them in total—a manageable number.

But even if they were measly Demonic Beasts, it was still pretty unsettling to see them bear down on us with unrestrained bloodlust. They definitely felt more savage now compared to the Demon Stampede. Although monsters had always had a tendency to attack humans, nowadays it felt like they were going out of their way to hunt people. Nor did they care if they were outnumbered or outmatched, no doubt because of the Demon Lord's influence.

Not that I had the time to ponder these things.

"Stay calm and take down each enemy," I ordered each group. "All subsequent orders should come from the team captains. I'll take the wolf in the middle."

"Understood, sir."

"Let's go!"

We rushed toward the enemies, attempting to intercept their advance. The Hunter Wolves bared their fangs. I kept an eye on them to make sure they were coming toward me and, just as they came within our threat range, stopped in my tracks and took a deep breath. Then—

"Attaaaaack!"

"Take this!"

“Eat dirt!”

Everyone swung their blades in unison. My spear consigned one beast to oblivion before immediately picking off another foe.

I’d seen this for myself multiple times by now, but I still had to marvel at how mid-game spears could demolish these starting area enemies in one hit. This weapon was viable even in the Poida Desert, which was even further along in the game than the Star-Counting Tower.

Next to me, Neurath was also busily taking down a monster. Schünzel seemed to be having a bit of trouble, but his opponent went down after another knight joined the fray. I didn’t have complaints about his performance—within each monster species, some were stronger or tougher than others, after all.

“Anyone injured?” I asked.

“We are all unscathed.”

“Good. Let’s just take the magic stones.”

“Yessir.”

Naturally, it was up to the squires to do the extracting. Without me even needing to tell them, the knights started surveying their surroundings warily. I couldn’t help but smile—they were getting the hang of this.

\*\*\*

The other day—well, more like two weeks ago—I submitted a bunch of hastily drafted proposal documents to my father. Because it was such a last-minute thing, I had to sheepishly ask for help not just from Frenssen, my aide, but also from my father’s butler, Norbert.

I worked a little trick into the paperwork to address the issue with Feli’s orphanage. It was something of an experiment to see if the people at the facility could earn some coin for themselves. This would hopefully form the foundation for a system that would secure livelihood for the orphans while maintaining the facility. Being an experiment, I was able to frame it as a low-stakes thing, which made it easier for the proposal to get through.

My father opined, “You really like to stick your nose into things.” It was hard



to tell whether he was impressed or exasperated. Either way, he had no issue submitting the document under his name, much to my relief. In terms of reputability, there was a world of difference between “a mere viscount” like me and the esteemed Minister of Ceremonies.

As for the other proposals, about half of them went through. I was grateful to have the spirited support of the refugees and slum denizens, who’d taken on auxiliary roles in the aqueduct surveillance mission. Some of the former Triot refugees had sworn vengeance against the monsters that robbed them of their family and friends. What they lacked in skills they more than made up for with pluck.

Admittedly, it was a bit of a problem overseeing people who were liable to get in over their heads at any moment. To have them familiarize themselves with battle, I asked the adventurers’ guild to assign guard shifts. They took care of the surveillance work during the daytime. Given how short-staffed we were, it didn’t hurt to have some reserve forces to keep an eye on things just in case things went sour.

We offered proper meals to the participants for the first few days: bread, soup, and even some side dishes to go along with those. After that, they would have to work if they wanted more than just a cup of thin porridge to go on for the whole day. This gave them the motivation to pick up the slack. It also helped that we announced this after their bellies were full and they’d regained their strength. I could tell that nobody would have taken the bait if they were already too exhausted to work.

The unfortunate thing about this medieval-ish world was that the guilds were indispensable for employment. In my old world, this kind of job might have been classified as a simple part-time gig, but that was not the case here. It was difficult to put people to work unless they went through a guild. Trust played a big part in this, as did business relationships. More often than not, the guilds were very insular. As much as I understood why they wouldn’t be inclined to share the techniques they’d built up for generations, it was still a hassle from my perspective.

The result: we had to create new jobs that weren’t covered by the guilds. Those with strength and guts patrolled the aqueduct, but that still left the

problem of where to send the people who weren't capable of fighting. Even the kingdom's bigwigs were racking their heads over this issue.

In the end, they went through with my plan to relocate a subsection of the refugees to Fort Werisa and make them work for the state. The fort was currently being converted into a factory of sorts for processing monster body parts and assembling miscellaneous items. They made jerkies out of monster meat and soap out of animal fat, among other things.

By paying someone who specialized in monster dissection to instruct the refugees, we reached a form of compromise with the adventurers' guild. I ended up having to observe the negotiations—not my idea of a good time, but to be fair, I *was* the one who suggested the plan.

Besides the Werisa factory, there was some industrial work near the capital that needed more hands, and some refugees were assigned there—though the details of what they made beyond me. What I could say was that there were new fences and mud walls being erected, along with a facility to make manure out of the refugees' bodily waste. Apparently, the building would eventually be repurposed to collect the feces of farm horses and cattle.

It actually took quite a lot of labor to turn feces into fertilizer, but it posed no risk to anyone's life, and you could earn a fair amount of coin from it. The job was starting to see some takers.

When I proposed making the manure indoors, the reason I gave for it was simply because the stench would need to be contained. But I was also hoping that the floors and walls would turn into a potassium nitrate deposit a few years down the road, as would happen in my previous world. Because it was the kind of substance that dissolved easily in water, it would get washed away in the rain unless it was inside a building.

I swiftly gave up on gunpowder and firearms, a common get-out-of-jail free card in light novels. I did briefly consider them, thinking that they would be useful for the attack on the capital, but a core component of gunpowder—potassium nitrate—was barely produced here at all. The Wein Kingdom didn't even produce sulfur ore.

In that regard, this place was fairly similar to Japan. This being a rainy country,



water would often seep underground, making it almost impossible to find sulfur in rock form. Although there were volcanoes, they were mostly located near the Demon Lord's castle from what I could remember of the game's map. The entire knight brigade would need to pool its strength to take down just one of the Fire Giants that hung around there. It was no place to take laborers who couldn't put up a fight. Besides, you couldn't easily access the vicinity of the Demon Lord's castle to begin with.

Maybe it would be possible to find a sulfur ore vein if I looked for one. Given that the climate was vaguely similar to Japan (because this was a game world, maybe?), I figured that it might have such deposits. But I definitely wouldn't have the time to locate one, mine it, and amass stockpiles before the attack. Still, there was no point crying over spilt milk, and I couldn't even guarantee that I knew enough to produce a working musket anyway. It was better to switch to a different plan while I still had the time.

So I gave up on the firearms and gunpowder, shelving the idea for after the Demon Lord was defeated. Gunpowder would certainly have its applications in a world without the Demon Lord, assuming I lived long enough to see it.

"Master Werner, we have finished extracting the materials and magic stones," someone called out.

It seemed the squires had finished disposing of the monsters while my head was in the clouds.

"Good," I said, then spared no time with my next order. "Let's take down two or three more packs while keeping an eye on the surroundings."

"Yessir."

Hunting the monsters also functioned as a form of training. I had no intentions to slack off in that department.

Thanks to the mock battles I'd been fighting alongside my house's knights, I could tell that I was stronger than before. Though I still couldn't beat Max or the other commanders.

To put it in RPG terms, you could probably say that I had leveled up a bit from the Demon Stampede. Without that, I might have perished in that battle against

the Tooth Sheep when we were escorting the refugees. As an ordinary schmuck, I could see the value of accumulating experience.

Even if it was laughable to compare me to Mazel and his crew, I couldn't deny that I wanted to get stronger—hence why I was pushing myself to hunt the monsters.

Fortunately, I had good-quality weapons and armor, which made it a cinch to take down my enemies. I was grateful to Mazel and the others for choosing swords instead of spears. Maybe they decided not to pick the one weapon I was good at out of consideration for me.

Honestly, I wanted to deck out all the Zehrfeld troops in high-level equipment, but money was an issue. I didn't have the funds to provide everyone with swords as good as the one at my hip, which was on the upper end of what you could get in stores. It was quite a pickle.

This was also the perfect opportunity to practice my equestrian skills. I wasn't much of a rider, as Lady Hermine pointed out when we were escorting the refugees. To put it uncharitably, Mazel was probably better than me at it without even practicing.

That said, thanks to the month of nonstop riding on that refugee mission, I got used to my horse, however grudgingly. Sure, I only got a handle on the basics, but one would certainly hope that you'd get a little better at something after doing it for eight hours a day for a month.

Even so, I knew that I was still lacking in some areas. By galloping for the monsters, making abrupt stops, and turning around, I could practice maneuvering my mount around, as well as using my spear on horseback. Yet even if I did improve somewhat, it was definitely still a challenge to do anything outside the fundamentals. If you asked me, Julius Caesar was an anomaly for being able to ride bareback on a horse without a stirrup or saddle. The dude wasn't even from a horse-riding tribe.

I made sure to repeat the same movements as I patrolled the areas where monsters were likely to appear. I was basing this off the geography and lay of the land, although I had no idea whether that was useful. The knowledge didn't hurt either way.



From where we were deployed, I could see the aqueduct under construction some distance away. I had to marvel at how they managed to build a structure of such massive scale in such a short time. This world had fairly sophisticated building materials and manufacturing techniques, all things considered.

“Master Werner,” Schünzel called out as he drew up beside me.

“Yeah, I’ve noticed,” I responded tersely.

What I noticed: a colony of Hyena Bats. Being capable of flight, they were a hassle to take down, which was bound to cost us in time. Not much point bitching about it, though. We were here to exterminate the pests.

“Group D, Group F, engage them from the right. Groups C and E, take a wide path around them. Make sure you cut off their escape route.”

“Understood, my lord.”

“Groups A and B, ready your crossbows.”

“Yessir.”

I waited until the messenger left before lifting my crossbow. While I couldn’t handle a regular bow to save my life, crossbows were easy to aim. Even if you were a bit clumsy, you could still hit the mark with a decent, though limited, amount of force.

I took a deep breath as I aimed. In the corner of my vision, I saw a blinking light. This was an experiment in using mirrors to communicate. Glass was expensive in this world, and Morse code didn’t exist either, so I had to think up all the signals. We were still in the trial-and-error phase. The prototype was made of sheet copper, which could reflect light. At this point, we hadn’t worked out all the signals, so a static beacon of light sufficed as a simple indication that everyone was ready.

“Both flanks have confirmed the signal.”

“Shoot!”

“Shoooooot!”

At the signal, countless bolts zipped through the air. A few of them scored direct hits on the Hyena Bats. Even with bolts sticking out of them, they still

flew around with wild vigor. A few of them even came flying toward us, seeking vengeance. Of course, that one volley wouldn't be enough to take them down. But that was good enough for now.

“Charge! Cut them down before they take to the air!”

“Yeah!”

At the same time the bolts found their marks, Groups D and F closed on the right flank, diving into close-quarters combat with the enemy. On my command, Groups A and B came running in after them. It was looking likely that we'd vanquish the bats before they could fly away.

After the Hyena Bats, we took down three more groups of varying monster types. Collecting the magic stones and usable body parts from them probably took more time than the actual killing. The horses carrying the smelly parts got *very* disgruntled about it too. I would have to ask the stablehands to appease those poor creatures afterward.

\*\*\*

Evening found us in a lodging house just outside the capital, taking a breather after a whole day spent hunting monsters. Because the job involved more noble houses than just House Zehrfeld, several lodgings had been prepared to accommodate the entire group. I was glad we didn't have to sleep outside.

Once the aqueduct was finished, this site would be host to several new industrial projects. The idea was for the laborers and their families to use these buildings as share houses. They would be dedicated to providing shelter for the refugees, not unlike the company dormitories of my previous world.

The lodgings were slipshod affairs, hastily assembled from wood without a single thought spared for interior design, but I saw no reason to get hung up over it after everything I'd put up with on military duty. If anything, what I really wanted to complain about right now was...

“Count Audenrieth is proposing to apply the Frankpledge system to the slums,” said Frenssen, my personal aide.

“I'm opposed,” I said. “The broader the scope, the more detached it becomes. It'd just get bogged down in paperwork, which defeats the purpose. You have to



supervise things in person.”

“That makes sense.”

“Besides, in practice it’s not a proper policing system but rather a means for authority figures to monitor the people. Maybe they could grudgingly accept it if it was their job, but they’re not going to take kindly to having their lives watched and nothing else.”

“I understand. I will convey your thoughts to Master Ingo.”

Okay, you see, I initially proposed a system to monitor the refugees based on Edo period Japan’s Gonin Gumi system. It was sort of like the Japanese equivalent of England’s Frankpledge system, which assigned responsibility for crimes collectively to households of five. It was quicker than creating a family register, and it was an excellent means of social surveillance that didn’t require much manpower.

Unlike the Frankpledge system, the Gonin Gumi system was very specific about organizing the households in groups of five. This was the same number as the smallest unit in historical armies. For some reason, a lot of premodern societies used the number five as a base for organizing groups. Maybe it was because five was the ideal number for ensuring that uneducated soldiers and farmers could stay on top of things. Not that there was much point thinking about that at this point.

The system would work, at least, in the very short term—a couple of years, maybe. The fear of losing their temporary homes would keep refugee households with children from getting involved with shadier members of the collective. It would be an effective way to motivate them to watch other houses and report their misdeeds, so that the entire group wouldn’t get punished. This was all well and good in a situation where there just weren’t enough people to go around. It was the best course of action, even.

The problem was expanding the scope to the inner city, rather than just the farmlands on the outskirts of the capital. It was one thing to make social surveillance a condition for obtaining residency, but applying the policy to permanent citizens’ livelihoods was another matter entirely. I was no Edo period scholar, so the finer points of the process were beyond my expertise.

Nevertheless, I still had some responsibility because I came up with the plan. When asked for my opinion, I was compelled to give a response. Ugh, what a pain. It was just like my father said—I had a habit of sticking my nose into things.

“I also have a report for you, Master Werner.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Frenssen had come all the way from our residence in the capital to deliver this report. As I looked over the document, I reflected on my meager tea-making skills. The taste was never consistent—today’s brew was a bit too strong. I suppose this world’s climate wasn’t suited for coffee, huh? Such were my thoughts as I leafed through the bundle of papers.

\*\*\*

The Mangold mystery thickened the further I read. He’d clearly met with *someone* before he came up with his reckless plan to attack Fort Werisa by himself. He met frequently with this individual in a bar, but because they wore a hood, there unfortunately wasn’t much known about them. Though Mangold had fallen on hard times, he’d nonetheless been brought up as scion to House Kneipp. It was hard to imagine him meeting up with a commoner on multiple occasions.

Regardless, Frenssen was thus far unable to track down this individual. I didn’t hold it against him, though, especially considering how much work I’d put on his plate. Their identity would have to remain a mystery for now.

The even bigger mystery was the number of people under Mangold’s command. He’d been spotted outside the capital with a group numbering in the dozens, but there were no reports of people disappearing from the capital in such numbers. The only cases of disappearance involved Mangold and a few of his retainers. I had Frenssen look into this as well, to cover our bases, and it didn’t appear as if the other noble houses had lost any of their people. This raised the question of how and from where Mangold assembled those people. Not to mention that nobody had actually seen him leave the city walls.

This was so obviously fishy that apparently even the Crown was busy with its own investigation. Frenssen had his suspicions as well and had taken the



initiative to look into things. I was comfortable leaving the reins in his hands.

I flicked through the next document. This one was from Norbert, the family butler, and it had my father's signature on it.

Skimming the contents, I saw that my father was in agreement about hiring refugees who were versed in letters and numbers as teachers at the orphanage. Our house would pay for their remuneration out of pocket. Of course, his idea was to poach any of the promising children. Literacy was *that* valuable in this world.

At the same time, my father had given a firm promise of employment to some of the refugees who helped out during the escort mission. Their job would be cleaning. Although we couldn't use water liberally at the moment, we would have a lot of it at our disposal after the aqueduct was finished, hence the prospects for work.

To put it plainly, they'd be doing the work of a temp cleaner or a coin laundromat. Much like the nobles of Earth's Middle Ages, the aristocrats of this world left it to their servants to wash the dirty clothing. On the other hand, this world also had a cleaning guild. It was common to hire someone experienced to clean up, say, dirty dresses or splotches on a carpet inside the mansion. High-ranking nobles might even keep a specialist among their household staff, although that was more the exception than the norm.

This was off topic, but there was a period in the Middle Ages where it was common to scatter fresh flowers on the carpet during banquets. It was an extravagant show of wealth, given that carpets and fresh flowers were both expensive. The guests would step all over it without a second thought, causing a massive mess by the end of the feast. This was the genesis of cleaning specialists that catered to the nobility.

This world didn't have such excessive displays, but regardless, the aristocrats wanted someone who knew what they were doing to handle their dirty laundry. Your average commoner, on the other hand, would handwash their clothing or beat it if it was really dirty. Detergent was unheard of.

Fortunately, however, we had mass-produced soap from Fort Werisa. We could purchase soap from the fort directly using state funds and prioritize

refugees to take on the cleaning work. This way, we wouldn't have to negotiate with the cleaning guild in the capital. To not step on the guild's toes, however, our cleaners served as generalists, rather than specialists.

Seldom did commoners hire cleaners, of course, and an aristocrat's mansion had servants to do the cleaning. In practice, this meant that the cleaning guild's clients would be other guilds. For example, the merchant guild or the packhorse guild might need somebody to do a whole bunch of jobs together, like cleaning their store branches or a bunch of buildings they owned.

Perhaps because of the influence of the Frankpledge system, if one of the cleaners happened to be outed as a thief, then they and their family would be expelled from the capital, left to the mercy of monsters lurking beyond the city walls. So far, this had deterred any crimes like larceny. We could probably make do with this as a temporary measure, given that we only had to endure till Mazel defeated the Demon Lord.

As for clothes washing, we'd implemented washboards on an experimental basis. They were pretty rare articles in twenty-first-century Japan, but they were a household staple up until the later years of the Showa era.

As a matter of fact, washboards didn't have a long history. Although people did fashion things that were sort of like washboards by assembling a bunch of tree branches, it wasn't until the seventeenth century when boards with ridges were invented. They didn't exist in this medieval-ish world.

I didn't have the technical know-how to determine how deep the ridges should be carved, nor could I tell what angle they would have to be at for the blemishes to come off, but I did at least know the general shape. I used this vague idea to create something in the same ballpark and had people use it for laundry.

Although you still had no choice but to wash silk dresses by hand, washing normal clothes with a washboard was preferable to beating them. This way, you didn't damage the fibers, and it was better than handwashing at getting stains out. Mr. Bierstedt from the merchant guild planned to get his hands on them after I showed him a demonstration of their efficacy.

Meanwhile, the orphanage and refugee kids had work too, though it was

nothing strenuous. Even as we saw to their education, we assigned them simple errands like cleaning the roads. I asked an acquaintance of mine in the academy's knight course to guide them around as they picked up garbage on the street and off the floors of public buildings.

My idea was to give people a positive impression of the orphanage and refugee kids, but that wasn't all. I was teaching the kids the concept of working for the food on your table by paying them for their labor. Nobody had interfered with them thus far, probably because people would give them a cold look for being jerks to children trying to beautify the city. The kids were also using the soap from Fort Werisa.

I had one other personal objective, but it had yet to come to fruition. It wasn't the kind of thing that would get done in one or two weeks. We would just have to keep at it.

\*\*\*

"Still a tough struggle, eh?" I commented.

"Such difficulties can arise when there are no precedents to follow," Frenssen commented.

I was having the craftsmen in town produce two things: improved bows and metal balls.

Fortunately, word of my undertakings had reached Duke Seyfert and he'd helped me out here and there. It was probably my father who asked for his assistance, but no doubt the military-minded duke also had a keen interest in researching high-performance bows.

For some reason or another, there was a sharp gap in quality between ordinary wooden bows and magic bows. There were shortbows and crossbows too, and if elves were around, maybe there would be more varieties. But there didn't seem to be any elves or dwarves here. Maybe they were hiding out somewhere, but I certainly hadn't heard a peep about them.

Elves aside, though, the bow I proposed was called the composite bow. In my old world, it was commonly made of metal and a long and thin bone or sinew from an animal. You took a strip of those materials and glued them together



with wooden strips.

Compared to simple bows made of curved wood, this type of construction yielded greater range and force. On the flip side, it was harder to draw because the string had more tension, and you had to take greater care when storing it.

More than anything, I was interested in seeing what happened when you made a composite bow out of monster body parts. The tighter the strings, the harder it would be to draw, but I figured that there would be greater force to make up for it.

I had to leave it to the bowyer to figure out which parts worked best for these purposes. Fortunately for me, Duke Seyfert's endorsement ensured I had a lot of different materials to play around with.

If all went well, we would be able to apply this know-how and get one step closer to making quality weapons... Hopefully. I did draw a picture to convey a vague idea of what I was looking for, so they would probably be able to whip up *something* for me. With my limited art skills, though, I couldn't exactly call it a concept illustration, let alone a blueprint, so there were no guarantees that the product would match my imagination.

"They're having trouble with the iron balls as well, huh?"

"It is difficult to make a round object that is well balanced."

"Makes sense when they haven't made anything like this before."

The kingdom was starting to roll out equipment that was equal to or better than what I was wearing. The idea was to start with the royal guard and work our way down from there, but the noble houses apparently insisted on jumping the queue. This was causing a lot of grief for the people in charge of procuring the equipment, including Mr. Bierstedt and the guild.

But if this kept up, the existing workshops for making equipment would struggle with sales. The government provided old armor cheaply to the workshops and having them melt it down to make other things. Right now, they were trying to make two types of metal balls: one the size of a golf ball, and the other the size of a baseball. The plan was for them to start producing balls of other sizes once they got the hang of it. That was in fact the entire point of the

exercise.

The metal balls I was asking for had to be uniform in size and durable enough that they didn't shatter too easily. I knew that this meant I'd become quite the nightmare client, but I really needed them to get the jobs done in time.

Apparently, the craftsmen dealing with this influx of unfamiliar jobs had taken to relieving their stress at the public bathhouse near their district. Having more customers meant that they had money to splash around, which meant more business for the bathhouse owner in turn. There were other things that were probably occupying them too, like the current water shortage and how the rise in monsters made it harder to reliably collect firewood. Given the context, I bet they didn't have the time to even care about uprooting the orphanage. Don't look at me, though—I had nothing to do with it.

"Have the Iron Hammer folks returned?"

My eyes fell on the next document in the pile. When I saw the names on the report, I breathed a sigh of relief. Given that adventuring group's experience with traveling, I was fairly confident they'd be okay, but I couldn't help but worry about them, what with the monsters becoming more active and all.

Honestly, I wanted to go and see those guys in person, but we were like two ships passing in the night. If they ever happened to stop by the capital and I had some time for a break, I would invite them to the mansion and hear their accounts in detail. For now, however, I pored over their report—and found myself frowning at what was written there. I looked up and turned to Frenssen.

"Hey, Frenssen, what's the meaning of this?"

"They said they haven't discerned the precise reason behind it."

Mazel's family was being ostracized by the residents of Arlea Village? Well, they didn't actually write the word "ostracized." The language was milder than that. But honestly, I didn't understand this in the slightest. Silently, I urged Frenssen to continue.

"Because they manage an inn, they've felt the effects of a drop in customers from outside the village. It seems they've also been unable to purchase some of their ingredients from other residents and merchants within the village."

What was this? The Iron Hammer members dropping hints that they wanted more spices and salt in their meals? There wasn't any scene like this in the game—not that everything had to be exactly like the game.

“Is there a problem with the chain of distribution?”

“No, the villagers acted as if there was some problem with the inn.”

Hmm? That house belonged to the Hero, whom the royal family had gone out of its way to call upon. Why would they be so hostile? The plot thickened. It was looking like a good idea to press the Iron Hammers for further details.

Unfortunately, the problem with adventurers was that if you weren't quick about it, they'd move elsewhere. Ah, if only I could book a reservation. That was a joke, but also kind of not.

“Frenssen, next time we're on break...”

“Please excuse me, Master Werner!” a voice abruptly boomed from outside the door.

The owner of the voice sounded familiar, so I gave Frenssen the signal to open the door. One of the knights practically tumbled inside. He wasn't one of the troops under my command—no, he worked directly under my father. Had there been an incident somewhere else?

“You are Kittel, are you not? What's happened? Was there a fire at the capital?”

“No, sir. The chancellor has issued an emergency order to dispatch the troops!”

...Wait, what?



# Chapter 1:

## Arlea Village

### ~Encounter and Rescue~

**A**N EMERGENCY ORDER TO DISPATCH. The instructions hadn't come from His Majesty himself, but they were still from the top rungs. Specifically, the edict commanded every noble house to ready its knights for deployment with utmost haste. Besides the royal family, only the chancellor and the Minister of Military Affairs could issue this command. To put things in perspective, even the Demon Stampede had not warranted an emergency order.

If my memory served right, these summons had only been issued on three occasions throughout the entire history of the Wein Kingdom. One of those times had been in response to a coup d'état. Needless to say, they weren't your everyday occurrence. Even a gacha gamer wouldn't roll with those odds.

The reality didn't quite sink in at first. My instinctual reaction was to exchange a dumbfounded look with Frenssen. To be perfectly honest, my mind had trouble catching up, even though I distinctly heard what that loud voice said. When Max and the other commanders came running, the switch in my head flicked on.

"Master Werner, what happened?" asked Max.

"I only just got word of the emergency orders. I'm in the same boat as you." I swiveled my gaze to Kittel. "An explanation, please."

Kittel seemed to need time to level out his breathing. It wasn't until Max and the others arrived that he met my gaze and dropped the bombshell.

"Yessir. The first matter of note is that Valeritz has been attacked by the Demon army. His Majesty is currently holding an emergency meeting."

"What?!" Max, Orgen, and I exclaimed in unison.

Barkey and Frenssen remained silent, but their expressions indicated that they were shaken to the core. It was a huge surprise for me as well, since I

hadn't anticipated this news in the slightest.

Valeritz was the capital city of Count Friedheim's fief. Being a bureaucrat-type aristocrat, he couldn't muster a great deal of military strength under ordinary circumstances. In terms of size and population, Valeritz wasn't too different from Zehrbulk, the city where House Zehrfeld was based.

Valeritz didn't appear in the game, and it didn't have any particularly notable industries. But it was one of the country's midsized cities, and its private knight force was comparable in size to House Zehrfeld's. The town was strategically located for the circulation of goods and services. I would guess that, in practice, the count would have been able to supplement his knight brigade with plenty of hired hands like adventurers.

In short, Valeritz was a large enough city that if, for example, a Demon Stampede were to break out, people would probably be able to get by if they turtled up in the walls. At the very least, it wasn't the kind of place that would fall to an attack at the drop of a hat.

"How fares the count?" asked Barkey.

"The reports are scattershot. At present, his fate is unknown."

Kittel's answer gave me little hope for the count's safety. If by some miracle he was still alive, they would have known right away and it would have been in the original message. Being a bureaucrat-type aristocrat, Count Friedheim belonged to the same faction as my father, but I had no personal recollection of ever seeing his face. I couldn't quite say I was beset with worry on his behalf when the reality of the situation still hadn't sunk in yet.

If the details were sparse, then there was little point in pressing Kittel any further. He had probably come running here after receiving the first report.

"I understand the gist," I said. "Is my father at the meeting?"

"Yes, he is."

If my father was attending the meeting as the Minister of Ceremonies and the head of House Zehrfeld, then all I could do at this point was twiddle my thumbs. I was just a deputy and a field commander. I decided to wait for my next orders.

“All right. Kittel, you head straight back to the mansion. Tell everyone that I will wait here for Father’s instructions.”

“Yessir, I’ll be on it right away.”

“Barkey, since there are emergency orders, wait until we receive our next command before you send out the fourth squad for night patrols. Max, Orgen, I want you to take all the troops in the second and third squads and remain on standby in the second sortie position. I will put together a document to instruct others to continue our patrol method. Frenssen, I’ll need your help with that.”

“I am at your service.”

The second sortie position wasn’t as sophisticated as an actual formation, but it meant that everyone would have their equipment ready and stand closely enough to hear verbal commands. The situation wasn’t urgent enough to require the first sortie position, which was basically having everyone leave immediately, but that was because I didn’t know when my father would send word. I didn’t want everyone to be all tense.

“Max, tell Neurath and Schünzel to put the first squad in the second sortie position. When you’re done, just keep an eye on them. If anything comes up, I trust you to give those two the guidance they need.”

This would be a fair way down the road, but I wanted Neurath and Schünzel to become deputy commanders on occasions when I wasn’t around to give orders. This was an opportunity to delegate the role and let them rack up some experience. As much as I understood that on an intellectual level, I was a darned student. At least, that was my physical age and appearance. Wasn’t I the one who needed to rack up experience here?

I really didn’t expect to become a noble with my own peerage at my age, even if it was just in name alone. I managed to give an order while suppressing my queasy stomach, but it basically just amounted to passing the buck to Max.

“As you command.” Max and the others bowed their heads and left.

A sigh slipped from my mouth. I wondered what exactly was happening in the big picture. Curious as I was, though, brooding on it wouldn’t get me anywhere. I decided to find something to occupy myself with for now.



“Master Werner. What did you mean by ‘patrol method’?” asked Frenssen, sounding puzzled.

“Well,” I answered, “if whoever comes after us changes the patrols, the workers involved will have trouble adjusting. I’m going to write down how exactly we did things for the record.”

It was basically a matter of marking the aqueduct pier’s location, dividing the patrol areas based on the natural landmarks, and indicating the route we took. Clocks were not commonplace in this world, which unfortunately meant I couldn’t note down the transit time. Oh well, they could probably live without it.

If the patrol method I wrote down was too individualistic, then people wouldn’t know what kind of orders to expect in a contingency. Clear instructions about the route and procedure would make it easy to figure out who to contact for help if there was a problem. People wouldn’t have to waste time asking around in that case. In other words, creating a regular pattern for the patrols would bring peace of mind to the workers on the scene as well.

“I see. So you thought that far ahead.”

“I hate relying on just personal experience.”

I couldn’t control how good the forces would be at handling the monsters, but if I made a manual like the ones in ancient Rome, then even a total newbie would be able to pick up the basics. Honestly, it wasn’t like patrol instructions required a great deal of innovation. It wasn’t anything more complicated than saying, “Here’s where to go, and be sure to tell someone if there’s a problem.”

This world was so full of muscleheads that barely anyone thought of making manuals like this. Well, it wasn’t like I was saying they were good in every scenario, or that it was my way or the highway. Manuals were of little use if they weren’t kept up-to-date, and people hadn’t been taught to do maintenance checkups. But it wasn’t something to get hung up over at this point. This could wait until after Mazel had beaten the Demon Lord.

I would have liked to make a manual for the slum-dwellers and refugees involved as patrol assistants, but it didn’t seem I’d have the time for that. I was a bit worried that there could be a problem or two if everything hinged on a

single person taking charge. Was I paranoid because people didn't use their brains here, or because this was a game world? Not that there was much point dwelling on it.









Finally, as a little side note, I noted down all the monsters we encountered, thinking it might be helpful for people to recognize their patterns. It turned out to be pretty random, though. It was a small sample size, but either way, that's how it struck me. It really was a mystery how the monsters spawned and where they spawned from.

I made sure to bring a box of potions with me, along with a blue box to deal with contingencies. Better safe than sorry, and I felt that they were especially necessary in a time of emergency like this.

Seriously. I knew it was nothing good, but just what the hell *happened*?

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The commotion reached all the way across the lodgings.

This place was a refugee camp... They didn't call it that, but that was basically what it was whichever way I looked at it. Refugees and night sentries alike jostled together in cramped quarters, most likely because they were caught up in spreading the news.

Going by feel, I would say that an hour had passed, but considering the time I spent changing out of my armor to do all that paperwork, I would add another thirty minutes on top. When I recognized the approaching sound of hooves, I could feel my anticipation rising.

"I suppose there's no need to wait. Frenssen, call over Max and the others for me."

"Yes, sir."

I left it to Frenssen to gather the others and stepped outside the lodgings. As if on cue, Kittel jumped off his horse. He had quite the equestrian skills.

"Well met," I said. "What are our orders?"

"Sir. Every man on guard duty under House Zehrfeld must depart for Bardea Village and join forces with the knight brigade. The village is on the outskirts of the capital."

"Every man, you said?"

“Yes. Every man.”

So they were basically ditching the aqueduct job, huh. No, wait, they’d probably lined up another noble house on short notice to pick up the slack.

In an emergency, I could certainly see the difference in reaction time between the state-owned knight brigade, which was always ready to deploy, and the nobleman armies. I could also see that this was a situation where they needed to gather every private army that could deploy immediately. I wondered if the chain of command would hold up, though. This world was much like my previous one in that the noble armies were like private militias. Even if you were able to string them together, command was bound to break down if you rushed haphazardly into the thick of things.

But worrying solved nothing. Max and the others chose that moment to turn up, and I decided to listen to whoever was in charge after we linked up with the knight brigade.

“All right. Max, Orgen, Barkey, we depart immediately. We’ll march through the night and aim to reach Bardea by morning. Frenssen, I leave it to you to handle the successor here.”

Everyone besides Frenssen hurried back to their troops. The squires lit torches for us. Although we did have magic lamps, they used expensive magic stones, and those smokeless lamps were best saved for a rainy day—literally. You had no choice *but* to use a magic lamp when it rained. On normal occasions, the good old-fashioned torch would have to do.

The torches we generally used for night marching weren’t short ones like your generic image of a torch. They were more like the ones used at some traditional Japanese festivals, which were almost two meters long. It was comparable to holding a spear or flag.

That kind of length—or, I guess, height—was essential. Long torches were easier to track from a distance, which was crucial for infantrymen far in the back of the march, and the height kept them far from the horses, who might otherwise panic at the fire. If the frontline came to a standstill during a night march and the backlines didn’t see it, the group could fall into disarray.

This variety of torch was different from the ones you’d use if there was an

enemy right in front of you, which meant yet more baggage for an army on the move.

I continued to ponder all the things we'd need to bring, issuing the relevant orders as my squire saddled my horse for the trip. Although the number of soldiers being deployed had increased, nobody missed a beat with their preparations.

"We're heading out now!" I called out. "Keep watch for monsters!"

In response to my voice, the sound of hooves clamored into the night. The torchlight reflected on our armor, painting a scene that, from a distance, might have seemed straight out of a fairy tale. Unfortunately, there was nothing so romantic to see up close.

But seriously, what the hell happened out there?

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It was probably appropriate to call Bardea one of the capital's satellite villages. It didn't take too long to reach—about half a day of walking was perfectly sufficient. As long as you were careful, it wasn't even much trouble to travel there at night. Fortunately, we didn't encounter any monsters along the way.

As a bit of background information, villages on the outskirts of major cities functioned in much the same way as their equivalents in my previous world. Not only did they often grow green vegetables, but they also raised cattle and sheep for dairy. Without tools for refrigeration, fresh vegetables were valuable commodities, and that went double for dairy products like milk that spoiled easily. During the peak of summer, people would bring the cows to the capital so that the milk wouldn't go bad. Some nobles were even known to rent cows and sheep from the dairy farmers for a limited time.

One significant difference, though, was that monsters in this world were liable to attack the grazing livestock. And it wasn't just adventurers who were hired to protect them. The knight brigade was always ready to deploy at a moment's notice for the sake of the dairy industry.

By the time we arrived at Bardea's outskirts, there were already a bunch of



knights standing around, ready for their next orders. This bunch looked like they were from the first order. The tension was so strong I could feel it prickling my skin.

“I am Werner Von Zehrfeld,” I said as I reached the command tent. “I would like to announce my arrival.”

“You may pass.”

How about that? They let me through on sight when I introduced myself. Er, it probably wasn’t because my face was all that memorable. More likely they just didn’t have the time to go through all the usual hassle.

“Pardon me,” I said, walking inside.

“Ah, Lord Werner, you have come.”

Oooh. I knew the guy sitting next to Duke Seyfert. He was Uwe Freimuth Schündler, Minister of Military Affairs. I couldn’t believe I was in the presence of the country’s highest military authorities.

“I apologize for my tardiness,” I said.

“You were one of the faster ones. But unfortunately, you will have to depart immediately.”

*Hey, c’mon.* It took a bit of effort to conceal my grimace at Minister Schündler’s words. It was yet another rather heavy-handed order. At the same time, I noticed that the duke’s brows were creased into a frown, so I refrained from voicing any protests.

Instead, I asked, “Is there another Demon Stampede?”

“Not as far as we know,” replied the duke, “but there is much that remains uncertain. What we do know for sure is that we were far too slow to respond. Prulea Village was the first to fall victim, two weeks ago.”

It took a while for my memory to thread the names and places together. Although the village didn’t appear in the game, I was pretty sure that it was in the upper basin of the Detmold Mountains.

“I can only imagine that Prulea was completely obliterated.” The minister picked up the story. “I say ‘imagine’ because we heard absolutely nothing about

this attack until we received a messenger from Valeritz.”

As I listened, I mentally took stock of the monsters that appeared around the Detmold Mountains. In the game, the region typically spawned Hunter Lizards and Hill Crocodiles. There weren’t any nearby towns, the monsters didn’t drop particularly good items, and they weren’t even easy to kill. With that perfect trinity of badness, there was absolutely no reason to go there. Even in the game, it wasn’t a very good grinding spot.

“Judging by their movements after the fact, the monster horde appears to be headed for Denham after Valeritz.”

*After the fact*, hm? This implied that Valeritz fell. It wasn’t like I *hadn’t* seen that coming, but it still came as a surprise that it happened so fast. Judging by the current discussion, the monsters hadn’t stuck around to conquer the place.

Hm? Denham Village wasn’t in the game either, but I remembered hearing that it and Arlea Village were common pit stops for pilgrims on their way to the temple. If you drew a line between the Detmold Mountains, Valeritz, and Denham, the trajectory pointed to...

“...Finoy. Is that the enemy’s objective?”

“You are quick on the uptake. That saves us time.”

The temple of Finoy. Okay, so this was the part of the game where Beliures, one of the three Demon Commanders, attacked Finoy to get at Laura. The game only told you that Finoy had been attacked, but in reality there was a trail of destruction.

Although I already knew the answer, I decided to confirm: “Could it be that Her Highness...?”

“She is at Finoy, yes.”

Bingo. And now I knew why the army was in such a rush. Not only was Finoy a holy place, held sacred by many, the second-oldest princess of our fair kingdom was a sitting duck. Considering how quickly the enemy demolished an entire city, this was incredibly bad news.

“I recall that there were no paths around Denham for a large army to

traverse,” I mentioned hesitantly.

“Indeed not.” The duke nodded, glowering.

Although there was an empty field in front of the temple, the game map was filled with forests along the way. There was hardly anything in the way of roads. Even in this more fleshed-out world, I doubted that there was anything more than small paths for the pilgrims. Moving an army across those grounds would be laborious, to say the least, and we couldn’t afford delays.

As I dug into my memories, the minister continued. “Accordingly, we will be sending out the troops in a piecemeal fashion. We will dispatch the available troops unit by unit to the vicinity. We will work out something with the supplies. I want you to take your troops along a different road and head to Valeritz without delay.”

“Are all the troops assembling at Valeritz?”

“Indeed,” said Duke Seyfert.

“If we are taking a different route, then it must be a detour. Very well, I understand.”

Although the knight brigade would take the main road, this would not leave space for the other armies to pass through. It was a bit like a traffic jam—hence the need for the troops to march separately. I would probably rendezvous with the other private armies at Valeritz.

“Then I will take the House Zehrfeld troops along the west route and head for Valeritz.”

“We’re counting on you.”

Phew, to think I would hear an entreaty from the duke of all people. Well, of *course* I had to help him out, I thought. But first, there was something I needed to convey.

“I have but one suggestion.”

“What is it?” the duke asked.

“I have heard that many of the monsters near the Detmold Mountains inflict poison upon their enemies. I would like to request that you supply our rear with

sufficient curative potions.”

The number of poison users increased from this point in the game. I figured it would be a good idea to be prepared nice and early. When I made this proposal, however, the Minister of Military Affairs and the duke exchanged startled glances.

“Most enlightening. I see. We overlooked this. I appreciate your suggestion,” said the minister.

“Much obliged.”

I had his promise, so I was confident in leaving things up to him. I hurried back to my troops and cried out: “Listen, all! The Demon army is headed for Finoy! We march with all haste for Valeritz!”

All we had to do was buy time for Mazel to reach Laura...hopefully. Given that the hero (in multiple senses of the word) made it in time in the game, where the knight brigade no longer existed, then we were probably in the clear. If anything, having the knight brigade around made it harder to anticipate the future.

Putting all that aside, however, I would focus on what I could do. A part of me needed to see the game’s events unfold for myself to feel assured. I prayed that this part of the story would follow the script.

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The thunder of hooves resounded into the night as the group of knights traversed the narrow road. The noise seemed to meld with the sounds of the surrounding forest, so that the din seemed to come from all directions. I didn’t care about the monsters, but we were probably disturbing the local wildlife.

Estimating that my horse was getting out of breath, I ordered a halt. “It is time to switch horses! Replenish your water!”

“Don’t eat anything solid!” Max and the other officers carried on the instructions. “Only drink diluted vinegar until we reach our destination!”

It was my first time marching on such a strict schedule. Max and the others were savvy and knowledgeable, but even they didn’t have direct experience in



this. Together, we worked out the possible problems that could arise and how to deal with them.

We weren't forbidding people to eat out of spite. In this world, almost all solid foods were quite literally hard objects. Having too much of them in your stomach made things very inconvenient when you were trying to prioritize movement. Still, it would have been nice if we could have bananas. Apparently, people in this world also knew that vinegar was good for dealing with fatigue. People had their preferences about how strong they liked it, though, based on their personal experiences.

Switching horses was a common way of tightening the pace in an emergency. Switching to a riderless horse before your current mount became totally exhausted would reduce their burden. Horses could keep up their strength much longer without a rider, so by rotating between several different horses, you could gain more ground. That said, it wasn't like they experienced *zero* strain, so this tactic was only used when you had to march at full speed.

The term "march at full speed" was very literal. It meant going as far as humanly possible, which was about seventy kilometers a day. Given that your average marching speed was between twenty to thirty kilometers per day, you can imagine that it was not a very pleasant experience to go at more than double the pace. Even if you were on horseback, it was a huge strain to your backside and thighs. Foot soldiers were known to desert the army altogether under these conditions.

Barkey's troops were stationed at the back of the line to catch any deserters, pulling along the foot soldiers, carriages, and supplies as they did so. They were carrying some consumables like arrows and basic food items, but only the bare minimum.

Anyone who genuinely couldn't walk anymore could get stuffed into a carriage and treated as luggage, but there was still a possibility that they could get attacked by monsters or wild animals before Barkey's troops could pick them up. People could die before they even saw any fighting. Given all this, I really didn't want to march at full speed.

This reminded me of how Toyotomi Hideyoshi (who was still called Hashiba

Hideyoshi back then) marched his army halfway across the country in just ten days after finding out about Oda Nobunaga's assassination. There were some ridiculous theories that Hideyoshi masterminded the assassination because he was *too* fast. People apparently thought it was suspicious how he managed to travel just under seventy kilometers in a day.

But *they* were the wild ones for thinking that way. I was pretty sure that the proponents of that idea just zeroed in on Japanese military history within the span of about a hundred years or so. It wasn't so implausible if you took the long view on history.

For example, in the Second Punic War, the Roman consul Gaius Claudius Nero (not to be mistaken for Emperor Nero) transported his troops a hundred kilometers within twenty-four hours in order to participate in the Battle of the Metaurus. The Chinese warlord Cao Cao of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* fame also successfully marched his troops about a hundred kilometers in a day in order to pursue and attack an opposing army. Those two men were properly enshrined in history.

Although there weren't precise records of the distances they traveled, there were other examples of armies that successfully moved about seventy kilometers in a day. These included the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II, the Roman general Julius Caesar, and the Yongle Emperor from China's Ming Dynasty. Depending on the route they took, some even managed to cross over eighty kilometers in a day. To give an example from a relatively minor character in Earth's history, the English king Harold Godwinson marched three hundred kilometers in four days. This blew Hideyoshi's pace of two hundred kilometers in a week out of the water. Even in Japan, Uesugi Kenshin and Takasugi Shinsaku were known to achieve similar feats when necessary.

As another example, the Mongol leader Genghis Khan would almost certainly have dragged his armies seventy kilometers a day on a regular basis, even if nobody had the thought or means to record that in writing back in the day. Coming from a horse-rearing tribe, the founder of the Timurid Empire, Timur, would also have surpassed seventy kilometers a day in his marches.

If you're familiar with your world history, you might have picked up on a name I *haven't* mentioned so far: Alexander III of Macedon, also known as

Alexander the Great. Without any exaggeration whatsoever, that man was an absolute freak when it came to military matters.

His fastest march was 276 kilometers in three days.

*Two hundred and seventy-six.* In three days, he covered the distance from Tokyo to Nagoya. And he didn't just take cavalrymen—he brought infantrymen along on a road that was ridiculously unsuited for travel at the time. He blitzed through enemy territory—not even his own turf—at a speed equivalent to an express courier using one of the Edo period's best-developed roads. This would have been a true test of mettle for a military group.

Oof, wouldn't his soldiers have revolted?! As strange as it was to consider, the fact that he managed to pull it off just went to show what a monster that man really was.

Putting aside total freak cases like Genghis Khan and Alexander the Great, there was at least one person in every century of world history who managed to match Hideyoshi's top marching speed. It wasn't an outlandish pace if it was just a matter of moving from A to B without fighting a war immediately afterward. Although it was certainly unusual for the Sengoku period, it was still a massive leap of logic to treat Hideyoshi as a devious mastermind.

My ponderous inner ramblings were interrupted when one of the knights on lookout called out to me. "The time stick has burnt out."

"All right."

A time stick was like an incense stick, to use a term from my previous world. However, rather than letting out a scent, they were used to measure time based on how long it took for them to burn out. If you made all the sticks the same length and set fire to them at the same time, they were a reliable way to track the passage of time. Because they were made from the body parts of a monster called the Eater Flower, the level of humidity didn't affect how long it took for them to burn out.

Mechanical clocks did exist in this world, but they were large and cumbersome to carry around. Hourglasses were made from expensive glass and were liable to break if carried into a battlefield. You couldn't use the position of the sun to determine the time on cloudy or rainy days, nor at night. This was

what made these pseudo-incense sticks the best fit for the occasion. Their only failing was that, predictably, you couldn't use them when it rained.

"Let's get going once the foot soldiers finish taking stock of their shoes and shoelaces," I said.

"Very well. Rest time is over! Finish your preparations and get on your horses!" At Max's voice, almost everyone mounted their horses without a second to lose. I was pretty sure I was the slowest one, actually.

Wasn't House Zehrfeld meant to be a bunch of bureaucrats? It felt like we were turning into a full-blown martial house.

I wrestled with some complicated feelings as we resumed our advance towards Valeritz.

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That same night, a messenger hurried into the Fürst estate and, heedless of the hour, announced the emergency dispatch orders. Lord Bastian Fürst, patriarch of the house, called at once for his children and the captain of his knights.

Fürst was a martial house, and neither Tyrone, son and scion, nor Hermine, daughter and knight, wasted a single moment responding to the summons.

"I am here, Father."

"What happened?"

The siblings had expected something was amiss, given the abruptness of the summons, but even so, the emergency orders caught them off guard. Bastian took note of their shocked expressions as he explained the situation. Then he swiveled his gaze to the captain of the knights.

"That sums up everything I know about the situation. Wilden, you must round up all the knights we have in the capital at once."

"Understood, my lord." Wilden nodded. The captain of the knights of House Fürst nodded. He was in the same age range as Bastian and a respectable knight in his own right, but because the count himself often led from the front, Wilden served more often as an adjutant, managing supplies and personnel.



It was all but guaranteed that the martial aristocrats of House Fürst would take to the battlefield. They hardly needed orders from the crown to respond to a call to arms. The situation being what it was, Wilden kept his cool and tried to prevent the nervousness from showing on his face.

Bastian turned his gaze from Wilden to his son Tyrone. "I have sent messengers to our fief. Tyrone, you are to return there posthaste. Gather our knights there and bring them here. But don't assume that superior numbers will be all you need to carry the day."

"I hear you loud and clear. Valeritz may have been a house of bureaucrats, but a foe that can bring them to their knees will not be bested by mere strength of numbers."

Bastian was silent for a moment before he said, "Indeed."

In light of the disaster that had befallen Valeritz, Tyrone could see that the enemy's forces were not to be underestimated. At the Demon Stampede, he experienced for himself how the monsters could overpower even the knights and their squires. He was determined not to make the same mistakes and to conduct himself more prudently.

Bastian gave a stony-faced nod before turning to his daughter standing next to Tyrone.

"You will accompany me, Mine."

"Very well." Mine nodded stiffly.

She knew that they were compelled to hurry, given that the order was a call for reinforcements. Still, as this was her first time experiencing it, she was perhaps *too* tense, and struggling to manage it. Bastian could sense this and decided to keep her close at hand as his deputy.

"Although the plan is to convene with the knight brigade at Bardea Village, this foray will indubitably take us elsewhere. Tyrone, make sure you convey that to the troops when you take the reins at the fief."

"Very well, I will head there immediately. Wilden, I'll take three knights as bodyguards."

“As you say, my lord.”

Tyrone and Wilden left the room, still discussing Tyrone’s guard retinue. He would need one to make the trip by night. Never mind the restless monsters that lurked near the capital; Tyrone was no coward, and they would not deter him.

Meanwhile, Mine promptly returned to her room and asked a lady-in-waiting to prepare her armor. The emergency orders had wrapped a thread of tension around the mansion, but a martial house had its pride. Nobody wasted time as they prepared to deploy.

“Is this what passes for normal now that the Demon Lord has returned?” Mine muttered to herself as she waited for her servants to finish carrying out the preparations.

As a lady knight, she would not shy from the prospect of battle. Even so, a chill ran down her spine. Unlike the mindless hordes of the Demon Stampede, groups of monsters were beginning to attack human towns with a clear and visible purpose. Knowing this drove home once more that the Demon Lord was well and truly back.

Then there was Bastian. After seeing his son and daughter off, he let out a quiet sigh alone in his study. He acknowledged the fact that the Demon army had never once attacked a major fief’s city within the entire history of the kingdom. However, this did not necessarily mean that the attack warranted an emergency call to arms. Although Bastian had figured this out, his heir Tyrone unfortunately did not think that far ahead. He was only concerned with sizing up the army he was in charge of.

Of course, even with limited awareness of the situation, Tyrone’s judgment was still sound. Bastian did not have the heart to point out where his son was lacking. At the same time, he could not stifle his unease at the thought of the battlefield which lay beyond Valeritz.

Bastian called his butler. Even with his heart on edge, he still had to prepare himself for the battle.

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The knight brigade was always ready to deploy, but the knights belonging to a noble house were a very different story. Even if they disregarded provisioning and departed in utmost haste, they would still need over half a day to prepare. It was a day later, close to evening, when House Fürst's army arrived at the outskirts of Bardea Village.

There was an indescribably loud din outside the village. Multiple armies were jumbled together, each with their own sources of noise: clinking armor, neighing horses, and other sundry sounds.

Part of this had to do with the circumstances behind the emergency orders. Many people had come running without knowing what precisely had happened. They conferred in hushed tones with friends, acquaintances, and relatives, fishing for information. Spreading groundless suppositions about military matters was a serious offense, however, so no rumors had gained ground. Perhaps the soldiers' discipline was to be commended in that sense.

After arriving in this state of uncertainty, Bastian headed for the base of operations to exchange greetings and receive clear directions. Meanwhile, Mine approached her acquaintances for information.

In this world where women could take on all kinds of dangerous work like adventuring, there were a fair few female knights. The women tended to stick together from their academy days, almost a faction unto themselves, with a distinct information network to which others weren't privy.

"The crown prince will not be coming this time."

"It has not been long since the Demon Stampede. It would not be sensible for the royal family to be away from the capital so often."

"That's quite understandable."

Although there were plenty of lady knights who accepted that Crown Prince Hubertus would refrain from military duties on this occasion, just as many looked disappointed. They had something of a hidden agenda in all this. The crown prince himself was off the table, but his royal guard was full of eligible bachelors. Although the women understood as well as anyone that it was neither the time nor place for such things, it was human nature to be at least curious. And though Mine had no desire whatsoever to engage in such

frivolities, she did understand where they were coming from.

Everyone's faces froze, however, when someone addressed the plain facts of the situation.

"Is it true that Valeritz has already fallen?"

"I only heard about it secondhand, but it seems so. The knight brigade is already headed for Valeritz, as are some of the noble houses: Count Zehrfeld, Viscount Berneck, Baron Gordan, and others."

"Count Zehrfeld's troops are already on their way?" Mine asked.

Having scoped out the information ahead of time, the lady knight nodded and elaborated on her explanation. "His heir, the viscount, arrived last night and was immediately dispatched."

"House Zehrfeld and House Berneck were the first of the noble houses to arrive. They were guarding the aqueduct and keeping surveillance on the refugee lodgings."

"That explains it." Mine nodded at the older knight's statement. It made sense that the armies with the least amount of prep time would deploy first.

At the same time, she could see that multiple lady knights looked interested in discussing Werner. Some of them had heard about his valor at the Demon Stampede from their relatives, while others had accompanied him personally on the refugee escort mission. One of the reasons for their curiosity was his inexplicable lack of a fiancée. Mine chuckled internally at how the young man had become an overnight celebrity.

As for Baron Gordan, he belonged to the same faction as the elderly Duke Gründing, father of the queen. The baron was known for his dauntless courage and for proactively hunting down monsters. Several lady knights displayed surprise upon hearing the news about him. Understandably, they must have been wondering if the duke was making a move.

Although Duke Gründing was an excellent politician, he belonged to the generation before the reigning king. Given his age, he was hardly involved in military matters. Much like how Duke Seyfert had effectively retired from service until very recently, some people were saying it was about time for Duke

Gründing to retire as well.

“I suppose it would be the duke’s heir in attendance.”

“I imagine so.”

The duke’s son was the king’s brother-in-law, which was more than enough prestige to allow him to command a large army. But he was even more of a dyed-in-the-wool bureaucrat than his father. It was hard to say just how much of a fuss the martial houses might make if he were to join the fray.

The truth exceeded even the women’s expectations. Only later would they discover that the duke himself insisted on taking personal command of the army.

“Is Lady Hermine here?” A knight from House Fürst, whom Mine recognized by face, approached the gathered women.

“Oh, has my father returned?”

“Yes. There is a message for you. Could you return to the base as well, Lady Hermine?”

“Very well.”

Mine said goodbye to her fellow lady knights and left the scene. In the distance, she could hear a clamorous din, indicating that some nobleman’s army was setting off. Subconsciously, she quickened her pace as she made for the base to see her father.

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It was the next night that I reached the outskirts of Valeritz with the Zehrfeld troops, but the fact that we covered in a single day’s march what would normally take three days was nothing short of impressive. Everyone really pulled their weight.

I gave the order for the soldiers to rest, then took Neurath and Schünzel with me to the knight brigade’s headquarters. We had to say hello and talk about supplies. It looked like the second order of the knight brigade had arrived ahead of us.

What seemed strange at first glance was that Valeritz was pitch black and the



knights hadn't gone inside. Maybe the fact that it had fallen to an attack meant that there was absolutely nowhere to rest in there. Things were still at that level of touch-and-go at this point.

"I am Werner Von Zehrfeld. I would like to announce my arrival."

"Viscount Zehrfeld, eh? Come on in."

The camp must have been pretty chill since they let me in straight away. That made things easier for me. I walked inside the tent, feeling pretty enthused.

"I am Werner Von Zehrfeld."

"Viscount Zehrfeld, hm? Thanks for coming out all the way here." This looked to be captain of the second order.

"You were fast." And this seemed to be vice-captain.

Both of them looked to be about my father's age if not a little older. They also looked rather disheveled. Not that there was a huge mystery behind that.

"My foot soldiers are a fair way behind, I must say."

"Understandable given the rush," said the captain. "You ought to rest your soldiers and horses while you can. Vice-captain, give the viscount's troops some basic grain and supplies."

"Yessir."

Oooh, nice. If they went along the highway, then they could bring a whole transportation unit along. Having taken a detour, our squad had drawn the short stick where supplies were concerned.

"But the situation is worse than we anticipated," the captain went on.

"Are you speaking about Valeritz?" I asked.

There was silence for a moment. Then the captain said, with a grimace plain on his face, "I doubt that you'll find it pleasant, but you might want to see for yourself. Take a look inside the town of Valeritz."

"A-all right."

I didn't really get it, but I nodded anyway. I would soon come to deeply regret peering at what lay beyond those gates.

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“Oof...”

“This is unspeakable...”

Even Neurath and Schünzel were at a loss for words. I was, well, speechless. The town walls had been reduced to rubble. Inside, there were no signs of any living creature, let alone humans. To me, this looked like the aftermath of a large-scale air raid.

And that wasn’t all. If we had at least come during the daytime, it might have been more manageable. But we were stepping all over *that*.

“It reeks.”

“When you think about the timeline, this would only have happened a few days ago. No wonder it’s like this.”

I let my knights’ conversation wash over my ears as I scanned my surroundings. Crumbled walls, burnt houses, roads littered with everyday objects—and streets tarred black with what must have been a sea of blood that day.

Rats and similar-sized creatures would probably have been swallowed whole by the monsters. Conversely, creatures that wouldn’t have fit in their gullets had been chewed to pieces. Dogs, cats, horses, pigs, birds—and humans. It was impossible to tell the difference between them now.

No wonder the army wasn’t camping inside the gates. The sight was enough to make you physically sick, and there was the distinct possibility of contagious diseases. It was so bad that the only choice was to set fire to the whole town. This certainly explained why the count was still considered missing.

And the group responsible for this indiscriminate slaughter was on its way to Finoy. This made Dreax, the boss of Fort Werisa, look like a pushover in comparison. I might have been underestimating the Demon army.

“This is making my stomach turn,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“Yessir.”

“Right away.”

When I caught an eyeful of a tiny pair of shoes on the road, I couldn't help but let out a sigh. Attached to those shoes was a pair of ankles—and nothing more. *Stop it*, I chided myself. The perpetrators weren't here, so there was nobody to take my frustration out on. But the thought just dampened my spirits further, while my anger swelled within.

Damn it, even though I knew that humans weren't responsible for this, it was still a sickening sight. Besides, I didn't even want to be the kind of person who could behold this kind of thing with a straight face.

We headed back to the Zehrfeld troops' lodgings, our faces slightly pallid. Just outside the encampment, however, I heard the last voice I would have expected there. My legs froze in place.

"B-Big Bro!"

...*Feli?*! What the hell was he doing here?

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We couldn't just stand around talking, so I brought Feli into our encampment. Max and Orgen came along to hear what Feli had to say. Barkey, who had been managing the back of the line, had yet to arrive, but I couldn't fault him for rounding up the stragglers.

Neurath and Schünzel wore terse expressions, maybe because Feli had addressed me so casually despite my noble station. I would probably have to talk with them later about that. Right now, hearing Feli out was the top priority.

"It's nice to see you and all, but what are you doing here?"

"Big Bro Mazel said that you'd come straight to Valeritz for sure. So he made me his messenger."

"Typical Mazel." I couldn't help but crack a wry grin. It was hard to say whether he had faith in me or if he was just overestimating my abilities. I had a lot of opinions to express on the matter, but there was no point venting it all to Feli. "So where is he?"

"At the temple of Finoy. We drove back the enemy's first attack. They're all still there—I'm the only one they sent out."

"What?!" Max, Neurath, and Orgen barked in unison.

Meanwhile, I was simply too speechless for words. *Wait, come on, how is Mazel already in Finoy?*

In the game, Finoy had effectively fallen by the time the hero made his entrance. Mazel swooped in to save Laura in the nick of time as she faced off against one of the three Demon Commanders. Mazel's presence in Finoy before the destruction was a major divergence from the original plot. How had this happened?

"Tell me what exactly happened. Spare no details."

"Sure. Hm, let's see..."

To sum up Feli's story: When Mazel's crew came to Guberg to grind levels and ask around about the nearby dungeon, they heard rumors about Valeritz getting attacked.

The reason they didn't head straight for Valeritz was because Luguentz said,

“There’s a time lag with intel. Even if we go now, we’ll be too late.” Mazel had agonized over the situation, but ultimately accepted Luguentz’s logic. I agreed with Luguentz but was impressed he’d managed to make Mazel see reason.

But that turned out to be a premature appraisal. Right after that, it turned out, a thought suddenly occurred to Mazel. What he said next turned the entire situation on its head.

“Oh yeah, Werner said we should make Finoy our destination.”

...Okay, I remembered that. So, um. Holy cow. Did my offhand comment seriously cause such a sharp turn?

At which point, Erich said, “I have been to Finoy before. I can take you there right away.” And that was how Mazel and his friends went to Finoy and warned the people there about the impending onslaught.

Apparently, the folks at the temple were skeptical, but Laura believed Mazel. I was reminded that, unlike in the game, the two of them were already acquainted by this point.

For the sake of precaution, Laura ordered the temple guards to take up a defensive position. They did so, securing their bastions by the narrowest margin before the enemy’s arrival.

Sure, it was plausible for a monk like Erich to have been to Finoy before. So why was this so different from the events of the game...? Oh, wait!

The Skywalk Boots! You could only buy them in the town after the Star-Counting Tower. The Hero’s party wouldn’t have had access to them at this point in the game.

With the boots in hand, however, they could zip to Finoy in an instant as long as they had someone in their ranks who had been there before. Erich fit the bill, so they were able to jump the gun on the Demon Army and get to the temple ahead of schedule. My mind was officially blown.

“We managed to fend off the first wave,” Feli went on, “and we needed someone to tell you what’s going on.”

“And that explains why you’re here.” I managed to muster a response, but my

brain was still reeling from this sharp left turn.

All I knew for certain was that this was a massive divergence from the game. The fact that the knight brigade, which should have been destroyed, was on its way to Finoy was a discrepancy as well. I could not even begin to imagine how events would unfold in the future.

“So basically you’re saying that Finoy is safe for now?”

“Yeppers.”

“Master Werner,” Orgen said, trembling, “This is...!”

“Yeah,” I told him. “Sorry, but could you report to the second order of the knight brigade? Tell them that the Hero is participating in the battle and that Finoy is still intact.”

“Yessir, right away.”

Orgen practically flew out of the encampment. This was definitely important information, but my thoughts were still jumbled in my mind. It felt like someone had flipped over a toy box, causing all the contents to come indiscriminately crashing to the ground. It slipped my mind to even watch Orgen go.

As a groan escaped my mouth, Feli spoke up again, this time to mention something peculiar. “By the way, Big Bro.”

“Quit it with the ‘Big Bro.’ What is it?”

“It might’ve been my imagination, but there were these weirdos at the temple.”

“Weirdos?”

According to Feli, the pilgrims and the merchant groups serving them were in the middle of evacuating. One of the pilgrim groups stood out as unusual.

“They were dressed lightly even though there’s a bigger monster threat than ever. And when they were talking, it was like...their smiles didn’t reach their eyes.”

Feli might have picked up on their suspicious behavior because he was a scout. When Mazel and the others heroically fended off the enemy’s first wave,

the strange group appeared to go around asking insistent questions about the heroes.

“How do I put it? It didn’t feel like they were asking because they were impressed and thought we were cool.”

He’d asked Mazel about it, but the guy apparently had trouble making a firm decision. Luguentz said they’d better keep an eye out. Hmm. I didn’t see any of this play out, so it was hard to comment on it one way or another.

“What kind of things were they asking?”

“Like ‘Who are they?’ and ‘Where did they come from?’ They also wanted to know about the relationship between Big Bro Mazel and the princess.”

Alarms rang in my head. Hold on. Did I figure something out?

I tried to recall what I knew from the game. Finoy had been more or less taken over by the monsters and the location was treated as a dungeon. At the chapel, the player character intervened in the confrontation between Laura and the Demon Commander Beliures.

What did Beliures say at that point? If I recalled correctly, he threatened Laura, mentioning something about hostages. This meant that he was definitely smart enough to take a hostage.

This begged the question: Was there someone at Valeritz who could capture hostages while the massacre was unfolding? Taken to its logical conclusion, the worst-case scenario was...

“A Trojan Horse!”

“Whoa?!”

Feli goggled at me, startled by my exclamation. Max and the others were also surprised, for that matter. This was only to be expected when, from their perspective, I’d just suddenly blurted out gibberish. There was no way anyone in this world would be able to understand the words “Trojan Horse.” But I didn’t have time to explain the concept.

Those guys had probably slipped into the temple beforehand to cause internal discord and secure a hostage. They might even have been the ones to open the

temple gates from the inside.

But what would they do when they discovered that the temple gates weren't so easy to break? Or that Mazel was the main force \_behind the defenses? If they tried sniffing out information about the Hero, they would find out that Arlea was his hometown. It wasn't any big secret.

Upon realizing the absolute worst-case scenario, my priorities flipped across multiple axes.

"Feli, can I ask you to do something dangerous for me?"

"Master Werner?" Neurath spoke up questioningly.

I ignored him as I fished out the blue box from a shelf in the corner of our encampment. Inside was an assortment of potions, as well as the magic items I'd requested the merchant corps to buy all that time ago. I still hadn't experimented with them, so I was taking a huge gamble here.

I took out two bottles and a pair of Skywalk Boots. Although there were still plenty of bottles left to spare, there were only two pairs of boots in the box. This meant that only one was left after this. This was an oversight on my side, given that I failed to procure them even though I had the time to experiment and replenish their stock.

"What's this?" asked Feli.

"This is a rare item called Monster Repel. It can temporarily prevent monsters from coming near you."

In the game, this took the form of preventing random encounter battles. Neurath and Schünzel let out exclamations of surprise, but I decided to ignore them for now.

The problem with this disposable item was that, although it prevented monster encounters on the field, I didn't know why it worked. Did it make monsters unable to sense your presence? Did it put some kind of divine protection on you to make them hesitate to approach? If your foe was already aware of you, the item might not even work at all.

But if there were spies inside the temple, then the situation was



unquestionably dire. And there wasn't much I could do about that state of affairs—or rather, there was something else I had to do.

“Apply this on yourself and then use these Skywalk Boots to return to Finoy. I'll give you one more Repel to sprinkle on the ground after you arrive. That should buy you some time.”

Feli listened to what I had to say with a straight face. He was just as overly trusting as Mazel—not that I was going to spew lies in this situation or anything.

I'd given him a rather dangerous proposition. By returning to Finoy with the Skywalk Boots, he would be moving outside the gates alone. He would be isolated in front of the Demon army until the gates opened.

I didn't possess the confidence to jump headfirst into such a dangerous situation. But Feli nodded easily. That was a member of the Hero's party for you—he certainly had nerves of steel.

“So should I apprehend those suspicious guys when I get back?”

“Say you're acting on House Zehrfeld's behalf and throw them into a prison cell. But don't do it alone. Get Mazel and the others to do it with you. If they resist, you can use force.”

“Got it.”

“The enemy is probably after Laura. Tell Mazel to keep an eye on things around her.”

“I hear you loud and clear. What are you gonna do, Big Bro?”

“There's something I need to do *right away*.”

Feli seemed to give up on further conversation after seeing my expression. After putting some Monster Repel on his head, he simply said, “Kay, I'm off. To Finoy.” And then, thanks to the Skywalk Boots, he was gone, leaving Max and the others staring in astonishment at the empty space where he'd been just a moment before.

Oh yeah, I'd been in such a hurry that I'd carelessly referred to the second-oldest princess by just her name alone. Maybe it was because I'd spoken with such a tense voice, but everyone let my rudeness go uncommented upon. Well,

maybe they just didn't care, given the situation.

"Master Werner, what is the meaning of th—?"

"I'll explain later. Max, I'm leaving command of the forces to you. Orgen, you'll be second-in-command. Follow the orders of the second order of the knight brigade for now."

"Master Werner?" It wasn't just Max; both Neurath and Schünzel were frowning in bewilderment.

But I really couldn't explain myself. At this point in time, I was the only one who knew about Beliures, one of the three Demon Commanders. Nobody was supposed to know that he possessed the cunning to take a hostage. If people found out that I knew, then they'd question how I knew, and that spelled trouble. As much as I wanted to explain what was happening around us, and what threats yet loomed ahead, I simply couldn't.

Maybe this was what they called *loneliness*. That thought briefly flickered through my brain for a moment, but then I decided that it didn't matter in the slightest.

"Neurath, Schünzel. Sorry, but I want you to come with me. Select ten other knights. We'll need forty horses to switch between along the way. Borrow the ones that look like they have the most energy. Don't forget to prepare potions and antidotes."

"O...kay..."

"What's happening?" Schünzel asked the obvious question.

The answer I gave was brief. I was going against military law, but who cared? If Mazel was at the temple, they'd hardly need me there anytime soon.

"I'm taking a select few to Arlea Village with all haste. Mazel's family is in danger."

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"You can sleep all you want when it's over! Snooze like a baby if you like!" I called out to the gathered knights, "But now, we march!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Neurath joined in with a rousing cry: “Show them our pride as knights!”

“Yeah!”

I’d explained everything there was to explain, and despite my reckless plan, nobody voiced a word of complaint. I felt pretty bad about putting them through all of this. Even the horses were rather exhausted. I felt sorry for them, but I needed them to hold out for us for just a little while longer. Right now, time was of the essence.

If we departed from Valeritz at night, we would arrive at our destination in about a day if we went full pelt. Counting the previous day’s trek, this meant pulling two all-nighters in a row. Even in my old world, I didn’t have such a deranged sleep schedule. I’d only slept about ten hours in total across three days. How the hell did Alexander the Great do it?

Maybe the reason I was able to tough it out was because this was a game world. I was basically running on potions. We were also using potions to manage the horses’ fatigue, but predictably, we were running low on reserves. We needed to keep some spares around in case people got injured.

I wondered what sort of time limit we were on. How long would it take for the enemy to observe Mazel’s exploits, gather information about him, learn about his hometown, relay that to their accomplices, and then send a squad to Arlea Village? How long had it taken Feli to slip out of the temple and reach us? In a race against time, we were probably the ones who were a step behind. I could only hope they took their sweet time gathering the information or that they encountered some delay in getting their intel to Beliures.

What I was doing constituted a clear military offense, no two ways about it. A squad commander had abandoned his unit to move around in small numbers. I’d pushed my job onto Max and Orgen so that I could go off by myself.

But I had to do this. I was the only one who knew where Arlea Village was at this point, even if it wasn’t the precise location. Just knowing the direction and the approximate position was a huge boon. If I didn’t pull out all the stops, then we would almost certainly arrive too late.

The road the pilgrims used to pass through Arlea Village wound its way through multiple villages. That would waste too much time, so I chose to strike

a direct course and plow ahead on our horses. But I had my doubts about whether I made the right choice. Damn it, the Iron Hammer group had been to Arlea Village before. If only I had them with me—although I knew I was wishing for a castle in the sky.

There was no guarantee that the Iron Hammer members were even in the capital in the first place. I didn't even have enough Skywalk Boots to teleport there and subsequently to Arlea Village. Besides, I didn't know for certain the maximum number of people who could be transported by the Skywalk Boots. If I had Mazel's overpowered abilities, then I could have easily forged my own path, but I wasn't him. Asking Mazel to go to Arlea Village when he was already caught up with defending Finoy would have been a preposterous strategic decision.

We continued our breakneck pace, switching between horses and munching rations during our brief downtimes. By the time we cut through the small path and emerged in a hilly landscape, it was closer to sundown than evening. Going purely off my game knowledge, I was pretty sure that our destination was somewhere around here.

In the game, the field consisted solely of forests and plains. The reality was full of hillocks and dips. With so many fluctuations in elevation, it was impossible to run at a steady clip. Although that was to be expected of the wilderness, I wanted to curse at the terrain. Why couldn't we have flatlands when I was in a damned hurry here? Not that there was any point in verbalizing this. I knew that I would achieve nothing by getting all worked up. Figuring that I needed some cooldown time myself, I called for another break.

"We should be almost there. If we switch our horses..."

"Master Werner!"

All of a sudden, one of the knights pointed at a copse down the hill. I knew what he was gawking at. Smoke coiled in the air, a sure sign of fire—and perhaps more—down below.

"Let's go!"

I didn't have to say anything more. It was clear to everyone that this was an emergency.

“Anyone struggling to continue is to follow as soon as they are able!” Schünzel added.

But the ten handpicked elites were nothing to sneeze at, and each of them, to the last man, rode on to Arlea Village.

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Although the village wasn’t crowded enough to justify the phrase “utter pandemonium,” the situation we dove into felt very much like it. Flames wreathed the buildings, casting a hellish glow upon villagers fleeing for their lives and the monsters hunting them down. But we had no time to study the scene in detail.

“Protect the villagers, everyone! You can extinguish the fires later!”

“Yessir!”

“Neurath, take two knights and head left! Schünzel, take two down the center. Don’t fight anything one-on-one! I’ll take the right. You two,” I said, turning to a pair of knights as I dismounted, “follow me!”

I broke into a sprint without waiting for their reply. Amid the chaos of fleeing villagers, the horses would be more hindrance than help.

If the map of the village was the same as in the game, then Mazel’s house-slash-inn was right by the entrance. Unlike in the game, however, I had approached from the side rather than the front, so that meant that the inn was actually some distance away.

After covering some ground, I could see that the shops’ positions mostly matched what I knew of Arlea Village. The only real change from the game was a stark increase in the number of houses. Come to think of it, rural villages in RPGs were pretty darn impressive for keeping things running with such a tiny population.

“Out of my way!”

I skewered an enemy with a single motion. At times like these, I was grateful for my Spearmanship skill. Even with my modest overall abilities, I could outperform your average knight or soldier with a spear. Plus, my spear was



good enough that it would carry me through for quite a while longer. It was guaranteed overkill for the schmucks around the temple of Finoy, that's for sure.

Wait, were they from the temple? As I pierced the neck of my second foe, I took stock of my surroundings. The creature I'd just slain was an Alligator Warrior, and glancing about, I could see that all the other monsters were bipedal reptiles classed as Reptipos. Which meant they almost certainly served Beliures.

Anyway, I knew that I wasn't going to lose in a one-on-one fight, so I saw no reason to hold back. I mentally apologized to the two knights trailing behind me as I dashed toward the blazing building ahead of me, which I knew for a fact was the inn I was looking for. Shit!

In my old world, people said that a full suit of armor was so heavy that you couldn't get on your feet unaided while wearing one, but that was only toward the end of the Middle Ages, when guns came into play. Before then, it was perfectly possible to run around in armor, and if you fell, you could pick yourself up. Besides, you couldn't compare the weight of something you carried in your hands with what you strapped around your whole body. I ran without stopping.

The armor I was using was viable until midgame. Perhaps boosted by the lightness of my gear, I moved fast enough to leave my two companions in the dust. As I turned a corner around the neighboring shop, I spotted someone sheltering a fallen person and a monstrous figure brandishing a curved sword.

The moment I saw what was happening, I bent my body forward and closed the distance in a single lunge. With the force of acceleration and all the strength in my body, I thrust my spear forward. The tip ran right through the creature, piercing its back and bursting out its stomach. Black-blue blood sprayed the air. I'd charged with such force that I slammed into the creature, but it barely registered. Thank goodness I made it on time.

"Are you okay?! Are you injured?!" I called out to the people as I stepped over the monster's corpse and extracted my spear.

There was a middle-aged-looking man lying on the ground, bloody from what appeared to be a laceration, and a woman who was probably his wife. She had

her arms around him, as if to shield him from an attack. She was a stouthearted lady.

Peering at the woman, I suspected that she was Mazel's mother. Although she didn't have a character portrait in the game, there was something about her that reminded me of him. Also, she was wearing the clothes I'd sent as a courtesy. Who would have thought they would come in handy at a time like this? One more thing: Mazel's mother was ridiculously young and pretty. You would never believe she had a son my age.

That ridiculous thought occupied my mind for a single moment, only to get blown out of the water the next instant.

"M-my daughter... Sh-she's been carried away..."

I gasped. "Where to?!"

"O-over there..."

With a trembling hand, she pointed outside the village. *Damn it!*

"Treat the injured man and protect these two!" I said to the knights, who by then had finally caught up with me. And then I was off again. I'd gone through so many ridiculous hoops to reach this point—*please* let me see this through to the end.

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*What happened? Why am I here?*

This thought passed blearily through my mind. I couldn't move.

All I knew was that something not-quite human had kidnapped me. But I had no clue why. I could hear lots of footsteps, but I couldn't count how many.

When I tried to resist, they hit me, and it hurt.

I knew that I was outside the village, and I knew that someone was carrying me on their shoulder, but when I asked myself what happened, it felt like there was a fog in my head.

Was Father okay? It looked like he got slashed. Was Mother okay? They sent her flying.

The hooded fellow burst in so suddenly. He took me, and I couldn't get my thoughts straight after that. What was happening to me?

They kept going for a while, parting the bushes as they went. Eventually, they stopped somewhere outside the village. They flung me to the ground, and it hurt.

"At this point..."

"The time..."

They were saying something. Conversing? I couldn't tell.

"...The Hero..."

"This girl is unquestionably..."

Oof. Someone lifted my head. They pulled me up by my hair and it hurt.

"Make her drink..."

"Use her body to..."

They opened my mouth. What was happening? Something that looked like a rock loomed in front of my eyes.

"It will be the end for this girl."

"Lord's revival..."

What? The end? I was...going to end...?"

No. I didn't... Was I never going to see them again? Father... Mother...

"Ma...zzy..."

Straight after that murmur slipped out my mouth, I felt something yank my body. I sank to the ground.

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I noticed something strange as I rushed out of the village. This exit was in the opposite direction from Finoy.

If you were on a direct path to Finoy, then you would have to cut through this village. This meant that their destination was not Finoy. Where *were* they headed, then? What was there in the game?

“The Star-Counting Tower, huh?”

At this point in the story, the Star-Counting Tower had turned into a dungeon crawling with monsters. To make matters worse, there weren't even any people living in the area. Only the Hero's party would be able to rescue her from that hive.

For better or worse, the enemy had cut a path through the bushes. Although it wasn't hard to follow the broken branches and flattened grass that marked their passage, it was dubious that I'd be able to catch up to them.

If the destination wasn't Finoy to the west but the Star-Counting Tower to the north, then after leaving the village they were bound to follow a semicircular route. I gave up following their suspicious tracks and decided to pursue a shortcut. The branches scratched my cheeks, but I did my best to ignore it.

The kidnappers appeared to have left the village around the time we showed up. They probably didn't suspect that they were being pursued. I could bet their guards were down. As long as I didn't give up, I was pretty sure I could make it in time.

I made a turn along the way, but when I delved a little deeper along that path, I bumped into some unmistakably fresh tracks. The shortcut had worked!

I ran on without pause. Fortunately, the moon was bright, meaning that it wasn't completely dark. When at last I had put some distance between me and the forest, I caught sight of four suspicious figures: two in robes accompanied by two in warrior garb. One of the robed ones was dragging a girl by the hair. She seemed unconscious or, at any rate, unresisting. The robed figure brought their other hand to her face.

I had no idea what was going on, but it did *not* look good. Without breaking stride, I adjusted the spear in my hands.

“Take this!”

This world didn't have a Spear Throwing skill. Instead, such techniques were also counted under Spearmanship. That said, spears meant for throwing had a different balance from your regular spears. I'd never really practiced throwing an ordinary spear before, but fortunately, I managed to hit the mark.

I hurled the spear with all the strength in my body. The tip sank into the robed figure's head, as if it were being sucked in, and they collapsed with the spear still lodged in their face. The girl dropped to the ground with them, but I'd have to save the apologies for later.

Before the other three could figure out what was going on, I ran up to the other robed one and drew my sword. Although swordplay wasn't my forte, the blade got the job done. As I cut into my foe, they bent backward dramatically and crumpled in a heap. Black-blue blood—or some other bodily fluid—gushed out of the wound.

Yet my strike had failed to finish it off. I'd swung a wide arc, meaning a follow-up cut would leave me open, so instead I kicked the foe to put some distance between him and the girl. He groaned like a squashed frog, but I paid it no heed.

Meanwhile, my other two opponents drew their swords and swung them in my direction. Although I just narrowly managed to avoid them, I saw the tip of a sword scratch my breastplate. I didn't care as long as they didn't target the girl.

There was something weird about their movements, though I didn't have time to ponder it. I drew even closer to my foes—close enough to get them with my fists. Then I punched one of them in the face with a fist that was still clenching the hilt of my sword. Their sword immediately slipped from their hands. Just like the fistfights I used to get up to in my school days.

I blocked my other opponent's sword with my own, steel screeching as sparks flew from our blades. I used the momentum from the earlier punch to switch positions so I could cover the girl's back. The victim of my punch did not let out a peep. That was a good thing, really. I wasn't great at swordfights, so I'd need every little thing that swung the fight in my favor.

A rotten smell wafted from the fist I'd punched with. Wait, rot? Alarmed, I took a second look at my opponent's face in the moonlight, and then gasped.

“W-why are these guys here?!”

A Dead Swordsman? Those enemies weren't supposed to show up around here... No, wait. I did recall that they were rare encounters at the Star-Counting Tower—the dungeon after you defeated Beliures. Which meant that these guys



weren't working under Beliures?

But no, the attack on the village had to be Beliures's doing. His signature Reptipos lackeys appeared at the temple. This was strange. Something was off.

These thoughts weighed on me as I swung my sword. Maybe there wasn't enough force behind my blow because my opponent blocked it easily with his sword. Meanwhile, the other Dead Swordsman came rushing in to close the gap between us. Damn it! Since he was undead, punching him in the face wouldn't incapacitate him. Not that there was any point complaining about this now.

I had to tip the scales, if only a little. Without a shield, I'd have to rely on my sword to guard against attacks from both foes. Easier said than done.

I blocked a strike and retaliated with one of my own, cutting horizontally even as I sidestepped a thrust. One of my opponent's swords clanged against my armor. I felt the impact in my bones as sparks flew off the metal.

This was a total pain in the ass. Not only was I using a sword—decidedly not my forte—I was up against two foes who were way over-leveled for this area. They were rare monsters that were supposed to appear later. Plus, I was already super tired, so I was fighting with an extra handicap.

Five, ten, fifteen strikes. Every time our swords met, sparks would fly. Undaunted by the numbness of my hands, I swung my sword in riposte, parried a thrust, and then turned my wrist to throw my opponent off their stance. I was putting up a pretty good fight against two foes with only the moon as a light source, if I had to say so for myself.

For a while, I exchanged blows with my two opponents. It was massively draining to keep my guard up against two foes at once. The moment my focus drifted to one, the other would come sliding into my blind spot. They were slowly yet surely driving me into a corner. The only reason I was unscathed so far was because my armor held up.

But I had the disadvantage when it came to stamina. I wondered if I should bait them into letting their guards down by allowing them to cut me. Just as I was weighing the option, I heard something that sounded like a faint groan.

Immediately, I spun around, swinging my sword in a wide arc as I did so. Then

I dropped my sword and scooped up the still unconscious girl with my left hand. With my right hand, I snatched at *that thing* in the corner of my vision and moved away.

The next moment, a roaring sound assailed my ears. I felt something hot and heavy strike my back.

I tumbled to the ground, still clutching the girl, but rode the force of the blast to keep moving, wincing as I rolled. I could see that the hooded one I kicked away earlier was on their feet, pointing their palm at me. So they were a Lizard Magician, huh? Then that was probably a fire spell.

If that was a Reptipos, then was it an underling of Beliures? As long as I didn't think about where they spawned, it wasn't necessarily unusual to see mixed groups of monsters and Dead Swordsmen, but I would have to ponder that later.

As I rolled across the ground, sizing up my enemy, I saw a Dead Swordsman coming in for the kill. It was a reasonable maneuver, but a bad move in this case.

Stifling the pain in my back, I stopped at a patch of level ground and got to one knee. I watched my opponent approach and took aim—then, as he swung his sword, I surged forward, all my force focused into a thrust at the point I'd targeted.

Whether it was the fruit of my training or a boon from my skill, I couldn't say, but a dull thump sounded clearly through the night as my spear pierced into the side of the Dead Swordsman, skewering armor and bone to erupt from his back.

"Yep, this is more my speed."

Pain washed over me, but no more than I could manage. As I stood up, I grinned. I readjusted my spear with my right hand and held the girl closer to me with my left.

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As I stood up, I swung my spear to the side in a wide arc. Spears might be famed for their thrusting power, but their swings packed a punch too, especially with enough centrifugal force. Admittedly, it did burn a lot of stamina to take a

swing and hit nothing but air, though I wouldn't make a bungle like that given my positioning and distance from the enemy.

The tip of my spear mowed sideways, slicing through the Dead Swordsman's cranium. Then I took half a step back so I was in range to reach the other foe's sword. I took a short breath and readied myself.

It was all too obvious that having more reach meant more effectiveness. In Japan, people often said that you needed to be three times as good with a sword in order to defeat someone using a long weapon. I had no idea what basis the "three times" figure came from, but it was undeniable that in an open area like this, a spear had the advantage over a sword.

On the other hand, the fact that the enemy mage was back on their feet canceled out my advantage. They might even have the upper hand over me, but I wasn't foolish enough to get weak at the knees. If my mind gave ground, it wouldn't be long before my body was done for as well.

I forced a smile onto my face and tried to regain my cool. According to psychology, you don't smile because you're happy, you become happy *because* you smile. The brain was a mysterious thing.

I cast a glance at the girl. Her eyes were open yet glassy. It was hard to tell whether she was conscious—it didn't seem as if she could see anything. She had eyes like a doll or a baby deer. I wondered if she'd become like this because of the turmoil, or if it was the influence of a status ailment spell. I felt a bit afraid for her. If I released her in this state, she would probably hit her head on the ground.

If she was Mazel's younger sister, then she was obviously younger than me. It only seemed to be about a one-or two-year age gap, though? Her face was sooty, so now wasn't a great time to scrutinize her closely. I would just count myself fortunate that she was staying put for now.

"Yeah, come at me!"

I had no idea whether he understood my words, but the last remaining Dead Swordsman shuffled closer. He aimed for my left side, naturally, since my left arm was occupied with holding the girl. The undead were not all too bright, I had to say. I decided to finish him off before the Lizard Magician could try

something.

With eyes faced forward, I jumped backward abruptly.

The Dead Swordsman's expression did not even flicker. He hurriedly attempted to close the gap between us—just as I anticipated. But I'd jumped farther back than he could cover in one stride, and I knew clearly which side of mine he was aiming for.

It was time for my spear to enter play.

The moment I landed I dug my heels into the ground. Rather than retreat, I stepped into my opponent's charge with a counterattack of my own. My opponent had stepped right into the range of my spear. As I pivoted my body, positioning myself between the Dead Swordsman and the girl, my right arm thrust out the spear. I leaned into the attack, putting my weight into the strike.

I twisted my spear for good measure. It ran straight between my opponent's eye sockets, causing pieces of rotten flesh to fly.

Then I kicked him in the stomach, sending his body flying. The force was enough to eject him from my spear. I immediately readjusted my stance, this time facing the Lizard Magician.

"Now it's one-on-one."

Although I pasted a cocky smile on my face, it was mostly a bluff. My foe was quite some distance away—and they were a mage to boot. In a long-distance battle, I had the disadvantage. And more than anything, I was wiped. I had no idea how to handle this if they, like the Dead Swordsman, had no scruples about killing the girl along with me.

But I wasn't about to let them see behind my facade. No, I readied my spear, brimming with confidence.

They chose that moment to speak up.

"Who *are* you?" They seemed vexed.

"Isn't it more polite to give your name before you ask someone else's?"

So this was a Demon, huh? I was a little surprised to hear them speak, but not so much that it left me stunned, like at Fort Werisa. If Dreax had Demons under

his command, then it stood to reason that Beliures would have them too.

I wondered if they were gnashing their teeth, but could lizards even do that? Maybe this one could pull it off because they were a Demon? No, wait, that'd be my first time seeing a Demon gnash its teeth as well.

"I will strike a deal with you," the Demon declared after a pause.

Huh? For a moment, I was bewildered. A deal? Between a Demon and a human?

Its tone was haughty, but that wasn't the surprising part. I was just stunned at the idea of a Demon proposing a deal with a human. As I fell silent, the Lizard Magician continued:

"I will let you and the girl live. Take the girl and leave this place at once."

"I refuse."

I uttered my answer without a second's hesitation.

I was pretty sure that accepting the deal would be the wrong choice. I had no idea why, but the Demon wanted me out of the way immediately. From a third-party perspective, the situation seemed favorable to me. Too favorable.

"Are you sure? You would be wasting the life you just attempted to save."

"It's not like I have you to thank for being alive."

We both moved slowly. I wanted to get into spear range, but my movements were sluggish thanks to the girl in my left arm. For its part, the Demon was probably aware that it would be at a disadvantage if I got into close range, but I had the impression its hands were tied. It was as if it wanted to flee yet couldn't.

It probably knew that I could throw the spear. I was planning to do exactly that if it turned its back on me, but that wasn't the only thing my opponent seemed wary of. I felt like it was ever so gradually guiding me to a different spot.

It looked as if the Demon was trying to distance themselves from here, but I had no idea why. At first, I thought it was after the girl, but when it said I could take her and flee, I wondered if there was something else. It had a reptilian



face, and the moonlight was not strong enough for me to tell what it was looking at. What was it after? Where was it?

We sized each other up for an opening. Though not much time passed, it was tense. Then, inadvertently, the equilibrium shattered—and in the best possible way for me.

“Master Werner!”

“Are you okay?!”

Neurath and Schünzel came cutting through the grass. In place of an answer, I barked, “Don’t let that fiend slip away!”

The Lizard Magician turned its body. Reacting to my voice, Neurath and Schünzel pressed in on the Demon, brandishing their swords.

The two of them slashed at the Demon from both sides. Vital fluids sprayed from the Demon’s body. Perhaps the quality of their equipment was not quite up to snuff, however, because their attacks failed to finish him off. The Demon attempted to snap back at Neurath and Schünzel, and in doing so gave me the opportunity to attack.

“Hyaaa!”

Summoning my energy, I hurled my spear. Right at the very last moment, the Demon must have noticed me because it managed to dodge just enough to avoid a fatal wound. But instead, my spear had lodged in its thigh. It fixed me with a glare. *Hey, hey, pay attention to what’s in front of you.*

While its attention was diverted to me, Neurath and Schünzel closed in on the Lizard Magician and struck it with all their might. Two swords planted themselves in the Demon’s body. Spitting out black-blue blood, it crumpled to the ground.

The tension drained from my body. I was just about ready to collapse into a heap myself, but at that precise moment, the girl bent backward as if an electric shock had run through her. I scrambled to support her. Perhaps the death of the caster had caused the status effect spell to lift.

“Master Werner, are you injured?” Schünzel asked worriedly.

“I’ve got some scratches, but nothing major,” I replied wearily. “You came all the way out here. Good timing.”

“We heard an explosion and feared the worst.”

“Ah, I see.”

They were probably talking about the spell the Lizard Magician used a little while earlier. Who would have thought it would work out in my favor? It was a pretty close call, so I would honestly take what I could get.

To be perfectly frank, I really wanted to plop down and fall asleep on the spot, but I noticed that the girl was trembling. Her eyes had been so blank before, but now she was clinging to me. Her hands were quivering slightly.

Well, of course she would be scared out of her wits. Monsters had just tried to kidnap her! I’d be a real jerk if I left her to sort it out on her own. I would have to power through my fatigue until she had settled down, at the very least.

“Neurath, Schünzel, search those two’s belongings,” I ordered, indicating the fallen robed and hooded figures. “Then do the swordsmen.”

“Yessir.”

With that done, I tapped the girl’s back lightly. It was hard to be gentle when I was wearing metal gauntlets, but I would have to make peace with that. She was a little on the thin side, but she seemed healthy enough for a commoner of this world.

“Master Werner, neither of them seemed to be carrying anything of importance.”

“That so, huh?”

“Um, excuse me...” The girl in my arms suddenly spoke up. Her voice was still trembling, but it looked like there was something she was determined to say, nonetheless. She looked not just at me but at Neurath and Schünzel as well.

“Um...that one over there...was holding something.”

“What was it?”

“Something... They were trying to make me swallow it... I think.”

I exchanged glances with Neurath and Schünzel. What was she talking about? Poison, maybe? I didn't know, but what the girl said made me curious. Still trembling, the girl came with us to approach the robed man.

Looking at him up close, I could tell that he was a black mage, albeit of a different variety from the one I saw at Fort Werisa. What was a black mage doing here? This guy wasn't supposed to show up at this point in the game either.

I couldn't help but frown. Meanwhile, Schünzel, who had been scanning the surroundings, exclaimed, "Master Werner, there's something on the ground here!"

"What is it?"

"A magic stone? No, not quite."

Not far from the black mage was a gem, which glimmered black in the moonlight. Schünzel was right in saying that it wasn't a magic stone. But it did have this strangely sinister aura about it.

I suspected that the reason why the Lizard Magician didn't run away was because of this thing. It reminded me of how, when we were facing off against each other not long ago, I got the impression that it was trying to direct my gaze away from this spot.

"Neurath, Schünzel. Make sure you don't touch that directly, just in case. Scoop it out from the dirt and wrap it in the guy's clothing."

"Yessir."

I didn't really think touching it posed a threat, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Whatever it was, it couldn't be good news if it was in the possession of a Demon.

"There appears to be nothing else of note."

"Got it. Oh, and could you pick up my weapon and those Dead Swordsmen's swords?"

In the game, the Dead Swordsman's sword was a rare drop item. I wouldn't get much use out of it, but it was still nice to have.

After Neurath secured the two swords, I was just about to set off to the village when it suddenly occurred to me that the girl was barefoot. Given that this world did not have any custom of taking one's shoes off except for taking a bath or going to bed, she probably lost her shoes during the scuffle. Oh well, there was nothing else for it.

"If you're all right with it, I'll carry you on my back."

"Er, um, but..."

"Neurath, Schünzel. Stay in front and behind me."

"Yes, my lord."

I didn't have the strength left to carry her in my arms. I would have to make do with a compromise. Without waiting for her answer, I gave my orders and rejected the other options. She wouldn't want to wear a monster's shoes, and I wouldn't want to risk them carrying some kind of curse. Cursed shoes weren't really a thing in the game, but the very fact that you could take any of a monster's equipment with you was in itself a divergence from the game. There was no need to court danger.

The girl was hesitant at first, but she eventually resigned herself to being carried. She seemed bashful but quietly stayed put. I was reticent mainly because of my fatigue. I couldn't feel her body temperature through my armor.

Speaking of which, I wondered what the wound on my back was like. It definitely stung, but I guess the magic didn't break my armor. I would have to check it out later.

I kept a careful watch on my surroundings as I hurried back to the village. Mazel's family was high on my list of priorities, but I was definitely worried about the town as a whole.

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"Father, Mother...!"

"Lily!" cried her mother. "Thank God..."

"I can't believe it! You're unharmed?!"

We arrived back at the village, fortunately without encountering any

monsters along the way. When we reached the entrance of the inn, the girl ran up to her parents, still barefoot. So Mazel's little sister was named Lily, huh? I knew he had a sister, but as I hadn't been interested in the details, I never bothered to remember her name. I had no recollection of her name appearing in the game, either.

As I approached the tearful family reunion, my knights formed up around the burning inn. They seemed somewhat relieved to see me.

"I had to dip out for a bit. Let's hear your report."

"Yessir. We have successfully eliminated the monsters inside the village. We have not yet extinguished all the fires, but we have managed to secure the safety of the villagers," the oldest-looking knight replied with a bow. His name was Benecke; I'd brought him along on Max's recommendation. He was past his prime but had a level head on his shoulders.

It seemed the knights had done just fine without me. "Any injured?"

"Two of our own sustained light injuries. Some of the villagers have sustained injuries, but we are still tallying the numbers. We healed the keeper of that inn, so his life is no longer in immediate danger. All potions have been consumed."

"Really? You did well. Thank you." Force of habit from my previous world made me bow my head unconsciously.

"O-oh. We were just doing our jobs," the knights replied, flustered.

Although I knew it was improper for a nobleman and commander to bow his head so easily to others, this was the least I could do, considering I had dragged them onto this dangerous excursion.

"Er, um, thank you so very much..."

Just as Mazel's mother started to thank me, Neurath and Schünzel suddenly sprang into motion. Not because they were on guard against Mazel's parents. When I followed their line of sight, I saw a withered-looking old man leading a bunch of men behind him.

Just as I was wondering whether the old man appeared in the game, he pointed a finger at Mazel's family. "This... This all happened because of *you*!" he

exclaimed abruptly.

Excuse me?

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For a moment, I was so stunned by the old man's declaration that I couldn't muster a reaction. Okay, well, he *might* have had a point in a certain sense. It was true that the enemy was targeting Mazel's family. But how was he supposed to know that?

Heedless of my turmoil, the old man continued to spit words of denunciation. "If you hadn't sent Mazel to the blasted capital, he would have been able to fight those monsters!"

...C'mon.

You could probably understand why I was speechless for a moment. It wasn't just me—Neurath, Schünzel, and all the other knights were stunned as well. What kind of crazy logic was that?

"You said that Mazel was the Hero, didn't you?! We could have made him fight! This all happened because you sent him away!"

"The chief is right! Mazel could have fought if he were here! You shouldn't have sent him to the capital!"

"The village is in this state now because of you!"

They carried on their abuse of Mazel's family while completely ignoring us. So the old coot was the village chief, huh? I could hear what he was saying, but, uh, how do I put it? His argument was so breathtakingly stupid that I couldn't even find the right timing to butt in.

"Watch out!"

"Father!"

Ugh. The morons started throwing rocks. Seeing Lily attempt to shield her injured father and being repaid with a large rock to her shoulder, even I couldn't keep my cool.

"Hey! Make them stop!"



“Yessir!”

The knights regained their senses and cut in between Mazel’s family and the mob, whose ire soon turned to us.

“You may be knights, but you oughta stay outta this! I am the chief of this village! I’m the one who calls the shots around here!”

Oh, these types existed in my old world too—not just in the past but in the twenty-first century as well. CEOs of unscrupulous companies and corrupt government officials alike were known to flout rules and regulations out of an unshakeable belief that their views and traditions took precedence. For some reason, they cropped up everywhere, regardless of the continent or era.

But medieval villages were a bit unique in that many of them were largely self-sufficient. In effect, they were miniature domains, in which the people in charge were convinced they answered to no one, especially not outsiders. To describe this in the most charitable way possible, you could say that villages were resistant to change.

But when things got really bad, they wouldn’t even *listen* to the nobility. It was just “my way or the highway” in perpetuity. And if things degraded further, then rural villages would hold their own witch trials reminiscent of my old world. If five people stepped up to the chief and claimed somebody was a witch, that person would be executed. Such horrifying customs, inconceivable to a former Japanese person like me, were recorded in the annals of history.

For the most part, this world wasn’t quite at that level. On their own, a village would be helpless in the face of marauding monsters, so they naturally had to turn outward for help. In fact, villages had to pay a tax unique to this world called the Safety Insurance Tax, which funded their liege lord’s countermeasures against the monsters. Basically, it paid for the soldiers or knights who had to be dispatched across long distances in order to hunt down the monsters. You might call it a tax system for a world with monster encounters.

However, it was widely known that some nobles simply collected the money and sat on their hands. In those cases, the village would have to pay out of pocket for adventurers. In this regard, you could clearly see the difference

between good and bad rulers on the regional level.

Basically, even before the Demon Lord's revival, villages would occasionally have to ask adventurers, guards, and knights for help, which meant that they must, in general, maintain some rapport with knights and the nobility. In general. This old guy was evidently a negative extreme. Hey, wasn't it because of the royal family's calling that Mazel went to the capital? This surely would have been explained to the village chief, right?

"Mazel was born and bred in this village! He's obviously supposed to stay here! Working in this village is his duty!"

"Yeah! Mazel was supposed to stay in this village and fight! But then you lot had to interfere!"

Listening to these utterly self-centered claims, my exasperation gradually boiled into anger. I cast a fiery stare at the group of villagers. I now understood why Mazel was so hesitant earlier about returning. It wasn't because he didn't want to see his family, it was because he didn't want to see this lot. One lamentable aspect of village life—that the youth were beholden to the whims of their elders—was on clear display here.

Although I knew from my previous world that long-standing local authorities could occasionally get a big head, it was still a surprise to see such a blatant example.

As we stood there in dumbfounded silence, the villagers went on ranting, looking pleased with themselves. They were probably getting caught up in their tirade.

"You get it? Now stop butting in, outsiders!"

"Yeah! You're in the way!"

"If you understand, then hand over the traitors to the village!"

"What will you do if I hand them over?" I asked back.

The oh-so-lofty village chief seemed to misunderstand the intent of my question because he went ahead and answered with unchecked arrogance, "A punishment, of course! Come on out!"

“Yeah!”

A young, brawny man showed up with an axe. Whoa, whoa, whoa, that escalated fast. At least the axe was for chopping wood, not for battle.

“But even scum like them can be a little useful. We’ll just give them a few scars to show off...”

I didn’t bother letting the sadistic old bastard finish. I had no desire to listen to him.

With footwork that put my performance against the monsters to shame, I thrust my spear unerringly, piercing the haft of the axe the man was brandishing with cruel intent. The spearhead broke through and poked a hole in the man’s clothes. The fact that it did not draw blood was a testament to my self-control.

“Yikes...”

The man paled at seeing his axe abruptly fracture. When the spear poked his chest, he stumbled back a few steps and sank to the ground. The other villagers fell silent, lost for words.

I understood that the village had recently been attacked. But no matter how high on adrenaline they were, they should have wits enough to conduct themselves properly in front of an armed combatant. In this world, a villager would suffer legal repercussions for taking such an arrogant attitude to anyone ranked higher than a knight.

I shot the knights a look to say that I wasn’t planning on restraining myself. I could tell from their expressions that they were in agreement. It was time to let loose.

“Wh-wh-what are you—?!”

“Silence!” I roared, interrupting the old man.

I’d been learning to project my voice ever since the Demon Stampede. I was confident that I could cow a bunch of villagers with just my voice alone.

“You overstep your bounds. Know this: I am Werner Von Zehrfeld. His Majesty has graciously allowed me the title of viscount.”

“You are nobility?!”

The moronic villagers instantly turned pale. To be fair, I was young and far from presentable, so they could be forgiven for not recognizing my title. They probably assumed that I was just an average knight. I wasn’t going to get hung up on that.

Still, their attitude could be considered rude even toward a knight. There was a little-known law, all but covered in dust for how rarely it was applied, that granted nobles the power to sanction commoners. Nobody would bat an eyelid if I punished these schmucks for treating a nobleman with contempt. Although my patience was at its limits, I wasn’t planning on punishing people here because that would only create further complications.

The fact that I was even here at all was because I’d breached military policy. Enacting a punishment would only create a mess that would be tricky to clean up later. I would hold back for the moment. Still, I was going to make it *very* clear to these villagers that they were way out of line.

Ignoring the village chief for now, I turned to face Mazel’s family. Sadly, they shrunk away at the sight of me. Sure, I was a nobleman and all, but I wasn’t going to eat them up or anything.

Oh well. I decided to ignore their attitude and do what I set out to do. I abruptly got down on one knee in front of Mazel’s family—a show of utmost respect ordinarily reserved for royalty.

A sense of electrifying shock crackled across the surroundings. I wouldn’t let it get to me. This was a performance, I told myself. Putting on a nobleman’s performance was something I’d been doing for half my life. I spoke in a voice loud enough to carry all the way to the villagers.

“I am honored to make your acquaintance, members of the Harting family. I am Werner Von Zehrfeld, son of Ingo Fati Zehrfeld, Minister of Ceremonies. His Majesty has graciously allowed me the title of viscount.”

Just a little reiteration of what I’d said earlier with the little edit to let them know my father was a minister. I would get into the meat of things next. I projected my voice further.

“For his great service in reclaiming Fort Werisa, a valuable location within our fair kingdom of Wein, the nobility extends its deepest gratitude to your son, Sir Mazel Harting.”

The villagers were utterly shaken with surprise. A nobleman thanking a commoner wasn't something you saw every day. I wasn't done speaking yet, however.

“Furthermore, for his great feat of avenging His Lordship Marquess Kneipp against the Demon general who took his life, your son was awarded a peerage despite his youth and standing as a student. Although Sir Mazel Harting has deferred the reward for now, His Majesty has nothing but the highest praise for his contributions to our kingdom.”

“His Majesty...”

“The king...!”

“P-peerage...”

I heard a string of shocked voices from the villagers. After all, they'd gone and thrown rocks at the family of someone who was guaranteed to become nobility in the future. I wasn't about to stop on account of the peanut gallery, though.

“His Highness the crown prince also expects great things of Sir Mazel in the future. I have been ordered to take special considerations.”

None of this was a lie. It was a fact that His Highness did have expectations of Mazel as the Hero. I'd just omitted the name of the person who told me to watch out on Mazel's behalf. I didn't particularly care whether the people listening jumped to the wrong conclusions.

A little glance to the side confirmed that the old village chief was white as plaster. This was only natural. He didn't want to mess with the royal family.

I was pretty sure that the news about Fort Werisa had made its way over here, but these bozos probably only heard what they wanted to hear.

Granted, it was hard to get accurate information in rural villages. Although they were aware of things relayed directly to them by the ruler of the fief, anything else was often easy to overlook. They should've paid attention to the

Finoy-related information from the pilgrims. I'd basically hammered the info into their ears just now.

"I can see that fire has ravaged your home," I said, turning to the Hartings, "and as His Highness the crown prince has charged me with taking special considerations in these matters, rest assured House Zehrfeld will take responsibility for the damage and provide you all with a safe and secure livelihood in the royal capital."

While emphasizing that I belonged to the house of a count, I was also saying implicitly: *Tell me more in the capital about what the villagers did to you.* What they said would most certainly reach the royal family's ears—I would guarantee it. I thought I heard some moaning sounds from the villagers, but that had nothing to do with me.

It was the duty of those in authority to protect upright citizens, but those who forgot their station were hardly upright, and were beyond such obligations. I also couldn't deny that I'd been a bit short-tempered because of my fatigue and lack of sleep.

"I see that the head of the Harting family has been injured. There should at least be a cart in the village. Go and assume possession of it under the Zehrfeld name."

"Yessir." Neurath moved fast.

"We will have our spare horses pull the cart along," Schünzel added, quick to jump in.

"I will take them."

They were already pretending as if the villagers didn't exist. They were the same as me, huh.

"Er, um, Sir Viscount..."

"Mister Harting, I ask that you check to see if you have any belongings affected by the fire. I will assign two knights to accompany you."

"R-right."

"Please leave any heavy baggage to us." The knights moved before I could



even give some kind of order. They thought well of Mazel for defeating Dreax at Fort Werisa, and after what they'd just seen, there was no way they *didn't* dislike the village.

After the knights returned with the luggage, I put Mazel's family in the cart, ignoring the villagers all the while. I only realized that Mazel's younger sister was still barefoot after I casually glanced her way.

"Miss Lily, was it? Could you sit there for a bit?"

"Er... Um..."

I half-forced Mazel's sister to sit in the corner of the cart. A bit of cloth had survived the fire at the inn. I cut it up so that it was about as long and wide as a towel from my old world and wrapped it around her feet. She was jumpy and somewhat reticent, perhaps because I was a nobleman. An aristocrat wouldn't normally do this for a commoner, true.

This simple method of making shoes out of towels was taught to knights in my old world too. Here, it was something you learned at the academy. It was important to know how to protect your feet.

If you wore wet shoes after marching in the rain, you could get athlete's foot or even immersion foot syndrome if it was really bad. The worst cases in my old world were referred to as trench foot. This could cause the death of your body tissue. Even if it didn't reach such extents, an injury would make it hard to lean your weight on your feet when swinging a weapon.

To prevent that from happening, people would take off their wet shoes before sleeping and hang them to dry on a tree branch or some other thing. They would also wrap their legs in warm cloth, functioning as simple shoes or socks. This would stop you from having to run barefoot in the event that a battle broke out at night.

You might wonder why wrapping cloth around your legs was a skill that had to be taught. This was because, much like how dressing a wound correctly required a specific bandaging technique, poorly wrapped makeshift shoes would hinder your movements more than they helped.

The scarcity of rubber string cheap enough for the lower classes of this world

was another reason learning how to wrap cloth securely was an essential skill. With the correct technique in hand, even an adult could walk perfectly fine with cloth wrapped around their feet and string around their ankles.

On a tangential note, adventurers often took two pairs of shoes with them when venturing into dungeons and caves. One pair was specifically for sleeping in. Shoes had to be durable or else the wearers would be at risk from traps and so forth. But those types of shoes would get moist from sweat, so you couldn't wear them all the time. It wasn't easy to be an adventurer when you had to think about so many kinds of contingencies.

This trivia ran through my head as I wrapped the cloth around Lily's feet, cut off a short length to serve as a string, and used that to fix the makeshift shoes in place. I chided myself for not bringing string beforehand.

"Okay, you should be good for now."

"A-all right... Thank you, um, very much..."

Her voice trembled, not from confusion or bewilderment so much as what appeared to be embarrassment. It just ended up bouncing off my ears, though. I was so darn tired that my brain refused to work properly. I was so physically and emotionally exhausted that I could only act on autopilot, but I felt that sleeping in this village would be mentally depriving. I wanted to leave the village as soon as possible, even if it did mean sleeping outside. Mentally, I apologized to Mazel's family for making them depart so suddenly.

I left without handing down any punishment, which had likely left those idiots deeply confused about their fate. There was certainly more reason to punish them than not to. I guess you could say I left them in limbo?

I got the vague feeling that the old man was calling out to me right until the last moment, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. It was probably because I was tired, yep.

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We departed the village late that night, keeping a steady pace until we reached a nearby brook. After stocking up on water, we figured it was finally time for a break. I was tired and aching all over, but I wasn't about to cut

corners with security. I ordered everyone to take turns keeping watch while the others slept.

The Demonic Beasts came at us in the night, which ironically saved us from having to hunt for food. The single Trident Boar we defeated while on the move was enough to feed fifteen people. Properly rationed, it might even be enough for two meals. We also took down two Killer Rabbits. Although we took the meat and magic stones from them, I was frankly so wiped that I couldn't muster the motivation to extract their body parts.

Mazel's parents said they wanted to prepare and cook the meat, and I was glad to take them up on their offer. Well, part of that was because it was considered proper for a nobleman to leave those things to others. Since we hadn't brought any squires along on this mission, there was a possibility that we would have to drain the blood and dress the meat ourselves.

Fortunately, Mazel's father seemed to have an abundance of experience in that department. Apparently, the inn sold foraged vegetables and what people in my old world would refer to as wild game. I didn't know this because the game didn't depict these minute details. I mean, most old RPGs didn't even have scenes where you ate at the inn. If there was a meal scene, I'd start bracing myself for some kind of plot event.

On the other hand, the game didn't have such an asshole of a village chief, and Mazel's family wasn't shown to be ostracized. What explained this discrepancy? I decided not to think about it for the moment. It was low on my list of priorities. I'd ponder it when I had more time up my sleeve.

That night, we all rested, tended to our injuries, and took turns sleeping. The next day, I woke up at dawn. It looked like I'd managed to catch about three hours of sleep—more than usual in my life recently. I was keeping an even tougher schedule than any I'd had in my previous world, but I couldn't see my situation as anything but fortunate, given that the worst hadn't come to pass.

It was also worth mentioning that although I had burns on my back, my armor was still in perfectly good shape. Magic was a real mystery. Maybe it was because leather armor didn't burn? No, maybe a magic attack had a stronger effect on the magic within one's body. This looked like something worth

experimenting with. The night before, I'd only been thinking about my desire to sleep, so I'd glossed over a bunch of things.

The horses also needed time to rest, so it was looking like we would break camp later today and set an easier pace. But still, there were a lot of things to do, starting with sending a report. I wondered who I should entrust that to.

"Excuse me, Sir Viscount. I brought you something to drink."

As I sat there pondering my laundry list of tasks, a sudden voice called out behind me. I turned around, flustered, and was entranced for a moment.

Of course. Mazel was good-looking, so naturally, his sister would be a beauty. The whole family was well above average in the looks department. This technically wasn't news to me.

But seeing her in plain view under the sun, without the grime on her face, it struck me that Lily was an adorable girl. If she'd had a portrait in the game, she definitely would've become a fan favorite.

"Um, Sir Viscount?"

"Oh, ah, thanks."

I managed to keep a straight face. She passed me a wooden cup that had probably survived the fire at the inn. With some fumbling words of thanks, I took a sip. A delicious and faintly sweet taste spread through my mouth. It wasn't black tea, though I got the feeling that it was some kind of high-quality herbal tea. Come to think of it, it had been quite a while since I last put something in my mouth.

"It tastes great. Thank you."

"I am glad that it suits your taste."

She smiled gently in relief. I knew that she was something of a poster girl for the inn, but she really did have an incredible smile. I would say she was the soothing type.

As I tried to figure out how to react, Mazel's parents drew near. It seemed that one of the knights had taken over the job of distributing the grilled meat. I was relieved at their presence, pathetic as that sounds, since my conversation

with Lily obviously wasn't going anywhere.

"Sir Viscount," Mazel's father began. "I have to thank you for..."

"Uh, first off," I interjected, "you can stop calling me 'Sir Viscount.'"







I mean, seriously, that whole thing was a performance. If they took to bowing and scraping around me all the time, it'd get unbearable fast.

"To be perfectly honest, I don't believe that my social standing outweighs my age. If anything, I ought to apologize to you."

"What have *you* to apologize for...?"

"Well, it is because of me that you ended up leaving the village."

There were no two ways about it. In my exhaustion, I'd acted on the first course of action to cross my mind, which was how they ended up here. I wasn't going to beat myself up over it, but I definitely could have found a better way to handle things.

Yet Mazel's father shook his head. It was hard to say whether his distressed expression came from him pushing his feelings aside or because he was tiptoeing around a nobleman. "No, this might have been a good opportunity to finally leave."

To sum up his story briefly, the village chief had long been pressuring him into doing heavy labor on the pretense of "taking responsibility" for sending Mazel to the capital. What a ridiculously cultish village.

To be fair, it was an isolated settlement with no large towns nearby. Although pilgrims would pass through, things were ruled on the inside with an iron fist. I would definitely have to mention this in my report.

"I apologize for taking so long to introduce myself. My name is Ari Harting. This is my wife, Anna, and my daughter, Lily."

"I'm Werner Von Zehrfeld. Your son, Mazel, has been very good to me."

I deliberately used polite everyday language. Ordinarily, being a nobleman, I wasn't supposed to speak deferentially to a commoner, but to stop the other man from constantly prostrating himself, I decided to accord him the respect that any older person deserved.

"Thank you so much for the present you gave us earlier," he said.

"Oh no, I'm just sorry I couldn't come over to say hello sooner."



Were I still a Japanese man, it would have been typical for me to self-deprecate about my gift choices, but I could hardly do that with my current social status. To be quite blunt, a commoner had no right to refuse a gift from a nobleman.

It was actually quite typical for aristocrats to give commoners the leftover food from their banquets, and for the commoners to accept with enthusiasm. You could count on seeing crowds of poorer folk hanging around the back gates whenever there was a party at an aristocrat's mansion.

There were even some aristocrats who would go out of their way to prepare excess food for just that reason. For example, they would put old, hard bread on a plate and stick a steak on top. The meat juices and sauce would seep into the bread below. Instead of eating this bread themselves, they would share it with the lower-class servants and their families as a form of charity. That was a medieval-ish world for you.

That said, as someone who'd known a different world, I was still ambivalent about some aristocratic customs, even if they'd become familiar. Not that it mattered much in these circumstances.

"I should have asked Mazel more about his family," I said with a laugh.

"Sir Viscount, you are..."

"Please stop calling me Sir Viscount."

I added "please" without even thinking. I was probably making a really pathetic face about now. Lily nodded and said with a little giggle, "All right."

"I've always wanted to meet you at least once," she went on. "My brother would often write about you in his letters."

"He did?"

What was he saying about me?

"Yes, he said you were his best friend, and he could rely on you for a lot of things. I could get a sense of what kind of person you are just from how he wrote about you."

Okay, it genuinely made me happy to hear that he thought of me as his best

friend. But darn it all, that was just making my cheap-ass present look more embarrassing. I'd have to give him a piece of my mind later.

Some of my emotions must have made their way to my face because the three members of Mazel's family had this sort of fond smile on their faces. I was glad they'd stopped being stiff, but I still felt put out. At that precise moment, a knight called out to me to say that my share of the meat was done cooking, so I excused myself to eat.

Although I was supposed to keep an eye on my surroundings, my stomach and mind cried out in hunger. Without a hint of restraint, I chowed down on the still piping-hot meat. I got the feeling that the Harting family was shocked to witness my decidedly nonaristocratic way of dining, but I didn't give a hoot. Oh man, this grub really hit the spot.

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A short while ago...

After using the Skywalk Boots Werner gave him to teleport outside the walls of Finoy, Feli spared no time in spreading the Monster Repel across his surroundings. The two-legged lizards, turtles, frogs, and giant alligators were shocked at the sudden appearance of a young human boy, but as soon as they sensed the drug in the air, they snarled in disgust and hurriedly backed away.

"Feels like they scampered 'cause I'm stinky. Dunno how to feel about that," Feli chuckled to himself as he cast his eyes to the temple entrance. After making sure that there were no large monsters around, he made a sprint for the front gates of Finoy.

There wasn't a great deal of distance to cover, so he soon made it to the towering gates of the great temple. There, he did something that would have made Werner's eyes goggle if he'd been there. He put his hands on the mental indents on the door and started to climb—just like that.

He reached out and pulled himself up as nimbly as if he'd sprouted wings. Even the Demon army was stunned at his seemingly weightless ascent. Soon enough, however, a Frogman recovered his senses enough to rear up on his two legs and chuck a spear at the boy.

“Phew, that was a close one,” Feli said, sounding thoroughly relaxed even as he twisted to avoid the spear, which clattered harmlessly on the gate before falling to the ground.

The walls were not built to be scaled from the outside, but that was of no consequence to him. If Werner had been there to witness this, he would have shaken his head in disbelief at Feli’s convention-defying movements. He might have been impressed at the raw talent of a Hero’s party member.

The people inside must have noticed the sound from outside. Feli had gotten halfway up the wall when the people inside launched their own attack to support him. Even priests knew some offensive magic spells. Every caster chanted their spells in unison, aiming at the throngs of the Demon army. Although they didn’t manage to kill any of the monsters, they did manage to suppress their volley of spears.

“Darn it all, it doesn’t look like the spells are working.”

“They must have taken defensive measures against magic.”

As the people on the fortifications exchanged such words of concern, Feli’s body lit up with magic. Having experienced this many times throughout his journey thus far, Feli knew that it was a magic buff to increase his speed. He scaled the rest of the wall in a single burst.

Cries of surprise rose up from the walls at the same instant. Feli turned his head as he climbed. A Lizardman crumpled to the ground, fluids gushing from a hole in his head where an arrow had pierced through. Another Lizardman was writhing on the ground, having taken an arrow to the eye. Even the Demon army flinched at the sight of this accurate and powerful sharpshooting.

Luguentz and Mazel were scowling down at the monsters, heavy-drawn bows in hand. Erich stood next to them with a calm and composed smile on his face.

“Upsy-daisy.” Eyes on his friends, Feli hopped over the wall, landed nimbly on the fortifications, and waved. “Hey, guys, I’m back.” He sounded as if he had just been out for a stroll.

“You seem to have had quite the adventure, young Feli,” Erich said in return.

“Didn’t we agree that you would give a signal when you came back?”

Luguentz chimed in with some exasperation.

Feli made a show of scratching his head in bemusement. Although he did recall having a discussion along those lines, having reached Finoy in a single Skywalk Booted step—and given the situation he hopped into—he could hardly have spared a thought to use a signal.

Erich, who had cast the support magic on Feli when he climbed the wall, spoke up again. “So, were you able to meet up with him?”

“Yeppers. I saw Big Bro at Valeritz. The knight brigade was there too.”

“Hey, you all hear that?! Wein Kingdom’s knight brigade is gonna be here soon!” Luguentz shouted down the walls. He was greeted by a round of cheers.

Because Feli had used the Skywalk Boots to travel to Finoy, the reinforcements weren’t technically going to arrive straight away, but positive messages were vital at times like this.

Mazel smiled at the bearer of the good news. “Thanks, and good work, Feli.”

“Heh, I could do this while drunk. Leave it to ol’ Feli.”

“Have you been drinking, you rascal?” Luguentz retorted with a grin, to which Feli insisted that he was just talking hypotheticals.

There wasn’t a single sign of tension in him. Even the guards at Finoy found their jaws relaxing at the sight of Feli’s easy-going manner.

They were surrounded on all fronts by terrifying powerful monsters from the Demon army. At a glance, they couldn’t have been in more dire straits. But having repelled the Demon army, the victors felt no shred of tragic resolve. Even the other guards and temple protectors held out hope for their current situation.

A serious expression returned to Feli’s face. “By the way, Big Bro had a message.”

“Did he now?” asked Mazel.

“Did that guy figure something out again?” Luguentz piped up.

Although it was a result of misunderstandings and coincidence, Mazel and his



friends were convinced that the temple of Finoy remained unscathed thanks to Werner's advice. This predisposed them to take anything he said with utmost seriousness.

"He said to round up those guys asking questions and throw them into a cell. Said they're after the princess."

Hearing this, Mazel's face darkened, as did Luguentz's and Erich's.

Mazel turned to Luguentz. "Mister Luguentz, if I remember correctly, wasn't that group..."

"Scheduled to meet the princess, yeah."

They were holed up in a temple, warding off an attack from the Demon army—a perilous situation beyond even the wildest of fairy tales. To ease the hearts and minds of the commoners stranded in the temple, the second-born princess, herself a holy woman, had offered audiences to any who wished to see her, so long as time permitted. Almost everybody in the temple knew this.

Of course, expressing hope for an audience with Laura did not necessarily mean that it would happen straight away, but they would get their turn eventually. Mazel and his friends had happened to overhear that multiple people wanted to meet the holy woman at the same time. Thinking it suspicious, the party decided to keep a close eye on that particular group.

"Let us hurry to the audience room," Erich declared.

"Yeah." Luguentz nodded.

They handed their bows to the guards in the area and sprinted down the stairs.

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"We are merely pilgrims. I doubt there is anything we can do for those who are fighting, but..."

"Are things truly well outside?"

"Your worries are warranted," Laura said to the six pilgrims before her, "but I am sure that things will turn out fine. His Majesty and the royal army would certainly not overlook this situation."

Laura had just finished tending to the sick and injured within the tower walls and was attending to a group who requested an audience with her. She knew well that as a holy woman of royal birth, she was obliged to serve as a symbol for her people.

Of course, after walking all around the temple casting healing magic, fatigue had inevitably begun to weigh her down. Because of this, she conducted the audience seated in a chair in the largest meeting room. Seats had also been set out for her visitors. She wanted to close the gap between her and her believers.

This did not mean that Laura lacked caution. Two guards charged specifically with her protection stood inside the room. Two more guards were stationed in the hallway outside. Although Laura felt stifled from being surrounded by guards at almost all hours of the day, she told herself that this, too, was part of her duty.

At the same time, she could not deny that as time passed in these unfamiliar circumstances and her stamina continued to dwindle, her sense of caution began to dull. Although she noticed that the group who sought her audience was occasionally giving her appraising looks as they spoke of their concerns, she didn't pay it much heed. Part of this was almost certainly because having guards around had lulled her into complacency.

"Besides," Laura said with a smile, "we have the Hero foretold by the divine revelation here with us in the temple. There is no need to worry."

The man who called himself the representative of the pilgrims opened his mouth then and said, in a peculiar tone of voice, "Can you really trust that Hero?"

"What?"

Laura shot the pilgrims a suspicious look. They had a strangely listless air about them as they continued to speak.

"For example, what if the Hero were to seek his own safety by opening the gate...?"

"As long as the Hero gets to live, he won't care about what happens to the temple..."

“He most certainly would not do that. What *are* you—?” Laura tried to shut down their claims, only for the temple guard behind her to abruptly speak without her permission.

“I can’t deny that possibility...”

“There is a certain logic to what these people say...”

“Wh-what on earth are you saying?” Laura responded in shock.

She felt dizzy. For a moment, she couldn’t figure out what she was supposed to be doing here.

“Your Holiness, all the guards have suspicions about that Hero... Does he really deserve our unconditional belief?”

The man’s voice sounded different from before. Now it held a strange allure that was difficult to resist. Surely, Laura thought, such a voice spoke only the truth. The next moment, however, there was banging on the door from outside. She heard the voice of one of the temple guards from the hallway.

“Your Holiness, please excuse me. They are saying they want to meet with you imme—”

“Scuse me.”

Before the guard could even finish his sentence, Luguentz butted his way through the door. This would normally be considered the height of rudeness, but because Erich was there too, the guards in the hallway were slow to respond.

In a world full of monsters, a monk who traveled across the land to study his craft and heal the sick was seen as worthy of respect among members of the church. Monks sometimes even traveled to remote villages that didn’t even have their own church. When the monk Erich requested an urgent audience with the holy woman, the guards were reluctant to refuse him. Mazel and his friends used that opportunity to slip inside the audience room.

“What is the matter, Sir He—?”

Laura’s startled cry was interrupted when the group of pilgrims in front of her let out strangled cries and leapt from their seats. This did not escape Feli’s

notice.

“The monsters outside had the same reaction!” he exclaimed.

The Monster Repel on Feli’s head was still in effect. The room was fairly small. For the monsters, it must have been like getting blasted by a sudden, unbearable heat wave from outside. As their power was suppressed, giant fly heads appeared with a dull sound, replacing the human heads they previously had.

Laura gaped at those compound-eyed heads. “Wha...?”

She only just barely managed to stand up. Still, she couldn’t quite comprehend the scene unfolding before her and remained rooted to the spot. Human bodies tore apart like tattered rags as monstrous forms burst from within. One could hardly fault her for freezing at such an unspeakable sight.

The two temple guards moved in to protect Laura, even as their minds reeled at the situation. But the monsters lashed out viciously. One thrust its arm through the breastplate of the guard on the right, while another gouged the face of the one on the right, who crumpled soundlessly to the ground.

Another monster jumped over the fallen guards, extending claws the length of a human palm at the petrified Laura.

The next moment, however, the monster’s black-blue blood misted the air as the creature fell to the ground. Even as Laura struggled to process what was happening, Mazel’s fiery red hair leapt into her field of vision.

“Are you okay?”

“Y-yes. Thank you very much.”

The Hero’s calm voice helped Laura get ahold of herself. She shook her head, taking stock of the situation around her even as the scales of combat began to tip.

The fly-headed monster that had lunged at Laura fell instantly to Mazel’s sword. Of the two monsters that had killed the guards, one Luguentz had cleaved in two, while Erich had slammed the other against the back wall, where it had gone deathly still.

The other three monsters had turned into Lizardmen with scales of a different hue from the ones outside. Feli toyed with two of them, keeping their movements in check. The last one brandished its massive claws. The guards from the hallway caught it with their swords.

“Erich, help the guards!” Mazel shouted.

“Oh no!”

The moment Erich headed to the guards to lend his support, one of Feli’s opponents slipped away from him and turned its sights on Mazel and Laura.

Erich saw this out of the corner of his eye as he rushed to the guards’ aid. Meanwhile, Luguentz joined up with Feli to deliver the finishing blow to their enemy.

The monster that reached out for Laura never found its target. After calmly appraising its movements, Mazel lopped its head off with one strike. The bipedal lizard-like body flopped to the floor.

The next moment, Luguentz dispatched the remaining two monsters. The sounds of battle ceased as the monsters’ last breaths left their quieted corpses. And into that silence, the survivors released heavy sighs of relief.









“Is everyone okay?” asked Mazel.

“I’m fine,” Luguentz said.

“Sorry I let that one slip,” Feli replied.

While this conversation was happening, Laura ran over to the fallen guards and immediately began chanting a healing spell. Wounds that even a veteran adventurer like Luguentz would have deemed lethal beyond all remedy closed in an instant.

“Wow,” Luguentz said. There was no sign of pretense in his amazement.

Erich was similarly impressed. “Such is the power of a holy woman.”

Breathing a sigh of relief that she managed to save the guards in time, Laura turned to Mazel and his friends and bowed deeply to them.

“Thank you so very much. I owe you a great debt.”

“Oh no, if anything, I should apologize for the harm that came to your guards,” Mazel replied apologetically.

It was hard to describe how magnetic his face was. There was something effortlessly natural about his expression, as if what he had done was just the obvious thing. It was so easy to trust him.

“Um, Sir Hero,” Laura began.

Yet before she could get any further, one of the guards who had participated in the battle returned to his senses. “Your Holiness,” he interjected, “we must report this to the High Priest.”

Laura and Mazel both nodded.

“You are right. Go and inform him at once.”

“Yes, my lady,” the guard said, and ran off.

“Your Holiness,” said the other guard, looking ill at ease, “please at least come out into the corridor...”

The audience room looked like a tempest had ripped through it, with dead monsters and broken furniture strewn about. Mazel and the others had to

agree. After making sure that the monsters were indeed dead, they went out into the corridor.

“I think Werner’s the biggest contributor, not me...” Mazel said with a reluctant nod.

“It was you and your party who rescued Her Holiness from the brink of abduction.”

After the pale-faced High Priest rushed onto the scene and heard the news, he vociferously extolled Mazel’s heroism. For his part, Mazel was quick to defer credit to those who’d helped him. Laura smiled fondly at his unassuming response.

It would be rash to publicly reveal that the holy woman had been attacked in the temple, and they couldn’t discount the possibility that other monsters had infiltrated. This caused a bit of internal chaos because they did not want to besmirch the temple’s reputation. The official story they went with was that the holy woman discovered some undercover monsters and asked the Hero’s party to secretly deal with it. Meanwhile, the temple guards would investigate the matter further.

Though she could not admit to it in public, Laura chafed at stealing the credit. This resulted in her spending a lot of time with Mazel and his friends as they defended Finoy. Eventually, she got close enough to them that she started to hope she might join them personally in their quest to vanquish the Demon Lord.

Though nobody in the temple knew it, the High Priest misunderstood something when he said that Laura was about to be kidnapped. At that point, the monster group had displayed no inclination to abduct her. They had only been trying to create a rift between the Hero, the holy woman, and the people of the temple. Because of Werner’s message, Mazel and his friends reacted in a somewhat heavy-handed manner. Hence the current situation.

Nevertheless, their actions meant that they were able to eliminate the spies who had infiltrated the temple in the earliest stages of their plot. With their source of inside information cut off, the Demon army would be unable to pull the strings behind the scenes. Yet neither could they risk an all-out offense, lest the holy woman perish in the onslaught.

The Demon army was at a loss, and this would have a considerable impact on the battle to defend Finoy.

## Chapter 2:

### Journey to the Temple

~Fighting and Flirtation~

**T**HE OUTER WALLS AND THE TEMPLE BUILDING OF Finoy were dyed red in the evening sun. A palpable feeling of relief spread among the Wein Kingdom troops as they sighted the fortifications in the distance. Hedged in by the human army from behind, the Demon army's assault on Finoy came to a halt. Even if it was only a temporary reprieve, the arrival of the kingdom's forces had turned the tide of the battle.

On the other hand, because the bulk of the kingdom's forces had to travel along narrow roads, it inevitably took quite some time for the troops to deploy into their formations. The nobleman leaders overseeing the knights' formations gathered at the base of operations for a strategy meeting.

According to the knights on scouting duty, the Demon army was positioned some distance away from the front gates of the temple. It was impossible to say, however, whether they intended to resume their attack on Finoy or to fend off the kingdom's army first. In the end, the leaders told all their troops to keep a strict watch that night, especially since the monsters saw better in the dark than they did, and to make ready for an attack to liberate Finoy the next day.

Afterward, they discussed the absence of a key figure: Werner, the heir of House Zehrfeld.

"I never imagined that he would prioritize the Hero's family over Finoy."

"Perhaps he used that as an excuse to desert?"

"If that's the case, then he's a pathetic sort."

"What can you expect from a student? Not to mention he's the heir of a bureaucrat house. It would be immature to censure him too harshly."

More than one nobleman at the scene chimed in with a sneer. Their condescension toward the bureaucrat houses remained unchanged even in a

situation like this. But their feelings about Werner as an individual also played a role. His exploits at the Demon Stampede were undeniable, as was the fact that Crown Prince Hubertus and Princess Laura had later summoned him to a personal audience. A number of nobles saw him as competition. They couldn't help but get carried away in criticizing his actions.

As the leader of House Zehrfeld's knights, Max endured the waves of slander, keeping a stoic expression throughout the entire meeting. While Werner's honor was under assault, Max could hardly protest. Werner had quit the battle lines without permission and that was an unequivocal breach of protocol.

As the noblemen began to shift their criticism from the absent heir's actions to the faults of his character, Bastian Fürst interjected. "The man is absent, so there is nothing more to be said. Our time is short and we have more important matters to discuss. What are our plans, Sir Duke?"

"Harumph... The fact that the enemy is some distance away from the temple is a godsend for us, but I cannot deny the danger they still pose to Finoy."

Duke Gründing was furious at Werner for abandoning the battle lines without asking for his permission as the supreme commander. His granddaughter was at Finoy and in need of all the support she could get. Nevertheless, he understood that this was not the main issue. Responding to Bastian's question, he laid out the situation. The other nobles adjusted in their seats and gave him their attention.

Many of the aristocrats who returned to their fiefs after the Demon Stampede were convinced that Werner's feats back then were an exception. He was, in the end, a mere bureaucrat. They might have resented his absence, but they hardly saw it as an actual loss to their cause.

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It was agreed, without objection, that the first order of business was breaking the Demon army's encirclement around Finoy. And as the discussion went on, one particular motion from the younger nobles began to draw widespread support: "We ought to launch our own attack on the Demon army."

Noblemen—particularly of the martial persuasion—were confident in the valor of their troops. In their minds, it was impossible for them to lose a frontal



assault. It was difficult for them to shake the idea that they only struggled with the Demon Stampede because their own complacency blinded them to the enemy's stratagems. Besides, the battle at Hildea Plains was a resounding victory. At this juncture, the kingdom army had the overwhelming numerical advantage. It was only natural for some people to make cocky claims.

Another major factor was Princess Laura's presence at Finoy. The noblemen looking to rise in the crown's esteem were counting on the temple being indebted to them. Many offered to lead the vanguard themselves, motivated less by loyalty than by their own ulterior motives. The captains of both the first and second orders of the knight brigade suggested that they spend a bit more time observing the enemy's movements, but Duke Gründing, in his capacity as supreme commander, ultimately decided to proceed with the attack.

Part of this was because they couldn't let a location so central to their religion be encircled by enemies. It would send a bad message. Even so, the belligerence of the martial houses and their leaders was far in excess of what the situation called for. Even the knight brigade captains were not immune to this feeling, struggling as they were to read the enemy's movements. And in the depths of their minds, a faint voice of reason cautioned that they were mistaking the nobles' bloodlust for actual skill.

The kingdom's army was raring for battle. Mine could see that plainly as she observed the proceedings from behind her father. When the others discussed what to do about House Zehrfeld, however, her breath caught for just a moment. There was a distinct possibility that they would be sent to the frontlines as a disciplinary measure. Just then, however, Bastian spoke, his words catching Mine off guard.

"There would be no point sending leaderless troops to the frontline. How about assigning them to the rear so they can watch out for wandering monsters?"

"You make a good point. Very well."

"Yes. I suppose that's fine as long as they don't make trouble."

Although House Zehrfeld had violated military law when its commander absconded without leave from Duke Gründing, Bastian's suggestion amounted

to a deferral of punishment. The nobles' eagerness to stand at the head of the kingdom's swelling ranks had saved House Zehrfeld from being sent first into the fray as punishment.

A certain Viscount Cioleck summed up the dominant feeling within the camp when he said, "A bureaucrat house like Zehrfeld might as well get some practice in."

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Although Mine was secretly relieved at how the military conference turned out, she was rather surprised that her own father had been the one to put out the flames. The only things left to discuss after that were where each noble house would be encamped and where they would be deployed for the attack the next day. When the meeting came to an end, Mine called out to Bastian as they headed back to their troops.

"Father, about House Zehrfeld..."

"A nobleman must never borrow without ever giving back," was all Bastian said to his daughter's half-unspoken question.

It was a fact that House Zehrfeld had rescued House Fürst during the Demon Stampede. Furthermore, Werner had proven his mettle only a matter of days ago, when he resolved the case of the damaged currency and let House Fürst take the credit for it. He had helped preserve peace and order within the royal capital.

In light of those events, Bastian had done what he could to avert the attentions of those whose resentment of Werner might have led to abuse of the Zehrfeld troops.

"I'm surprised at your thoughtfulness, Father," Mine said, an answer but also an insight unto itself. Bastian responded with an expression that was close to a grimacing smile. His pride as a nobleman was undeniably part of his motivations. As a martial house, the Fürsts could not bear the thought of owing a debt to the bureaucrats of Zehrfeld, even if the count was the Minister of Ceremonies. And, of course, he had no intention of holding this favor over the Zehrfelds' heads.

Seeing her father's expression, Mine thought, but did not say, that Lord Werner was indifferent to the whole idea of debts. Silently, she and her father made their way back to their troops, but before they arrived, they were greeted by Tyrone's cajoling voice.

"Father, we ought to engage the enemy surrounding Finoy without a moment's delay."

"Calm yourself, Tyrone," Bastian said, his countenance darkening in an instant. "We must stick to the deployment that the duke assigned to us." As Tyrone's father, he knew that his son's feelings for Princess Laura were more than just dutiful concern for her well-being.

Although Tyrone certainly felt the need to act because Laura's survival was at risk while she was inside Finoy, he also couldn't deny that this was a good opportunity for him to display his valor as a martial noble. Tyrone wanted to demonstrate the skills he'd honed, to prove that he deserved to carry on House Fürst's proud martial traditions.

If another nobleman made a name for himself in the battle, then he might become a candidate for Princess Laura's hand in marriage. Given that he was far from the only man in the competition, Tyrone's desire for glory in battle bordered on feverish.

And knowing where the House Fürst troops were positioned, Tyrone scowl only deepened.

"Ugh... Not only are we far from the front gates of Finoy, we're nowhere near the enemy's main forces."

"Our troops lack the strength."

"But the houses at the vanguard only have numbers to their name!"

"Tyrone. Don't you forget that our forces have been depleted."

Tyrone swallowed uncomfortably upon hearing this. It was a fact that they had lost many capable knights from brute-forcing their way through the battles at Hildea Plains and Fort Werisa. And the man responsible for that, in his lust for glory, was Tyrone.

Had they fought against another country, their vanquished knights might yet have been ransomed back to safety. But anyone who fell in a battle against monsters would be counted among the dead, a permanent hole in their military force. The soldiers and squires who perished in the Demon Stampede could never be deployed in future battles, and their loss was felt all the more bitterly for it.

“We should have at least assembled our people...”

“Numbers alone won’t help in this situation. Cool your head.”

“Do you think I can remain calm in these circumstances?!” Tyrone snapped back.

Seeing her father and brother at loggerheads, Mine spoke up. “Even if you did drag our ranks to the vanguard,” she said uneasily, “you could not possibly achieve glory from that, brother.”

She chose to verbalize what she saw as the undeniable truth.

“But it’s a *possibility*.” Tyrone refused to back down, his mouth curling in sullenness.

Bastian looked at Tyrone and said, “Mine is right. Besides, although the kingdom has the numerical advantage, the enemy’s numbers are nothing to scoff at. Nobody thinks the battle will be decided in just a single scrape. We must first get a feel for the enemy.”

After a pause, Tyrone said, “I understand.”

His expression was still troubled as he left the tent. As soon as he was outside, Mine heard some kind of sound—probably him punching or kicking something. Bastian sighed a little when he heard it.

“Brother seems to be in a rush,” Mine said to her father.

“Well, I can understand why the presence of Her Highness would stoke his interest.” Bastian shook his head lightly.

The Wein Kingdom generally valued martial valor. It was not unheard of in this country’s history for promising individuals to marry into royalty even when they were a count or even lower rank. There was no doubt that Tyrone,

knowing this, was angling for the perfect chance.

“Should I keep quiet about the Zehrfeld case?”

“That would be wise.”

“Very well.”

As a matter of fact, Tyrone was among Werner’s critics. When he heard the first report that Werner left without permission, he laughed: *“What do you expect from a cowardly bureaucrat?”* But when he heard about the reason behind the departure, he was incensed.

*“He went to rescue that commoner Hero’s family?! Does that upstart not comprehend the importance of Her Highness and Finoy?!”*

Even now, Mine could clearly picture her brother’s outburst. To be perfectly honest, she did not have a strong impression of the Hero Mazel one way or the other. Tyrone, however, saw him only as a lowborn man who had upstaged him at the battles of Hildea Plains and Fort Werisa. His feelings were closer to anger than sullenness.

But although Tyrone took his attitude to an extreme, he was hardly the only martial noble harboring such thoughts. It was a widely held belief among their circles that they deserved the initial glory while commoners ought to settle for whatever trickled down from them. They only refrained from verbalizing this because the crown itself sponsored the Hero.

Yet the truth of the matter was that the Hero served as the bulwark in the battle to defend Finoy. Meanwhile, the kingdom’s army would be breaking the siege from without. From Tyrone’s perspective, the Hero was poised to hog all the glory yet again.

Feeling a bit of apprehension, Mine spoke up. “I don’t suppose Brother will try to cut his own way through without permission?”

“I don’t expect he will, but I suppose we should warn our senior knights of his ambitions just in case.”

“Right.”

“However, there is no guarantee that the other noble houses will cede the

credit,” Bastian muttered with a wince.

Surprise flickered over Mine’s face. “Father, does that mean that the kingdom’s army will struggle in this battle?”

“The enemy obliterated an entire town under a noble house’s direct protection. Never mind that they were a house of bureaucrats. If we underestimate the enemy’s strength, our losses may be far greater than we expect.”

He had experienced a difficult battle at the Demon Stampede, and he had heard from Mine that a Demon attacked the refugees while they were being escorted. Bastian took these matters seriously, which led him to decide that their first clash against the monsters here would be a test of the waters.

Upon hearing her father’s reasoning, Mine nodded too. If a Demon was at the reins, then they could expect that the group of monsters would attack Finoy with the same force they had leveled at Valeritz. It would be rash to let one’s guard down in front of a foe like that.

“Speaking of which, I got the impression that some of the other noble houses were being more cautious.”

“As long as you remain in the capital, you will keep abreast of the situation. Yet some who returned to their fiefs after the Demon Stampede are out of touch with the news. Although the commoners fear the monsters greatly, there are many noblemen who only see them as game to be hunted for sport.”

That had been the case before the return of the Demon Lord, at least. Of course, the nobles were known to suffer great casualties if they got complacent, but for the most part, they saw monsters as simply fodder to eliminate.

But now the monsters’ habits were changing drastically. Following the Demon Lord’s return, it was best to think of the monsters as entirely new entities. If that was the case, then perhaps Lord Werner had a reason for dashing off to save the Hero’s family that Mine herself was unaware of. As Mine contemplated this terrifying prospect, a knight called out to them from outside the tent.

“What is it?” asked Bastian.

“My lord. A knight from House Zehrfeld by the name of Max has come to express his gratitude.”

Mine shot a look at Bastian. “I wonder if he is talking about the conference earlier, when you covered for House Zehrfeld.”

“I suspect as much. Let him pass.”

“Yessir.”

Max squeezed his gigantic frame into the tent. Inwardly, Mine was impressed. The man before her seemed like the honest and upright type, the very image of a knight sworn in service to a minister.

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The next morning came—the Demon army had not struck in the night.

Before the rays of the morning sun even hit the earth, the Wein Kingdom troops marched across the vast plains before the fortified walls of Finoy. Multiple noble houses assigned to the vanguard planned to launch their attack on the Demon army as the sun was rising.

With their superior night vision, the monsters would have had the upper hand in a battlefield shrouded in darkness. Because of this, the kingdom’s army—or rather, the human army—preferred to stage the battle during daytime. To put it another way, the kingdom’s side snorted at the Demon army for squandering its advantage. As the troops marched inexorably forward, their tongues turned to the topic of their foe’s glaring lack of cunning.

While the morning sun lit up the earth, trumpets blared in unison across the plains. A roar of excitement swelled up over the clatter of armor and shuffling of hooves. Swords, spearheads, and polished mail glittered in the sun, and for a moment the grounds surrounding Finoy seemed carpeted in light.

The kingdom’s army surged forth like a fierce wave. By contrast, the Demon army’s movements were, if anything, sluggish and sloppy. The monsters individually turned to face the approaching army.

Their host contained many bipedal reptilians known as Reptipos. Swarming around them were monsters large enough to devour humans, such as Hunter



Lizards and Killer Turtles. As far as anyone could see, there were no ranks or divisions among the monsters. The Reptipos readied their weapons—keen, in contrast with their own dull bearing—as they prepared to face down the kingdom’s army.

The knights continued their mad dash forward, taking the shortest possible route to reach the monsters. All of a sudden, the lusty roars of excitement transformed into angry shouts. Shrieks, howls, rallying cries, and screams of pain all at once inundated the battlefield.

At the forefront of the kingdom’s forces were several armies led by young nobles who, like Werner, had assumed command in the stead of their fathers. The Demon army was subjected to their advance—swords sliced into their bodies, spears pierced flanks, axes dug into shoulders, and war hammers smashed heads.

But the horde of monsters did not give way. Their endurance and defenses were on a vastly different level from the Demonic Beasts near the capital. The reptilian scales covering the outer layer of their skin deflected poorly angled cuts, which would leave their assailants off balance. When the monsters struck back, the humans fell to the ground with cries of pain.

A knight on horseback slashed at a monster’s shoulder. At the exact same moment, a different lizard soldier chomped down on the horse’s neck. With a scream of agony, the horse reared, tipping its rider off. A lizardman plunged his sword into the knight, piercing through his armor and inflicting a fatal wound. A Hill Crocodile and Killer Turtle set themselves upon the fallen horse. The horse let out one last agonized neigh as its flesh was torn off its body, leaving nothing but an unmoving corpse behind.

Unable to break through the line of hardy monsters, it was the kingdom’s side that actually lost its momentum and came to a halt. As the humans faltered, the monsters launched their counterattack. A knight tried to stop the inhuman strength of a monster’s sword swing with his gauntlet, only to lose his entire arm. Heads tumbled to the ground still encased within their helmets, spraying blood in geometric patterns on the earth.

A squire who boldly attempted to fend off the monsters surrounding his fallen

master had his leg bitten off by a Hill Crocodile snapping at his heels. Another soldier squared off against the Hill Crocodile in turn, while a stone's throw away, a Killer Turtle feasted on the wounded knight. His agonized cry for help quivered in the air.

"Hold fast! We will not lose to the likes of these monsters!"

"Yeah!"

Dozens of nobles and knights in resplendent armor roared out as their army promptly readjusted its position. They were stalwart soldiers of the noble houses, their mettle tested on the hard-won battle of Hildea Plains and in defense of their home fiefs against ravaging monsters. Whether insect, beast, or bipedal aberration, they thumbed their noses at all monsters regardless.

A knight and his squire both brought their blades down against a monster's sturdy, reptilian scales. They were rewarded when the tips of their swords pierced their opponent's belly. After the initial roadblock, the kingdom's forces gradually resumed their advance on Finoy. But just as they were gaining momentum, the Demon army changed tack.

Knights and squires alike let out startled cries at what they saw.

The figure that abruptly appeared was over twice the size of an adult male. But compared to the other bipedal Reptipos, what stood out even more prominently was its dragon-like head and the sinister atmosphere that hung in the air around its wicked form. The kingdom army seemed to gasp as one at the sight of the colossal beast.

"Are you the commander of the Demon army?!" Viscount Cioleck of the kingdom vanguard snarled at the mysterious foe. If the enemy's appearance had caught him off guard, there was no sign of it in his voice. If anything, he sounded eager.

Although Viscount Cioleck was only three years older than Werner and Mazel, he already possessed the rank of viscount. Having graduated before the two had enrolled, he'd never met them directly but was confident enough in his martial prowess to boast that "If I'd been there, that Hero or whoever wouldn't have a perfect win record."

Unfortunately, his father, the previous head of the family, had dragged their knights into a pointless assault during the Demon Stampede, resulting in considerable casualties. Under a lot of pressure, particularly from his kith and kin, his father was forced to retire, allowing his young heir to take the reins as the new head of the house. The young viscount responded to the emergency orders to take to the battlefield partly because of the internal discord within his house. He was arranged to marry a woman from the same house, but she broke off the engagement before they could wed.

But then, it was *because* he was not currently betrothed to anyone that he found the prospect of winning Princess Laura's hand enticing. He believed that if he could win the esteem of both the royal family and the church by performing the highest feat of valor—liberating Finoy—then he could raise his house's standing to that of a county, and so doing, be able to marry the princess.

It was unclear whether Cioleck's shouts reached the ears of the massive Reptipos, who brandished a massive sword befitting his gargantuan frame.

A knight and two squires were unfortunate enough to be in the path of the dragon-headed Reptipos—Beliures, commander of the Demon army. A single sweep of his sword sliced all three men right through the middle. Dozens of startled cries sprang from the kingdom's army.

Noticing the army draw to a halt, Beliures stepped forward. He scattered knights and squires with effortless strides, and with each sideways swing of his sword sent more warriors to their deaths. The gigantic blade cleaved through shields and bodies, severed helmeted heads from their shoulders, and turned armor into ungainly clumps of metal. The knights and soldiers instantly turned from living and breathing people into mere corpses.

“Get down, everyone!”

At first, Cioleck simply stared, stunned. But when he saw one of his retainers fall to Beliures's blade, he snapped back to his senses and retaliated with a ferocious swing of his own sword. Though he was aware that he was not up against an ordinary foe, he might have been more motivated by the temptation—no, *greed*—for the glory he would obtain for defeating this monster. But this

was not only reckless but a waste of his life.

Beliures did not even move his sword. He blocked the incoming sword not with his weapon but with his arm. Then he grabbed Cioleck by the arm and lifted him off the ground, ignoring his shouts of protest. Even clad in his armor, Cioleck cut a piteous figure, suspended as he was in midair. Beliures yanked him close.

The next moment, an eerie sound rang out across the battlefield.

Beliures did not use his hand to take Cioleck's life. Casually, without a flicker of deliberation, he put his mouth over Cioleck's head—and crunched. The officers and soldiers of the kingdom's army who bore witness to the awful scene stood stock still.

Sounds of mastication echoed across the field. Beliures stood right in the middle of the fray, chewing through Cioleck's helmeted head as if it were nothing. With every crunch, the onlookers' faces turned paler. There were no exceptions, not among the soldiers, squires, or even the knights. Blood gushed from Cioleck's headless body, dowsing Beliures's entire body in red.

“Ah... Argggghhhhhh!”

Somebody screamed. Hearing this, Beliures tossed Cioleck's corpse gracelessly to the side and began pacing toward the kingdom's army. As if on cue, the troops under Cioleck's command broke rank, turned tail, and ran.

But turning one's back to the enemy was the most dangerous thing one could do. Spotting their opportunity, the Demon army ran ahead of Beliures and commenced their slaughter. Close on their heels, the lizardman soldiers advanced with hacking blades, the Demonic Beasts running down the fleeing humans. Hunter Lizards and Hill Crocodiles sank their teeth and claws into the knights and soldiers' backs, shredding ribbons of flesh from their backs. The body count climbed.

Spotting this from a distance, the neighboring army under Baron Gordan's command hastened its march to intercept the Demon army's forces. But the valiant Baron Gordan was helpless against Beliures. Even though his sword had struck down more than ten Demonic Beasts, he was unable to land even a single blow on Beliures. Beliures bisected him and his horse with a single stroke.

Seeing their commander so easily dispatched, the baron's forces succumbed to their fear and crumbled.

From his position in the second row, Count Teutenberg saw the two noble commanders each ended in the span of an eyeblink, their forces scattered to the wind. Panic beginning to well up in him, he urged his forces onward to back them up. The count, who was in his mid-forties, had an abundance of experience hunting monsters with his two sons, and by no means was the army at his disposal a small one. Duke Gründing had positioned him near the frontlines in order to support the younger noblemen at the vanguard if they ended up struggling in battle.

Count Teutenberg proved himself worthy of the supreme commander's trust. Instead of forcefully cutting in front of the Demon army, his forces worked to stem their momentum. This bought enough time for the many injured knights to retreat from the battlefield.

But the cost was steep. The count himself and his second-oldest son both fell victim to Beliures's massive sword. When he saw their deaths, the elder Teutenberg son attempted to rally the fleeing warriors to regroup. Unfortunately, in the ensuing confusion, several Lizardmen and Alligator Warriors chose him as their next meal. The family line ended in mere moments, the three nobles' bodies scattered across the plains in front of Finoy.

In a short span of time, the kingdom lost the heads of three noble houses. Things were unfolding so quickly that Duke Gründing couldn't keep up with them from his station at the base of operations. That said, in their pursuit of the retreating kingdom forces, the Demon army's battle lines were also being stretched quite thin. Two armies came in to intercept from the side: Count Teutenberg's troops and the forces of House Fürst, which were positioned in the second row.

Bastian, head of House Fürst, ordered one of his squads to keep a wide berth around Beliures as they charged into the Demon army's scattered lines. Bastian's heir Tyrone was at the forefront, swinging his sword ferociously at the monsters.

Meanwhile, under Lady Hermine's command, the soldiers and squires used

coordinated battle tactics to extricate Count Teutenberg's knights and soldiers from the chaotic battle they'd fallen into, successfully curbing the number of casualties.

"Don't underestimate your foe! Work together to annihilate them one at a time!" Mine shrieked.

"Yes, m'lady!" The surrounding soldiers leapt to her command.

Even in a world that prized valor, the warriors who'd seen the horrors of the battle unfold were eager to forgo glory if it meant coming out alive. Even as each swing of their swords bathed their whole bodies in splotches of black-blue blood, the squires under Mine's command slowly but steadily chipped away at the Demon army's numbers.

Bastian's watchful eyes kept stock of the battle situation as he ordered his troops to press on. The knights cut down their foes and the soldiers worked to support their momentum, keeping a safe distance from Beliures all the while. By splitting their roles in this fashion, the House Fürst troops successfully stopped the Demon army in its tracks.

At about the same time that House Fürst strove valiantly against the enemy, Viscounts Reinisch and Degenkolb launched their own assault some distance away.

Having fought under Werner's command during the Demon Stampede, the knights of both houses were accustomed to maneuvering in teams. They decided that securing their allies the space to escape would work better in this situation than dashing to their aid in a chaotic battlefront. By pushing the bulk of the Demon army away from their commander, Beliures, they opened up a path for their allies to escape to the rear. Thanks to their support, the soldiers who had been reeling from the deaths of their leaders were able to slip away.

"That thing is a freak."

Degenkolb groaned as she observed Beliures from a distance. Like a primal force of nature, a single swing of his sword caused blood to spurt and fountain in his wake. However much she prided herself on her valor, she knew it was reckless to fight against that *thing*. Promptly, she sent a messenger to the adjoining unit under Reinisch, suggesting that they move the troops away from

Beliures. Reinisch agreed. They would shift their troops away from the Demon army's onslaught while keeping the enemy pinned so they could not breach the kingdom's inner line.







It was around this time that the messengers Count Teutenberg sent before deploying his troops finally reached the base of operations with a report. Duke Gründing finally learned that the battle had taken a sharp turn for the worse. He was particularly startled by news of the Baron Gordan's death, who had been praised for his valor. Deciding that the battle should not be left solely in the hands of the battle-eager noble houses, the duke gave the order for the knight brigade to deploy, bringing the entirety of the army into the assault. The kingdom's army made its move.

Unfortunately, it was not so easy to direct a large army all at once. For all the armies that sprang immediately to action upon receiving their commands, there were just as many knights that would only begin mounting their horses after hearing the signal. Overall, the bureaucrat houses moved slower, which was perhaps a reflection of the roles they normally played. As a result, even as the knight brigade and some of the noble houses commenced their assault on the Demon army, other fronts lagged behind, throwing the already uneven battlelines into further disarray.

A deciding factor in Duke Gründing's orders was his assumption that Count Teutenberg still lived. This was something that was known to happen occasionally in battles of this scale. The situation on the battlefield could change so wildly that it would lengthen the time it took for information from the front line to reach the supreme commander and for their orders to subsequently reach the troops engaged in combat.

By the time the duke's orders reached the noble houses, Count Teutenberg had already perished. And though the duke's judgment had been correct at the time he issued his orders, they no longer fit the situation.

"This is getting out of hand. Let's just do our own thing," Anshelm Zeagle Jhering muttered cynically to himself as he surveyed the scene on horseback.

Above all, the enormous dragon-headed Reptipos, presumably the head honcho of these monsters, was like nothing the nobles and knights had ever seen. This kind of foe warranted the same kind of techniques one would apply against an extra-large Demonic Beast or Demon, but the kingdom army's head-on assault demonstrated a gross misjudgment of the situation.

Even a knight was liable to perish in a one-on-one fight against a savage beast. Against a monster of *that* strength, the casualties were no laughing matter. Stepping carelessly into this chaotic front would arguably result only in the loss of one's troops.

"It would not do for us to be seen as cowards. Let us advance, but cautiously."

"Do you think that wise?" one of the knights asked Anshelm.

"My father entrusted me with this brigade. I have no intention of sending them to their doom. Besides, this battle won't be won in a single day."

The tone of Anshelm's reply was beyond cool; it was cold-blooded. He wouldn't see the deaths as a waste if there was a chance at getting glory, but that clearly wasn't going to happen in this situation. In that case, he figured, he might as well push the casualties onto the other noble houses. Ignoring the screams of the knights and soldiers on the main battlefield, he directed his troops to pick off weak enemies in the surrounding area.

"The ideal outcome would be the kingdom and the Demon army exhausting each other's strength."

If the Demon army were to overrun the temple without receiving aid in time, then both the temple and the royal family would lose their influence. It was impossible to say how this would change not just the domestic politics but their standing with other states. It could, of course, expand the influence of the Demon Lord and his army. This would usher in an era of chaos. *Things have gotten interesting*, Anshelm muttered, his face twisting into a cynical smile.

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"What madness," Duke Gründing could not help but groan.

That evening, after becoming briefly ensnared in a chaotic battlefield, the kingdom's army managed to put enough distance between them and the Demon army to return to their base camp. This required the first and second orders of the knight brigade to engage in some hard fighting while the mage squads continuously bombarded the enemy's rear from a distance. Marquesses Norpoth and Schramm also took command of the army, just barely managing to secure the safety of most of their injured, yet still-breathing soldiers as they

beat their retreat.

Unfortunately, they were now in a wretched state. During the duke's first battle, he lost Baron Gordan, a favored member of his faction. The deaths of Count Teutenberg and his entire family were particularly grievous, for without a commander, his knight corps could no longer serve in battle. Viscount Cioleck, who was the first to fall in battle, left hardly any of his knights behind. Having suffered a catastrophic blow, there were not even enough fighters left in his unit to maintain the appearance of a squad.

Although those three houses suffered the most grievous casualties, dozens of noble houses felt the human cost of charging headlong into battle in their desperate chase for glory. Many houses failed to prepare against the monsters' poison, resulting in the loss of many of their officers and soldiers. After returning to camp that night, priests who could use healing magic and members of the supply squad with antidotes ran themselves ragged around the camp.

The first clash ended with the semblance of a draw. But even that hard-won result scarcely reflected the big picture, because it was hard to imagine that the Demon army's losses were all too great when their forces had been fewer to begin with. The cold truth was that no matter how one sliced it, this battle had ended in a telling loss. The duke rued his overconfidence in assuming that mere numbers would trump the enemy's strength.

Even as he cursed his folly, the duke saw to his duty as the supreme commander. Firstly, he commended House Fürst for frankly acknowledging the lapse in leadership at the front and working tirelessly to rescue the ailing troops. He also rewarded other knights and nobles who fought bravely even at an overwhelming disadvantage. He arranged healing services for the injured, sending those who required it to a safe place in the backlines. Furthermore, he ordered the knight brigade to refrain from advancing on Finoy when they resumed hostilities against the Demon army the next day. Being a civil official at heart, Duke Gründing was good at making swift and suitable arrangements.

After confirming the duke's orders and arranging the treatment for the knights of his own house, Bastian sat down to eat with Tyrone and Hermine. Not that it was much of a meal. The supplies hadn't caught up to the emergency sortie, resulting in some rather coarse fare.

But it was not because of the food or supplies that the three of them had dour looks on their faces. They were, after all, intimately involved in the events of that day. As Tyrone reckoned with the situation once again, he said bitterly, “Who would have thought that the entire Teutenberg line would be wiped out in battle...?”

Mine nodded. “The only direct kin now is Danilo, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” Bastian answered tersely. “Teutenberg lost many of its most important knights. They will certainly require aid in rebuilding their house.”

Tyrone and Mine nodded, frowning. They knew that it would be up to House Fürst to provide the support for that recovery.

The sole remaining male in the count’s house, Danilo Von Teutenberg, was only five years old. He was a grandchild to Bastian and a nephew to Tyrone and Mine. His mother was Bastian’s eldest daughter, who was married to Count Teutenberg’s eldest son.

“How were things between my elder sister and the madame?” asked Mine.

“Not too good, apparently,” answered Tyrone.

A silence fell over them. The wife of Count Teutenberg was known to be haughty, mercurial, and impossible to predict. There was a very real possibility that she would pull some strings and usurp rule of the house. The Fürsts were compelled to protect Danilo’s standing in order to preserve the dignity of their own house.

“When this battle is over, I will have to pay a visit to Count Teutenberg’s estate,” Bastian said. “Tyrone, you must manage affairs while I’m away from the capital.”

“All right.” Tyrone swallowed some dried meat boiled in grape wine. Then, in an attempt to change the mood, he said, “But who could have thought that the kingdom’s army could be so brittle?”

Bastian shook his head. “Although we certainly did underestimate the enemy’s strength, we might have gotten drunk on our victory at Hildea Plains.”

Bastian did not think the kingdom’s army weak. But because they had



trounced their foes so thoroughly at Hildea Plains, they had been inclined to underestimate the monsters. It reaffirmed to Bastian that it was because of the crown prince's leadership and strategy that the battle at Hildea Plains ended with such a resounding victory. He had to admit that he was no less guilty of letting his guard down.

Although they should have known that these monsters were different from the undead, who only moved on command, they had utterly failed to internalize that. While House Fürst came out relatively unscathed, Bastian figured that some of the other knight corps would have little morale left thanks to the day's losses.

"Either way, we will see how things pan out tomorrow. We have an army to lend aid to Finoy. We will stop the enemy in their tracks before they reach the tower."

"Um, actually, Father, about that..."

Both Bastian and Tyrone turned to Mine. "What is it?"

Due to the massive scale of their army, information was slow to spread through the ranks, with hearsay often filling the gaps. This meant that it was not just the enemy that sought accurate information about the army; even their own troops had to go out of their way to find it. Knowing this, Bastian had ordered Mine to gather information about the army's internal movements.

Finding herself under sudden scrutiny, Mine started with a disclaimer, saying she was only relaying what she'd heard, and had no proof of it herself.

"Apparently, morale is split between two extremes."

"What do you mean by split?" Tyrone pressed.

With a nod in his direction, Mine proceeded to explain. Although they had rushed to the battlefield on emergency orders, it was an undeniable fact that there were some aristocrats whose priority was keeping their own casualties as low as possible. This way of thinking was especially pronounced among those from regions where the change in monster habits had been particularly stark.

"Although they don't mean to discount the temple's importance, there are multiple houses that wish to avoid fighting as much as possible."



“Unbelievable. They would say that when Her Highness is at Finoy?” Tyrone spat, his tone a mix of anger and derision. Although he was grateful about having fewer rivals, nobody wanted the liberation of Finoy to drag on. The attitude of those nobles was unbecoming of their station, Tyrone was saying.

Mine let her brother vent his scorn before continuing. “On the other hand, there are others who hope to win glory by avenging the deaths of Count Teutenberg and the other fallen lords. They’re more than eager to take their troops to the front lines, regardless of the rest of the army’s movements.”

Bastian blanched. “Have our battle lines spread too thin?” he moaned.

Anyone who witnessed the shock wave of an assault that pushed them back would have understood that Duke Teutenberg’s killer was no easy foe to defeat. But given the lay of the battlefield, those who’d been fighting far from Beliures may have failed to grasp the scale of the threat. That, or perhaps they knew the danger and thought themselves tough enough to handle it anyway.

“It would be foolhardy to fight against that thing,” Tyrone muttered.

“They’re not convinced of the gravity of the threat,” Mine responded.

Mine was no coward, but there were no two ways about it: *that* foe defied all expectations. Who wouldn’t feel fear or revulsion upon hearing how the beast devoured a living person’s head on the battlefield?

Bastian watched as Mine winced. “Is the duke aware of this?” he asked probingly.

“He should be, as far as I know...”

Understanding and morale were two different things. If they fought tomorrow the way they had earlier that day, then they would only lose more people. Bastian resumed eating, his spirits sinking at the lack of clear directions for the days to follow.

Bastian’s grim premonition unfortunately came true. The next day, some of the noble houses deployed secretly ahead of the rest of the kingdom’s army. Like dogs who had slipped their leashes, they sprinted off into battle right as the sky was brightening, only to get demolished by Beliures. This caused the army as a whole to fall into a state of disarray. The day ended with everyone counting

themselves fortunate that Finoy, at least, hadn't been attacked.

The situation didn't change until a few days later, with Duke Seyfert's arrival at the head of a supply convoy. When he learned of the staggering scale of casualties, he urged Duke Gründing to reorder the chain of command and impose harsh sanctions on anyone engaging in battle outside of his commands. This injunction would hold the authority of the highest ranks of both the bureaucrat and martial nobles.

Unfortunately, it took a while for the duke's missive to reach the ears of the entire army. During this time, some of the noble houses that had suffered large casualties lost their will to even stand on the battlefield. Others, meanwhile, had only just begun to realize the enemy's strength. A peculiar torpor spread throughout the camps, and the army fell into a rut.

Throughout all this, the Demon army refrained from any heavy offensives against Finoy. From the perspective of the kingdom's army, this was a peculiar thing indeed. Several days passed like this, with nothing but minor skirmishes as the two armies reached a deadlock.

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Over a repast of meat, I regaled the Harting family with stories about Mazel's life in the capital. Although it was filtered through my point of view, they all listened attentively. That was family for you. I supposed it was like hearing about what a student got up to while they were on exchange.

"So yeah, when it came to mock battles, Mazel had the highest win ratio of anyone at the academy. Out of forty-six battles, including against the teachers, he has forty-five wins and one draw."

"Was that draw with you, Lord Zehrfeld?"

"Nah, I couldn't hold a candle to Mazel."

At this point, if we fought with a handicap—him with a tree branch and me with an actual spear—I would still get my ass handed to me, probably.

"Oh, really? Then who...?"

"Well, that's, um..."

It was something of a legend among the people of our year level. It happened one day, well into the school year. We had a class in the outdoor training area where the idea was to have mock battles to test our strength. Mazel's opponent was the third-oldest son of a noble house (name omitted). Not that this guy was a weakling or anything, but Mazel was definitely the stronger one under normal circumstances.

Both participants assumed their usual positions and readied their swords. Just as the teacher serving as the referee said, "Begin!" there was a plopping sound as bird poop dropped on the nobleman's head. Silence followed.

The rest of us who had been watching from the sidelines burst out laughing. The poor guy stood stock still, stiff as a rock. And then there was Mazel, who looked absolutely flummoxed. I'd never seen that expression on his face before or since.

The teacher did their best to restrain a laugh as they declared the match a draw. Then they told the guy to wash his head. With an awkward smile on his face, Mazel accepted the result, and thus it was counted as part of his official record. As a testament to Mazel's sheer skill, it would be the first and only draw of his student days.

"Everyone thought it was hilarious," I said, wrapping up the story.

The Harting family's eyes were wide as saucers throughout the tale. When I laughed, they all laughed too. I was glad that they *could* laugh after leaving their hometown so unceremoniously. It was only natural that they would be feeling tense.

At that moment, Neurath approached me, and I turned to regard him.  
"Everyone has finished eating, Master Werner."

"Good to hear. How are the horses doing?"

"I would say that they are sufficiently rested."

"All right, gather everyone here, including the people keeping watch."

I swallowed my last bite of grilled meat, which had been skewered between two bunches of herbs on a twig. I washed it down with some tepid water. With my meal officially over and done with, I called everyone to me and listened to

their reports on how things stood in Arlea Village while I was absent.

As an aside, my men retrieved the pot used for our meal from the ruins of the Harting household, and they also handled foraging the herbs. I was honestly grateful to them for lightening the Harting family's load. They had been trying to pack as lightly as possible.

I thought it would be uncouth to ask about what happened at Arlea Village, but it would be risky to rely on assumptions that might differ from the reality. I made sure to preface my request with "I won't ask if you don't want to talk," but the Harting family graciously shared their experiences at the meeting. I felt pretty bad for them.

My second-in-command for this expedition, the knight Benecke, lived up to Max's recommendation. Not only was he a decent fighter, but he also went to the effort of gathering information for me. I appreciated his efforts, but my mood soon worsened as I listened to the uncomfortable findings.

"So, basically, those monsters were targeting the Harting family right from the start."

"Indeed. Although the first residence to be attacked was close to the Finoy-facing entrance, the assailants apparently asked the occupants, 'Where is the family of the man known as Mazel?'"

I took my time digesting this and then said, "And I suppose the occupants had loose lips?"

"Apparently so."

I could only grimace at Benecke's crisp response. Although I could understand a person's self-preservation instinct, it still unsettled me how quickly the residents sold out the Harting family just because they had defied the village authorities. It just went to show that rural towns really could end up like despotic kingdoms. Anyone who didn't toe the line was left to the wolves, it seemed. The results spoke for themselves.

"My apologies for asking this, but has such treatment always been the case for you?" Schünzel asked Mazel's family.

After a pause, Ari said heavily, "Things got bad about a month ago."

This was around the time when people could tell for certain that the monster habits had changed. The villagers started demanding that he call Mazel back home because the village was in danger.

“The village prized Mazel highly because he is young and can fight. But to call him back just to suit the whims of the village...”

“You can’t exactly do that, huh,” I finished, not missing a beat.

It was ridiculous to call Mazel back home when it was the crown that had summoned him in the first place. At the same time, I could understand why his family didn’t tell him about what was going on. Knowing him, he would have rushed straight back home if he caught wind of it. No doubt about it.

But doing that would have sacrificed his future. Arlea Village would most certainly have used and abused him for the rest of his life. Not to be rude about it, but I didn’t see any future prospects for such a life there. Mazel’s family probably wanted to preserve his options.

“They even told me to put my wife or daughter to work at the water mill,” Ari added.

Hearing this, Anna and Lily’s faces fell. It seemed that Ari hadn’t mentioned this to them before now. They’d gone pretty pale, to say the least.

“What do you mean by the water mill?” asked Neurath.

“So you don’t know, huh?” I said.

To be fair, I only knew about it from book learning. “Water mill” was a bit of a strange euphemism, though it appeared that a born-and-bred city kid like Neurath was more innocent about these things than I was.

In medieval times—well, in a medieval-ish world in this case—rural water mills had a curious function in their society.

The power generated by turning a waterwheel could serve various purposes in a village, like threshing or grinding wheat into flour or turning sheepskin into felt. While it was the most important facility in a village, it cost a lot of money to run because it required woodworkers, metalworkers, and plenty of other skilled technicians. This meant that the owner of the fief was generally the person who

set up the building.

Water mills thus fell under the direct control of the feudal lord. The lord employed the millers to work there under a live-in arrangement. These employees were vassals of the lord, so to speak, who resided within the village grounds. The villagers had to pay the miller a fee whenever they turned the water mill, which served in effect as a valuable source of tax revenue. The lord didn't allow individual households to possess their own millstones so as to monopolize the water mill and rack up usage fees.

All of this meant that millers possessed their own unique authority. Within the village, the area around a water mill was like another world. Millers were known to lie about the price of grain so that they could pocket the difference. Then, after amassing a great deal of personal wealth, they would start side businesses around the mill. As a matter of fact, bathhouses were often owned by millers because the waterwheels drew up the water for them. In that sense, you could say that it was quite literally a side business.

Because the sound of the mill kept going all night long, the surrounding establishments were often of the type that didn't mind the noise. By that, I mean taverns and brothels. This world was no different from my old one in that regard.

A village best known as a pit stop for pilgrims might seem an odd place to put a brothel, but pilgrimages often kept mercenaries around even before the Demon Lord's return. The pilgrims might not have gone to the brothels much, but I doubted their hired arms held any such reservations. For better or worse, a lot of mercenaries and adventurers boasted of their virility. If the pilgrims also brought merchants along for the trip, then they, like the guards, would possibly have some use for a brothel.

This was off topic, but in light novels and stuff from my previous world, the first floor of an inn would serve as an eating space, but many historical establishments didn't serve meals to people staying the night. It was common for people to go elsewhere to eat. This was so travelers would spend their money more evenly across the village.

Anyway, it wasn't unusual for village women to sell their bodies if there was a

poor harvest. Part of a miller's job was to prepare a space for the women near the mill. Then, from this side business, they would collect income from both the travelers who paid for the women's servicing and the women who rented out the location. There were some horror stories about millers shackling women with debts. That said, if they were too brazen about it, no one would take the job, so it was more common for millers to be somewhat lax with the villagers.

Unfortunately, no such kindness applied to a pariah. If the village's two highest authorities—the chief and the miller who worked directly under the lord's employ—agreed upon it, then anyone who was being shunned by the village could be forced into working at the local brothel.

It appeared that Mazel's family hadn't reached such dire straits, but they could very well have been on the verge of it. I got the feeling that if something of that sort did come to pass, then Mazel might have been crushed, or maybe driven to genuine fury. Once you factored in that possibility, then those straits seemed dire indeed, and in more ways than one.

Another cause for concern was that some monsters lived in bodies of water. Water mills would generally be situated within a barrier inside the village to deter monsters from approaching. But the waterwheels themselves invariably made a lot of noise, so they were almost always placed somewhere outside the village's bounds.

"I understand your situation. I'll make sure that you can make a comfortable living in the capital, so please be at ease," I declared.

I wouldn't deny that part of my eagerness to help the Hartings was out of sheer spite for Arlea Village. But even if they did perhaps choose to return to their hometown one day, there wasn't much hope for it right now, what with their house reduced to cinders and the villagers out for their blood.

In my position as a viscount, I could at least offer them a salary. I still had some reward money from the refugee escort mission since I'd moved straight onto guarding the aqueduct without any time to spend it. Besides, I didn't have a wife or children to provide for. With my personal wealth, I could guarantee a fresh start for at least one family.

It probably wasn't an expense I'd have to shoulder for long, anyway. I



doubted that the crown prince would just sit and twiddle his thumbs if he heard about the family's plight. So it wasn't as if I was *really* going out of my way, although I suppose this was also a testament to my faith in the kingdom.

Which raised the question of how the kingdom would respond to Arlea Village's treatment of the Harting family. Even if they were kin to the Hero Mazel, it was kind of hard to imagine the crown responding directly. Maybe they would dispatch an official to the village and take things from there. They'd probably make a token effort, considering they didn't put much importance on commoners and their familial matters. Although I didn't have a firm grasp on the situation, I thought that it at least warranted an investigation.

"I believe that I will be able to secure some form of employment for you in the capital, but we shall discuss that further in the coming days. For the moment, I will secure everything you need."

"We would be most obliged for your kindness."

"Thank you ever so much..."

Oof, the whole family was on the brink of tears as they thanked me. Given what kind of world this was, there was no shortage of nobles who would "indulge" the commoners with their kindness, but I'd like to think my intentions were sincere. I doubted that they were in a hurry to return to their village any time soon, given the distinct possibility that they would be treated as pseudo-slaves.

By the standards of my previous life, it would be ridiculous for a teen to provide for his friend's parents, but being highborn in this world bestowed such privileges as could only be called excessive. And what was the point of privilege if you didn't use it? So I didn't think twice about supporting Mazel's family.

The conversation then moved onto the events from my troops' perspective. I couldn't very well *not* explain what had happened. Technically, military matters were supposed to be a secret, but if Mazel's family was going to tag along with us for several days, then the story was bound to slip out at some point. The other reason I decided to explain things was to demonstrate my trust and goodwill.

"I'd like you to keep this a secret, but the kingdom's army is currently

marching for the temple of Finoy,” I said bluntly. I went on to explain that the Demon army was attacking Finoy, and that Mazel was defending the temple. The whole family paled upon hearing this, so I hastened to add that Mazel was currently safe and sound.

Although I doubted that Mazel would sell out to the monsters if his family got taken hostage, the morale at Finoy would tank if the hero of Fort Werisa suddenly went AWOL—even if it was to rescue his loved ones. Though I didn’t have much to go on, I suspected that this was what the bad guys had been aiming for.

“It was our negligence that resulted in this lamentable situation. As a nobleman of the Wein Kingdom, I extend my deepest apologies.”

“Oh dear. Please lift your head, Sir Viscount,” Ari said in a flustered tone.

He was probably like that because a nobleman was bowing to him, but the kingdom was unambiguously at fault for this. As a state servant, I simply couldn’t equivocate on that point.

“I understand,” Ari insisted, “so please lift your head...”

“I thank you for your forbearance. As an apology, allow me to provide for you on the road and in the days to come,” I said as I bowed once more.

With that, I brought the conversation to a close. Considering what Benecke mentioned earlier, there was another, more pressing issue to attend to right now. I turned to regard the knights.

“There’s another issue looming over us. It’s possible that the Demon army will attack again.”

“By which, you mean...?” Schünzel prompted.

“Now that we know for certain that the Harting family was targeted, we can say that the enemy has been putting their feelers out for information,” I answered. “From their perspective, the Lizard Magician and the other assailants have gone missing. We have to consider the possibility that more enemies will come.”

Technically, it was possible that all of Arlea Village would be massacred, but it

seemed that our foes were only after Mazel's family. The problem was that it was unclear why they were a target. Was it because Mazel was an obstacle to conquering Finoy, or was it because they were aware of the Heroism skill? At this stage, I couldn't discard the possibility that the Demon Lord had happened to obtain information about the Hero's family and decided to take measures before he became a true threat.

I decided to put those questions aside for now. I lacked the information to draw conclusions. What I did know for certain was that Mazel's family was under threat. It was hard to say whether our fighting force was enough to guarantee their safety under these circumstances. Considering the monsters' low opinion of humans, they probably hadn't expected their assault would be such an utter failure. But that was no reason for me to get complacent in turn.

Besides, they very well could have anticipated a scenario where the Harting family fled the village. A separate squad could be wandering the vicinity of the village specifically to capture any fleeing prey. I couldn't say that we were out of the woods just yet.

"Regardless, we can't afford to waste time here. We don't know what the Arlea Village chief will try to pull."

Scoundrels like that would lie through their teeth if that would get them anything at all out of it. I had to report on the troubled state of Arlea Village to the authorities before he could set the narrative.

According to human psychology, pretty much everyone took the information they first received as the baseline, and anything they learned later would be judged against it. Thus, if one side got painted as the villain first, anything that got said about them later would come across as a defensive statement. During trials, this came in handy for the accusing side.

Given that I was up against someone who cared only for himself, the army at Finoy and the people at the capital might be convinced I was the villain in all this. It was of utmost importance, then, that I make the most of our head start to get a report in nice and early.

When I explained this to everyone, including the Harting family, they nodded as if impressed. I felt a bit uneasy about this because I was just cheating with

knowledge from my previous world.

“We have to get going as fast as we can and explain what happened. I’ll send two people to go on ahead. It’s going to take time for the rest of us to move while keeping guard. The two messengers should return to the Zehrfeld troops and apprise Max of what’s happened. They should be headed to Finoy.”

“Understood. How about sending Willy and Firat?” Benecke suggested.

“Okay. I’ll leave it to those two.”

These were all handpicked elites, so any one of them would be equal to the task. To be frank, I didn’t really care who did it. I deferred to Benecke’s recommendation as the leader of the group.

“Once you’ve delivered your report, tell Max I have some orders for him. I want him to assemble a squad to escort the Harting family to the capital. I also need him to tell the supreme commander and my father what happened at Arlea Village.”

If my father knew about the situation, he could pull strings for me at the capital. I’d be leaving matters in his hands, but I would do everything I could to make sure they were handled right. I felt no shame whatsoever about what I was doing for the Harting family, which meant that I could ask for my father’s help without thinking twice about it.

Willy and Firat were quick to pick up on my plan. Having witnessed the events at Arlea firsthand, they offered to head to the capital themselves after reporting to the Finoy relief army. I saw no reason to refuse.

“In that case, I authorize you to use a magic item when you head for the capital. After you’ve made your report to the supreme commander, search my tent for a clerk’s storage box. Take the tool that looks like a pair of boots and say ‘To Weinzierl, the Royal Capital.’”

“Yessir.”

“Also, you are forbidden from telling anyone about the effects of the magic item. Wait a short while as I prepare a document authorizing your use of it.”

The two knights looked bemused, but I couldn’t hold that against them. I’d

barely explained what the Skywalk Boots did, and I didn't want information about it to spread too far given how few of them existed. I also wanted to look into the reason why the word about them *hadn't* spread.

I didn't have any paper or writing implements at hand, so I carved a pen-like object out of a chip of wood. I used ashes from our campfire as ink and a bit of torn cloth as paper. The message I wrote was short and sweet, a simple granting of permission. If I bit my thumb and used my bloody thumbprint as a seal, then this would suffice as a makeshift official document.

After that, I picked out six of our fittest horses and sent the two knights off with them, giving them stern orders to fulfill the mission at all costs, even if it meant ditching the horses to distract any foes that might come their way.

"We will head straight to Valeritz from here. I want you to ask Max if he can arrange to meet up with us on the way."

"As you command."

To be perfectly honest, I wanted to send Mazel's family straight to the capital from here, but they needed guards, and food would be a problem as well. If they were adventurers or knights, then it would only take a few days while they hunted monsters for sustenance on the way. But that was a tough ask for common folk who might not even know how to hunt.

If there were only a few people on the journey, then they could feasibly get by on edible plants, but that prospect was still too dangerous. A family like theirs absolutely needed guards to protect them.

On the other hand, it was rather unlikely that the kingdom's army would still be around Valeritz at this point. It was reasonable to assume that they were already on their way to Finoy. Since I didn't know the army's precise position, we could probably save a bit of time by joining up with them somewhere along the way.

If I'd known this would happen, I would have brought the Skywalk Boots with me, but I really didn't imagine that Arlea Village would be in such trouble. Come to think of it, would I even be able to use the boots to teleport to Valeritz when the place was in ruins? Oh well, there was no point thinking about it when I didn't even have the boots on me.

“Everyone else, come with me and protect the Harting family. Once we meet up with Max’s escort team, you’ll accompany the family back to the capital.”

“Understood, sir.”

I felt chagrined about jerking the knights hither and thither, driving them at a grueling pace. Anyway, this meant that my entire stock of Skywalk Boots would get used up. I wanted to replenish them somehow. Maybe I could ask Mazel to share some with me if he found any.

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After dispatching Willy and Firat, I bade the Harting family rest while I sorted the remaining knights into teams, which could take turns on night watch to fend off any monsters that might attack. It was particularly important to have the protocols and strategies worked out in advance when we couldn’t anticipate the enemy’s movements.

Fortunately, I recalled that the monsters around these parts didn’t have any particularly strong attacks. The main things to look out for were the poison from the snake-type monsters and the mages.

“First off, I’m sorting you all into three groups. You will keep these groupings for night watch, and they will form the base of your response in the event of a monster attack.”

Each group had its own specific set of orders for what to do should a battle break out. Although there were many different patterns, I kept it to three because otherwise things would get too confusing for them to follow. I would change the orders in response to what the enemy was doing.

That said, I didn’t have to explain the basics to these guys. The academy taught camping techniques, and all of my men had experience with fighting monsters after the Demon Stampede.

On the other hand, my instructions were something of an experiment. All that time I spent chatting with adventurers during the refugee escort mission came in handy because they gave me a wealth of insights and information. It was a bit much to take in all at once, but I thought it would be useful to drill some of that into my knights and put it to practical use.

“Okay, now let’s all get ready to depart.”

“Yessir.”

Not that getting ready to depart involved all that much work in this case. We barely had any luggage with us, so the prep only amounted to a quick polish of our shoes and armor, checking if our horses were tired, and examining their horseshoes. Although I saw some worrying signs of rusting on my armor, now wasn’t the time or place to get hung up on it.

I stood up and was abruptly met with a slight surprise. Lily was standing right next to me, peering directly at me. I’d been so absorbed in the conversation and staying vigilant about whether monsters would appear from the forest boundary that I hadn’t noticed her at all.

“What’s the matter?” I asked as she handed me a wooden cup. There was a slightly dazed expression on her face.

“Oh, um, nothing. I was just thinking that you’re kind of amazing... Sorry.”

She bowed her head to me, sounding flustered all the while. I wondered just what about me was so “amazing,” but then it occurred to me that it would probably surprise a young person to see someone their age giving orders to a bunch of older, dashing knights. But that was just a day in the life of a noble.

As I was mulling over this, one thought struck me. It was clear my presence still put her on edge, but if we kept this distance between each other for the next few days, she wouldn’t be able to get the rest she needed. And so, I decided to disregard the typical formalities for speaking with a young lady.

“So, um, first of all, I should say...”







“Y-yes?”

“You don’t have to be so nervous around me.”

“B-but...”

I was serious here. While I was used to being treated with deference thanks to my time in the academy, Lily’s behavior was on another level. She was so conscious of our gap in status that even I was bothered. Technically, knights and noblemen alike were supposed to treat ladies with respect, but I was finding it tedious to be so stiff all the time.

Although I understood on an intellectual level that a commoner should be bowing and scraping even *more* to me, I genuinely wanted Mazel’s family to take things a little easier. They were the victims here, forced to leave their village on such a sour note.

“It is true that I am a nobleman. I won’t deny it.”

I couldn’t downplay my birth and standing. An aristocrat would only abase themselves in front of other nobility or royalty—that was a foundational assumption within this world’s society. Even if I did possess knowledge and memories from another world, I was currently a resident of *this* world, and that meant having to abide by its rules on interacting with other people. I certainly couldn’t deny my privilege as a nobleman when I was squeezing it for everything it was worth.

Besides, if I were to downplay my social privilege, how would it reflect on Mazel, bearer of the Heroism skill and future slayer of the Demon Lord? Glossing over the advantages of my birth would be a show of contempt for all Mazel had achieved. He was my friend and Lily’s older brother—I couldn’t do that to him.

“I think that your attitude is the correct one to take around a nobleman, Lily. But you could also see me as one of Mazel’s drinking buddies from school.”

“R-right,” Lily said after an awkward pause.

Oh man, now that I think about it, we really got up to all kinds of mischief during our school days. Looking back, we could have cleaned up our act a little,

but let's put that aside for now.

"So at least until we reach the capital, I wouldn't mind you treating me not as a noble but as Mazel's friend and partner in crime."

"Partner in crime..." Lily giggled. Yep, she was definitely cuter when she smiled. I bet she was a hit among the inn's customers.

Such thoughts ran through my head as I said, "Mazel usually takes the piss out of me when he sees me acting all noble-like."

I mean, I could hardly imagine myself putting on airs. I shrugged, and then continued in a deliberately light tone:

"I won't force you or anything, but that's just how I'd like things to be between us."

After some hesitation, Lily nodded. "Okay."

I was glad to see that her expression had loosened a little. I told her to get ready to depart, even though we really didn't have much stuff to prepare. Then I drained my cup with a single swig and headed for my horse.

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After a few hours of travel, we were far enough from the previous night's campsite to take another break. We had a quick bite to eat and let the horses rest. Up till then, we'd been able to push the horses hard thanks to our potions, but now that our supply had run dry, keeping their strength up was a real worry.

"Honestly, I want to press on a little further, but that's not really feasible, is it?" I mused.

"Right," said Benecke. "We must keep the horses' fatigue in check while keeping watch for the best grazing spots on our path."

"The best option would be a residence or a village."

"Sadly, we don't know the lay of the land, so all we can do is keep an eye out for things as we move forward."

I'd asked the veteran knight for advice and had Neurath and Schünzel close at

hand so they could listen in as well. Going forward, we'd have to keep an eye out for things as basic as whether there was drinkable water up ahead. This would inevitably slow us down. Even the Harting family didn't appear to know these parts too well, although I couldn't really blame them for that when they were too busy running their inn to visit the other villages.

In this world, the regions that didn't have towns or villages were located in the same sorts of places they would be in Earth's Middle Ages. You might find it easier to understand if you picture the Silk Road or a desert region. Much like how you look for oases as you move through a desert, traveling through a medieval-ish world meant looking for spots of civilization among the forests and wildlands. Traveling through an area where you didn't know the roads was akin to wandering a desert without a compass.

To make matters worse, the family was riding a horse-drawn cart meant for traversing village roads, not a carriage for long-distance transport. And even where there were roads, they were no more than dirt paths with no paving stones whatsoever. And there were a lot of places that didn't even have dirt paths. There was a limit to how fast we could go, however much we hurried.

In the end, although we were going faster than we would on foot, we were still lagging behind a proper marching pace. Well, beggars couldn't be choosers. Looking on the bright side, the refugee escort mission had given me a lot of useful experience in juggling our traveling distances with the horses' stamina.

Although I was worried about how things were going at Finoy, I figured that things would be okay as long as Mazel was there. It would be easier to entrust the fate of Finoy to him than me.

"It sure would be nice if we knew where to replenish our water," I said. "Maybe we should hire someone from a village to show us around."

"In that case, why don't we use the road that heads directly to Finoy?" Neurath suggested. "The path from Arlea to Finoy is well-trodden by pilgrims. I expect we'll find water along the way."

I'd considered the idea myself, but considering it was Reptipos that had come for the Harting family, there was a strong chance the Demon Commander Beliures would be at Finoy. And given that probability, it was too dangerous to

bring them near the temple.

“We’d have to be on the lookout for enemy reinforcements headed for Finoy...”

“That certainly is a problem.” Schünzel nodded.

Even if we assumed there were only a few monsters around, we’d still need to be vigilant.

If, say, someone were to pass through and trip the security net around Finoy, then they could very well get ambushed. At the moment, it was a better idea to evacuate to the capital.

It was also likely that bandits roamed the areas the Demon army had ravaged in its assault on Valeritz. With that in mind, I suspected that it would be dangerous for our small group to take any roads other than those the kingdom’s army had marched through.

Ultimately, every option had its risks. There weren’t many of us, and we had people to protect. I wanted to limit the risk of getting into a battle as much as possible. There were so many things to think about that it was making me queasy.

When I happened to glance at the surroundings, I noticed that the Harting family was picking herbs while accompanied by a guard. They were already well aware that we didn’t have any spare food to go around, so they probably wanted to help in whatever way they could. I felt a little bad that they felt the need to go out of their way for us.

“First things first, we need to hunt some monsters for today’s food,” Neurath said.

“Can’t say I’m not grateful to the monsters for coming to us when they know we’re around,” Schünzel quipped. “Unlike wild animals.”

I couldn’t help but smile awkwardly at this conversation. It sure was troublesome living in a society. Even a meager group of ten people had to fret over things like replenishing supplies. I hoped some Six-Legged Rabbits would show up.



In this world, you could live purely on eating monster rabbits, but in my old world, there were records of hunters dying because they fell on hard times and could only eat rabbits. The problem was so well known that there was even a term for it: rabbit starvation. This implied that the monster rabbits of this world only looked like rabbits on the outside and were fundamentally different on the inside. I knew basically nothing about that topic.

“Let’s keep an eye out for monsters for now,” I said. “We can get going after we’ve had a bit more rest.”

“Yessir.”

I also called over the Harting family and asked them to inspect the cart wheels. Just to be thorough, I inspected them myself as well and happened to notice something out of the ordinary. In the corner of the cart was a little bundle of cloth. Inside it was the stone we retrieved when we rescued Lily, the one that made me feel a strange, sinister presence.

I wasn’t versed in the appraisal of magic items, nor did I have any special skill that would allow me to sense magic. The very fact that I felt something from the stone intrigued me, although maybe that was just my intuition talking.

Just to be safe, I decided not to transport it next to the Harting family. After giving everyone a reminder about the dangers of the stone, I carefully fastened the bundle to one of our riderless horses.

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We were on the move. Even as I kept a watchful eye on the surroundings from astride my horse, I passed the time making small talk with the Harting family. Well, I called it “small talk,” but they would clamp up if I didn’t say something first. Unfortunately, I didn’t have a wealth of topics to whip out at times like this. I suppose this was one of the unfortunate side effects of having devoted my life to preparing for the future attack on the capital.

“Oh, I see. So you know a thing or two about herbs, huh?”

“I do. Our inn got a lot of acclaim for its food,” said Anna.

Despite everything that had unfolded, her pride in her cooking was still very much evident. That reminded me that she had somehow managed to retrieve a



bunch of cooking utensils and ingredients from the scorched ruins of the building.

In the medieval world, herbs had a broader influence than you might expect. Charlemagne was known to have ordered his attendants to raise seventy-three types of herbs in his imperial garden, and the list had been carefully preserved all the way to the twenty-first century. Some herbs on the list had descriptions like “effective against a witch’s hex.” Although this world’s herbs weren’t exactly the same, they were undeniably significant in their own right.

“Sounds like you’ve got some skills,” I commented. “If you start a restaurant in the capital, I’ll be sure to stop by.”

“Please do,” Lily answered happily.

As I pulled the reins on my horse, I let myself daydream a little about this hypothetical restaurant. If they did end up opening one, I’d love to take Drechsler and the others to “the place Mazel’s family runs.”

But that would probably have to wait until after the Demon Lord was done and dealt with. But wait, wouldn’t Mazel be moving way up in the world by then?

“Lord Zehrfeld, are there any foods you don’t care for?”

“None in particular.”

My efforts at striking up conversations here and there had clearly borne fruit, seeing as our interactions had lost much of their stiffness. But still, I found it a bit hard to make conversation with the commoners of this world—especially the female ones. I honestly felt grateful when she came up with something first.

“You can’t afford to be a picky eater on the battlefield, so now I can eat pretty much anything. Of course, I’ll always appreciate good food.”

“So do even noblemen eat bland or boring food?”

“Well... It depends.”

The bias—or, I guess, subjective viewpoint—that noblemen automatically ate better food than everyone else appeared to exist in this world as well. People were half-right about it, I suppose. It was a fact that noblemen had plenty of

opportunity to feast on delicious food.

What I didn't say out loud (because this was not the place for it) was that war rations were filled with horror stories, like soup flavored solely with bugs. I had no idea about its nutritional value, but as far as the taste went, you were way better off just having boiled water.

"Oh yeah, what was that tea you gave me earlier?"

"Ah, I made that from the dried leaves of a root vegetable..."

"Ohh, I see."

Much like the historical Middle Ages, people generally used everything they could of a root vegetable so long as it wasn't rotten. People even used turnip leaves on the regular. Putting aside the amount of root vegetables you could cultivate, the fact that this world had so many types of them reaffirmed that this was a video game setting. Although I hadn't laid eyes on them, it wouldn't surprise me if this world conveniently happened to grow a potato substitute.

"I didn't mind it at all," I continued. "It was a nice change of pace."

"Thank goodness," Lily whispered in relief. Perhaps she was worried about getting scolded for feeding a nobleman something so alien to his typical palate.

Not that I would have raised a stink—if it tasted good, I wasn't going to complain. I wasn't a fussy eater even back in my old world. I didn't have any particularly bad food-related memories, although that might have just been because there wasn't much I felt strongly about in either direction. Perhaps that aspect of my personality served me well in this world, where I had to put up with all the discomforts of going into battle. As for any painful memories... Meh, that wasn't worth going into.

"If you'd like, I can make everyone's dinner tonight as well," suggested Ari. Being the owner of the inn, he was apparently no mean chef himself.

"I'd appreciate that very much," I said without hesitation. For better or worse, any food prepared by the knights would be bog-standard war rations.

Just as I was responding, however, I felt a sort of prickling down my neck.

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“Master Werner.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed.”

The human senses were a strange thing. To use an example from my old world, people could tell when someone they knew called out their name even in a crowded station. And now, my ability to detect danger or the so-called killing intent was sharpened. Maybe it was because the senses became more acute when you were on edge.

I did a quick scan of my surroundings. This area didn’t have many irregularities or quirks. There were some slight rises and dips, and it wasn’t particularly vast. That was about it. In this terrain, the monsters wouldn’t have any advantage over humans. In fact, if we had to face them, this would be a good place for it.

“Everyone, get off your horses and take up defensive positions,” I ordered as I dismounted and shepherded my horse to the rear. “Ari, Anna, Lily, you should all stay put.”

The knights were consummate professionals indeed, because they all seemed to have realized what was going on. Without missing a beat, they drew their weapons and got into position, each one keeping watch in a different direction, covering everywhere an enemy could potentially approach from. One of the tried and tested rules for keeping guard as a team was determining in advance which direction each person would watch.

The horses, also well-trained, remained still and quiet next to the cart. As long as the monsters didn’t attack them directly, they would probably stay put.

I retrieved the spear I had slung across my back. Anytime I had to be ready for trouble while on the road, I generally used a special shoulder strap to keep my spear fastened diagonally across my back. Magic bags were expensive, which meant that there were a lot of things you couldn’t immediately have on hand. And if I strapped the spear to a different horse, I wouldn’t be able to bring it to bear immediately at times like this.

Before long, multiple bipedal monsters showed up from the thicket. In their cart, the Harting family stiffened. Perhaps they were getting flashbacks to when Lily got kidnapped.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of this.”

I did not take my eyes away from the enemies as I spoke. I wasn’t trying to be cool or anything. Putting aside the possibility that, as I’d seen in prior battles, the monsters could act faster than we could react, I wasn’t going to let a monster beat me in this situation. And I wasn’t going to let them lay a hand on Mazel’s family. I wouldn’t be able to look Mazel in the eyes if that were to happen.

I quickly took stock of my opponents: four spear-wielding Frogmen, two Lizardmen with scimitars, an Alligator Warrior clutching a stone axe, and a Snake Priest behind it, carrying a staff. Eight enemies in total, then.

The Snake Priest would likely use magic. Although the frogs were amphibians, they often appeared as monsters in the same areas as the reptilian ones. I guess they were treated as grunts in Beliures’s army.

I wondered how these guys got here. Did they track the Harting family all the way from Arlea Village, or did they come from Finoy’s direction? I would have to figure that out later.

“Let’s go with pattern number two for dealing with these guys. Watch out for the snake’s poison. Benecke, I’m counting on you.”

“As you command.”

Because we’d already worked out what we were going to do if any monsters appeared, I didn’t have to give out any further orders. I readied my spear and exchanged baleful glares with a Frogman, but only for an instant. The next moment, it kicked off the ground with a remarkable leap. So these guys did jump attacks, huh? The game had relied on text to describe their actions, with no animation to speak of.

Meanwhile, a group of armored knights charged, closing the distance with the enemy. They weren’t aiming for the frontlines, though. They dashed straight past the Frogmen and the Lizard Warrior and homed in on the Snake Priest. The Lizardmen at the center of the group were evidently surprised that the humans ran past them. They tried to stop the knights, only for Benecke’s group to close in and cut them off.

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My commands were like something out of a game, in a sense: take out the mage first, especially if it was a healer. I assembled a team of knights who were particularly confident in their combat skills so they could neutralize a mage in short order.

The second team would attack the enemy or assist their allies as the opportunity arose. Their role was basically to protect the first team's back, although it was important to be flexible and adapt to the situation. This required people with a good head for decision-making, so I assigned Benecke and another veteran knight to the job. After the first team defeated the mage, they would move in to assist the second team with fighting their enemies.

The third team, consisting of Neurath and Schünzel, was tasked with attacking any monsters that came near the Harting family. Although they were both perfectly capable as knights, they had less combat experience than their companions, so I had them focus on a single task. They didn't have to worry about anything. Although I was initially part of their team, I planned to join up with the second team once there were fewer enemies.

A Frogman leaped in front of us. Fortunately, its movements were monotonous and predictable. I was initially surprised at seeing it jump so high, but when I thought about it rationally, the knights I'd trained with showed way fewer openings.

"Don't stand underneath where it's going to land. You don't want it to take control of the flow of the battle!" I called out to Neurath and Schünzel.

Contrary to my own instructions, however, I actually ran for where the Frogman would land. I planted my feet on the ground and thrust my spear up diagonally in an anti-air pattern. I had the longer and sturdier spear. Because my opponent was falling from the sky, their weight would be concentrated on the tip of my spear. The result: the tip ran through the Frogman's lower jaw and into its head. A rasping gasp—or, I suppose, croak—seeped from its mouth and into the air.

When your feet are off the ground, you can't move your body around to respond to your opponent's movements or the proximity of their weapon. To

put it another way, anyone who couldn't fly was basically a sitting duck in the air. The Frogman could jump, sure, but it couldn't change course in midair, and it couldn't dodge my strike.

With a sharp exhale, I extracted my spear from the Frogman's head, then I swung it to the side in a wide arc to keep the Alligator Warrior creeping up on me in check. Meanwhile, Neurath and Schünzel each started hacking away at a Frogman. The two Lizardmen were engaged in one-on-one battles against the two members of the second team.

The Alligator Warrior moved its head. Mentally, I worked out the trajectory of its gaze. *Ah, I see.* I nodded. These monsters hadn't hemmed us in simply because they were drawn to our scent, but for a very specific purpose. In that case, I could anticipate their order of priorities. Just as I was thinking that I could hold the fort until the first and second groups finished off their opponents, the last remaining Frogman turned its gaze.

Not at me or any of the knights, but at the Harting family.

I moved before the Frogman's gaze could even settle on its target. As I retreated from the Alligator Warrior's strike, I took a big step and thrust my spear, not at the Alligator Warrior in front of me but at the Frogman that was just about to jump. The spear penetrated the monster's belly. The Frogman let out an agonized croak that was difficult to describe in words.

Although I'd made good use of my spear's reach, stabbing the Frogman had put me into an awkward, unbalanced lunge. The Alligator Warrior came at me, brandishing its stone axe. Okay, good, I got it to target me. I had a good reason for showing an opening.

I had no intention of taking my eyes off the enemy's movements in this situation. I made sure my feet were steady as I pulled my spear out of the Frogman and turned the butt end toward the Alligator Warrior. Then, with a leaping motion, I closed the distance between myself and my foe.

This was closer than I would need to bring my spear to bear. It was more like we were in wrestling range. As the Alligator Warrior brought its weapon down, my body collided violently not against the stone axe but the arm that held it. At the same time as my armor wailed under the monster's brute strength, the butt

of my spear rammed into the beast's lower jaw. I put my full weight into the strike, which caused the Alligator Warrior to reel back sharply.

With centrifugal force on its side, a single hit from a weapon like a stone axe could be devastating. By jumping into close quarters, my body would take the force of its arm rather than its axe, avoiding the worst of its swing's momentum. It was quite a reckless way of doing things, but this was the best way to avoid the fatal wound it was trying to inflict on me. But dear lord, that stung!

Having been struck by the hard butt of my spear, the Alligator Warrior staggered back several paces, creating some distance between us. I took this time to readjust my spear once more, stifling my pain as I did so. The Frogman with the pierced belly had gotten up and was trying to lunge for the Hartings. I finished it off with a thrust through its neck.

These schmucks might have been trying to abduct the Harting family, but I wouldn't be surprised if they'd decided it wouldn't hurt to kill one of the members. My priority was to keep the entire family safe and intact. I wouldn't let these fiends have their way.

"Master Werner!"

"Don't worry about me, you two!" I shouted at the knights behind me.

They answered with a short but spirited cry. Feeling their motivation flow into me, I turned back to the Alligator Warrior and sized it up. When I thrust my spear in its direction, it battered my weapon away with its axe. Alternatively, it might have been trying to shatter my spear altogether, but unfortunately for it, my spear wasn't flimsy enough to break so easily. Although it managed to deflect my spear away from my target, I still scored a gash in its shoulder. My arm shuddered as if I'd struck steel instead of the beast's scaly skin.

Maybe this sudden reversal had shaken it up, or perhaps it had realized the threat I posed. Either way, the Alligator Warrior turned its focus to me. I loosened my stance and shrugged my shoulders conspicuously. Upon seeing my dismissive gesture, it lunged at me with a snarl. Okay, good. All I needed to do now was just buy time.

As I dodged a heavy swing of my opponent's axe, I countered with an attack



of my own, keeping the monster busy. I didn't have to put up with this for long. Once Neurath and Schünzel finished dispatching their Frogmen, they came running my way. Taking up positions at my left and right, they brought their blades down upon the Alligator Warrior. Even with its tough skin and scales, it couldn't just shrug off a sword slash at close range.

Seeing that the Alligator Warrior had sustained damage, I made a quick scan of the battlefield. The fight seemed to be going our way. Once the three knights hunting down the Snake Priest had eliminated their target, they went on to cut down one of the two Lizardmen from behind.

When I saw that the knights were moving toward the last remaining Lizardman, I thrust my spear at the Alligator Warrior's face to drive it back. Then I retreated a few steps myself, buying some space to check if the Harting family was all right. I was relieved to see that there weren't any extra squads around.

While I was scanning the surroundings, the first and second groups made quick work of most of our enemies. Finally, they surrounded the Alligator Warrior, which was still locked in combat with Neurath and Schünzel. They came at it from behind, cutting and slashing, and however tough it may have been, it was now at their mercy. Confident we had the situation in hand, I assessed the field more thoroughly. At the corner of my eye, I saw one of the knights from the first group lying prone on the ground.

"Neurath, Schünzel, keep blocking the enemy's attacks. Benecke, you and the others need to aim for its arms!"

So saying, I rejoined the fray. Whenever the Alligator Warrior moved to attack someone, I aimed for its arms or eyes before it could make a move. I was worried about the fallen knight, but it was equally important to make sure that we didn't suffer any further injuries.

Finally, after we quite literally ganged up on the Alligator Warrior, the monster crumpled to the ground and stopped moving.

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"What happened?!" I rushed over the fallen, immobile knight.

One of the other knights from the first team approached as well. "It appears

he's been poisoned," he said.

The man seemed to be conscious. After ordering the other knights to keep an eye on the surroundings, I hurriedly retrieved some antidotes from our supply bags and started treating him.

The treatment must have come just in time because his pallor immediately improved. Alas, unlike the game, an antidote wasn't so handy that it could instantly restore your health to its previous state. It didn't remove the numbness in one's body, nor did it restore your energy. Video game medicine could take you from the brink of death to walking around like nothing happened. A crude comparison, I guess.

"Sorry, but I'll have this man ride in the cart," I told the Hartings.

"Of course. That's fine with us."

Another knight helped me carry the man to the cart. The family seemed willing to watch over the patient. I thanked them and left the matter in their hands.

When I asked the knights from the team about what happened, they explained to me that he covered his throat with his arm when the Snake Priest tried to bite his windpipe. Its fangs must have been insanely sharp if they could penetrate a knight's gauntlet. I'd heard stories from the adventurers, but I'd still been underprepared.

When the knights had finished rounding up the monster body parts and magic stones, I told them to collect their weapons too. We ditched the stone axe because it was too heavy, which left us with the Snake Priest's staff, two scimitars from the Lizardmen, and the spears from the four Frogmen. It wasn't much, but selling them would give our travel purse some extra weight.

"Master Werner, what are you planning to do now?"

"We'll wait a little longer while we heal the injured and rest up. Don't slack off on keeping watch."

I figured that, after taking into consideration the time we spent on the move after lunch, it wouldn't hurt to spend a little longer on recovery. As I was appraising the monsters' weapons, though, I realized something strange. The

quality was standardized. This struck me as unusual, and I was still puzzling over it when a knight called out to me.

“Master Werner, over there...!”

Snapping out of my musings, I looked where the knight was pointing. What I saw made me breathe a huge sigh of relief.

A thin column of cooking smoke—the telltale sign of human civilization—stark against the evening sky.

Two knights went ahead to make contact, while the rest of us made our way as quick as we could to the village. I gave my name and handed over the magic stones we’d just collected as payment for staying at the inn. This would spare us from camping outside for the night.

Although it would be misleading to describe it as an afterthought, I also took the opportunity to exchange our leftover magic stones and the monsters’ weapons for things we would need for the journey. I got wooden clogs for the Harting family, as well as a few sundries. When the villagers told me that they would have it all ready by the next day, I was relieved. I made sure to thank them, even if I did have to maintain my aristocratic facade the whole time. If I got reincarnated again in Japan, I think I’d make for a convincing aristocrat on stage.

All in all, I was glad our reception hadn’t been a reprise of Arlea Village, even if that was only due to me being upfront about my noble status. I rented out the inn with the hope of letting the Harting family and the poisoned knight get some rest. Since we only had one night before we hit the road again, I made sure to tell the village chief that he needn’t extend his hospitalities any further.

I suspected that rumors, at the very least, of Valeritz’s demise had spread to this village. The villagers likely saw the presence of nearly ten knights in their town as a godsend. As a show of gratitude for their warm welcome, and to allay our own worries of a monster attack, we decided to set a watch over the village. Except for the Hartings and the injured knight, we each took a shift (myself included) looking out into the dark of the night.

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My turn came late at night. I went outside with another person. Although we weren't wearing armor, we had overcoats over our uniforms. If something were to invade the village from without, having guards outside the buildings would allow us to spot it as quickly as possible. I left the front door to my partner, while I kept watch by the rear entrance. Duly occupied, I decided to pursue my earlier train of thought a little further.

During the fight, the Alligator Warrior pointed its gaze in a particular direction, and the Frogmen likewise focused their attacks against the Harting family. From these two pieces of information, I could imagine what their priorities were. My guess was that acquiring the mysterious stone was at the top of their list.

But it was hard to imagine that high-and-mighty Lizard Magician had anticipated his own failure. When the enemy realized that the unthinkable had happened—the Lizard Magician had perished—then it was natural for them to assume that interlopers in Arlea Village's vicinity had come to take the stone.

At this point, nothing had actually happened with the stone. Just having it in one's possession didn't do anything. To put it in video game terms, it was more like a McGuffin that drove the plot forward.

I'd been able to work out that much, but I didn't have a clue about anything beyond that. I wouldn't even dream of fiddling with the stone to see if something would happen. It would be unbearable if it was some kind of event item that used a human sacrifice to trigger a Demon Stampede or something.

Anyway, I could see that this was a dangerous thing to have around, and I decided to pass it off to some kind of specialist the first chance I got. Looking back, I should have given it to Willy and Firat, but I wasn't thinking that far ahead at the time. I decided to just consider myself grateful that they didn't have a run-in with the Snake Priest.

There was one other thing. In the game, every type of monster had the same sprites, so I didn't think too hard about it, but in reality there was something quite eerie about encountering monsters with identical equipment. Claws and fangs were one thing, but what really stood out was how uniform the equipment was among monsters of the same breed. Although there were some

monsters that just happened to spawn with weapons in hand, it was extremely weird upon consideration for small fry like goblins and Frogmen to bear identical equipment.

But this reminded me of something else I knew, related to this topic: Monsters carried treasure chests inside of them, and by slaying the monsters, you could obtain equipment and items from those chests. Nobody knew how those items got preserved, but the quality was always uniform. If this wasn't just some video game thing, how did it work?

Maybe this operated under the same logic as the towns and nobility that didn't exist in the game, but which did exist in this reality. There were monsters that I didn't know of from the game. Much like how humans cultivated pigs and lambs and whatnot, perhaps there were undiscovered monsters being bred as livestock from which these weapons were harvested. Or maybe those monsters crafted the weapons. It was a tentative theory.

The Turks from central Asia often supplied iron to medieval Europe, among other unique exports. For example, the legendary swords Excalibur and Caladbolg were modeled on the Ulfberht swords. Many of them were exceptionally durable, and they maintained their deadliness even after being buried in the ground. They were a marked improvement over many other swords made in medieval Europe. Multiple swords with Ulfberht inscriptions were unearthed in later years, giving rise to the theory that the name referred to a region or the manufacturer.

Although plenty of Ulfberht swords have been excavated from the graves of their owners, the reason behind their sturdiness had long been a mystery. It was only in the twenty-first century that people were able to pinpoint the impurities from the ground inside the metal. Through this, people discovered that the high-quality steel in the blades came from central Asia, not Europe. At the time, it was probably more accurate to describe the Silk Road in central Asia as an Iron Road. Such was the secret behind the Ulfberht's steel.

This world didn't have a counterpart to central Asia, a region outside of its cultural sphere from which it sourced raw materials. Although there were mines, there were hardly enough to support the manufacture and use of metalworks to such an extent.

But if the treasure chests produced by monsters were a source of metal, then this would address the imbalance between the supply and the demand. Monsters showed up just about everywhere, never mind how that happened. It wasn't uncommon to melt down a monster's weapon and armor to use as a metal source. Much like how my old world had urban mining, you could say that this world had monster mining.

And if the items produced by monsters always had the same level of quality, then I could swallow the idea that monsters of the same species would always carry the same weapon.

This still left the question of how those monsters created steel swords and shields. But this *was* a world where people could shoot fireballs and ice arrows. I wouldn't be surprised if someone could just straight up create a gold ingot out of nowhere... Okay, that was a lie. I'd probably lose my mind if I saw that happening in front of me.

Anyway, if my theory was correct, then these monsters were even more of an enigma than I'd thought. Maybe the Demon Lord had some kind of factory that started churning out monsters again when he returned. This implied that the ancestors of monsters must have existed before the Demon Lord's time.

I had no idea how the timeline worked. I wasn't likely to see any further information about any of this, so I would just have to leave it alone. There was no point getting lost in my own speculations, so I decided to stop thinking for now and start focusing on the more pressing question of what to do tomorrow.

Just as I'd shifted my thoughts to a different track, I heard the sound of wooden clogs from inside the building.

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Instinctively, I turned to the source of the sound. Lily gazed back at me in surprise. She'd opened the back door of the inn, careful not to make a sound. I guess she didn't know that I was standing outside the building. I figured I might as well say something to her.

"Good evening. Something up?"

We may have been in the safety of a village, but she really didn't strike me as

the type of girl who would walk around alone at night. I wondered if there was some kind of problem, so I figured I'd ask.

"G-good evening," Lily said, slightly hesitantly but also apologetically. "No, um... I just couldn't sleep, so I wanted a bit of fresh air."

"That makes sense."

I accepted her answer for now. It may have been presumptuous of me, but I studied her face more closely. Lily fidgeted in discomfort. Maybe a bit *too* presumptuous.

"Er, um, is something the matter?" she said.

"Oh, nah, I was just thinking that you don't seem to be straining yourself, at least."

Although I didn't have any sentimental attachment to Arlea Village, Lily must have, since she'd been born and raised there. Honestly, I wouldn't have been a bit surprised if she'd been crying, but though I could see hints of fatigue on her features, there was no trace of tears. That didn't necessarily mean that she *wasn't* straining herself, but it looked to me as if she'd come to terms with the situation.

Just as I was thinking that, Lily's expression turned downcast.

"To be honest, I was scared," she said quietly, "and I wanted to cry. But..."

"But?"

"When my brother went to the capital, I made a promise to him. That I wouldn't let my anxiety control me. That's why...I'm fine," she said, flashing me a smile. It did seem slightly put-on, but I could see the depth of her resolve, not just for her parents' peace of mind, but for Mazel's sake as well.

Seeing that expression of hers, I couldn't help but feel remorse well up in me.

If Mazel's strength was firm and unyielding, then Lily's was supple and graceful. She chose to accept her situation without despairing. Moreover, she had it in her to be considerate of other people, including the absent Mazel. She was, at the very least, far stronger than me, a guy who'd thought only of saving himself when he was reincarnated into this world.



I thought about how I ought to comfort her, for all sorts of reasons: because of noblesse oblige, because she was Mazel's sister, because I was older than her, because she was a girl. But that was just my foolish, embarrassing ego at work.

She was living her best life in this world. Her adaptability gave her a power that surpassed my imagination. It would be a disservice to her strength to reduce her to a damsel in distress.

...Okay, I was done feeling bad. This wasn't the time for pensive silence.

"Oh, really? You're a remarkable person, Lily."

It felt weird to tell someone to their face that they were "great" or "strong," so I sidestepped to "remarkable." Still, I genuinely did want to commend her mental strength.

"Th-that's not true... I think."

"Then might I say you have remarkable aspects, then?" I said as I bowed my head, sincerely now, not as part of my noble facade.

In this world, a bow and scrape were second only to offering up one's sword to a lady. It went well beyond the realm of common courtesy. You could say it was the highest show of esteem I could offer a woman with whom I shared no special bonds.

"Wh-what?!" Lily said tremulously.

I doubted that she grasped all the implications of my gesture. She probably reacted that way simply because she never would've expected a man of the nobility to lower his head before her. Maybe I'd come on a bit too strong. I didn't want to make Lily uncomfortable or anything, so I quickly changed the subject.

"Oh, but you oughtn't catch a cold." I nonchalantly shifted to a more casual way of speaking. I wouldn't be able to take it if she went back to treating me like a nobleman.

As I spoke, I draped my overcoat over her shoulders, prompting her to look at me with surprise.

“Y-you’re right. Um, Lord Zehrfeld...”

“Ah, if that’s a mouthful for you, you can just call me Werner.”

Something in my own words sparked a memory in me, prompting a small laugh to slip out my lips.

Lily cocked her head in bemusement. “Er, um, what are you thinking about?”

“Oh, nothing, it’s just that your brother said my name was a mouthful. I couldn’t help but laugh at the memory.”

Freakin’ Mazel complained that my name was too hard to pronounce, so I told him, “You can just call me Werner.” How long ago was that, again? It felt like ages.

“He was totally cool with calling me Werner. I hope you will as well, Lily.”

After some slight hesitation, Lily smiled. “Okay. I will do my best.”

I got the feeling that this wasn’t something you had to “do your best” at, but I decided not to point that out. “Are you cold?”

“I’m fine. Should I get you something warm, Lord Ze...Werner?”

“Nah, I’d feel bad if I was the only one getting something. I appreciate the thought, though.”

“Is that...so?” Lily looked slightly dejected.

“Besides, if you prepared something for me now, you really wouldn’t get any sleep at all tonight, Lily,” I said jokingly. Lily rewarded me with a little laugh.

I wasn’t actually joking, though. Although the inn had firewood, it was a valuable resource, so all fires were put out at night, leaving nothing but smoldering embers. The whole process of transferring the firewood to a stove, making a fire, scooping up water, and setting it to boil would leave you wide awake by the time you were done. Running water and gas stoves were godly creations. Although this world had magic items that could start a fire, this place didn’t have one.

“Instead of going through all that hassle, I think you ought to go back to your room and rest up before you get too cold. You wouldn’t want to be straining

your body while we're on the road."

"You're right. Thank you. I'll go inside in a bit," Lily said.

We stayed together a little longer, chatting underneath the moonlit sky. She asked me to tell her about the capital, so I brought up some inoffensive anecdotes. When I told her that the roads became so crowded with people that it became hard to walk during the early morning markets, her eyes widened in surprise. Yeah, I doubted that was an everyday occurrence in a village.

"Um..." The conversation had reached a temporary lull. "May I ask you a question?" Lily asked me abruptly, after some slight hesitation.

Judging by her tone, she didn't seem to have anything particularly heavy on her mind. She seemed unable to hold back her curiosity about something.

"Sure, go ahead," I said.

"I was wondering, um... Why do you have long hair?"

"Oh, that."

I pulled my hair, which was tied up in a low ponytail, out from behind me and let it swish lightly. Come to think of it, it was rather rare for male aristocrats to grow out their hair. It wasn't like my reasons were a big secret or anything, but...hmm.

"Ah... Well, first I should say, you don't have to worry about it."

"Huh...?" Lily cocked her head in puzzlement.

When I told Mazel about the reasoning behind my hair, he gave me such a deeply pitying look from the bottom of his heart. I had the premonition that this was going to be a repeat performance.

"It's a superstition, you could say."

"A superstition?"

The Japanese word I was using had its origins in Buddhism. It was a mystery how the people of this world could understand it, but I decided to not dwell on it. Maybe the word was simply being translated that way in my brain. Anyway.

"When I was a child, I got into an accident. The carriage my older brother and

I were riding in got flipped over.”

Just saying that caused Lily’s easy expression to flicker. She looked like she regretted asking the question. Perhaps she had guessed what I was going to say next.

“Back then, my brother set off on a journey beyond the light. I haven’t cut my hair since then.”

Well, it wasn’t as if I wouldn’t die as long as I didn’t cut my hair. But from the moment I remembered that I *could* die after the Demon Lord returned, I clung to whatever I could for survival, and that included superstition. That was an undeniable fact.

That said, I wasn’t capable of growing facial hair back then. Knights often swore not to cut their beards when making a hallowed vow, so as a compromise, I decided not to cut my hair. And that’s how I ended up with a long mane. I couldn’t deny that it also served as a connection between me and my brother.

“I...I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“That’s why I told you not to worry about it.”

I was being genuine, but I didn’t want her looking at me with such a depressed face. I decided to change the subject.

“By the way...”

“Y-yes?”

I realized when I called out to her that I didn’t actually have anything to talk about. I looked up at the night sky. The stars were so pretty. *Ah, right.*

“Apparently, there’s a country out there that gives names to the stars.”

By “country,” I meant “world.” This world didn’t have the concept of constellations. Perhaps this was because, according to the local religion, the stars represented the countless wishes of the gods. It might not have occurred to the people here to associate the shapes with other creatures or objects. It was kind of darkly symbolic for wishes to be located in a place so far out of anyone’s reach.

“Giving names...to stars?”

“For instance, take that red star over there. If you connect it to that little star on the left...”

When I traced a neat line between several prominent stars, Lily spoke up. “Is that...a bird?” It sounded like she was catching on.

“From the size, you could say it’s a pigeon.”

There wasn’t any frame of comparison, so it was hard to say whether it was small or large. Just as that thought ran through my head, Lily giggled. “It is a bit cute, now that you mention it.”

“A big one would be an eagle or a hawk.”

Maybe I should think of a knightly constellation, like a horse or something. Coming up with a horse-shaped constellation seemed like a pain.

“What other shapes does that country have?”

“I can’t say I’m too familiar. You can always come up with the constellations for this country, though. Now’s as good a time as any.”

I didn’t have much interest in astronomy, so I hardly remembered any of the constellations from my old world. Besides, I was pretty sure that the stars were in completely different positions in this world, considering that this was a different planet altogether.

If the concept of constellations were to take root at this point in time, people might come up with one to represent Mazel as the Hero. Or so I’d thought when I brought this topic up.









She looked up at the starry sky once more, her eyes bright with interest. “In that case, what about this one...?”

Carefully and thoughtfully, she drew lines between several stars. More than anything, I was relieved to see that the guilt had left her mind. But now, seeing her sparkling eyes, I found myself being stirred by an overwhelming sense of curiosity. I decided to keep talking with her for a while. Through this line of conversation, I discovered that Lily was a quick study. I couldn't help but admire her, but that was all off topic.

Eventually, after Lily let loose a little sneeze, I bade her to go back to her room. We exchanged farewells, and my eyes followed her as she disappeared into the inn. There was absolutely nothing amorous about our conversation, but I figured that it might have been a nice change of pace for Lily. Or maybe it was more of a reprieve for me.

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The next morning, the Harting family used our leftover ingredients to make breakfast. Our bellies were sated, and even the injured knight seemed to have recovered his stamina. I ordered everyone to let him help himself to a bit more food.

The family was present too since we were all dining in the same food hall. Fortunately, none of the knights objected to sharing the room with commoners. Perhaps it was because the family was always trying to be helpful and the food they made for us was delicious, or maybe it was because the knights had seen just how bad things had been for them at Arlea. Either way, it was heartening to see some camaraderie taking root.

I noticed some of the knights sneaking furtive glances at Lily as she served them their drinks. Thankfully, their behavior wasn't yet on a level that could be described as improper. Besides, it wasn't as if I couldn't understand how they felt about a cute girl, so I pretended not to notice their indiscretions. I'd have to give a warning if anyone crossed a line, but otherwise it wasn't anything to get worked up over.

After the meal, I took Neurath and Schünzel with me to pay a courtesy call to the village chief and thank him for the impromptu accommodations. He'd also

prepared the things we'd asked for, so all we needed to do was run a quick check to confirm the contents. This really saved us a lot of time.

Unfortunately, however, we weren't able to get a guide. This was understandable. For the sake of its own protection, the village needed all its young folk close at hand, and it would have been difficult for us to guarantee their safety while on the road. At least they pointed us in the direction of a neighboring village.

After parting ways with the village chief, we returned to the inn. I brought the bags to the front of the establishment so the Hartings could see what we'd procured as well. When they saw the small mountain of fabrics, Ari and the others gaped in surprise.

"What is this...?"

"Changes of clothes. You'll be meeting up with some guards and then heading straight for the capital. You'll need it for the journey."

I wasn't kidding. Those of us who took to the battlefield often stuck with the clothes on our backs as long as they hadn't fallen apart, but I wasn't going to force the Harting family to do the same, especially not when they'd brought so little when they left their village. If our traveling pace remained steady, they'd be camping outside for quite a few nights to come. Plus, they'd need the garments once they started living in the capital.

"This large cloth and this clump of wax will be your rain gear. When the weather looks like it's taking a turn for the worse, I want you to smear a liberal dose of wax all over the cloth. If you stay underneath it, it'll keep the rain off you."

That was what rainwear was like in this world. Although aristocrats could wear waterproof leather fashioned from monster body parts, that sort of stuff was hard to come by for common folk.

We were lucky to get rain gear for the Harting family in such short order. When you were out on the road, getting wet would sap your strength more drastically than you would imagine. Although we had to exchange quite a lot of magic stones and monster body parts for just clothes and rainwear, I couldn't afford to scrimp on things that had such a direct impact on one's health and

livelihood.

On that note, because cloth was such a valuable commodity, large tents like the ones you'd see in my old world were a luxury item. This large piece of cloth was more like a giant sleeping bag that the whole family could get into. The wax, meanwhile, was mainly sourced from beehives. You could also use animal fat as a substitute. Both, as it happened, were also fire hazards. This world was the same as the Middle Ages in that regard.

There were some monsters that could be harvested for their wax, but this world's equivalent of a waxworm was as large as a telephone pole, and you had to extract the wax from their bodily fluids. Although they were weak to fire, burning them made it impossible to extract the wax. This meant that they were easy to slay yet difficult to harvest from. Anyone freaked out by the sight of bugs would probably find those monsters revolting.

"This is a water flask. Refill it wherever you can."

Most readily available water flasks were made of leather, wood, or metal, although some varieties were made of monster body parts. Because water could leak from leather containers if they weren't sewn properly, using a cheap leather flask had its risks. It wasn't uncommon to find over a tenth of your water gone before you even knew it. The other options had their downsides—wooden containers were heavy, while metal ones were expensive. You couldn't normally buy flasks made of monster hide from villages, so those were out of the equation entirely.

I showed the Harting family a bunch of traveling items and told them what they needed to know for the journey. Because none of them were familiar with traveling, I proceeded as if they knew nothing, explaining everything right down to the basics. Probably to an annoying degree.

While I was at it, I sourced some food for the horses. Villages often kept fodder around for their agricultural horses, but they often sold the feed in individual bundles, which amounted to some insane costs when you had a lot of mouths to feed. The prices were high enough that soldiers often pillaged villages for fodder when at war. And on top of that, we'd also need grain for the fodder.

Just contemplating the mounting expenses made my head spin, but I couldn't let that show on my face. I continued my explanation while maintaining a face of perfect calm.

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After we left the village, I spent the next few days keeping up the guard work and hunting monsters. Listening to stories about Mazel's childhood helped pass the time.

Then, one morning...

"Master Werner."

"Mhmm. They got here faster than I thought."

I'd initially tensed at the approaching group, which had a carriage in tow. Then I saw that the rider at the front was the captain of the second group from the aqueduct patrol mission. All the members from groups one and two had shown up. I only knew these people by face, so I was glad that there wasn't time for any imposters to try and pull one over us.

"Lord Werner, I apologize for keeping you waiting."

"I've caused you a lot of trouble, but we can talk about that later. I want you to take the Harting family to my father in the capital."

"It shall be done, my lord."

An encouraging response. I was really counting on these guys.

"How goes the battle?"

"Our army has attacked the rear of the Demon army. The fighting has lasted for several days and is currently at a stalemate."

"How are things at Finoy?"

"The temple has yet to be breached."

Inwardly, I breathed a massive sigh of relief. It looked like Feli had done his job well. Then I decided to ask about something painfully basic.

"By the way, who is the supreme commander?"

“That would be Duke Gründing.”

Whoa. The head of the queen’s family. Kind of a big deal! My eyes glazed over. I sure hoped I’d be able to get away with my insubordination with just a stern talking-to.

Oh right, now that I thought about it, that guy was Laura’s maternal grandfather. He definitely had a personal stake in this. Come to think of it, though, he never showed up in the game. Oh well, best not to think about that.

“And the other commanders?”

I soon regretted my question. Marquesses Norpoth and Schramm were, of course, in charge of the first and second orders of the knight brigade. I also had no complaints about the mage squad leader. But there were over twenty noble houses participating in the charge, led by an assortment of counts, viscounts, and so forth. How many soldiers were they throwing at the problem? On that note, what were they doing about supplies?

It would be terrible to lose the battle, but a drawn-out fight would be dangerously costly.

“Duke Seyfert also arrived the other day, leading the supply squad.”

“Oh, now I get it.”

The supply squad also needed to eat... They’d probably accounted for that, of course. Which meant that, including porters and the various other noncombatant roles, there were probably just over thirty thousand people assembled at the battlefield.

In the medieval world, particularly in the early period before the agricultural revolution and the population spike, one didn’t really imagine overwhelmingly large armies. Well before the Middle Ages, though, the republic of Rome was known to mobilize forces in the tens of thousands (the quality of the soldiers was a different story). Charlemagne, the father of Europe, had an army of 150,000 at his command.

Such a large army had never been mobilized in the game. Well, more to the point, only the Hero’s party was supposed to be present here. The story had changed in so many different ways that I didn’t know how to react.

Maybe it was a good thing that Mazel and the others were already holed up inside Finoy. If they'd been outside instead, the nobles might have forced unreasonable tasks on them.

In any case, I would have to show my face to bigwigs like the two dukes. My stomach turned at the thought of it. Though I guess I deserved this for ditching the army on my own accord.

"All right. I'll head to Finoy from here. I leave the Harting family in your hands."

"Yessir."

I'd exchanged almost all the monster body parts at my disposal. This meant that I'd need some other way to reward the knights for their service, including for the stuff they'd done previously. I'd been trying not to put a strain on the family coffers, but what was I going to do about this? I might have to grovel in front of my father again.

As worried as I was about our finances, I couldn't forget about my other commitments. There was a lot of information to pass along: about the Harting family getting targeted by the monsters, about the increasing precariousness of the roads, and so on. It took time to cover everything.

Once I got that all done, though, I went over to the Harting family to exchange farewells and tell them that I would be returning to my military duties. I'd given an abridged version of what was going on, so they understood my circumstances well enough.

"Sir Viscount, please take good care of my son."

"I sure will," I said with a strident smile. How else was I supposed to react to such a request? I didn't see the need to make them feel worried.

That said, if you considered how strong each of us was, it was more like Mazel taking care of me. That possibility flashed through my head as Lily called out to me, voice tight with concern.

"Um, Lord Werner, please take good care of yourself."

"Thanks. I will."

Seeing her look so genuinely worried for me, I felt obliged to respond with a smile... Uh, wait? Was it just me, or had it been ages since the last time someone showed a normal amount of concern for me?

I was probably better off not knowing just how shitty my working conditions had been lately. Ah well, we all have to face the truth at some point.



# Chapter 3:

## The Battle to Defend Finoy

~Valor and Cunning~

“I AM WERNER VON ZEHRFELD. I WOULD LIKE TO announce my arrival.”

“Enter.”

“Please excuse me.”

It felt like I was walking into a courtroom. That probably wasn't that far off the mark, actually. Although this wasn't technically a hearing, it was pretty close to a court-martial. My decisions back then had been spurred on by the urgency of the situation, and I had no time to consider alternatives, but that didn't change the fact that I'd abandoned my troops and my position without leave to do so. I had no choice but to suck it up and deal with whatever punishment they deemed appropriate.

At least I had something to show for my efforts, so I probably wouldn't come out of this *too* bad.

I entered the command tent to find Duke Gründing watching me with a fearsome scowl on his face. Duke Seyfert, meanwhile, looked on with his usual placid countenance. Although his command extended only to the supply squad, his rank of duke granted him one of the highest seats here. Both men were old enough to be considered elderly in this world's society, but age hadn't diminished the imposing air of authority they exuded.

The whole assembly of leaders was present. The captains of the first and second orders of the knight brigade sat to the left and right of the dukes. The two marquesses sat next to them, followed by the people who looked like the leaders of the mage and priest squads, and the various aristocrat commanders in order of their importance.

Hmm. The counts in this particular lineup generally looked a little younger than my father. They were in their thirties or forties, which I suppose you could

say was the age at which people thirst for military glory. The captains of the knight brigade, the marquesses, and the mage corps leader were all older than them.

“Viscount Zehrfeld, to begin, state your case.”

Whoa, no preamble or anything. I’d prepared myself for nothing short of a verbal crucifixion. Could I assume everyone here had at least been briefed on my situation?

“Yes, my lord. Allow me to explain my circumstances.”

At this point, I explained the context as objectively as possible, not naming any names. I tried to be succinct yet clear. I didn’t want to sound defensive right off the bat.

“That concludes my explanation of the background information. As for why I took action...”

Then I described the reasons behind why I did what I did. Some of my statements had my subjective impressions mixed in, but this was necessary if I was to justify myself. There was nothing to feel guilty over...for the most part. Knowledge from my previous life was not something I could openly speak of. Well, it wasn’t as if anyone would believe me if I talked about it, so I decided to put that thought aside for the moment.

“You speak no untruths?” one of the noblemen cut in.

“I have already sent a messenger to the capital, and the Harting family is likewise headed there as we speak. Please direct your inquiries to my messenger at the capital. In the meantime, I have no objections to being placed in the detention barracks.”

My response was a veiled threat. I was a viscount, after all. They could read between the lines: “If you treat me, a nobleman, as a petty criminal based on mere suspicion, then I’ll be sure to return the favor later.” Predictably, the nobleman shut up.

“What is your reasoning for not bringing the Harting family here?”

“I saw what happened to Valeritz. I determined that common folk ought not

bear witness to such a deplorable sight.”

“You swear that you had no intent to desert your position?”

“By my honor as a man of House Zehrfeld, never did I intend to desert.”

Several noblemen came at me with snide questions, but I wasn’t going to rise to such petty bait. Maybe it was because I’d already vented all my anger at Arlea Village. There wasn’t enough fuel left in me to spark the flames of fury. I was pretty tranquil, if I say so myself.

Swearing upon one’s family name had the added implication of invoking one’s ancestors. I was not just putting myself on the line, in other words. I was insisting that House Zehrfeld, which had served the royal family for generations, could hold its head high. It was the weightiest vow one could make short of swearing by the king.

“Did you not think to communicate the circumstances and delegate the task of rescuing them to someone else?”

“As I explained, the Hero’s family was already in danger by the time I ran to them. I accept that I made the decision without due consultation, but I deemed it the correct course of action.”

“Could you not have sought aid from the other troops?”

“Only the second order of the knight brigade was present. Furthermore, I could not determine how quickly we could have arrived if other troops were to join me. Nor did we have enough food to sustain travel in large numbers.”

Hmm. All the counts and lower-ranked noblemen were annoyingly persistent... Then it hit me. The urge to hammer down the nail that sticks out was a universal constant among cultures. I wouldn’t mind biting back at them, but I wouldn’t want Mazel and his family getting caught in the crossfire. I’d have to play this safe.

Fortunately, I could handle this level of nitpicking, no sweat. Compared to my hellhole job in my old world, where I got put on blast for sticking words in the wrong spot of a PowerPoint presentation, this was nothing. My boss had electron microscopes for eyes, I swear. Who would have thought *that* experience would have prepared me for this?

“Is it true that a Demon was present at the scene?”

“I can only say that it was very likely. Speaking of the Demon, I discovered a mysterious stone after vanquishing it.”

“Show us this stone.”

I handed over the bundle with the black gem to a person who looked like a squire. Upon unwrapping the gem and finding specks of the dirt it had been dug out from, Duke Seyfert and the captain of the mage corps frowned deeply. What was that about?

I answered more questions after that, giving firm and resolute responses to any questions that sounded vaguely like slander. By my reckoning, I endured about thirty minutes of this. Just when I was reaching my limit with all the goading questions, Duke Gründing spoke.

“That is enough. Your claims have been communicated. You may take your leave.”

“Yes, my lord.”

With a single utterance, Duke Gründing brought the first round to a close. Frickin’ finally. I obediently got up from my seat.

“I would like Duke Seyfert, the marquesses, the knight brigade captains, and the mage corps captain to remain here. The other noblemen are to return to the frontlines in case of an enemy attack.”

“Your Excellency, that’s—”

“There will be no end to the discussion if we must listen to every tongue in this room. Or is it that the men I’ve chosen are beneath your trust?”

“N-no, that would be absurd.”

Upon hearing the nobleman get quickly shot down, I proceeded into the empty tent right next door.

Oh man, I was beat. Plopping myself on the bare earth, I finally allowed myself to sigh.

I was pretty sure that I was not going to get off scot-free. There was no

getting around the fact that I'd committed insubordination. I'd just have to wait and see what kind of punishment would come my way.

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After making sure that Werner and all the lower-level aristocrats had quit the scene, Duke Gründing sat back down again. Then, with a heavy sigh, he swept his eyes across all the remaining officials.

"Now then," he said, "I would like to hear your thoughts on Viscount Zehrfeld's actions."

"I do not believe that he was attempting to desert," Hindermann, captain of the second order of the knight brigade, answered. Although he had not interacted with Werner directly in the past, he had a favorable opinion of the young man. "At the Demon Stampede, he took to the rearguard and ensured the survival of many of our men. It was the most dangerous position at the time. I find it hard to imagine that he would suddenly be stricken by cowardice now."

"Mayhap his tune has changed?" Marquess Norpoth spoke up, though not necessarily out of malice. His tone of voice suggested that he simply wished to consider the situation from all possible angles.

"He does tend to act without regard for the group, but he is certainly no coward," replied Vilsmaier, captain of the first order of the knight brigade. He stated his observations dispassionately, having no strong connection to the young lord, nor any resentment for him. "He carries himself well. And it was certainly a failure on our part to have overlooked the safety of the Hero's family. The results, at least, were not without merit."

"He certainly does have that tendency," Marquess Norpoth agreed.

Hindermann spoke up again. "Despite his youth, he seems to have quite a level head. That was not the conduct of a man with a guilty conscience."

"His rash actions would seem to give lie to that collectedness," Marquess Schramm added.

The captain of the mage corps eyed the pensive Duke Seyfert as he said, "I cannot be certain, of course, but it seems the young viscount's actions are a

strategic achievement of no small import.”

“What do you mean?” asked Duke Gründing.

The mage corps captain turned his attention once more to the cloth bundle containing the stone Werner had retrieved. “This stone appears similar to the ones we retrieved at the Demon Stampede and Fort Werisa. Although I cannot say whether they are precisely the same...”

“To the extent of my knowledge...” Duke Seyfert said at last, a frown darkening his mien, “it is exactly like the stone retrieved from the fallen Demon Commander at Fort Werisa.”

A slight ripple of shock passed through the delegation. The frown on the duke’s face did not flicker.

“Impossible! A Demon Commander?”

“How absurd.”

“I would not go so far as to suggest that. That being said,” Duke Seyfert turned to the mage corps captain, “I would like you to keep this stone strictly secured and have it examined at the capital.”

“As you command.” The man bowed deferentially before tucking the stone away carefully.

“Putting the matter of that mysterious stone aside,” Marquess Schramm said, eyeing the man as he spoke, “we have yet to decide what to do about the viscount’s misconduct.”

“Although it was laudable of him to rescue the Hero’s family, his actions remain improper,” said Duke Gründing. “What do you think, Duke Seyfert?”

None of them were inclined to a harsh punishment. They also knew that it was because of Werner’s plans that the Hero had remained in the temple protecting Laura, and that they were able to share information from inside. This understanding was implicit in Duke Gründing’s question.

Duke Seyfert stroked his chin as he said, “Let’s see...”

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In the end, I got off with a slap on the wrist. Me and the knights I roped into my mission got a stern reprimand, but nothing went on our permanent record. Basically, we were told “Don’t think you’ll be so lucky next time.”

I got a scolding, a fine, and a three-day sojourn in the detention barracks. I slept like a log for two whole days. It honestly felt more like a reward than a punishment.

As a nobleman, I was allowed to pay my fine after I returned from the battle, while a soldier would have had the amount deducted from their salary. I was picking up on some discrimination there.

That was the initial ordeal, at least. I would also be shoved in front of the enemy later on. “Go and prove yourself,” basically. This freakin’ muscle-brain world, I swear.

There was one final consequence to my truancy that I had to face: regret. I had the feeling that I would look back on this moment as a cringe episode in my life. I wondered if the people of this world would understand the meaning of “cringe episode.” I mean, the spirit of the words probably got across, right? Anyway, I forced those thoughts out of mind for the moment, to think about literally anything else.

By the third day of confinement, I was naturally feeling restless, but I obviously had to stay put. At least people weren’t barred from visiting me or anything, so I was able to confer with Max and the others, who filled me in on what was going on. Unfortunately, they weren’t allowed to bring me anything from outside.

The food they served at these barracks was not exactly Michelin Star material, but I put up with it since I wasn’t in a position to complain. Speaking of which, while I was sitting around eating and napping, the second wave of supplies arrived—not that this elevated us to luxurious standards of living.

While I had no inclination to escape, I did take my time sizing up the barracks’ security. Since I was being detained and all, there were two guards watching over me at all times. They seemed bored on the job, so I chatted with them every once in a while. According to them, the battle was still at an impasse.

Neurath and Schünzel dropped by early in the morning of the third day, at



around the time the guards were changing shifts. Their expressions were stiff, which had me wondering if something was up.

“Sorry about all of this, you two. Did something happen?”

“No, there haven’t been any changes on the battlefield.”

“Both sides have been staring each other down. To elaborate further...”

I tried imagining the battlefield from a birds-eye view. In the game, the temple of Finoy was sequestered amid tall mountains, which made entry difficult. Here, it was located halfway up a mountain. This still made it difficult to approach from any direction but the front. As a result, the fighting was concentrated around the front gate of the temple.

“Are there any signs of them attacking from the surrounding mountains?” I asked.

“Not at this point.”

Dreax, one of the three commanders, was an undead-type monster, making him a poor match against the priests at the temple, who were all capable of using divine magic. Likewise, the Four Fiends with their magic aptitude would find it difficult to break through the priests’ defensive magic. The last of the three Demon Commanders, Abdolas, was a Giant, which made him ill-suited for abducting the heroine Laura from inside the building. Beliures was best equipped to capture the princess, so it made sense for his Reptipos monsters to carry out the operation.

But right now, Mazel and his friends were standing in their way at the front gates of Finoy. The situation was very different from the game. With Mazel’s current skills and equipment, Beliures would struggle to overcome him, and so the stalemate continued.

“The kingdom’s army has formed a semicircle around the Demon army, pinning them against the temple. They’ve created fences and embankments in preparation for a protracted battle.”

“That part I don’t get. Although the individual monsters might be stronger than the soldiers, don’t we have the numerical advantage?”

“Although our side certainly does possess more soldiers...”

Apparently, the two marquesses and the knight brigade captains were taking things cautiously, well aware of the threat the Demon army posed. On the other hand, some of the noble families had brought along the entirety of their forces, including droves of slave conscripts. It seemed that they had responded to the emergency dispatch orders by pulling everyone they could find for the sake of filling the numbers.

“Isn’t that just going to make the army harder to maneuver?” I said.

“It is exactly as you say. To make matters worse, the large numbers have been a burden on the supply chain,” Schünzel explained.

I couldn’t help but sigh. “They really screwed this up.”

“The battle owes its current tempo to the initial clash,” Neurath continued. “The apparent commander of the Demon army is a Dragon Newt, it seems.”

Dragon Newts stood at the apex of the half-human, half-scaly-creature category of monsters. They walked on two feet and were perfectly capable of wielding weapons. Although they possessed a high level of intelligence, their appearances weren’t very human-like. Their faces resembled those of dragons.

Lizardmen and Sahagins were deadly enough of a threat to your ordinary human, but Dragon Newts were so strong that nothing short of a battalion of knights or veteran adventurers could bring one down. And even then, you had to brace yourself for casualties. For an ordinary soldier, to approach one was to court death.

In the game, Dreax and Beliures were distinguished from their generic counterparts by having distinct colors, but the generics were plenty strong too. They showed up in the latter half of the game as random encounters. Not that I could mention any of this aloud, of course.

“Eyewitnesses say that it is twice the size of a human, and its physical strength is a clear cut above the average monster.”

“With that size, it might as well be a Giant.”

This matched up with the game. If your average grunt soldier was one block

tall and the boss-class enemies took up two blocks, then it stood to reason that the Beliures would be twice their size in reality.

It also made sense that Beliures would be strong if he was referred to as a Demon Commander. That said, he wasn't as tough as the random encounters in the game's second half. At least he and Dreax got quite a bit stronger when they were resurrected in the last dungeon.

Hm, did I not tell Mazel that the three Demon Commanders would get resurrected...? I had the feeling that it slipped my mind. Although it wasn't quite essential knowledge, I figured that it wouldn't hurt to give him a heads-up at some point.

I made a mental note of this as Neurath continued his explanation.

"During the first clash, a number of units in the army met with a grisly fate. Their forces are reeling still, which has left us unable to reach more than a stalemate in open combat."

"What do you mean by a 'grisly fate?'" I asked.

He told me that a cocky noble tried to intervene at the first encounter, only for Beliures to devour him.

"He got *devoured*?"

"Quite literally, apparently. Rather than use its weapons, the fiend simply chewed his head off."

"Holy cow..." This was like in a *MegaTen* game where if you failed in negotiations with a demon, it'd just bite you. I could see why that would freak people out.

"More casualties followed the next day."

"I heard that the victims were immobilized by poison and had their stomachs eaten out while they were still alive. The battlefield was filled with cries of pain and calls for help, as well as the snapping and grinding of bones. The soldiers who witnessed it broke into a panic."

"Hmm."

It was like watching a real-life version of a dinosaur movie where people got

eaten alive. Yeah, that would probably spook anyone, not just the rank and file soldiers. Even the knights would feel the urge to flee. And if the noblemen serving as their commanders fell in battle, then it only stood to reason that their armies would break formation.

“Furthermore,” Schünzel continued, “morale has taken a hit. Many soldiers, having seen their comrades savaged or devoured, whether in death or while yet living, have utterly lost the will to fight.”

“Conversely, some of the others have been raring to take revenge,” Neurath added. “The atmosphere is split between extremes.”

Watching a monster eat one of your kin was the sort of thing that demanded vengeance in blood. So even with their morale shattered, the soldiers couldn’t quit the field as long as their liege lords were keeping them there to protect their houses’ reputations. If word went around that any of the noble houses had ditched the temple and fled, it would probably affect their relationship with the church. Maybe they’d get snubbed when the priests got dispatched to heal the sick.

I could now see why the army as a whole had become such a dysfunctional mess. With so much disparity in terms of morale across the group, it would be hard to coordinate everyone’s movements. Even in a world where brawn mattered more than brains, the knights, regular soldiers, and slave soldiers would obviously all have differing levels of motivation.

Judging by what I’d just heard, things were falling into a distinct pattern. Some guys needed time to cool off from impulsively seeking revenge. The nobles who were motivated to fight got frustrated at the soldiers who didn’t share their inclinations. Both sides were digging their heels in.

This was the downside of sending out an emergency order to assemble a large group. If the orders were preplanned or anticipated ahead of time, then the commanders could have dispatched just the people who wanted to fight. But where troops were gathered just to have numbers to show, then you’d definitely see some disparity in the motivation levels.

But what could I say? This was more or less within the realm of what I predicted.

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I doubted anyone could blame me for sighing after hearing all of that. As if attempting to cheer me up, Neurath went on:

“Regardless, if the Demon army were to march on the temple, the kingdom’s army would also move in to attack.”

“They can’t leave their back exposed, huh.”

“Indeed,” Neurath said. “Besides, not every noble house is made of cowards. There are plenty of knights and noblemen who still wish to fight. In fact, some more zealous warriors have had to be restrained.”

“There is a shared understanding that we mustn’t hand Finoy over to the enemy,” Schünzel added.

This was giving me a headache. So our side had no common goal other than pinning the Demon army down? It was one thing for people to have different ideas, but this was a fine mess of things. There wasn’t a single stitch of coherency. If anything, one had to marvel at how this slapdash army managed to stay together at all. But, well, hmm.

“It seems that Duke Gründing has achieved half of his objective,” I remarked. “What remains to be seen is how long he can keep up the stalemate.”

“What?” Neurath and Schünzel looked at me as if they didn’t know what I was talking about. Maybe I jumped the gun a bit. It was probably because I had so much downtime. With my body all cooped up, I’d had nothing to do but exercise my brain.

“Let’s break it down step-by-step. You guys saw what Valeritz was like, right?”

“Right.”

“I couldn’t possibly forget.”

Indeed, every living creature in Valeritz—including its human residents—had been quite literally devoured. In other words, the reptilian army was unlike the undead army in that it ate its victims.

“The enemy has to eat. But if our side has them hemmed in on an empty field, then they can’t go hunting for food.”

Although they might think of hunting the human soldiers for food, our side was armed to the teeth. These humans wouldn't just sit there and get eaten. In that sense, the opposing side didn't have an abundant source of food. If they were trying to eat the kingdom's soldiers on the battlefield, then they were probably hungrier than one would think.

"Basically, we're employing starvation tactics by pinning the enemy on an open field. So far so good."

The question was how long Finoy could stay intact. Although the temple surely had some stockpiles, who knew how long they could hold out under siege?

There was also the problem of the priests' personalities. Many of them weren't used to combat, so there was a significant risk of their spirits breaking under the stress of a stretched-out battle. There was also the chance they'd provoke the kingdom army into some premature scheme in the hopes of being rescued sooner rather than later.

"Then there's the problem with our army. Exhausting the enemy through hunger is a valid strategy, but our side has too many soldiers."

Some of the noblemen had been a bit *too* eager. Human beings didn't move in set, predictable patterns like in a game. I suspected that this outcome was partly because of the chancellor's emergency dispatch orders, but it was probably also because the target of our enemy was Finoy.

At the moment, the temple had a cordial relationship with the royal family and the aristocracy, but there was occasionally friction regarding the king's authority versus the authority of God. The aristocracy undoubtedly saw this as a good opportunity to have the clergy in their debt. People in this world relied on priests and their magic whenever they suffered from illnesses and whatnot, so it was understandable to want some leverage over them. There was one other reason to suck up to the temple in this situation, but I'll just leave that to your imagination. No need to spell it out.

The duke's second miscalculation was in not thinking about the surroundings. I hadn't confirmed it with my own eyes, but I was pretty confident in my read on the situation.

“It’s hard to make up for the shortfalls in our supplies. There aren’t many other monsters in the area to hunt. The Demon army ate up everything nearby on the way here.”

They were so insatiable that they ate up the entire population of Valeritz. I was certain that they feasted on everything that crossed their paths en route to Finoy, as well. Before I linked up with the army, I’d scouted out Denham Village and confirmed it, too, was tragically empty. Although they were reptilian in appearance, these monsters were as voracious as army ants.

I had no idea whether monsters in the Demon army ate each other, or whether the wandering beasts responded to a Demon Commander. All monsters were the same from a human’s perspective, but it was possible that there were divisions and disagreements within the Demon army, just as there were among different types of humans. Maybe some types of monsters could have been regarded as livestock by others. This area was a total mystery to me, although I highly doubted that a monster would give an answer no matter how nicely I might ask.

Regardless, this was the dilemma we were faced with: The kingdom’s army had deployed in a rush with supplies no more than an afterthought. They’d been denied the opportunity to hunt the surroundings for food, and Valeritz, which should have been a key stronghold for a large army operating near Finoy, was totally destroyed.

“If, in our attempt to starve the enemy out, we end up dying from hunger ourselves, I certainly won’t be laughing. I expect that His Majesty and His Highness the Crown Prince have their own problems to deal with.”

“The crown prince, you say?”

“Why do you mention him?”

“Because he’s not here. That’s the surest sign.”

At times like these, the monarch’s involvement was expected to go no further than issuing orders. He had to take care of the supplies, manage the diplomatic front, and ensure the roads were safe while the soldiers were absent from their lieges’ territories. In all likelihood, the crown prince and the Minister of Military Affairs had their hands so thoroughly tied that they couldn’t even leave the

capital.

If anything, the prince demonstrated his impressive competence by ensuring that we didn't starve even with the obvious shortage of commodities. What if that guy was actually a genius?

"How does diplomacy factor into this?"

"Our kingdom isn't the only one that sees Finoy as an important temple."

Although the temple wasn't quite like the Vatican of my old world, it was alike in that it was treated as a holy land. Pilgrims from other lands came to Finoy, albeit in modest numbers. Our current predicament would slowly yet surely reach the ears of our neighboring nations; the only question was how fast.

This would have an effect on the kingdom's interests. From the perspective of political rhetoric and influence, there was a world of difference between rescuing Finoy on our own, as opposed to calling on our allies for aid. And even if Finoy wasn't going anywhere, our actions here would have an insane influence on how the temple regarded our kingdom in the wake of the Demon Lord's return. This was probably another factor weighing on the scales.

Given all that, his Majesty and the Minister of Foreign Affairs were probably working themselves to the bone trying to keep word from getting out.

But now that I thought about it, Arlea should have been a much bigger village if it regularly hosted pilgrims from other lands. What on earth was that village chief doing with all the money?

"If word reaches our neighbors of Finoy's current state, they might decide to send soldiers this way. But you can see for yourself that we're in no state to support them."

In this world, barring extenuating circumstances, the currently stationed army would have to provide food and other supplies for the reinforcements. In this case, the currently stationed army was us. Unfortunately, we were struggling to feed even our own mouths at this point. Whether they came as volunteers or as professional soldiers, the reinforcements would only swell our numbers well beyond the capacity of our supply chain. And because this incident was mixed up with a major religion, we couldn't turn down the offers for help forever.



From a diplomatic perspective, this would be an opportunity for the neighboring countries to hold one over the Wein Kingdom. They could cash in on a favor, use us when they could, and even antagonize us when they felt the need. Such was the nature of diplomacy. Regardless of the relationship between the individual leaders, the overall interests of their respective nations had to take precedence. Pax Romana, the period where the Roman Empire achieved relative peace, was only able to exist because it suited the convenience of the neighboring territories.

“I’m just using my imagination here, but I reckon that we have about twenty days at most to settle this cleanly. If only there was some kind of—”

*Strategy*, I was about to finish, only for one of the guards to suddenly burst out laughing... Uh, Mister Guard? What was going on here?

Having noticed my gaze, the two guards standing at the back took off their mass-produced helmets. Their faces were terribly familiar. Was this the reason Neurath and Schünzel had such stiff expressions when they came in? They entered at the same time these guards started their shift.

“What do you think, Duke Gründing? I told you that the viscount’s insight is not that of an ordinary youth.”

“Indeed. I can see how it was his strategies that brought us victory at Hildea Plains.”

Two elderly gentlemen stood there in front of me, having a rather absurd conversation. Although they did have a point in saying that I wasn’t much of a youth, especially if you were counting the years I’d spent in my previous world.

But um, why were Dukes Seyfert and Gründing costumed as guards in this hovel?

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When the two dukes stepped toward me, Neurath and Schünzel retreated behind them. I lowered my head to bow, but Duke Seyfert forestalled me.

“This is an informal meeting. You needn’t stand on ceremony.”

Easier said than done. But if *they* were saying it, then I had to comply. I’d just

stick to simpler courtesies.

“You don’t seem too surprised,” Duke Gründing said with an imposing expression.

I felt the need to protest. “I *am* surprised.”

That said, what threw me off was that they’d taken this *way* farther than I’d expected. Still, it seemed my predictions were generally correct.

“I would like to know your thoughts on the matter you chose not to elaborate on earlier,” said Duke Seyfert.

“I would respectfully defer to Princess Laura’s opinion,” I was quick to answer.

Duke Seyfert laughed again.

All Duke Gründing had to say was, “You’re a sharp one,” grimacing all the while.

It didn’t exactly feel like praise when he said that with such a scary expression. But since this was an informal meeting and all, I wondered if I could get away with posing a rather crude question to them.

“Pardon my blunt phrasing, but are there people in this camp who have intentions toward Her Highness?”

“Quite a few.”

*I knew it*, I sighed inwardly. This explained the age range of the nobles present. It wasn’t unusual among the aristocracy for the betrothed to be more than ten years apart in age. The men in their early to mid-thirties probably figured that they might as well shoot their shot. If they weren’t eligible themselves, then their sons would be around Laura’s age. There was no in-between.

Basically, they had an ulterior motive in mind: use this opportunity to strut their stuff and become a marriage candidate for the beautiful Princess Laura. She was just about the right age to start considering these things.

Whether they sought to wed Laura themselves or win her hand on their sons’ behalf, the noblemen who’d attended my hearing saw me as a rival because of my age. This explained why they were so dismissive and belligerent toward me.

What a pain in the ass.

This was another reason why the crown prince didn't accept foreign aid—or rather, why he didn't *want* to do it. It would have been a dilemma of the highest order if another nation used their leverage to pressure Laura into marrying one of their own.

And so, even though Finoy was supposed to be the priority, the goals were getting mixed up along the way. The Demon army was the enemy, but they weren't necessarily the only *problem*. One more twist and this story would make a good opera.

"You have met Laura before. What did you think of her?" Although it was her grandfather speaking, I was still a little surprised to hear him refer to her without a title. Guess they were serious about being informal.

I figured I'd reply in the same spirit. "As much as I admire her beauty, she is well beyond my station."

Duke Gründing let out a hefty sigh. "If only everyone knew their place like you did."

He said that so casually, but *damn*. I mean, sure, if you questioned whether Laura and I would be a good fit for each other, the answer was an undeniable no, but I just got eviscerated here. This guy clearly doted on his granddaughter.

What I decided not to mention was that Mazel was the best match for Laura. I didn't want anyone sending me to an early grave by throwing me in front of a Hippogryph. So yeah, I really wished Duke Seyfert would stop looking at us as if he was grinning on the inside. Neurath, too, had a face bright red with stifled laughter.

"In light of your opinion, I have a request for you," Duke Gründing said.

"By all means."

It was probably more an order than a request, but there was no point dwelling on it. Honestly, no matter how he chose to phrase it, a duke's words to a viscount were, in essence, absolute. Just as I found myself wondering what kind of ridiculous order it would be, his words blasted right past my wildest expectations.

“I want you to bring an end to this battle that will satisfy all involved.”

There was a very long pause. Then—

“Huh?”

Come the hell on. No way did he come all this way to see me, disguised as a guard, to tell me *that*.

“In other words, you want me to scatter all the bugs swarming around Her Highness? By distinguishing myself in the battle but *not* asking for her hand?”

“To put it bluntly, yes.”

The duke was basically asking for the impossible from me. Well, at least I was honest about not wanting Laura as a reward. That part was true. I’d been doing a lot of inner bitching this whole time, but I could be forgiven for the thoughts I didn’t express aloud.

“Calling upon you directly would provoke suspicions. That is why I came to see you under more informal auspices, to confirm that you have no designs on Her Highness.”

“Quite so,” Duke Seyfert concurred. “And in exchange, you will be lavished with praise for your actions, including that time you ran off without permission.”

I clutched my head in my hands. “This is too crazy...”

I blurted out my raw feelings, right there in front of a duke of all people. The sheer height of rudeness. Even in the heat of the moment, I knew it was a bit much to actually say the word “crazy.” Fortunately, Duke Gründing chose not to comment on my attitude, but that did absolutely nothing to put me at ease.

“I apologize for pushing such a tall order on you,” Duke Seyfert said as he suppressed a chuckle. “But you must understand is that this is a matter of great political significance.”

“You’re saying...this is political?”

“You must demonstrate to everyone that you have no amorous desires for Her Highness. This will disqualify everyone who brought a large army to this battle from being considered for her hand.”

I instinctively shot a glance at Neurath and Schünzel. This was turning into quite a big deal.

“Neurath, Schünzel, you can’t tell anyone what we just heard here. I’ll have both your heads if any word of this spreads.”

“Y-yessir!” they answered, standing stiff as statues. They evidently understood the gravity of the situation.

The two dukes simply looked on. This was between me and my subordinates, after all. On the other hand, this meant that the burden of responsibility fell entirely on my shoulders. If those two happened to leak this conversation, then I would get punished along with them.

I let my gaze hangover Neurath and Schünzel’s faces a moment more before turning back to Duke Seyfert. “Did everyone bring a large army?”

“Yes. Her Highness is the finest holy woman in generations, after all.”

“I have heard about that from somewhere.” ‘Somewhere’ being the game.

“That makes things simpler. Are you also aware that there are multiple people now alive who can receive divine revelations from God?”

“Yes.”

Although the game described Laura as the most talented holy woman in generations, it was probably a different priest who advised the royal family to appraise Mazel’s skill. I’d assumed it was Laura, but that probably wasn’t the case. Given her personality, she would have felt compelled to meet him herself the moment she knew. Perhaps it was written that way so that the two of them would have their first meeting at Finoy.

“It has been revealed to another that Her Highness’s child will stand at the pinnacle. Not even she herself is aware of this.”

Neurath and Schünzel gasped. While this was news to me, it wasn’t beyond my expectations. I knew from the game that Mazel would become the king, so the revelation kind of made sense.

This topic never came up within the game itself, but it was hard not to see this as a matter of utmost confidentiality within the ranks of the high-ranking

nobility. Judging from the way the duke spoke, it sounded as if pretty much none of the aristocracy knew about this.

As I let this knowledge stew in my head, I spoke up, half to confirm a suspicion I held. “So that’s why everyone who brought a large army is out of the running.”

“It is true that the Demon army poses a major threat to Finoy. However, anyone who wants to use this opportunity to curry favor does not deserve to stand at the pinnacle of our kingdom,” Duke Gründing answered in Duke Seyfert’s stead.

This prophecy was rather troublesome. From the perspective of anyone who already possessed noble peerage, the implication of “pinnacle” was, well, becoming royalty. But this left a big question mark hovering over His Highness Prince Ruven and where he stood in all this.

If the prophecy signified that Laura’s son would become king, then this could turn into a massive problem. The words weren’t necessarily bound to come true; divine revelations didn’t address straightforward questions like how strong the Demon Lord was. Even so, a particularly greedy spouse or father-in-law of the princess could use it as a reason to stir up civil strife. There could be extremist factions out there who would seek to murder Laura before things could come to a head. It was possible that even the crown prince would consider throwing Laura into confinement for the rest of her life.

But it was also possible that “pinnacle” meant something like chancellor or duke. The prophecy was vague enough that one would hesitate to discount those options entirely. Nevertheless, it would still be a problem if a power-hungry lout wielded the influence of a chancellor.

And to make matters worse, the prophecy concerned Laura’s *child*. If she had a girl, then she could become the queen in her time. It also wasn’t outside the realm of possibility that the words referred to an adopted child or son-in-law. There were too many options to consider. It was even conceivable that die-hard royalists might cross the line in their desire to twist Laura’s fate to serve for their own ends.

The oracle’s prediction was correct as far as the game’s ending was concerned. Perhaps it was better to say that it was *not wrong* rather than

correct. But it was still a very fine line. No wonder this was being handled with utmost caution.

Laura's child would be Duke Gründing's great-grandson. More likely than not, the duke himself would have passed away by then. A man of his importance had to consider his descendants. The oracle did not mention Laura's relationship with Mazel at all. Was I the only one who felt like this divine revelation was messing with us?

Wait, hold on a minute there. Now that I thought about it, the game never explained why the Demons were going after Laura. Considering the game's vintage, I'd just written off that plot point as a genre staple without thinking twice about it, but on reflection, maybe there was a reason why the Demons would target the princess without intending to kill her. What if they were acting on the same premise that the oracle revealed?

There was a lot of food for thought, but I would have to put that all aside for now. To be honest, I didn't really want to think about our current predicament. Although the dukes hadn't said it in so many words, it was a matter of screening the applicants for their ulterior motives. The problem was that they'd mobilized far more troops than anyone anticipated, and they were eating away at our scant food supplies.

To be fair, it wasn't as if I couldn't understand why people would throw their hat in the ring when a beautiful girl like Laura was dangling in front of them. I wondered if all those royals had gotten desensitized to all the attractive people around them.

"As a woman born into the royal family, she cannot simply marry whomever she fancies," His Excellency Duke Gründing continued. "She must consider whether the match will benefit our kingdom."

His logic was sound, though it did seem as if his personal feelings were rather heavily mixed into it. Objectively, the princess-slash-holy-woman was under threat. Emotionally, his granddaughter's life was at stake. I could understand why he wouldn't want to entrust Laura to an opportunist.

"You need only strive for similar feats of valor as others. If your achievements are comparable, then your fine example is sure to get the idea across. I will

reward you suitably for your work. I will also take your position into consideration in the future. Will you accept my proposal?”

Yeah, as if I had the choice to refuse after hearing all of that. The reward was basically hush money. They’d left me no way out.

“I will endeavor to do my best...”

Could I cry, please?

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I spent some time after that asking the dukes some follow-up questions. Once I’d confirmed the relevant information, there wasn’t much else for the distinguished men to do but go back to the base of operations. Ostensibly as Neurath and Schünzel’s subordinates. Mwa ha ha ha, those two would come to know the perils of an upset stomach.

Eh heh, not that there was much point thinking about that, I knew.

The two people who came in to replace the two dukes were dressed as guards, but I could tell from their body language and the coolheaded way they monitored me that they were no ordinary schmucks. Maybe they were the subordinates of one of the dukes. They’d probably kill me if I attempted to flee after everything I’d heard. Not that I had any intention of fleeing, mind you.

As an aside, soldiers were detained in a cage inside a horse-drawn cart, while noblemen at least had the luxury of staying in a building or tent secluded from view. Although I called it a tent, it was made of sturdy stuff—monster leather, in fact. The material was tough enough that a knife couldn’t pierce it. The tents used by soldiers were sturdier still, which I suppose only stood to reason when they were supposed to stop people from escaping. If we were at war with another human nation, then any aristocrat hostages would be shoved into this sort of place.

Inside my tent, I lay flat on my back on the bed and bemoaned my fate. Why did I have to get dragged into this mess? At the same time, I knew that if the knight brigade were to fall like it did in the game, then any self-respecting aristocrat would prioritize protecting their own territory. Even if they wanted to sidle up to Laura, the circumstances would force them into putting that on the



backburner. Ironically, the fact that the knight brigade was still intact was precisely why these idiots had the leeway to strut about.

In other words, this was an indirect result of my own actions. Woe was me.

There was no point crying over spilled milk, though (or in this case, un-spilled milk?). I took a few deep breaths and cleared my head. I had a multi-part objective for the next stretch. I had to distinguish myself in battle and, at the same time, ensure Mazel's reputation remained unmatched.

If we were following the original game's story, then Laura would be motivated to join the Hero on his journey because Finoy was half-destroyed. With the temple intact, this plot point was now scattered to the winds. The problem was coming up with another set of conditions that would achieve the same end result.

If Mazel did not come out of this battle with a feather in his cap, then Laura might not be allowed to accompany him. Not only would this interfere with their budding romance, there were certain parts of the game that couldn't be cleared without the holy woman in your party. I absolutely had to get Mazel and Laura on the road together. Mazel was at Finoy now, and while I had begun to see the downsides to that, it meant he had a shot to, at the very least, strike up a friendship with her. Probably. I could only hope he had his ass in gear.

At the same time, there was a complication. If another nobleman got more credit in the battle than I did and became Laura's betrothed, then there was a possibility that she wouldn't be able to go journeying at all. Instead, she'd be stuck at the capital or some nobleman's fief. This would also make it impossible for Mazel to vanquish the Demon Lord.

Naturally, failure was not an option I could entertain.

In the game, you fought Beliures as a boss when Laura was right there in front of you. Here, the Demon Commander was with his army. Not even Mazel could plunge straight into the enemy army for a surgical strike on the boss. You could pull off that kind of crazy stunt in a game, but the real world would throw too many obstacles at you.

Having said that, there was no telling how the story might diverge if we failed to defeat Beliures here. I wouldn't like our odds if he managed to retreat,

reassemble his strength, and come back for a rematch at the capital.

So basically, we had to annihilate the Demon army encircling Finoy and defeat Beliures, *while* Mazel and I proved ourselves the two most distinguished figures in the battle. And all we had to work with was what was already here. What was this? *Mission Impossible*?

With a sigh, I reviewed the two armies' positions in my mind. You could imagine the lay of the battlefield like a folding fan, with Finoy as the pivot. The Demon army held the area corresponding to the sticks, while kingdom held the ribs and the paper spans. It was a small mercy that the terrain prevented the enemy from attacking Finoy from outside the confines of this fan-shape area.

Finoy was on a mountain, while the Demon army lurked in the nearby plains. The kingdom's army was positioned where those plains bordered the nearby forests. If the monsters in the forest respawned and attacked us in a pincer formation, things wouldn't look good for us.

Nobody could say where monsters came from. Maybe Beliures was actually trying to stall until we'd have to fight a resurgence of forest monsters. In a one-on-one fight, a monster easily outmatched one of our soldiers. Even the knights would have trouble in that scenario.

The lackeys directly under Beliures's command were likely even more powerful than the monsters that spawned around this area. I wondered if that was the reason why they didn't attack us despite the circumstances. Although I couldn't prove it, I suspected the reason they hadn't attacked the temple in force was that their side was aiming for a war of attrition too. I wondered what they were doing for food.

Our side had theirs half-surrounded. Following convention, the captains of the first and second orders of the knight brigade controlled the left and right flanks. That was all well and good, but because we had way too many people overall, the army's formation came out looking like melted rubber.

The command tent was situated some distance away from the action. Between the guys who were raring to make Laura their bride and the despairing troops who wanted nothing more than to retreat—to say nothing of the nobles who actively undermined their peers—this army had lost any semblance of

unity.

“What am I gonna do about this?”

I could bitch about this state of affairs all day, but that wasn't going to achieve anything. At times like these, I tended to fixate on the enemy's strengths and our own weaknesses. This wasn't going to break this deadlock. I had to come up with a way to take our strengths and use them to batter through the enemy's weak points. We had a time limit, after all. No amount of waiting would give us an edge over the enemy.

The kingdom's army had the advantage of numbers. There's strength in numbers, or something like that. On the other hand, the Demon army's weakness was... Hm, wait a minute.

I sat up and crossed my legs as my mind latched onto this new train of thought. When I considered the Demon Commanders' lines from the game, the Demon's tone of speaking at Fort Werisa, and the Lizard Magician's attitude when he abducted Lily, there was one thing in common: a contempt for humans.

They would never suspect that the opponents they took so lightly would lay a trap for them. Also, from what I remembered from the game, defeating Beliures would unlock the map of the temple. Basically, there was a boss enemy but no second-in-command to worry about. Beliures was the only target we needed to deal with.

To be honest, I really wanted to come up with a detailed, foolproof plan, but that didn't quite come together. At least Duke Gründing confirmed that our army was in contact with Finoy. Apparently, we were using magic bags to supply food and weapons to the temple, and we could also use them to convey messages. Good thing for us we had this option even during a siege. I was fairly confident that things would work out as long as I could get the people inside the temple up to speed on the plan.

This would ensure that Mazel won the most glory, which was ideal. I had my reservations about the duke's support. Even if he was true to his word, I was merely a viscount. I wasn't looking forward to the fallout.

That said, Mazel had been called to action by the royal family itself. As long as

he had their endorsement afterward, he would be okay. I had to aim to get him into the top spot and then come in second. I didn't have to accomplish everything by myself. As long as Mazel was around, things would turn out fine.

"Sorry, but I have something I need to discuss with either one of the dukes. Could you pass on a message for me?" I called out to the guards, who had been watching me sit on the floor, muttering to myself.

They nodded, and then one of them left. Just as I suspected, they were the direct subordinates of one of the dukes.

That night, I received a package from Duke Seyfert with soldier's clothes. I put them on, left my detention cell, and met with the two dukes face-to-face to explain my plan. Fortunately, all the things we needed were still in my blue box, so I was able to explain their role in this as well. After responding to two or three questions, I obediently went back to my prison.

With that, the foundations of my plan were set in place. All that was left was to see how things turned out on the battlefield the next day. How would I rack up some military achievements...? Ugh, I felt queasy.

In any case, my detention would end the next day. With a sigh, I consoled myself: *I ought to treat myself to some soft oatmeal.*

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The next morning, the long and leaden contest to outlast the foe came to an end. The kingdom's army was in a flurry with such excitement that the prior stagnation seemed like nothing but a lie.

The first unit roused to action was the first order of the knight brigade, situated at the army's leftmost flank.

In a show of daring, they dismounted their horses before the charge, relying instead on the fervor of their feet to traverse the mountain belt. They struck at the enemy's side cautiously, taking care not to be outflanked, slowly thinning the numbers of the monstrous turtles there, which were large enough to swallow a human whole.

"Don't get in too deep!" Vilsmaier barked. He understood that this battlefield was just one corner of the larger design, and so he restrained his knights

accordingly. “We just need to cut down their numbers!”

All the while, he continued to watch the enemy’s movements cautiously. When the battle had gone on for a while, he and the other knights spotted a hulking figure in the distance.

“All right, send the signal,” Vilsmaier ordered a nearby mage. Then he turned to the troops. “Everyone, retreat! Don’t fight that thing. Don’t let anyone get injured.”

Responding to the captain’s command, the mage shot a large and conspicuous-looking fireball into the air. With the help of the mage corps, the first order of the knight brigade commenced its retreat. Meanwhile, on the right flank, the second order began to make its move.

Upon seeing the fireball explode over the first order’s battlefield, the second order charged. Astride their horses, they rode full force into the Demon army’s lines, which were now stretched thin. Frogmen and giant lizards crumpled beneath the weight of their charge as they thundered through the enemy lines, toward the temple gates.

“Don’t get carried away!” called out Hindermann, captain of the second order. “Ours is but a feint at the temple!”

“But captain,” a nearby knight spoke up, “it looks like we actually *can* get inside the temple at this rate...”

Hindermann, however, shook his head. “There would not be any food for us at the temple.”

“How vexing.”

They continued their conversation as they methodically obliterated their enemies, running their bodies into the earth. Their foes put up little resistance, since their commander was occupied on the other flank. And though the monsters here fought fiercely to keep the kingdom’s forces at bay, they were scattered, each fighting on their own. Against the knight brigade’s superior coordination, their lives were forfeit.

“Captain!” a knight cried out in warning, pointing toward a colossal figure.

“It’s here! Shoot the fire arrows!” Hindermann gave the command.

With admirable nimbleness, the nearby knights shot fire arrows up into the air from the saddles of their horses. Then, without missing a beat, the second order rapidly began to pull back, like a wave rolling back from the shore. By the time Beliures drew near, the knights were well into their retreat.

Beliures arrived at the scene, where countless Reptipos corpses were strewn across the field, only to hear another roar of excitement elsewhere. The noble house armies positioned next to the first order of the knight brigade had begun their swift, decisive charge.

Among the troops that responded to the second order’s signal, House Fürst’s were exemplary in their tactical mastery. Under Hermine’s expert command, they moved as one to cut off a section of the Demon army. Tyrone’s knights charged into the isolated group, crushing them into the dirt.

Although Tyrone had his sights set on slaying the enemy commander himself, he understood the importance of fighting as a cohesive whole. Restoring morale came first. Besides, he was not privy to how this particular offensive factored into the kingdom’s army’s overall strategy. The details had only been explained to Bastian, the head of the house.

Thus, Tyrone approached his current situation as a way of venting his anger, putting his fervor into every sword stroke that cut into the Demon host. His prowess was unmatched throughout the Kingdom armies, and with him at the fore, his troops cut their way to a more advantageous position.

Following Tyrone’s charge, Marquess Schramm led the nearby noble armies into the breach. Exploiting the havoc wrought by House Fürst, they battered the Demons into even smaller groups that, once isolated, were easily dispatched.

Lizardmen and Alligator Warriors were strong individually. When cut off from their allies in the chaos of combat, however, they could be overpowered by sheer numbers. The Demonic Beasts were dying in droves, and even the monsters who came in to support them were starting to suffer major casualties.

Beliures’s visage twisted in unconcealed fury as he heard the telltale din of battle in the distance, and with fearsome footfalls, he stalked toward the fighting at its source.

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“Are you sure this will do, Master Werner?” Max asked me.

“Yeah. First, we need to restore the troops’ confidence—show them that by leaving the big boss aside, they have what it takes to win.”

Easier said than done for the slaves and foot soldiers who were there just to pad the numbers. Still, I thought as I observed the battle from a rise some distance away, the results were starting to show. Not to say that building morale was my only objective.

I saw some knights and soldiers withdrawing to the base for a moment after a spot of fighting. When they saw me, I noticed them laugh. I also took note of how Max, upon witnessing this, shrugged his shoulders beside me.

I couldn’t help but frown at him. “You’re allowed to laugh, you know.”

“No, my lord, I have had my fill of laughter.”

“This is the part where you deny it, even if it’s a lie!” I fumed.

I figured that people would find themselves restraining chuckles when they saw me in my current getup. After all, I was dressed in sandals and a pure white one-piece dress for ladies. Ohhh, I could feel the wind tickling my bare feet.

This outfit was the final punishment in store for me because I’d left the battlefield without permission. When I thought about how even the people on the frontline could see me dressed like this, I couldn’t help but have complicated feelings about it. I was pretty sure that the women of modern-day Japan would object to the use of such a punishment. It was a misogynistic holdover that equated women with weakness and fragility, even when women could become knights and adventurers these days.

Given the whole valor-above-all thing, anyone who demonstrated cowardice was punished through humiliation. Hence the dress. I also wasn’t allowed to ride a horse. I had to go everywhere on foot and put up with the ridiculing stares.







I wasn't a deserter, and it wouldn't have been fitting to punish me like one, but I couldn't deny that I had left the battlefield without permission. But wearing this outfit was... Well, how do I put it...? I was taking a lot of psychic damage from those mocking looks. And there was going to be more of this tomorrow. Joy.

On the other hand, this punishment exempted me from fighting on the battlefield, so that was nice. Jumping into a warzone without armor was basically a death sentence. If I *was* a deserter, I'd either be executed or be given orders absurd enough to get me killed if I followed them. Had to say I was lucky to have avoided those fates. But still, when I considered how this cross-dressing punishment was doled out even to bearded old guys, I had to think: *Isn't this just a whole new crime?*

Other forms of punishment included lashings or beatings with a cane (well, more like a club or some other kind of blunt object), being forced to go on night patrols outside the camp confines, being denied rations, or demotion in martial rank. One of this world's peculiarities was that the form of punishment changed based on whether the offender had access to potions or not.

When you were forced to go on night patrols outside the camp fences, it meant that you would be the first target if there was a night attack. Because you also faced threats from wild animals and monsters, it was a very stressful job. I was fortunate enough not to have experienced it myself.

If you were part of a nobleman's private army and got demoted, then you would no longer be allowed to move within that army. Instead, you would be passed off to some other nobleman and you would have to follow orders as their lackey. Given that it was a punishment, the person at the top of the chain of command would work you to the bone.

Punishing a single wrongdoer was one thing, but when an entire squad was convicted, it meant a lot of people would wind up dead or injured. Unless the crime was particularly severe, demotions were generally avoided. It was usually tragic when it did happen.

Among the harshest punishments were cases of knights who formed the backbone of a noble house being sent on suicide missions that ended in all their

deaths. No such things had happened in my lifetime, so I couldn't attest to it myself, but it had supposedly happened to some noble houses plotting rebellion against the royal family.

Also, while I mentioned being denied rations, this didn't mean losing out on an entire meal. It was common to get served some water and tasteless gruel without any meat. Not the kind of meal you'd enjoy even if you were snug at home. When you had to carry weapons and walk around in armor, it was quite difficult to subsist on gruel. Well, it *was* a punishment after all. When you looked at it from that perspective, I was lucky to get off with a fine and a stint in detention.

For milder crimes, people would be made to wrap a highly absorbent cloth (like a towel) around their legs, just below the knees, then take an extended walk around the grasslands while they were still wet with morning dew. The cloth around their shins would absorb the dew. Within an hour of walking, the cloth would be soaked with enough water to slake a person's thirst.

Walking aimlessly through raised grasslands was a slog, which was good enough to get it classed as a punishment. On days where you couldn't gather water this way, the offender would just have to go without drink until midday. If you walked for half a day without drinking any water, and then marched for the other half, you could very well risk death if the weather was harsh enough.

Adventurers often used this cloth-around-the-legs method to procure water, but this could only suffice for a couple of people at most. In the context of an army, it was nothing more than a disciplinary task.

Other forms of punishment, which were apparently considered a type of imprisonment, included magical sealing and a restriction on magic items. These really made me think: *Wow, this could only exist in this world.* There weren't any tools that could conveniently seal away magic, but if you were spotted using magic or a magic item, then you would instantly be given even harsher penalties like hard labor or imprisonment.

For better or worse, magic made the world go round, so being barred from using magic or magic items for a certain period of time was quite tough. It could be for years in some of the worst cases. To use an analogy from my old world, it



would be like not having access to the internet or being able to use electronic items for a set time. This would instantly restrict your freedom of life.

“Oh.”

While I was deep in thought, I heard the sharp noise of something sailing through the air.

“The whistle arrows have been loosed.”

Whistle arrows were roughly analogous to Japan’s kabura-ya, arrows which made a distinct sound upon being loosed. I liked them because the sound was rather pleasing to the ears, but because they functioned as a signal, they seldom saw actual use. A darn shame.

Upon hearing the signal, one of the private armies raised a cry of excitement. They were positioned next to the knight brigade’s second order, Count Harfaulk’s troops, if I recalled correctly. Apparently, he led part of the army at Hildea Plains as well, so he probably knew when to fight and when to pull back.

The strategy I proposed would probably be classified as operating along exterior lines. Although the scale was completely different, any Japanese history buff would cite Ashikaga Yoshiaki’s stratagems against Oda Nobunaga over the course of several years as an example of exterior lines at work. From a detached location, you would set multiple battlefronts, pulling the enemy’s main force from one place to another. Then, by continuously attacking the areas where the main force wasn’t present, you could wear the enemy’s entire army down. Once their fatigue had set in, you could finally move to encircle them.

It wasn’t particularly complicated as a strategy. After all, the kingdom’s army was never going to move as a single unified force. Thanks to their feudal ties, the forces of each noble house wouldn’t heed any but the most basic instructions from other commanders, except with the threat of demotion hanging over them. The crown itself struggled to get them in line, never mind nobility of similar rank.

Also, our bloated numbers had led to battle lines drawn too broadly across the field, which meant complex orders would inevitably be delayed in getting across. All this considered, I discarded the idea of a unified battle from the

outset and let the individual armies do their thing.

Ordinarily, operating independently would only turn them into easy targets, but that changed when you considered the enemy had no commanders other than Beliures. If he showed up, our troops would have to go on the defensive while sniping foes from afar. However, in areas Beliures left unattended, our troops could rush in and winnow the enemy's fighting force.

Because the noblemen were competing with each other for glory, they would attempt to strut their stuff wherever Beliures wasn't around. This was causing enough damage to the Demon army that they could no longer afford to ignore their losses.

The Demon army, for its part, fought along internal lines. But because Beliures dragged the bulk of his forces with him wherever he went, it was a simple matter to figure out when to retreat. He was so huge that you could spot him from miles away.

Whenever Beliures was close, run. Whenever he went somewhere else, throw everything at the monsters he left behind. By applying our strength on two fronts at any given time, we could steadily chip away at the enemy's forces. Rinse and repeat.

The reason we were able to pull this off was because our opponent lacked soldiers with high mobility like cavalry. Common soldiers still struggled with these stronger monsters, apparently, but since they were more rabble than organized army, even your average Joes could take them down if they worked together.

From a distance, I was also able to spot something that I'd been curious about for some time. Just as I suspected, whenever Beliures wasn't around, the hordes didn't work together. It was more like every monster for itself. Admittedly, some of the knights and squads on our side were like that too, albeit to a lesser extent.

I could think about the full implications of that later. I didn't have the luxury of time to ponder it all. For now, we just had to focus on exhausting Beliures of his patience.

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At sundown, the kingdom's army retreated, taking care not to leave any of the injured behind. Each noble house returned to its respective division and concerned itself with all the work of war that wasn't fighting.

The knights and soldiers were obviously the stars when it came to combats but overseeing noncombat work was crucial as well, whether the army was currently in battle or not.

Their work covered a whole array of tasks. They took food from the supply squad and prepared meals for multiple people, set up the campfires at night, made sure the latrines didn't overflow, fortified the fences around the camp, and so forth. They dug trenches to flush out water in case it rained and made sure they stayed intact when the troops deployed.

Besides all those regular jobs, they would also respond to orders related to battle. For example, they set up positions near the fences from which people could hurl rocks in case there was a night ambush.

They couldn't afford to take it easy even when the enemy's attacks let up. If, say, there wasn't enough rope to fix a damaged fence, they would often expend a lot of time and labor preparing the necessary materials. This meant that you would have to give them orders before the troops deployed in the early morning.

Thus, part of the top brass's job was giving orders to the noncombatants first thing in the morning and checking on their work at the end of the day. I, however, would have to spend the next few days doing those things while wearing a woman's dress. After I double-checked the arrangements and returned to my tent, my eyes glazed over. Oh man, cross-dressing was tougher on the soul than I imagined.

I was inside the tent that served as the main headquarters for the Zehrfeld troops, busily documenting how much of the consumables we had used thus far, when I heard a voice outside.

"Master Werner, have you a moment?"

"Is that you, Max? My hands aren't too full right now." I gave him permission to enter.

In response, Max folded his burly frame into the tent's narrow entrance.

"What's up?" I asked.

Max gave a brisk salute. "As it so happens, the young lady of House Fürst says she has something about which she wishes to consult with you."

I grimaced. "She wants to do it *now*?"

Despite my somewhat weary response, I'd pretty much resigned myself to the sudden strangeness that had overtaken the camp, inverting the routines I'd gotten used to. Since morning, people had been seeking me out on all sorts of flimsy pretenses, like asking about the Hero's family. After a strategy meeting I'd been called to, people were still furtively pointing as I left.

Incidentally, Duke Seyfert complimented me. "That looks surprisingly good on you," he'd said, then laughed unabashedly. He was so frank about it that I couldn't bring myself to get mad at him.

"All right, she can have her meeting."

At this, Max's face twisted into an awkward expression. "Actually, there is something you probably should hear."

I wondered what he was going to say. As it turned out, Count Fürst covered for me when the formations were being decided. This was when I was en route to Arlea Village.

"Count Fürst did that for me?"

I frankly had not anticipated this. But I was sure he had his reasons. Putting my personal feelings aside, nobody wanted to be on bad terms with their neighbors.

"All right, I'll keep that in mind. Show her in."

"Yessir."

Max briefly exited the tent so that he could bring Lady Hermine inside.

"I apologize for disturbing you when you are so industriously engaged, Viscount Zehrfeld..."

Although she bowed her head low and spoke ever so politely, she failed to

keep a poker face. She didn't burst out laughing, at least, but her eyes and mouth struggled to hold back a smile. Yeah, yeah, we'd been through this already.

"Please excuse me." Lady Hermine cleared her throat then assumed a neutral expression. Her upbringing as a noblewoman made her quite adaptable in these sorts of scenarios.

Inwardly, I breathed a sigh of relief that her reaction fell within the realm of my expectations. Outwardly, I maintained a cool facade. "What brings you here?"

Lady Hermine's face abruptly turned meek. "Er, I apologize greatly for my presumptuousness, but I came to seek your endorsement in a certain matter."

At these unexpected words, I reflexively traded looks with Max. What was going on here?

"May I ask for the details?"

"Yes, of course. You see..."

When I heard her story, I groaned quietly as I crossed my arms. The Fürsts were relatives of the Teutenbergs. So they were in danger of being dragged into a succession struggle or some kind of family drama, huh?

"So by 'endorsement,' you'd like me to bring this up with my father?"

"Yes, I would humbly ask that your father, the Minister of Ceremonies, grant us some of his time."

This made sense. By virtue of being a minister, my father wielded more clout than your average count. Also, the king and the Minister of Ceremonies attended the ceremonies enshrining the succession of noble houses and their peerage. This meant that, although he had no decision-making power, per se, his words did hold significant sway. If a potential successor was posited to him, he could prevent them from being called to the ceremony by claiming that they weren't "suitable" for the occasion. To use an analogy from my old world, he was like an upper manager in the HR committee who could technically step in and veto a new hire but didn't have much involvement in the process otherwise.



Looking at it from another angle, my father could select the person he wanted by rejecting everyone else in the line. Of course, he would only make enemies of noble society if he was *that* heavy-handed about it, which meant that he had never actually used his privilege to manipulate others' positions to his whims. He had a good reputation within the royal court as someone fair and evenhanded.

The reason Count Fürst would call upon him for a meeting was because he was worried about the mother of the young child poised to succeed House Teutenberg. She was, after all, the woman who had once been engaged to my older brother.

After my brother's accident, his fiancée—Count Fürst's daughter and Lady Hermine's older sister—was quickly married off to a different noble house. That house was Teutenberg. At that point, her ties to the Zehrfelds ended, and we had no obligations toward her.

Personally, I wouldn't go as far as to wish misfortune upon her, but I would have been glad never to see her again. I had no idea what my father thought of her. But still, as long as our houses maintained a cooperative outlook, he probably wouldn't turn them down out of hand. Besides, he was probably more stressed with me than with them, thanks to my whole business with Arlea Village.

"I understand. I will convey Count Furst's request to my father. If he assents, I expect that he will be in contact with you about the date and time."

"You have my humble gratitude." Lady Hermine bowed her head.

I really wished she'd quit that—I was at a loss for how to respond. Besides, to be perfectly honest, my connection to House Teutenberg was so distant that I was liable to forget their existence entirely. For good or ill, a relationship between houses made them impossible to forget. By that logic, the Zehrfelds were practically strangers. Not to mention that the Teutenbergs belonged to the martial faction. Being bureaucrats, our house didn't have much to do with the martial houses in general.

But anyway, I wouldn't say that their plight was totally urgent. Sure, it was practical to address it sooner rather than later, but it hardly required Lady

Hermine to call upon me here on the battlefield. I bet she just wanted to see me cross-dressing. Call it idle curiosity, if you will.

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Mine breathed a sigh of relief at Werner's assurance that he would pass her message on to Ingo Zehrfeld, the Minister of Ceremonies, and she returned to her troops with a lighter heart.

As a matter of fact, her brother Tyrone had initially declared that he would visit Werner himself. But his ulterior motive, seeing Werner in the midst of his cross-dressing punishment, was plain to see. Fearing this might upset the negotiations, Mine suggested that she go instead. In the end, Bastian chose her. Tyrone ceded to her with a somewhat disgruntled look, which made Mine suspect that seeing Werner in women's clothes might in fact have been his *only* reason for going.

"Hi, Mine," a woman called out to Mine as she was walking back to her troops.

"Fancy seeing you here, Annette."

Much like Mine, Annette Elsa Mölders was a lady knight of noble birth. Although she was not participating in the battle directly, having been assigned to guard the supply squad, she was quite the capable knight. As an individual, she might have been stronger than Mine. Although they only came to know each other after they entered the academy, Mine considered her something of a bosom buddy. They felt comfortable talking casually when they were alone.

"What brings you?"

"I'm making sure the right potions get delivered to the right patients."

Potions didn't come cheap. A single bottle was one thing, but the prices climbed when you were dealing with an army's level of consumption. Because of this, there were occasionally scoundrels who requested potions when they weren't actually too injured just so they could pocket them for their own knight brigade's stock. Unfortunately, it was an inescapable fact of life that some people sought their own profit regardless of the situation.

In order to circumvent these dishonest requests, it fell to the supply squad to

check whether the claimants really needed the potions. Civil officials usually handled this, although the knights would also help if there were a lot of requests to handle.

It was the perfect job for an honest, straitlaced woman like Annette. “I see,” Mine said, nodding inwardly. “I was just talking to Viscount Zehrfeld.”

“The distinguished son of the Minister of Ceremonies?”

Annette’s reaction was not exceptional. Although Werner’s absence from the line of duty had been controversial, he’d done it to save the Hero’s family. Those who knew this tended to have a favorable impression of Werner.

After all, the Hero Mazel had a proven track record of success. He reclaimed Fort Werisa. In a world that prized valor, the Hero’s deeds were worthy of respect from the perspective of anyone looking without the blinders of a noble standing. It was only natural that people would think well of someone acting to protect the Hero’s family.

“By the way, how is the situation?” asked Mine, knowing that Annette had been traveling from encampment to encampment.

“I would say about half the noble armies are proactively taking part in the battle, while the other half are merely deploying under orders,” Annette replied. “Some of the go-getters have been making names for themselves with their results.”

Scuffles with monsters didn’t just lead to people getting injured. It was also common to round up the monster corpses for magic stones and usable body parts. If someone saw that and described it as savagery, they would have a point. The fact that nobody thought twice about it was perhaps because this was, as Werner called it, a muscle-brain world.

“Then some of the noble houses may be regaining their will to fight,” Mine remarked.

“I believe so.” Annette nodded in agreement.

As a matter of fact, when word started spreading that House So-and-So had amassed a great deal of magic stones, other officers and soldiers on the kingdom’s side would gradually kick themselves into gear, worrying they would

miss out if they just kept doing the bare minimum.

Part of this was due to the knights and soldiers' greed, but the results were clear, nonetheless. As the gossip spread, the situation on the battlefield moved on to the next stage.

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On the second day after the kingdom's army launched its offensive, its various units repeated the previous day's strategy of picking their own fights with the Demon army. Heated conflict would erupt on multiple fronts of the enormous battlefield, only to end just as abruptly as the kingdom fighters, sticking to their plan, retreated when Beliures approached.

Beliures did get close to the action on one occasion, only for the troops he targeted to start hurling rocks. Every soldier—even the knights—poured their efforts into long-distance attacks. While Beliures was thus distracted, the first order of the knight brigade pretended to charge for the temple gates, forcing the Demon Commander to shift course.

At this point, Beliures noticed that the kingdom's mage corps had changed up their movements. Instead of chanting their spells in unison and focusing their attacks on one area, they expanded their striking range, varying the group's chanting time and targets. Seyfert and the captain of the mage corps, whom Werner knew from the magic experiment, had worked together to divide the mages into small groups. As part of their plan, these groups shifted to attacking individually.

Each spell packed quite a punch, which only became evident when they started landing one after another. Even Beliures had to give up on forcing his way through. Though his scales could turn away all but the most masterful sword or spear strokes, he would certainly sustain more than the usual amount of damage if he got hit by magic. Even a Demon Commander like him had to tread carefully when up against the kingdom and its squads upon squads of mages.

Thus, fierce battles between the kingdom and the Demon army would continuously break out on localized fronts. Yet because the Demon side had few opportunities to bring its full force to bear, neither side sustained many losses,

relative to the scale of the armies involved, even as the casualties climbed.

On the third day, the kingdom's army did not advance its troops a single step. Silence hung upon the field. While the Demon army stared down their opponents, wondering when they would make a move, the humans made themselves scarce and concerned themselves solely with hunting the monsters that were starting to spawn in the forest. The day came to an end without conflict.

On the fourth day, the kingdom's army ventured into battle once more. That said, they still stuck to picking fights wherever Beliures was not present. Whenever he approached, they beat a single-minded retreat. There were no major changes to the battlefield, though in a new development, Duke Seyfert himself took to the frontlines. Under his command, the troops maneuvered themselves adroitly, always staying one step ahead of the enemy.

By the fifth day, the Demon army's accumulated losses caused a tangible shift in the battle's dynamic. With the depletion of the Demonic Beasts as the auxiliary troops, the magic-wielding monsters were also seeing steep casualties. The Demonic Beasts were no longer able to shield the mages on their side, leaving them wide open to attack. When Seyfert saw that the time was ripe, he ordered his troops to prioritize the magic wielders. This caused major damage to the part of Beliures's forces that were capable of attacking Finoy's defenders at range. Invading the temple's fortifications became that much harder for the Demon army.

That same day, a third wave of supplies arrived from the capital. This, combined with the supplies from the neighboring fiefs, gave the armies a temporary reprieve from their food shortages.

Then, on the sixth day, the kingdom's army came to a total standstill once more.

On this day, the strategy meetings within the kingdom's army reached fever pitch. Some of the noblemen insisted that they should press on with the fighting. But Duke Gründing managed to silence them with the threat of punishment from His Majesty himself should they disobey orders.

Meanwhile, the soldiers and knights from some of the other noble houses

joined the Zehrfeld troops as volunteers in secretly hunting the monsters in the forest. On the surface, it was spoken of only as group-tactics training against monsters respawning in the forest.

“I don’t really care if you see me as a rival, but you need to be cunning enough to at least steal your rival’s fighting technique,” Werner said afterward.

On the seventh day, the kingdom’s army resumed fighting early in the morning. This was the first time the main force of the Demon army suffered major casualties. Beliures did not appear on the frontlines that day.

The Demon commander deemed it pointless. After all, the humans would just scamper off if he showed himself. Instead, he just pointed his lackeys at their foes. When they realized that Beliures had taken a sabbatical, the kingdom gathered all of its nearby forces and, advancing as one, struck a fierce blow against the Demon army.

At this juncture, Marquess Norpoth demonstrated his knack for strategy. Viscounts Kranke and Mittag—who were young, eager for battle, and, following their achievements at Hildea Plains, full-fledged commanders in their own rights—led a frontal assault against the monsters in order to sow chaos. Meanwhile, Count Jhering’s troops circled around the enemy, cutting a subsection of them off from their main forces. Marquess Norpoth then directed his elite troops to charge the now isolated enemy unit, annihilating them.

It was an utterly perfect showcase of fighting. Duke Seyfert would describe it as art.

Beliures returned to the frontlines on the eighth day, only for the kingdom’s army to resume its strategy of running away from him and lashing out wherever he was absent. As the losses on his side slowly yet surely mounted, Beliures’s rage reached its peak.

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That night, Beliures gnashed his enormous teeth, making no effort to conceal his foul mood. Even the monsters kept their distance out of fear and trepidation.

To be precise, it was the continued absence of Gareth, the Lizard Magician,

that had Beliures ill at ease.

Beliures never had been good at using his head. It was strength that made a Demon, after all. So when it came to attacking the temple, he'd left all the thinking to Gareth, being quite content to follow his strategy. The magician had been right about how easily they'd crush the towns on the way, and so Beliures had trusted him implicitly.

Things had started to go awry after they attacked the temple. Trusting that his army was strong enough to handle things without him, he left the first battle to his lackeys. He'd sorely misjudged. For some reason, the wretched Hero had shown up and prevented them from breaching the gates. The holy woman hunkered down within the temple's walls, hardened with magic from the ancient kingdom. This was difficult for the Demon army to handle. With his current strength, it would take Beliures several years to break down the fortifications.

As a matter of fact, the facility that the humans called the "temple" was a fortress, which gained significance in the era of the ancient magic kingdom for repelling the Demon army's onslaught. In this world, the so-called *skills* of priests were derived from God's blessing and could be used anywhere. A temple was nothing more than a center of faith. Simply put, whether the temple stood or not, the blessing would remain. While the humans might view the temple's fall as a disaster, it was thoroughly irrelevant to the Demon army.

Either way, after the first battle ended in failure, the situation degraded into a standoff. At that point, Gareth used his lackeys to sneak into the temple and scope for information. He said there was a way to lure the Hero out.

Beliures decided the plan was worth a shot. He had a bone to pick with the Hero for what he did to one of the other commanders, Dreax, at Fort Werisa. Another major factor was the approaching source of food—that is, the kingdom's army—at the rear.

Gareth's idea had been to fight a war of attrition while he targeted the Hero's weakness. Meanwhile, he would take steps to isolate the holy woman within the temple. With that, he had departed from the battlefield. Dreax's subordinates, who had spent some time active in Wein's capital after escaping

Werisa, went with him.

But this meant that all communication with Gareth was cut off. Since then, whenever they spotted Beliures in battle, the kingdom's soldiers would run off so that he ended up striding pointlessly up and down the battlelines. To make matters worse, information coming out of the temple had run dry. It was hard to even decide whether he should intensify the assault.

Pressed by his foes at both the front and rear, Beliures couldn't decide who he should attack. As he struggled to make up his mind, the battle had crawled onward, resulting in ever more casualties. It hadn't occurred to him that his confidence in winning any fight he picked had led him to neglect matters of tactics altogether.

Beliures's anger flared even as he gnawed away at the corpse of an Alligator Warrior. To a monster, even a fellow comrade or subordinate was potential food when they were dead. On the other hand, by eating his lackeys, Beliures was forced to admit that those pesky humans got the better of him. A human would probably describe him as bottling up his stress.

*"Curses,"* Beliures murmured to himself, prompting the bipedal Reptipos monsters around him to flinch. Although they did not show their expressions on their faces, one could sense a faint aura of fear from them.

Their meek attitudes only served to infuriate Beliures further. Strength was everything to a monster. Succumbing to fear was absolutely unacceptable.

There was no one around him to offer words of caution or encouragement. In the heat of emotion, Beliures came to a decision.

*"I'm out of patience. Get everyone together."*

Trembling in fear at that guttural voice, the monsters gathered before Beliures. Another flash of fury ran through him at the pathetic sight they made, but he deliberately restrained his searing anger.

*"The humans have not given battle for three days in a row,"* he declared. *"They must not possess much stamina."*

Twice now, the humans fought for two days and then rested on the third day. Beliures was convinced that the kingdom's army would refrain from fighting



tomorrow. His decision was fueled by his fundamental condescension toward humans, though he did not doubt his judgment for a second.

“Tomorrow, I will stand personally at the front of the pack and crush that irritating temple. Follow my lead.”

The monsters each howled in response to Beliures’s proclamation. The Demon Commander’s voice, though tinged with unease, rang out across the night sky, as if straining to reach the moon itself.

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The next morning, Beliures stood at the frontlines just as he had declared. Behind him were the bipedal Reptipos monsters, along with all manner of large reptiles: alligators, lizards, and snakes, all capable of swallowing a human being whole. They surged toward the temple, kicking up a cloud of dust behind them.

As the monsters advanced like an angry, mighty wave, the temple’s side was still as death. As Beliures drew near, however, the gates began to screech open.

For a moment, even Beliures felt a flicker of surprise at this unexpected development. But when he saw a diminutive robed figure waving at him from inside the gates, a savage smile came over his face. Someone within the temple, he realized, driven by fear at their inevitable loss, must be ushering them inside.

The moment Beliures figured that he could vent all his pent-up anger, he broke out into a sprint. And for a demon like him who relished in destruction and slaughter, a delicate mission like capturing the holy woman and bringing her before the Demon Lord was reason enough for irritation.

Spurred on by the prospect of at last bringing their irksome task to a close, Beliures dashed with such speed that his lackeys couldn’t keep up. He almost bumped his head on the low gates, but knowing that it would take quite a lot of time and energy to destroy it, he chose to duck and slip inside instead. As he lowered his massive frame, the hooded figure ran past him and hurled something outside the gate.

With a crackling sound, the Monster Repel wafted outside.

Because Beliures had run ahead, there was a considerable distance between him and the other monsters. The cloud of dust Beliures kicked up was also

significant, because it prevented the other members of the Demon army from spotting the human.

As the Monster Repel spread across the gap between Beliures and the army behind him, the other monsters hesitated to tread inside the temple, perceiving an invisible wall. For an instant, the Demon army firmly stopped in its tracks.

The next moment, a torrent of arrows and magic spells came raining down on Beliures's vicinity, even as the temple gates closed tight behind him.

Beliures let loose an indescribable bellow, even as he deflected the missiles and strove to resist the magic. Plumes of dust rose from the ground where the arrows and magic struck it.

"Heh, you got led along by the nose."

Beliures jolted in shock. Then, without hesitating, he swung his massive sword downward at the point in the dust cloud from which the voice had issued. But something repelled his strike—something unbelievably strong. An expression of pure astonishment came over Beliures's dragon-like face.

While this was happening, the latch came down on the fortress gates, sealing the exit entirely. The next thing Beliures heard was the monsters screaming outside the walls. The arrows and magic spells were now being directed at them. Beliures instinctively whirled about at the sound of his subordinates' agony and saw a man standing with his back to the sealed gate. There was a bold smile on his face and a giant sword in his hands.

"You ain't the only one who's pissed off. I'm gonna go hog wild."

There wasn't a hint of fear in Luguentz's demeanor. A scrawny boy next to him pulled his robe off with obvious annoyance.

"If you lose here, Big Bro Mazel, you won't be able to face Big Bro Werner," Feli laughed.

"Yep," came the brisk response.

The one who'd answered was Mazel, the "Hero" who had deflected Beliures's sword. To his right was Erich, and to his left was Laura. She insisted that the safest place of all was at Mazel's side.

It occurred to Beliures that the holy woman had delivered herself to him. His eyes met Mazel's.

The Hero had a sharp expression on his face. An indescribable feeling welled up in Beliures, and his face twitched slightly despite his standing as a Demon Commander. Unable to face the fact that he had lost the battle of nerves, Beliures let out another roar and swung his sword at Mazel.

Mazel watched calmly through narrowed eyes. He readied his sword and declared in a voice no louder than a murmur:

"It ends here, Demon Commander."

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Since early morning, we'd been double-and triple-checking our weapons and armor with bated breath. When we caught sight of a fire arrow soaring from the temple, a war cry swept through each of the encampments in the kingdom's army.

"It's the signal!"

"The beast is in the cage!"

The soldiers sprang from their encampments in unison and charged at the Demon army. The monsters wavered for an instant before they moved to resist, but the momentum was against them. Though each of their members were individually stronger than their opponents, the kingdom's army overwhelmed them, tearing them to pieces.

In large part, this was because the Demonic Beasts that had been responsible for maintaining the frontlines, like the snakes and alligators, had already been obliterated, leaving their army with a personnel shortage.

Even so, it was as if the kingdom army had been born anew. Watching them, it seemed to me that morale itself was a weapon in its own right. Beside me, Schünzel held his palm to his head, observing something in the distance.

"They're doing well out there," he remarked.

"It's what happens when you play cat and mouse with the enemy for so long."

The Zehrfeld troops under my command had prepared for battle beforehand.

We were now active in a corner of the battlefield, though with less fervor than the other houses. I told Max and Orgen to keep a leash on our soldiers.

*It's not yet time to go all-out,* I muttered to myself as my eyes swept over the enemy's fierce resistance.

It was obvious they were planning to attack when they howled at the top of their lungs the night before. These guys weren't too bright, huh? I suppose this was as good a proof as any that underestimating humans came naturally to the Demon army.

If anything, I had to be grateful for their stupidity. On the human side, the only order that got passed around was "remain on standby for an attack." There were a lot of cases where the losing army made decisions that future generations would look back on, brows furrowed at how stupid they were.

"Who would have thought that running around would have this much of an effect on them?" Neurath wondered aloud as he surveyed the battlefield.

"It's a psychological thing," I responded simply.

Throughout these past few days, the kingdom's army ran away exclusively when Beliures appeared. Whenever he wasn't around, our side actually fought on equal terms with the Demon army quite frequently. Beliures always took the main force with him wherever he went, leaving only the weaklings behind.

By repeating this over the course of several days, it gradually sank in for our side as a whole that, when you took the commander out of the equation, the Demon army wasn't such a terrifying, unbeatable foe. The human imagination could be pretty formidable.

"Erasing our fear is the best path to victory. Even if they are small victories."

"That makes sense."

It was just a matter of overwriting the assumption that "Beliures is scary, therefore the Demon army is scary" with "Beliures is scary, but the Demon army is not so scary." Making people unafraid of Beliures was a lost cause, so I went with the more plausible option.

I mean, that beast frightened the crap out of me too. Even just sighting him

from a distance killed any desire I had to advance further. If he hadn't been the kind of leader to take the bulk of his force with him wherever he went, I would have been hard-pressed to think of a different strategy.

"Basically, we used the same strategy you would use against a nomad tribe."

"What?" Schünzel asked.

"Oh, I was just checking something," I deflected, not wanting to explain.

I was talking about the Germanic peoples of ancient Rome and the northern nomads of ancient China. This was one of the ways you could fight against one of their armies if they were led by a strong and battle-hungry leader.

These armies would be rather formidable if their commander was present, but they didn't fight so tightly when the head honcho was out of sight. The idea was to chip away at the enemy's forces by targeting the parts where the leader wasn't around. You could leave that job to a frontline commander without having to give detailed orders.

And because these tough guy leaders weren't so kind as to permit their minions to flee while they were away, those soldiers would struggle desperately against their foes even outside of the commander's eye. However, because they lacked cohesion as a group, each of them could only rely on their own might.

The Demon army was in precisely the same boat at this moment. They fought back violently and held their ground. Because I sensed that nothing good would happen from forcing an assault on wildly thrashing foes, I decided to preserve my fighting force.

The kingdom's army made adroit use of its forces. I guess Duke Gründing was also a guy who demonstrated the wisdom of his years. He was able to keep a firm grip on the reins without issuing any orders that would kill the momentum.

Ooh, just ahead of me was a unit that was really tearing into the enemy. I recognized their family crest. The guy swinging a battle axe at the fore was Viscount Davrak, who had also been an MVP at Hildea Plains. Yeah, he really earned his reputation as a valiant leader. If nothing else, I probably stood no chance against him in a fight.

Apparently, there was an old distinction in the Japanese language between

military leaders who struck down enemies with their own weapons (moushou) and leaders who commanded their troops skillfully to achieve great results (yuushou). The two terms were used interchangeably in modern times, though, to refer to a distinguished commander. An easy way to comprehend the distinction was through the example of the samurai warlord Minamoto no Yoshinaka. Having never slain a renowned enemy by his own hands, he was called a yuushou.

The existence of the word moushou proved that there were commanders who fought on the frontlines. The Japanese proverb “there are no cowardly soldiers under a brave general (yuushou)” alluded to the soldiers fighting, not the commanders themselves. Toushou was another term for a valiant leader, although this referred to the commanders of very small units. A moushou took the helm of a much larger group of soldiers.

That said, even by the Sengoku period, people just used those words because they liked the sound of them, not because they had any distinguishing meaning. Languages were full of exasperating cases like this.

“Don’t bite off more than you can chew! Keep your cool!”

“Work together and take them down one at a time!”









“Do it just like you’ve practiced!”

At the left and right flanks, Orgen and Barkey barked at the soldiers. But man, I *just* told them that they didn’t have to get so fired up or yell so loudly. I guess it was in a military man’s nature to feel their blood rushing when they saw a battle unfold before their eyes.

“Yaaaah!”

And then there was Max. He was supposed to be the captain of the Zehrfeld troops, but here he was on the frontlines, crossing swords. I did have to admit that he was clearly in his element. It boggled my mind that he could do all of this and still finish more paperwork than me.

I wasn’t personally participating in the frenzied battle, so I was able to catch glimpses of what was going on in the field. Being on horseback gave me a surprisingly good vantage over the situation. Although the height depended on the horse’s breed, it was usually more than one hundred and fifty centimeters. A large horse could give you over one hundred and seventy centimeters.

Basically, I was sitting on a platform that was roughly equivalent to my own height. Although it wasn’t quite the level of a pool lifeguard’s chair, I could still see clearly far into the distance. On the flipside, I stood out rather prominently to the enemy. In an era with guns, I would have been a sitting duck.

“Master Werner, has something gotten your attention?”

“What do you two see?” I asked Neurath and Schünzel, prompting them to survey the field once again.

Because the Zehrfeld troops were also participating in the battle, the two of them could see the knights and soldiers locked in combat with the Lizardmen and Alligator Warriors. On the whole, our side had them on the back foot, giving ground, but some monsters would lash out even when several spears were lodged in them. Monsters sure were made of sturdy stuff. Sheesh.

“Overall, I believe that we are in a good position.”

“I agree...”

“I don’t think we’re struggling or anything, but...” I trailed off.

Just as I suspected, they hadn't noticed. Perhaps they thought this was normal. This was a game world, after all. I fell into thought for a moment, but before I could say anything, the situation changed.

*"Listen well, brave warriors."*

A voice suddenly rang out across the battlefield. It sounded like it belonged to an austere old man. It was probably someone of authority, since they seemed accustomed to delivering speeches. In the game, though, the so-called High Priest was just a tiny collection of pixels.

He was probably using magic to amplify his voice across the entire battlefield. I'd never heard of anything like this until now, but I guess they would have something like this at a temple where many believers gathered.

*"A valiant young man has vanquished the villain that led these monsters in their heedless march upon our hallowed temple."*

A peculiar atmosphere slowly descended over the field, as if there was a stir or murmuring in the air. I see, so Mazel was the one who did it. If the soldiers at the temple defeated Beliures, the old guy would have said so.

*"Behold! The fate of the fell demon!"*

As the voice boomed, I saw something waving on the temple walls. It stuck to the end of what seemed to be three spears, which meant it must have been quite heavy. At this distance, the sight resembled a soybean with three toothpicks in it.

That was about all I could muster in terms of thoughts and feelings, but the monsters had a very different reaction. Suddenly, all at once, they began to tremble. This all but confirmed that it was Beliures's head being paraded up there. For a moment, it briefly occurred to me that the monsters had better eyesight than me, but now was not the time nor place to ponder such things.

*"Zehrfeld troops, charge!"*

*"Yeah!"*

*"Chaaarge!"*

I'd been holding back thus far, but when I saw the enemy trembling, I seized

our chance. Everyone responded without hesitation. The Zehrfeld troops quite literally surged into the Demon army's lines. Other houses leaped into action after us, but none could match our vigor.

To be quite clear, this was because we weren't nearly as tired out. While the other houses had gone full force into the enemy's fierce resistance, the Zehrfeld troops had been holding back, reserving strength. And now that the enemy was starting to waver, the time had come for our attack.

The Demon army, on the other hand, had been held together by fear of punishment from their powerful leader. The existence of a foe capable of killing that leader, along with the peculiar sense of relief they experienced from knowing that they would no longer be punished for running away, caused their morale to dissipate. It was a common story throughout the history of my old world.

As for me, I used my horse's momentum to rush into the enemy. On the way, I skewered the throat of a hapless monster that stood in my path. This was just as much because of the quality of my weapon as it was my skill, but to the knights and squires around me, I was probably the very image of a consummate general.

"Surround them and take them down one at a time!"

"Let's go in from the right!"

It looked like our troops had gotten the hang of squad tactics, which made sense considering that they'd been at it for a while now. I no longer had to give out precise orders, nor did I have to fear for myself. With Neurath and Schünzel flanking me, I charged into even the formidable opponents without hesitation.

I left it to the two of them to finish off the enemies I wounded. I focused entirely on charging forward as much as I could. The monsters I skewered soaked the ground with their blood. It took quite a bit of training to swing a spear while on horseback—good thing I practiced while we were patrolling the aqueduct.

Meanwhile, our allies were pouring out from the temple's open gates. Good timing. Come to think of it, Luguentz was inside the temple too, wasn't he? He probably knew a thing or two about fighting a war. He would know when to

capitalize on an opening.

“Join up with the soldiers inside the temple and divide the enemy! Max’s squad will take the lead!”

“Yessir!”

He still had stamina to spare, far as I could tell. I could trust him with the reins. While he charged, I stopped my horse and straightened up to get a better look at the enemy’s movements. When Max took to the fore and charged at the opposing army, the unit he struck dissolved into chaos.

Viscount Davrak pressed at the enemy group to the right. Like herded sheep, the monsters flocked to the rear. It looked like they would flee the very second they had an opening. I could relate. During the Demon Stampede, the urge to run away hit me like a stack of bricks. Not that there was anywhere to run.

“Tell Orgen’s troops to keep the enemy contained on the left side so that they don’t circle around us from behind. Barkey, follow behind my troops. We’ll go after Max and make a dash for the temple.”

“Yessir!”

Although it sounded like I was declaring a headlong charge, the Demon army was visibly disoriented from learning of Beliores’s demise. It was crucial that I find some way to distinguish myself, and I figured a dramatic charge would accomplish that better than mopping up the nearby foes.

Besides, the Demon army was half-surrounded to begin with. If we charged straight through the middle, they’d lose any semblance of being a unified force. It was time to cut through with one fell swoop.

“The monsters on the right are disorganized, so don’t worry about them. Just charge forward! If our troops break through, we can destroy the enemy!”

“Yeah!”

Cheering in unison, my troops charged. In premodern warfare, an army was generally guaranteed to win if it managed to encircle its opponents or break through their center to strike at their rear. Basically, the principle of war was that if you got surrounded, you lost.

Although it was a common turn of phrase, there weren't any universally agreed-upon "principles of war." It was enough to say that any such principles were about finding a path to victory that was easy to implement, I suppose. I wasn't a military or language scholar, so I couldn't tell you about all the precise definitions formulated throughout history.

There were all sorts of reasons why an order wouldn't be a good fit for the soldiers' morale or the battle situation, but the exact logic always differed depending on the individual circumstances, so I decided not to think about it here. The important thing was to give the impression to the folks around us that the enemy army had crumbled under a single strike.

Moving as a single body, the Zehrfeld troops broke through the enemy. As we did so, I spotted a very familiar face at the front of the group that had come out of the temple to fight. It brought a smile to my face.

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When they saw troops under the Zehrfeld flag cutting through the center of the Demon army, the nearby members of the kingdom's army sprang into action after them. Almost every fighter understood that the Demon army was on its last legs after the commander's head was exposed.

But the knights, who made up the primary fighting force of any nobleman's army, had already expended their energies. Because they charged when the Demon Commander fell into the trap inside the temple, they were slow to move after the momentum shifted. The troops of House Fürst were no different in that regard.

"Show them the pride of a military family!" Tyrone, the heir, barked at his troops as he charged at the Demon army.

Unfortunately, although the Demon army's will to fight was at an all-time low, the monsters did retaliate when attacked. Some fierce struggles broke out here and there, and lives were sacrificed on the kingdom's side. Mine took on the role of rescuing the injured and sending them to the rear. Even as they fought a winning battle, she worked to limit the casualties and guard her brother's back from the monsters.

Duke Gründing also made his move at this point. He directed the first and

second orders of the knight brigade, the strongest members of the kingdom's fighting force, to charge the clustered remnants of the Demon army. He did so deliberately so that he could credit Werner with the feat of cutting through the enemy lines, as per their secret agreement.

Though a ruse, it was still an astute move that ensured not a single monster could flee. He had divided the Demon army forces so the human soldiers around them could strike them down surely. Enveloped by lines of armored soldiers, the monsters could not escape their demise.

At the same time, the sound of flutes emanated from the base of operations, and the flags went up. Understanding that this was their signal to move, Marquesses Norpoth and Schramm spurred their troops into action so that they could obliterate the last of the Demonic Beasts. The noble houses fighting under their command moved to encircle their foes and then eliminate them. Seyfert gave a brisk nod upon seeing this. He decided that, given the situation, there was no reason for him to take to the field personally.

He left command of the battlefield to Duke Gründing and returned to the tent that served as the base of operations. There, his eyes pored over the documents that had just arrived from the capital. One was from Crown Prince Hubertus, while another was from the monarch himself.

Slowly and deliberately, he read each document twice. He asked the messenger who had delivered the papers a few clarifying questions. Then, after a brief pause for thought, Seyfert began writing his response. He completed it just before the kingdom's army finished off the Demon army. Without a moment's delay, he ordered a messenger to take his reply back to the capital.

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Right on the heel of the previous day's drama, the temple played host to a ceremony of triumph. In the game, you didn't even get an illustration of Finoy's interior, but the place turned out to be worthy of its prestige. A solemn air permeated the building. Stained glass adorned the walls, and great care had been taken in the placement of the lights. And to think glass cost a small fortune in this world.

In a way, it was more unusual to hold a victory ceremony in the temple's

grand chapel than in the palace. At the altar stood Dukes Gründing and Seyfert, the High Priest, and even Princess Laura. It was rather lavish for something held outside the palace. I felt really out of place here.

At the same time, there was something stark and brutal about the scene. Even as we basked in the temple's grandeur, right outside, people were wrenching magic stones from the corpses of monsters and then burning their remains. It would be a little while yet before the squires and soldiers could afford to take a rest. I was probably still a plebeian at heart, because I felt kind of sorry for them. Although the supplies were running thin at the moment, I wanted to at least take the Zehrfeld soldiers out for cheap drinks after we got back to the capital.

On that note, it was possible to eat the Alligator Warriors and other beasts. Technically. The very thought of eating the creatures that had gorged themselves on the people of Valeritz provoked a visceral aversion. And as far as I'd heard, they didn't taste very good anyway. I decided to make do with our diminished supplies.

We could also use their skins for our armor and shields. Although they were more durable than your average leather armor, they looked pretty darn silly, so adventurers and mercenaries used them more often than knights did. Armor made from their hide looked like a crocodile costume. To be fair, it wasn't a bad option if you were only thinking of survival.

Also, any item drops found on the battlefield had to be submitted to the higher-ups for review. After due procedure, the bosses would grant the items to the finders. Some bosses would request some of the items, but they generally offered a fair price for them. It was also conceivable for the finders to ask their superiors to pawn the item off them.

The bosses—that is, the nobles—could technically refuse their subordinates' sale requests, or demand the items at absurdly low prices, but that sort of thing got people talking. Nobody wanted their reputation to suffer, so they generally did honest business.

Speaking of which, the sword from the Dead Swordsman was a rare item for this point. It was hard to say whether that was lucky or unlucky. There was only

one of them, so I had to buy it from Neurath and Schünzel and give them a cash bonus. But what was I going to do with it? It would be wasted on me, and Mazel's party had better equipment. I guess I should hand it to my dad as a souvenir.

"We accord the highest honors to Mazel Harting. Step forth."

"Yes, Your Excellency."

While I'd been pondering those scattered thoughts, the ceremony had come to this next point. Responding to Duke Gründing's call, Mazel stepped forward, kneeled before the platform, and bowed his head. He wasn't a knight or anything, but he sure painted a picture of one. That was main character energy for you.

"For your vanquishing of the Demon Commander, I can acknowledge no feat of greater merit or valor upon the battlefield. Your actions are admirable in the utmost. This kingdom shall reward you for your efforts. Have you any desires?"

"I do have a request, if you would allow it."

A peculiar tension gripped the room—the nobles much more so than anyone else. They were probably wondering what Mazel was trying to pull.

"Very well. Say it."

"I am of common birth, and my family is abundant in neither wealth nor possessions. I was deeply distraught at my inability to bring relief to this temple and its communities in their hour of need."

If his words were persuasive, it was because he spoke from the heart. As the person who advised him on what to ask for, it was a bit of a strange feeling.

"Thus, I humbly ask that you donate all of my reward money to the temple and as relief to the victims."

The murmuring in the room came to a sudden hush. Nobody had expected that he would ask for this.

"Your concern for others is magnificent. Very well. My house shall offer the funds in your name, so that the temple and its surroundings can be restored and its people cared for."



“I thank you deeply for hearing my plea.”

The duke just nonchalantly offered up his house as support, which led me to believe he was also a quite the man of principle. It was a little tough to keep my poker face. I figured that this would serve as a point of compromise.

By going this route, nobody could complain about Mazel taking credit for the victory. The duke’s house had rubber-stamped his reward, and the temple was benefiting from the restoration funds under Mazel’s name. To offend the duke and the temple was an act of suicide in this country.

And this didn’t even touch upon the amount of money on the table. The duke had his pride, so I doubted that he would scrimp on this, but it was also worth noting that Mazel never specified a number. Nobody could find fault in him for being too extravagant or selfish. The most anyone could do was call him a hypocrite behind his back. Anyone who voiced such qualms would just appear jealous of the savior who had vanquished two Demon Commanders. They would just bring shame on themselves.

“The second-highest honors we accord to Werner Von Zehrfeld. Come forward.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

Crap, now I was the one getting stage fright. I tried to put on a show of calmness as I stepped up to Mazel’s side and bowed. A commoner like Mazel had to kneel even at a humble battlefield ceremony, but for a nobleman like me, a simple bow would suffice. For a ceremony of this scale, I would only have to kneel if His Majesty were present. This world had discrimination even when it came to little things like this.

That thought bothered me. I flashed a glance at Mazel, only for him to choose that exact moment to look at me and smile. It was all well and good that he wasn’t hung up about the discrepancy in our respective treatments, but he could afford to be at least a *little* mad.

“Viscount Werner Von Zehrfeld, you put forward a worthy proposal at this recent battle, and your efforts contributed to the enemy’s defeat. The matter of your unauthorized absence from the battlefield shall be forgiven. Furthermore, I shall bestow a reward upon you in proportion to your military achievements.”

“I am honored and grateful.”

One might ask, “Is that all?” But you could say it was a matter of maintaining appearances. As far as my accomplishments went, my situation was quite a tricky one. This was more my fault than anyone’s, admittedly.

It was a relatively complicated matter to determine which contributions in the tactics and strategy departments could be praised and which couldn’t. If the concept of tactics extended to just what was in a specific battlefield, then strategy was about military operations across a broad region. To compare it very broadly to professional sports, strategy was what you did to secure a win across the span of a year, while tactics were about what you did in an individual match.

In my case, you obviously couldn’t say, “You were the MVP in yesterday’s match, therefore you’re also today’s MVP.” What I did at Finoy and what I did at Arlea Village had to be counted separately. Otherwise, you’d get people claiming that they deserved credit for wandering off and conquering some unrelated castle or something.

Also, regardless of what things were like in practice, the Zehrfeld family would take the credit. Successfully breaking through the center, for instance, was a credit to the house as a whole. My father, the representative of the household, would receive the commendations. This had happened with the Demon Stampede too.

On the other hand, the military authorities understood and acknowledged that my proposal for the Finoy battle was a personal accomplishment. They also gave a nod to my actions as a commander. It was an extremely roundabout way of saying, “We can’t reward you directly because you were only acting as a deputy, but you deserve some kudos.”

Although the authorities could reward or punish a commander for what they did on the battlefield, you would need His Majesty himself to extol praise and bestow rewards for accomplishment of a strategic sort. It was like how in the Sengoku period, you’d receive a reward on the battlefield and get a separate reward when you returned home.

When praising Mazel and me, the duke used phrases like “this battlefield” and

“this recent battle.” Think of these terms as having asterisks attached. This was why he limited himself to praising me for just “a worthy proposal” and my personal feats of valor. When the duke said that the reward would be “in proportion to your military achievements,” he was deliberately leaving it vague. He could have been referring to just the feats he verbally recognized or to my accomplishments as a whole.

I didn’t want to be that guy who couldn’t read between the lines and then whined about being shortchanged. You could say there were upsides and downsides to this kind of subtextual theater. I couldn’t say that it was my forte, but I understood, at least, that the duke was trying to say that he wanted to commend me but there were some things he couldn’t mention in public. I was content to leave it at that.

For the second-highest achiever, the duke would usually come up with his own idea of a reward and declare it. As the person of lower standing, I would just have to humbly accept whatever he had on offer. But with the Laura issue hanging over us, we would have to continue this conversation—or rather, performance—a little longer. Much like Mazel’s reward, we hashed this topic out yesterday.

“If there is something you would request, I will hear it. What do you desire?”

“I will humbly state my wish. I am currently developing countermeasures against the Demon army. I would ask for Your Excellency’s support in that matter.”

“What countermeasures are you proposing?”

“I would like to present them to you personally at the capital. Thus, I seek no reward for this particular campaign, Your Excellency, but that you allocate funds and skilled craftsmen to this undertaking.”

I actually did need some good craftsmen. Quite urgently, in fact. So I took the liberty of asking for them here. I figured I was allowed to ask for this much.

“That would satisfy you?”

“For the sake of our kingdom, my sole desire is to prevail against the Demon army.”

His Excellency cracked a smile. *Oh, quit it, you.* I already knew I was a hammy actor. I wondered if the term “hammy actor” made sense to the people of this world. In the first place, actors were generally employed by noblemen and occupied a different place in society. This wasn’t the kind of world where you could call yourself an actor if you didn’t make a job of it.

“Very well. I will see what you have to demonstrate at the capital. I will prepare funds and letters of recommendation. Another reward from the crown will also be bestowed upon Count Zehrfeld after you have returned to the capital.”

“I am honored and grateful.”

I bowed. There, that did it. Mazel, the top achiever, asked to restore the temple and provide relief to the victims, while the second-top achiever (me) asked for money and manpower for developing countermeasures against the Demon army. The duke also indicated that my house would receive a separate reward, but that was up to the higher-ups to decide, not me. Because of the examples we’d set, nobody ranked third or below could ask for anything too extravagant.

That said, from an objective perspective, it wouldn’t be good for the group’s morale and loyalty if the rewards were too stingy. This was the rationale behind addressing the reward not to me but to House Zehrfeld. The royal family would probably discuss Mazel’s case in the coming days. It sort of felt like the duke was the puppeteer pulling the strings behind the scenes, while I was his accomplice.

Although we were inside the temple, this was still a ceremony taking place in front of a battle. There wouldn’t be any parties or whatever, but the formalities were bound to continue. Nobody could afford to neglect giving thanks to God for protecting the victorious army. I wasn’t a believer myself, but plenty of soldiers were. If word got around that a count’s chosen commander was an atheist, then my reputation among the soldiers would tank.

I was something of an outlier in this world. In modern Japan, it was common enough not to believe in God, but in this world, God’s miracles took on a tangible form. I was the weird one for remaining a skeptic even though God

definitively existed. But still, it was one thing to be a believer and quite another to rely on God for everything. It was tricky to find the right balance.

Thinking about all of these complicated things made me uncomfortable. I wished this ceremony would hurry up and end already.

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After the battle celebration ceremony—or whatever you call it—concluded, things settled down a notch. It was then that I got called into a room where, at last, nothing awaited me but a leisurely chat. Phew.

“Long time no see, Big Bro.”

That was the first thing I heard.

“Enough with the ‘Big Bro,’” I answered Feli with an exasperated smile. “Looks like you came in handy back there.”

Then Mazel and I laughed. We lightly bumped fists by way of greeting.

“I gotta hand it to you, Mazel. You saved our bacon.”

“That’s what I should be saying. Oh, and thanks for the advice about what reward I should ask for.”

No, seriously, if this guy hadn’t defeated Beliures, we would’ve been mincemeat. I had no way of knowing whether this was destiny aligning with the events of the game, but Mazel deserved all the gratitude in the world regardless.

As for the other people in the room... I decided to start by exchanging casual greetings with the two men.

“Nice to see you again, Luguentz, Erich.”

“Hey,” Luguentz said. “You did a great job baiting that stinking lout into the trap.”

“Yes, you did well.”

This was some high praise. It was making me squirm a little. Anyway, since I didn’t need to be polite, I decided to wave off the compliment. Then I turned my eyes toward the real person of interest here. Why was Laura in the room?

“Your Highness, to what do I owe the honor of meeting you here?”

“There’s no need for formalities here, Lord Werner. Please be at ease.”

I figured she would say that, but her words weren’t much assurance when the aura around her was so darn powerful. It was hard to figure out how to respond to her. Was it really okay to speak casually?

On the other hand, there was probably no point getting hung up about courtesies now, seeing as I hadn’t even greeted her first. Considering our social standings, she should have been my first port of call. Feli really messed up the order of things, but Laura herself didn’t seem to mind, and I wasn’t going to stir the hornet’s nest.

After I got Laura’s permission, I elected to maintain a tentative degree of courtesy without going overboard. Then I sat down across from Mazel and exhaled. Erich deftly slotted a cup of tea in front of me, which I accepted with gratitude. The ceremony had taken all morning and I was wiped.

As I downed a mouthful of tea, Laura spoke up. “I must extend my thanks to you, Lord Werner. Your assistance has been a boon.”

“Please, I didn’t do anything much.”

*So please, I’m begging you, stop bowing your head to me.*

Besides, I couldn’t deny that, in practice, I was simply correcting for a problem that had already gotten out of hand.

Belying my earnest feelings, however, Laura shook her head. “I heard that those monsters were targeting me. If Sir Mazel and his friends had not been there for me, I would have been in grave danger.”

It was probably plot convenience that let him get to her in time, but whatever. Moving on, the fact that she was referring to Mazel as “Sir” aligned with her relationship with him in the game at this point, although it seemed that she’d gotten quite buddy-buddy with his party. They probably got to know each other while they were holed up in the temple. That was a good sign.

I would have to wait for their next major relationship milestone before she dropped the “Sir.” Not that I would be there to see it play out. That would all

happen in a different country.

“Mazel and his friends ought to take the credit for helping you, then.”

“How modest you are. I suspect that if you hadn’t told them about Finoy, they would not have made it in time. Yes?”

That was a coincidence. I mean it, honest. I only told them to set their sights for Finoy because I knew that, according to the plot, Laura would be their next party member. Not that I could say this aloud, of course.

But still, I knew that it would be obtuse of me to keep contradicting a member of royalty. Boo-hoo. I decided to change the subject. There was a more pressing one anyway, as far as I was concerned.

“You flatter me. By the way, Mazel, I gotta apologize.”

“What for?”

He seemed off-balance thanks to the swerve in the conversation, but I really had to get this out in the open. I decided to relay everything that happened in Arlea Village from start to end.

After I finished my explanation, Mazel was silent for a moment. At last, he said, “Thanks, Werner.”

“Nah, there were a lot of things I couldn’t see through properly. If anything, I have to apologize.”

Like how the house he grew up in got burned down, or how his sister got abducted. It was a whole bunch of screwups on my end. I felt bad about only doing the bare minimum.

I noticed that a fearsome look had come over Laura as she listened silently to my account of Arlea. Fortunately, her ire didn’t seem to be directed at me. By comparison, Luguentz and Feli were quite vocal with their disdain.

“So what happened to that village chief?” asked Luguentz.

“Dunno. I mean, I just left them there. I went straight to this battlefield after that.”

“You sure that was okay?”

“I had priorities. Yeah, he was a dumbass who pissed me off, but he was a speck of dust in the corner of the room compared to the problem at Finoy.”

“Couldn’t you have been tougher on them?” asked Feli.

“I get what you’re trying to say, but there’s only one of me.”

It would have been unbecoming of me as a nobleman to hand down a punishment on the spot and then wash my hands of the matter. I wasn’t into the whole tyrant shtick either. Punishing people wasn’t a straightforward matter.

Although noblemen generally had the right to punish commoners for their insolence, doing so on another nobleman’s territory risked causing affront to that nobleman. They might demand to know why I chose punishment instead of any other option. If they were really short-tempered, they could openly badmouth me. It was kind of like how in the Edo period, samurai had the right to kill commoners for perceived affronts, but this was rarely ever enacted in practice. I had a reason for not striking the people in that situation. Striking the balance in that respect was a real pain in the neck.

Judging by the way they talked, those two would probably have let their fists do the talking if they’d been at the scene. Erich showed no outward reaction, although I suspected that if he’d been there, he would have been more frigid toward those villagers than I was.

“Anyway, I don’t plan to leave things hanging. Don’t you worry. I’m just sorry that I wasn’t capable enough to prevent the dangers that befell your family.”

“I’d be a total scoundrel if I blamed you for that.” Mazel smiled ruefully. What a swell guy. He was a saint, not a hero.

Oh, and, um, Princess Laura? What was up with her dark muttering? *“I’ll tell Father...”* Come to think of it, despite her playful attitude, she could be downright scary when she was mad. Mhmm, come to think of it, in the game, she... Yikes. I decided to pretend I couldn’t hear what she was saying to herself.

“So my father and the others are at the capital?” Mazel asked.

“For now, yeah,” I replied.



I would have to evacuate them before the capital got attacked, though. Fortunately, there was a good spot. I could just come up with some excuse to have them work at the processing factory at Fort Werisa. I was pretty sure that the people there would appreciate having good cooks around.

Which reminded me, there was something that had been bugging me for some time, which I almost forgot to ask. “Feli, what happened to those suspicious guys you mentioned?”

“Oh, them?”

There were a few things I would’ve wanted to question them about had they been captured.

When I heard they were dead, I was somewhat disappointed, though not surprised. There weren’t any examples of Demons being taken hostage, so it only made sense that things turned out the way they did.

But anyway, it was impressive how nobody died after the exposed Demons launched an all-out attack. A testament to their overwhelming distaste for Monster Repel, I guess.

Another thing: this was apparently the incident that broke the ice between Laura and the Hero’s party.

“That was quite the close shave,” she remarked.

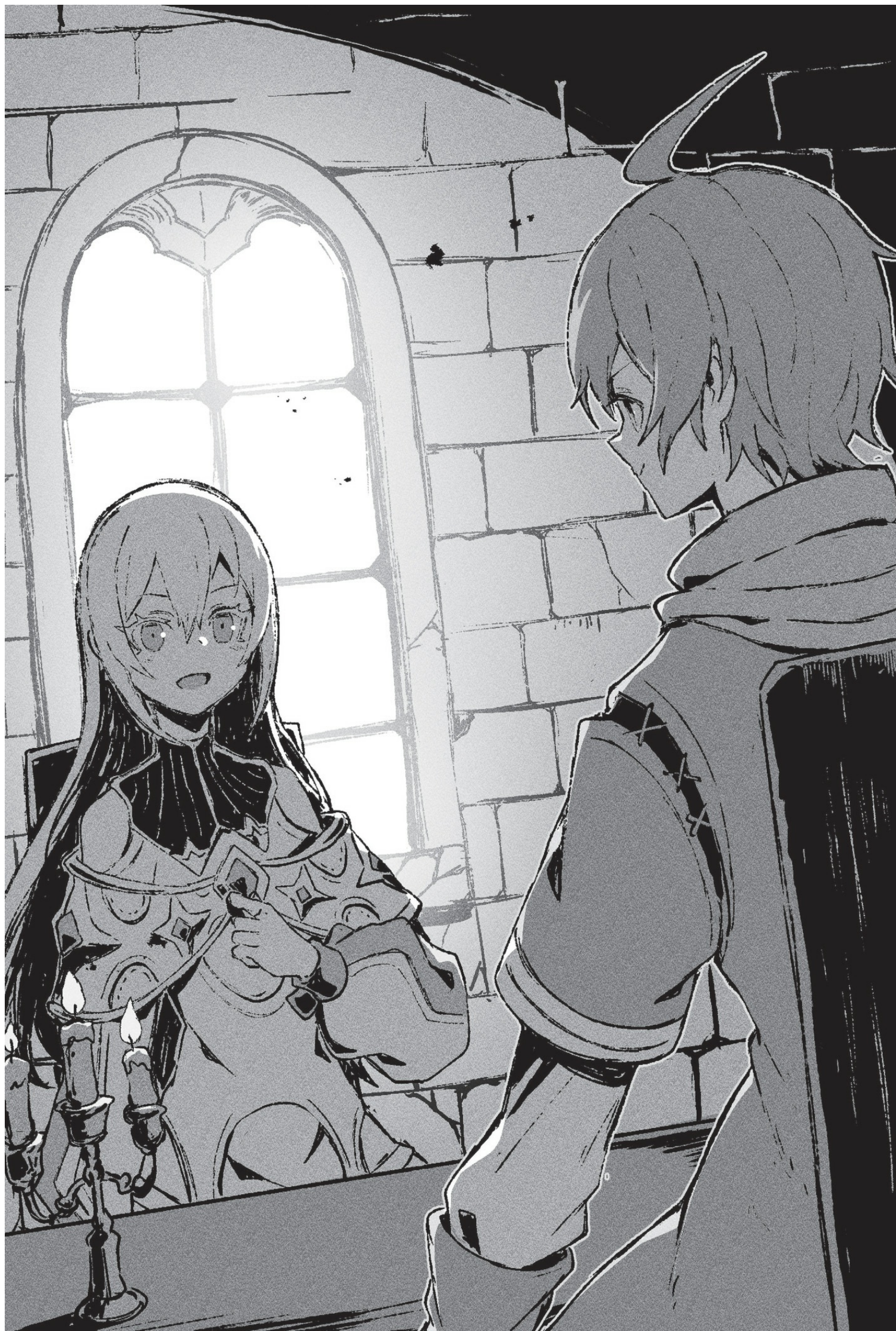
“Laura was in the room at the time. When they realized their disguise was undone, they tried to attack her,” Mazel said.

She blushed. “I don’t know what to say other than I’m sorry.”

“It was an accident, so don’t worry about it.”









One wrong step and this could have turned into a real mess. I was glad things worked out okay. Let's just say *all's well that ends well*.

Nor did it escape my notice that Mazel casually addressed Laura by name, ditching the usual royal courtesies. Oh well, this was probably fine. Maybe even good, since it seemed to be in line with the game. I couldn't help but chuckle inwardly at how things were converging.

"By the way," Erich interjected, "what do you suppose we should do now, Lord Werner?"

"Hm, let's see..."

Urk. Oh yeah, this was a problem. If we were following the game, then Mazel would spend some time leveling up around Arlea Village before heading to the Star-Counting Tower. But would Mazel really go to Arlea Village at this point? Probably not, huh. I wouldn't, if I were in his shoes. Let's see, what plot-important information got dropped at Arlea Village...?

"Your Highness," I said, after a pause. "Are you familiar with Uwe Almsick?"

"Of course I am. But where did you hear of him?"

He was the final member of the Hero's party. The elderly man was a legendary mage who once served as a tutor to the reigning king, but he abruptly vanished several years ago. Appearance-wise, he was a total Gandalf expy. Back in those days, the fantasy genre was synonymous with *The Lord of the Rings*.

I decided to ignore that fact and move on with my train of thought. According to the game, he found out about the Demon Lord's resurrection several years ago. He'd gone off alone and incognito to investigate it, unbeknownst to anyone but the kingdom's upper echelons. There had been no word from him since.

Despite his lofty reputation as mage, he joined the party at a low level. This happened a lot in video games, so I saw no particular need to have it lampshaded. What else was there to say about him...? Well, despite his venerable age, he was pretty irascible and short-tempered. In the game, there was a cutscene where he blasted a huge spell at the enemy unit sitting in the destroyed capital and burned them all to cinders. On reflection, it was pretty

rare for the human side to instantly defeat a bunch of bit characters in a cutscene. It was usually the other way around.

“I just happened to hear about where the venerable mage was last seen...”

I took out the map I always kept on hand. Erich and Laura’s faces twisted in surprise at the sight of it. Oh yeah, this was probably their first time seeing a map of the continent. Hopefully, it wasn’t because my drawing skills sucked. I was well aware of my lack of artistry.

“I heard he was headed toward this tower. Apparently, monsters roam the inside, but perhaps he was investigating something. Is that relevant to your interests?”

“Hmm, I see...”

Laura probably knew that the old man had hidden himself to prepare for the Demon Lord’s return. No doubt she was also bothered about his radio silence. If I recalled correctly, he couldn’t move because he was trying to stop a magic device from the ancient kingdom from going berserk.

Not that this mattered, but the sight of Laura tilting her head in thought made for a *very* pretty picture. The gesture had a lot of impact when it was the main heroine doing it.

“I expect that Teacher may have some good advice. Perhaps we ought to seek him out.”

It looked like she was inclined to follow the game’s storyline. I breathed an inward sigh of relief. The magic astrolabe on the Star-Counting Tower’s top floor should point them to old Uwe in Emdea Ruins. There was no need for me to nudge them any further.

“All right. Then let’s head for that tower,” Mazel declared.

“I would like to come too,” Laura shot back. “I am the only one who knows Teacher’s face, yes?”

Ohhh, who knew the day would come when I would see the game’s dialogue play out in real life? But wait, would her grandpa, Duke Gründing, assent? I wasn’t so certain.

Well, things would probably turn out fine. No point dwelling on it. Was I just escaping reality? Probably, but don't get on my case about it.

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Inwardly, I scrunched up my worries, and hurled them far, far off into the distant sky. Outwardly, I took another drink of tea as the conversation continued around me.

What Mazel said next bothered me. "Oh yeah, I found another black gem."

"Like the ones from the Demon Stampede and Dreax?"

"Yeah. I found it while looking around after we beat that Demon Commander's army."

They were the biggest mystery at the moment. This reminded me of something I'd been totally putting off.

"The other gems are being investigated at the capital, but I'm sorry, I haven't followed up on the findings. Oh, and also, I found one myself. Not here, but at Arlea Village."

"Really?" Feli piped up.

I gave a simple explanation. Not that there was much to say—I had no idea what the gem was or why that black mage had one. The whole thing was a mystery. It really bothered me because it was all very different from the plot I was familiar with.

"I gave it to the duke, so I don't know what happened to it after that."

"I did that too..."

Mazel's eyes flitted to the side, prompting Erich and Laura to nod.

"The High Priest informed us that he sensed a mysterious magic from the gem," Erich said.

"I felt the same way," Laura said. "I think it's dangerous. I said as much to my grandfather."

Hmm. Well, now that they mentioned it, yeah, I did get some bad vibes from it too. But I did have to wonder why they were telling me about it as if they

expected me to have some deep insight about it. Did I set some weird expectations?

“There’s not much I can say. I haven’t taken the time to confirm how the investigations are going. But yeah, I get it. I’ll look into it as much as I can.”

I addressed my response to Mazel, but it was Laura who answered first. “Please do.”

She bowed her head to me with a strangely serious expression. This was what I meant about her aura being super intimidating. But anyway, if the most talented holy woman in generations was so curious about the gems, then they probably had to be a big deal. Admittedly, though, it would have been *very* complacent to think there was nothing to them when the Demons were carrying them around.

“Anything else to tell?” asked Luguentz.

“No pressure, huh?” I really didn’t have a good answer to the question, which sucked. There was nothing much to say because I hadn’t personally confirmed what was going on in the capital. Then again: “Oh yeah, I’m out of Skywalk Boots. If you happen to get your hands on more of them in the future, would you mind sending some my way?”

“Sure,” Mazel responded instantly, which made me feel kind of apologetic. “I’ll make a mental note.”

What else...? Oh yeah, it wouldn’t hurt to give them a bit of a hint of what to expect from the Emdea Ruins plotline.

“I’m also curious about those Demons that snuck into the temple. About how they transformed into humans.”

“Yes, that’s certainly concerning.” Erich nodded.

The fact that such malicious beings got into a place so important to the faith was a huge gaffe from the church’s perspective. The barrier around the place was supposed to be strong enough to prevent such shenanigans. Knowing that the barrier around the capital would eventually break, though, I didn’t have high expectations for those barrier things.

“You might see more of that in future. Could be a good idea to keep your ears to the ground next time you’re in town.”

“Good call,” said Luguentz. “Can’t afford to let our attention slip.”

“Although I doubt you’ll constantly be fending off attacks in the middle of town.” Something nagged at the corner of my mind as I was speaking. What was it? I decided to finish my current thought first. “While I do think that you should pay attention to stories about people who have changed personalities overnight, I don’t necessarily think that you should be worried about it all day, every minute.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, just don’t get too complacent, right?”

In the game, there was a town where a Demon had transformed into the fief lord. I was pretty sure that you heard rumors about the man changing drastically.

When you finally reached the town from the rumors, you would stay at the inn. Right when the regular inn music was playing, you would suddenly enter a battle screen. I remember being surprised that the game would spring an attack on you in your sleep.

During that encounter, you’d be decked out with all your weapons and armor. Games back in those days didn’t have the flexibility to change that up, but I really had to shake my head at the idea of going to bed in armor. Well, whatever.

I took some time to digest the implications of what I had said earlier. When I said that they wouldn’t be fending off attacks *all the time*, that still left the implication that there could be multiple attacks. At the very least, the infiltrated Demon population certainly wasn’t capped at just one or two.

Take the refugees, for instance. They probably didn’t know the names and faces of all five thousand of them. A Demon could conceivably transform into a human and slip into the capital among the refugees, or perhaps as a merchant, traveler, or adventurer.

The attack on the capital took place offscreen. In the game, you didn’t know



what happened. The refugee plot didn't happen either, but who was to say that this didn't play a part in the attack on the capital?

This could be bad news. At the very least, it warranted an investigation—and quite a high priority one at that. Although the deadline was still a ways off, I didn't have the luxury of time considering how long it took for investigations to produce results.

"Werner?" Mazel spoke up, noticing that I had suddenly fallen silent.

"Hm? Oh, I was just thinking." I knew that this was not much of a reply, but I kept my poker face on. I didn't want to give Mazel and the others any cause for worry. "I just remembered something. But you can leave it to me."

So I said, but I did intend to rely on someone else's help. I was well aware of the investigation's urgency, but also that it was more than I could handle on my own. Besides, investigations weren't my forte, and I didn't have the authority for it anyway.

Wait.

*I didn't have the authority.* Come on, wait just a second here. Something about that thought tugged at my brain. This wasn't the first time I'd tried to do something I wasn't authorized to do. The fact that none of this was new gnawed at my mind—but why? I tried to think things through step-by-step so that I could figure out what I'd overlooked.

...Oh, right. It's not that it nagged at me just now. *That thought* had been nagging at me all along. I couldn't help but click my tongue.

"Your Highness."

"Y-yes? What is it?" Laura was surprised at how I abruptly addressed her, but when she saw my expression, she was all business once more.

She could get mad at me later for clicking my tongue in the presence of royalty or forgetting my manners altogether. But I couldn't let go of this chance to report—or well, consult about—a certain matter of import.

"I'm very sorry to ask for a sudden favor, but I would really like to speak to His Excellency the Duke. As soon as possible, if it pleases you."

I should consider myself fortunate that I hadn't let this slip by me. It was way, way better than noticing when it was too late to do anything about it.

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In the end, I got permission to meet with Duke Gründing with Mazel and Laura in tow. This involved a great deal of hassle. First, I had to return to the Zehrfeld troops to give Schünzel a letter to give to Laura, which she *then* submitted to His Excellency the Duke.

Technically, I could have handed my request to Laura directly, but this would have been an affront to the High Priest's office and so forth. Apparently, Laura told the duke that the request went through the High Priest. Thanks to her intervention, I got to have the meeting today instead of tomorrow or even later than that.

"I would like to announce the arrival of Her Highness Laura Luise Weinzierl, Werner Von Zehrfeld, and Mazel Harting," I told the guards.

"Please wait a moment."

Although it wasn't unheard of for me to announce my arrival to the guards, this was because Laura requested the meeting as the Princess. If not for that, I would have had a squire or some other attendant announce my presence for me.

Although Mazel would henceforth follow the direct instructions of the royal family, as far as his social standing or official position went, he was still squarely a commoner. Even if it was just to a guard, he would only have the authority to announce himself if he was being summoned personally. Though emergencies were another story entirely, of course.

Thus, it fell to me to announce our arrival in this situation. I referred to Laura as Her Highness because she occupied a higher standing than the duke inside the room. I, on the other hand, occupied a lower position than him, so I omitted my title. Mazel, who didn't possess any peerage, came last. These kinds of minute rules about social standing were a real pain in the neck.

"Our apologies for keeping you waiting. You may now enter."

The guides spoke with utmost courtesy since they were in the presence of

Laura and a viscount (me). If it were just Mazel, they would've said, "Go on in," or some such thing. Guards had it tough too when it came to unwritten etiquette.

I went inside and was just about to bow when I saw something that probably had my mouth hanging open. I mean, even Laura was surprised.

Duke Gründing wasn't the only important man in the room. There was Duke Seyfert, the captains of both the first and second orders of the knight brigade, the High Priest, the captains of the mage and priest units, and even Marquesses Norpoth and Schramm. It was an all-star cast. That was a good thing as far as I was concerned, though.

There were also some adjutants and guards, but they hardly counted. Treating people as if they weren't there was kind of a thing with the nobility.

"Your Excellency, I am grateful to you and all the others for graciously lending us your time." The princess spoke first. The order of speaking was also dictated by rules. Privately, they were grandfather and granddaughter, but in a public meeting, she had to speak like this.

"You are welcome. We also had some topics to discuss," the duke responded.

His Excellency spoke second because it was with him that we'd sought to confer. Technically, however, the High Priest outranked him. Wow, was this ever a drag.

"What manner of things did you mean to discuss?" asked Laura.

"We can talk about that later. First, please tell us about this urgent matter of yours."

"Very well. Viscount Zehrfeld will share the details."

While I was lost in thought, Laura and the duke finished their exchange, and it was finally my turn to speak. "Thank you, Your Highness," I said with a bow. "Allow me to explain."

Everything had followed the template of courtesy thus far, but I would have to chuck all of that out the window to move the discussion at a proper pace.

"I will begin with the conclusion. An investigation must be conducted at the

capital with utmost haste. Although I have no hard evidence for this claim, I am certain that danger approaches.”

There was a beat of full silence. And then the duke spoke up.

“What reasoning do you have for this?”

“I will explain in order. First of all, Demons in the guise of humans recently infiltrated the temple.”

“I am well aware,” the High Priest interjected. He didn’t have to get defensive—I wasn’t trying to blame him or anything.

“There is every possibility that there are other Demons capable of similar transfiguration. In fact, it is logical to assume that there are others.”

I knew for a fact that they would appear. It was from the game, but yeah.

“Hm. Continue.”

“You may recall that, not so long ago, Mangold Goslich Kneipp, son of Marquess Kneipp, launched an attack on Fort Werisa with a small group of soldiers.”

It was possible that the High Priest didn’t know, so I included a brief explanation. Fortunately, the High Priest seemed to be familiar with the story, because he nodded.

“I looked into that as well to some extent. When Lord Mangold was sighted outside the capital walls, he was commanding several dozen people.”

“I heard the same,” Captain Vilsmaier of the knight brigade’s first order interjected. “The guards saw him when they were patrolling the capital’s walls.”

So that was where he was seen, huh? As much as I wanted to hear the deets, that was very much a topic for later.

“Despite those reports, I heard nothing about any soldiers, adventurers, or mercenaries disappearing from the capital in corresponding numbers. My investigations turned up nothing, and nobody was sighted beyond the capital walls either. The group Lord Mangold was commanding is completely unaccounted for.”

I doubted that anybody here was short on brains. Almost everybody besides Mazel and Laura turned pale at my explanation.

“In other words,” said Duke Seyfert, as if to make sure of something, “you believe those several dozen people to be suspect.”

“I would go one step further. I believe we can assume that those several dozen people are Demons in human form.”

At this point, the question of how Mangold managed to gather those soldiers hardly mattered. But if dozens of people had disappeared, the adventurer and mercenary guilds would have noticed. If not them, then the managers of the capital’s population registry would have caught on, surely.

But what if, right when those mercenaries left the capital, Demons took on their faces without anyone knowing? A slight discrepancy in the number of people probably wouldn’t attract much notice.

A lot of people went in and out of the capital at any given time. If a few people claimed to be headed out on a journey, on an extended vacation, or to meet up with an old friend, their absences would be forgotten within a day.

If my suspicions were correct, then several dozen Demons were currently waltzing around the capital. Because of the identities they’d assumed, nobody would bat an eye if they were to bear arms. This was very bad news indeed. And to make matters worse...

“Lord Mangold was trying to enlist the aid of knights within Marquess Kneipp’s faction. If the real knights disappeared along with Lord Mangold and were replaced by Demons in human guise, then there is a very real possibility that the Demons have infiltrated the ranks of the nobility.”

In the worst-case scenario, they might slip into the palace under the pretense of guarding a nobleman. This brought up a lot of questions, like whether they didn’t just copy the faces of people but also their memories, or whether the barrier worked on them. But for now, we would have to operate under the assumption that they had all these advantages.

Marquess Schramm spoke up. “Yet the gatekeepers at the capital have informed me that they’ve seen nothing of Lord Mangold or his group.”

“We can take them at their word if, and only if, they are human.”

I might have sounded a bit curt there, but I was only being logical. We didn’t know if the Demons had replaced the gatekeepers, and eliminating potential witnesses would be the obvious play for a criminal.

“It is conceivable that Lord Mangold and his entire group are being manipulated by the enemy.”

“That is certainly the impression one gets...”

I doubted that Mangold would pay much attention to the people who were obediently following his orders. He was exceedingly arrogant. Maybe he thought that it was only natural for people to yield to his commands.

There was also the possibility that Mangold himself had been replaced, but there was no way to know for certain. This did remind me, though, that there were reports of him meeting with someone multiple times. They smelled suspicious. Either way, Mangold himself was probably no longer alive. Rest in peace.

By the way, the term “Rest in peace” didn’t exist in this world. When people died, they attended a trial before God. If God deemed them virtuous, then he would usher them into his divine realm. Sinners would become food for monsters in the Demon world. Don’t ask me if any of this was true.

Regardless of the veracity of these beliefs, the concept of an underworld didn’t exist, which naturally meant that there weren’t any words for resting in peace below the earth. It was much like how in my old world’s religions, those whose faith held no concept of an underworld would say that “Rest in peace” wasn’t an accurate turn of phrase.

Not that there was much room to argue in this case when the priests of this world could use what they called divine magic. It made God’s existence pretty hard to overlook.

Back on topic, Mangold seemed like the kind of guy who could easily be manipulated by flattery, but this still left the mystery of what happened to all the people he gathered as soldiers.

There were ways for the Demons to get those people outside the walls

without resistance. For example, they could have gathered them together under the pretext of doing some reconnaissance, then used poison or magic to render them unconscious. I was pretty sure that they hit Lily with a status ailment spell back at Arlea, given that she showed no signs of struggling.

I wondered what would happen if those guys got hit with something similar. In the game, succumbing to the confusion condition would cause you to attack your allies instead of your enemies. Come to think of it, the game also had cursed equipment which had really good stats but could render you confused at all times.

Putting the matter of cursed equipment aside, it was conceivable that, after suffering an unexpected defeat at the Demon Stampede, the Demons would take their time to prepare for their next attack by swapping places with several dozen humans.

Surprisingly, there were a lot of cases where you'd think human beings would be familiar with the people around them but they actually often weren't. Even in my old world, there were plenty of examples of enemy soldiers infiltrating a castle by dressing as allied soldiers.

At present, the guards at the capital had no idea that Demons could use such tactics to infiltrate human society. They were completely unguarded against subterfuge. Even if they thought someone was acting a bit shifty lately, it wouldn't occur to them that it was a different person altogether as long as their physical appearance stayed the same.

"There could be multiple people who have been their puppets for some time now," Duke Gründing mused. "I cannot discount the possibility."

"'Tis a matter of urgency indeed," said Duke Seyfert. "Thank you for bringing this to our attention, Lord Werner."

"I can only hope that I have simply been overthinking the matter," was all I could say.

The two dukes exchanged glances and nodded. Then they turned back to the knight brigade captains.

"In the name of Duke Gründing, I command you to select the ten most

capable knights from the first and second orders. I will prepare a document for them to deliver to His Majesty in all haste.”

“At your command.”

“The messengers from the first order will use the regular roads. The second order will take an alternate path to the capital. This should ensure that the letter arrives one way or another.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“Sir Duke, please wait a moment,” the captain of the mage corps cut in.

He shot a single glance in Mazel’s direction before turning his eyes to his back. Then a person who looked like an attendant put a box on the table. When I looked closely, there was something like an ofuda paper talisman stuck on the box. I wondered if it was some kind of seal.

“I believe this also warrants an inspection.”

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So said the captain of the mage squad as he opened the box. Inside, there were two objects resembling black gems. One of them seemed to be the one I picked up at Arlea Village. The other was probably the one found after Beliures was defeated.

Just one of them would have given off a sinister vibe, but having both of them together sent chills down my spine. I had no idea how to describe that vaguely eerie atmosphere.

Everyone in the room more or less had the same expression... Unusually, Mazel had a deep frown on his face. It was out-of-character for him.

“I should explain first that a number of people have lost their minds while attempting to appraise these black gems.”

“What do you mean by ‘lost their minds’?” asked Duke Gründing, though by the tone of his voice, I surmised he knew the answer, but had asked for the benefit of everyone else in the room.

“After close contact with the gems, they appeared to lose their capacity for lucid and rational thought.”



“It was not from a reaction of distaste or discomfort?” pressed Duke Seyfert.

“If I had to say it, it was more like they succumbed to a charm,” the mage corps captain replied. “It was as if they’d been beguiled. Perhaps you could say they were overcome by obsession.”

The High Priest was nodding beside him. I wondered if something similar had been happening to the clergy. It was strange to hear that something so obviously fishy could have a charming effect. I knew absolutely zilch when it came to topics like this, seriously.

“Lord Werner, you secured one of these gems. Did you experience any such effect?”

“None that I can recall. Though I must say that I did not spend much time looking at it or scrutinizing it.”

Although it was only intuition, I’d gotten a bad vibe from it. Besides, I didn’t have an appraisal skill or anything like that. Not to mention that after the whole exchange with the Arlea Village chief, I was so exhausted that examining the gem hardly seemed worth the effort. And after I found out that the monsters were trying to get their hands on it, I didn’t want to mess with it. I wouldn’t call myself a wise man or anything, but I had enough sense not to poke my head into obvious danger.

“I see. How about you, young Mazel?”

“Before I answer that, may I confirm one thing?”

Normally, it wasn’t a good look to answer a question with a question, but the mage corps captain simply nodded. Something about Mazel’s expression must have convinced him.

But when Mazel spoke next, I couldn’t understand what he was trying to ask.

“Why is that here?”

Everyone seemed taken aback by this unexpected question, not just me. For a moment, all the important men in the room exchanged glances. Then, as if designating himself the representative, the High Priest spoke up.

“What do you mean by that?”

“The black gem on the right side was discovered after the Demon Commander fell.”

Frankly, I didn't understand what he meant by right and left. Although their shapes did look a bit different when you lined them up next to each other, I couldn't tell which one was which. When I looked more closely, I could see that there were different-colored pieces of cloth underneath each gem. They were probably there to differentiate between the two, huh?

To that point, I hadn't been too invested in Mazel's comments. What he said next, however, caused my eyes to goggle.

“And the gem on the left is the one from Fort Werisa, when Dreax was defeated.”

A silence thick with unspoken implications fell upon the room, till at last, Duke Gründing spoke. “Are you certain?”

“I am not mistaken. It is the same gem.”

I was reminded that Mazel had incredible powers of memory, enough to never forget something he'd heard just once. As far as the game was concerned, this amounted to the player keeping notes on the other side of the screen. But anyway.

“Lord Werner, are you absolutely certain that you obtained this gem near Arlea Village?” asked Duke Seyfert.

“Yes,” I responded without hesitation. “Everything is as written in the report I submitted the other day.”

I was speaking the truth. But that could only point to one fact: someone had taken the black gem out of the palace. The captain of the mage corps had gone deathly pale. I could understand that being the man in charge, he would have to take the fall for this.

The dukes and the knight brigade captains were also frowning. The High Priest advised us to close the box, probably because he feared the gems might entrance us if we looked at them too long.

But what did this mean? What wasn't I seeing?

As my stomach churned with unease, Laura spoke up. “Your Holiness,” she said, addressing the High Priest. “I would like to take this opportunity to confirm the facts.”

“Indeed,” Duke Gründing responded first, “we cannot afford to leave anything overlooked.”

“I agree.” The High Priest nodded and took out a pen.

The two of them started to exchange information, bringing up points of interest probingly in an effort to get on the same page.

First, we knew for certain that the black gem dropped by Dreax at Fort Werisa was present here, meaning that it had been taken to Arlea Village.

Duke Gründing knew that His Majesty had ordered the mage corps to investigate the black gem from Fort Werisa. The corps captain had apparently seen it for himself at the laboratory on one occasion.

The captain had chosen who would be in charge of the laboratory. He could vouch for the researcher’s talent and character. Just when I was thinking that none of this sounded out of place thus far, Mazel spoke up next to me.

“Can I ask another question? I would like to know whether the mage corps are also still investigating the gem found at the Demon Stampede.”

“Of course.”

“Is it at your laboratory right now?”

Normally, this question would be the height of rudeness. Even if he had asked it in good faith, he was, in effect, accusing the mages in the palace of treachery. But it was a reasonable thing to ask at this point. If anything, it would be weird to assume that only Dreax’s gem got taken out.

“Given the circumstances, I cannot say yes with complete certainty,” the mage corps captain said heavily. “Lord Pückler is a dependable researcher, but...”

“Lord Pückler, you say?” I blurted out without thinking.

The name rang a bell. He was that prickly guy I met once... Once?

Hold on a minute. I willed myself to recall the strange feeling I had at the time, as if something was off. What did Lord Pückler say back then? It was something like *“I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”* Although it was the first time we’d properly spoken, it was actually our second meeting.

Then Vogt said, if I recalled, *“He was not so disagreeable before.”* Not “normally” but “before.” In the game, when a Demon switched places with the fief lord, there were rumors abound that his personality changed overnight.

Lord Pückler was a specialist researcher. It was possible for him to secretly carry the jewel out if a Demon had swapped with him or if he had gotten a status ailment from being in close proximity. In fact, you could say he was the number one suspect based purely on the evidence at hand.

“Lord Werner, is something the matter?” asked Duke Gründing.

After an uncomfortable pause, I said, “It is nothing certain, but...”

I couldn’t *not* respond to the question. I was probably pale as a sheet. Hardly a poker face, that’s for sure. While I only had suspicions, I figured it was best to speak up at this occasion.

But also, I figured that by speaking, I could draw the spotlight away from Mazel. He had his vague suspicions at this point, but what I had to say was basically slander without evidence. There was no putting the genie back in the bottle after I said it.

If, in the ensuing investigation, Lord Pückler and the mage corps were cleared of all suspicion, then I would be the one to face castigation, rather than Mazel who had only voiced his doubts. That was a much better outcome than fallout between Mazel and the mage corps. I had any number of ways to recover from whatever consequences I might face.

“I noticed something slightly suspicious about Lord Pückler. You see...”

Mazel might have been blissfully aware, but as a princess versed in political machinations, Laura certainly understood why I began my piece by singling out Lord Pückler as an individual. For a moment, she looked at me as if she really wanted to interject, but this time I managed to keep a straight face and pretended not to notice. I was willing to accept any problems that came my way

if it meant Mazel could focus on vanquishing the Demon Lord.

“I can only hope that these are groundless fears. For caution’s sake, however, I believe it would be best to investigate.”

Although I couldn’t tell people that I knew from the game that a personality change was the telltale sign of a Demon swap, there were definitely still grounds for suspicion when my testimony was taken in its entirety. Just to be on the safe side, I stopped short of expressing an indictment and instead positioned my story as a heads-up. Since there were no other suspects, I expected that an investigation would go ahead. Probably.

Personally, however, I found it hard to decide whether I wanted my suspicions to be correct or unfounded. If I was right, then it would be a fact that a Demon had managed to infiltrate the mage corps. If I was wrong, then I’d slandered an innocent man. This would have lasting effects on my relationship with Lord Pückler. Alas, both prospects made me feel sick to my stomach. Although if I was correct, my problems wouldn’t just stop at a stomachache.

Predictably, several people frowned uncomfortably at what I’d said, but the mage corps captain nodded.

“I see. Given the circumstances, we cannot afford to take anything for granted. I will begin an internal investigation.”

“Thank you very much.” I bowed my head once more.

Oh man, if this turned up nothing, I was going to suffer some serious reputational damage. Things would probably turn out just fine, though. Yep.

More importantly, I figured I had better get in touch with my father and make sure he was keeping himself well-protected. Although it would be misleading to say it was an afterthought, I decided to bundle this message with my communications about Arlea Village and the Harting family. I also intended to submit Frenssen’s investigation notes on the Mangold case to the royal family via my father.

All things considered, it was hard to say whether my father was lucky or unlucky to be a civil official in these circumstances. Almost all of the count’s personal army was here with me. On the other hand, the Demons would

probably see him as a low-priority target, given their “strength is everything” outlook. I had no idea whether that was a good thing or not.

Because Duke Gründing and the others would be busy writing reports and such after this, they held an impromptu meeting to brainstorm countermeasures to our pressing problems. Laura still seemed to have something to discuss with the High Priest and His Excellency the Duke, but I was personally satisfied with what I had accomplished for now. Apparently, the investigation would get started before I even got back to the capital.

When the adrenaline of the situation had trickled out of me, it occurred that between the Hero, the princess, the dukes, and all those captains, I was the odd one out in that meeting. I spent the night writhing in bed, hoping I hadn’t said anything cringe. I had to make sure that I didn’t carry my hang-ups over to the next day. Oh, brother.

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That same night, in the camp of House Fürst, Bastian ordered his son to return to their fief with the troops he’d initially brought from there.

“Very well,” Tyrone answered sullenly after a short pause.

Truthfully speaking, Tyrone was not happy about his lot. This was not just because Mazel, right on the heels of Fort Werisa, had taken the glory yet again by defeating the Demon army commander. He was also unnerved that Werner earned the second-highest honors. Part of this was because his ego had grown outsized thanks to all the fierce scuffles he got into on the battlefield.

“If he earned those results for himself, I would have understood, but to give the credit to that commoner Hero... What is that brat thinking?”

“Everything worked out for the best,” Mine said. “Is that not good enough?”

“That’s not the point,” Tyrone snapped at his sister.

Bastian sighed at his son’s attitude.

He understood what Tyrone was feeling. Rumors that the princess repeatedly fraternized with the Hero during the defense of Finoy had crept all the way to House Fürst. Not only had Mazel gotten the glory at Fort Werisa, he would

surely receive decorations for his contributions on this occasion too. It was only inevitable that Tyrone would feel a fierce rivalry with Mazel for striking up a close friendship with the princess.

Then there was Werner. Though he had also distinguished himself on the battlefield, it was hard to say that his form of contribution warranted the second-highest honors. It made one wonder if it turned out that way because Duke Gründing favored him. Not only was Werner the son of a count and minister, people were also saying that the crown prince thought highly of him. If the princess's brother and grandfather both held Werner in high esteem, then it was only inevitable that he would be seen as a strong political candidate for her hand in marriage.

Rumors of this sort would spread in a flash regardless of the era. And in fact, Mine heard that there were multiple noble houses that felt the same way as her brother about the outcome, for they had also deployed at Finoy with the intention of bolstering their reputation.

As Mine gazed at her brother's sullen face, a vague feeling of unease came over her. At this rate, she thought, there was going to be trouble.

# Epilogue

**E**ARLY THE NEXT MORNING, IT WAS TIME FOR the knight brigade, the mage corps, Duke Gründing, Marquess Norpoth, and their troops to head back to the capital. I saw them off, and then went over to Mazel's group to say goodbye.

Apparently, they were concerned about what was going on in the capital, but they ultimately decided to resume their quest to vanquish the Demon Lord. There was every possibility that the interlopers would raise their guard if the Hero returned to the capital. We would be headed our separate ways once again.

"You take care of yourself out there, Werner."

"That goes double for you. Go and get that Demon Lord's head."

My fist made a satisfying thump against Mazel's. We were practically experts at this now, having made a habit of it in our school days.

After exchanging lighthearted farewells with Luguentz, Erich, Feli, and Laura, I waved the group off. Frankly, I knew that they would face many perils across their journey, but all I could really do was pray for them. I was sure that Mazel would pull through no matter what came his way. It was hard to say whether my confidence came from the advantages he got from being a video game character or because of the strength of his personality.

As a side note, I heard that Laura had spoken with Duke Gründing and the others after I left the meeting about wanting to accompany Mazel. Evidently, she got their approval, which was one worry off my chest.

The duke objected, but he couldn't say no when both Laura herself and the High Priest insisted. For Laura, it was because she couldn't miss the opportunity to repay the person who saved her life. Then the High Priest chimed in to say that, as the temple's representative, Laura was compelled to aid the Hero on his quest after he donated so much money to Finoy's restoration. The High Priest came in for the assist in a rather contrived way, but I doubted that this was because of anything I did. It had to be the game course correcting itself. Yeah.



As for the matter of restocking my Skywalk Boots, Mazel said that he would give me some if he found spares. I settled with that for now—I didn't have the budget to spare for them. If Mazel came across any pairs he didn't need, he could take them to the Zehrfeld estate in the capital. When I told him that I could arrange a meeting between him and his family if the timing aligned, he laughed and said that he wasn't too worried about them so long as I was around. That guy had way too much faith in other people.

Oh yeah, I heard from the duke earlier that the army was in contact with the temple before the battle. Apparently, Feli was the person in charge of communications. How the hell did he manage to slip out of the temple time and time again when it was surrounded on all sides? He was practically a ninja. I might have underestimated his capabilities.

Apparently, the duke offered to employ Feli. When I heard about that, I panicked internally. Honestly, I was relieved that Feli turned him down so that he could stick with Mazel. But still, I couldn't shake the feeling that the duke kept getting the short end of the stick.

Most of the armies led by noblemen would return to their fiefs from here. As a matter of fact, I heard that some of the nobles bled their entire forces dry for this battle, leaving their territories unguarded. Although it wasn't really my business or anything, I had to wonder if those fiefs were safe from monsters. There was also the undeniable fact that their presence here was a drain on supplies, which also partly explained why they were being unceremoniously shooed off.

Only the knights and soldiers would return to their fiefs on this occasion. After the first wave of troops departed, the aristocrats themselves would all head for the capital with their personal array of knights in tow. This was so that they could call upon His Majesty in person to offer courtesies and report their military achievements. Unless there were extenuating circumstances like an emergency at their fief, returning to their territories without notice would be perceived as a slight against the royal family. This was kind of an unwritten rule or peer pressure thing.

As part of the second group, I departed for the capital the day after, along with the Zehrfeld troops under my command. Also with us were Duke Seyfert

and the noble houses under Marquess Schramm. Although it took about ten days to reach the capital, we weren't in any particular rush to get back. For one thing, the roads would be packed if there were too many people. And because the injured had already received their treatment at the temple, there wasn't any pressing need to march at top speed.

The gentle pace gave me time to kill, so I asked Duke Seyfert if I could watch the transportation unit at work. It was a real surprise. They were put together so efficiently it was like watching a well-oiled machine. I learned that the crown prince had implemented some major improvements in this short time frame. The man was absurdly competent.

Another thing: Public funds would pay for the damaged weapons and armor. Shields were the biggest casualties. You can probably imagine why. People weren't terribly fond of them. When an army was on the march, the soldiers would complain that the shields took up space and that they were heavy and unwieldy to carry. I could kind of understand why there were some countries, like Japan in my old world, that didn't bother with handheld shields at all.

On the flip side, plenty of soldiers would viscerally understand the importance of shields after experiencing their advantages in a real battle. Many regretted not lugging a bigger one into the fray. By the time the next march rolled around, though, this lesson would be forgotten in its entirety, and you'd get the routine complaints about how the actual, serviceable shields were heavier than they were worth.

During marches, shoes tended to wear away the most. To deal with this, a group of soldiers carried around a file. Nothing in this world was factory made, which meant that even shoes were made by hand. Shoemakers could vary a lot in terms of how much polish they put into their work, and shoes had to be customized according to individual needs.

For example, if you didn't properly trim the edges around the parts where the shoe would touch the skin, it would feel like absolute torture. The leather straps would keep rubbing against you while you were on the move. If bacteria got in your shoes, you could even get necrosis.

This might come as a surprise, but people weren't too fond of shoes. Much

like how clothes cost a pretty penny because fabric was expensive, processing woolen fabrics to a state-of-the-art level didn't come cheap. Pinching pennies on shoes meant that they could rub and chafe against you, causing blisters.

Leather shoes made from monster skins also existed in this world. Even the monsters that spawned around the capital could yield remarkably durable materials, so these shoes had a good reputation. Partly, this was because processing the materials was a major hassle and cost a ton of money. It was also kind of a status symbol to make something out of the skin of an iconic monster. In my old world, there were people who flaunted their designer brands, but in this world, it was more like people strutted in their monster shoes to show off how strong they were. People always needed something to brag about, it seemed.

When it came to the subject of footwear, I could understand why a lot of fantasy novels had people wearing sandals or going around with bare feet. A lot of soldiers found it simpler to wear shoes, though. They underwent training for walking long distances, so they had some pretty thick skin on the backs of their feet.

Because shoes didn't count as weapons or armor, however, each individual had to bring their own pairs. You were forced to choose between buying expensive shoes or going with a cheap pair from a store of dubious reputation and customizing it yourself. The kingdom was pretty darn stingy in this regard. Not that I was going to say that aloud.

At least the crown would provide for the soldiers' salaries in this case because they were deployed under emergency orders. However, because the noble houses supported the state, this meant that the nobles would allocate the funds to the knights and soldiers.

Although my father and I would never dream of doing it, it was technically possible for us to secretly dip our own fingers into the pot. In fact, there were plenty of aristocrats in the historical Middle Ages who racked up wealth by doing precisely that.

For people who distinguished themselves on the field, the individual noble houses were allowed to crack open their own wallets to pay for their bonuses,

of course. Although I would need to bring this up with my father and get his permission, I planned to splash out for the knights who accompanied me to Arlea Village. I also felt compelled to reward Neurath and Schünzel for sticking with me throughout the whole saga.

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On the way back to the capital, both waves of troops stopped by the towns of Denham and Valeritz. They spent a whole day carrying out a ceremony for the repose of the departed souls. Some of the troops stayed behind to clean up afterwards. Although House Zehrfeld wasn't assigned that particular duty, I was obligated to attend the funeral as the house's representative.

Seeing the deplorable state of those towns, I could only pray that the victims could rest in peace. At the same time, the knowledge that the capital could end up the same way if things went poorly weighed on me like a lump of lead in my stomach.

That day as we marched, I tried to keep my inner turmoil from showing on my face, but when I saw a knight approach Neurath, I forced those fears away from even my deepest thoughts. Neurath and Schünzel seemed none the wiser as they approached.

"Master Werner."

"Yes, what is it?"

"There is a message from the count at the capital and from the main troops that have been gone ahead."

*Jeez, they wrote a whole darn letter,* I thought with a sigh. It was awkward reading things on horseback. The letter said that the investigation was proceeding swiftly, which I thought was quite impressive. On the other hand, while it was a good thing that they had a fair grasp on the suspects, it didn't feel good to have confirmation that there was shifty business afoot. Given that the Demon army was unlikely to give up even if we dealt with the current infiltration, this all but confirmed that the attack on the capital was in the cards.

At this point, I didn't know what exactly would attack the capital. This thought really bugged me. When I played the game, I didn't bother scrutinizing it

because it seemed like just another plot device, but now that it was likely to happen to me in reality, I figured that it was best to assume that the Demon army would attack the capital with some kind of motive in mind.

Anyway, as we kept our languid pace, the messengers kept going back and forth between the army and the capital. The fact that Duke Gründing and the crown prince were making so much headway with the investigation just went to show that they both had their wits about them. The capital's investigators had to be quite adept too to get so much done in such a short time.

"Sorry, Neurath, Schünzel. Could you call Max and the others for me?"

"Yessir."

As I watched them trot off on their horses out of the corner of my eye, I made a list in my mind of all the work I'd have to do when I got back to the capital. Fortunately, I got hold of a veteran stone worker when we were guarding the aqueduct, and my connections would secure me people with the skills to make a wooden scaffold. Duke Seyfert had gotten me in touch with craftsmen who could make bows, and I could rely on Duke Gründing for help as well.

I also needed blacksmiths—or, I guess, metal casters—who could make things in large quantities. I also had to get all the things together for the orphanage, and I was curious about how things were coming along in the anti-area-of-effect magic department. There was a lot on my plate.

There was one other thing. Just contemplating the thought of adding yet another task to the pile made me want to throttle myself in exasperation, but I remembered that there was something from my old world that didn't exist in this world. From observing the enemy's fighting habits in the recent battle, I figured that this invention would come in handy depending on how one used it. Because it wasn't a mechanical object, it would be possible to create given enough time. I really, really wanted to have it made. There was the issue of figuring out where to store it, but I would probably be able to work something out.

For now, I steered my thoughts back to the present. Since the knights and the palace guards were assigned specifically to deal with the current incident embroiling the capital, I probably wouldn't have to deal with it directly. The

royal family wouldn't want to involve the noble houses too much because this brought up the question of monetary compensation. There were already multiple houses demanding compensation for responding to the emergency orders at Finoy. When you considered the burden on the crown's coffers, it was only obvious that they would attempt to resolve the issue with just the state-owned military forces. That was what the knights and guards existed for in the first place.

With that in mind, I figured that my efforts were best applied to preparing for the forthcoming attack against the capital. If I declared at this point that the capital would get attacked, I wouldn't be taken seriously out of lack of proof. If anything, I might earn a reputation as a paranoid idiot and nobody would listen to my suggestions. Right now, the best I could do was make preparations that could be put into action at a moment's notice. If I skimmed on them, then it would only get harder to get the ball rolling when the situation took an inevitable turn for the worse. Gotta remember the importance of manpower management.

"I've gotta go all out, huh?"

Back during the Triot refugee escort mission, I saw the problem as one of "numbers." Valeritz struck me as a "precedent," an illustrative example of what *could* happen. With Mazel's family, I had seen the individual human cost. If the Demon army succeeded in its attack on the capital, then the people I knew could all meet similar fates, whether it was abduction or slaughter. With the reality of the situation pressing on me, I couldn't *not* worry about it.

The defensive battle at Finoy stretched us thin, so I doubted that House Zehrfeld would be called into battle anytime soon. Another group had probably been assigned to guard the aqueduct. Maybe even the kingdom thought that they'd been working us too hard. Hopefully.

Part of this was me counting my chickens before they hatched, but I planned to make full use of this breathing time to take preventive measures against our horrible fate. Such thoughts ran through my mind as I watched Max and the other Zehrfeld commanders approach.

"Master Werner, what need do you have of us?"

“Ah, yes, sorry. I know it’s sudden, but there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

Until the day Mazel defeated the Demon Lord, I would do absolutely everything within my power.

## Afterword

**H**ELLO, I'M YUKI SUZUKI. I DEEPLY APOLOGIZE TO all the readers for the long wait since Volume 2.

It's thanks to all the fans that I was able to release a third volume. I received all your comments, I've seen your fanart on Twitter, and I'm even aware that there are Pixiv Encyclopedia and NicoNicoPedia entries for this series now. I am so thankful to everyone for their support.

In this volume, I was finally able to introduce Lily. To be honest, as the author, I felt like I could finally let out a huge sigh of relief. At the same time, I decided to dig deeper into the actions of the human side and the intrigue on the Demon side. Hopefully, this heightened the entertainment value. I hope that readers of the existing web novel will also find something extra to enjoy this time.

Finally, I would like to use this space to extend my deepest gratitude to all the readers, both old and new. I would also like to thank Mr. Yoshida, who edited the first two volumes of this series, and Mr. Kawaguchi, who took on this series from Volume 3. As always, Sanshouuo has done a remarkable job illustrating the characters in cool and endearing ways. I would also like to thank the manga illustrator Rampei Ashio and the new manga editor Mr. Uchida.



Yuki SUZUKI

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