



# REINCARNATED INTO A GAME AS THE HERO'S FRIEND

RUNNING THE KINGDOM BEHIND THE SCENES

WRITTEN BY  
Yuki SUZUKI

NOVEL

1

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Sanshouuo



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"Squeee! The Hero just looked at me!"

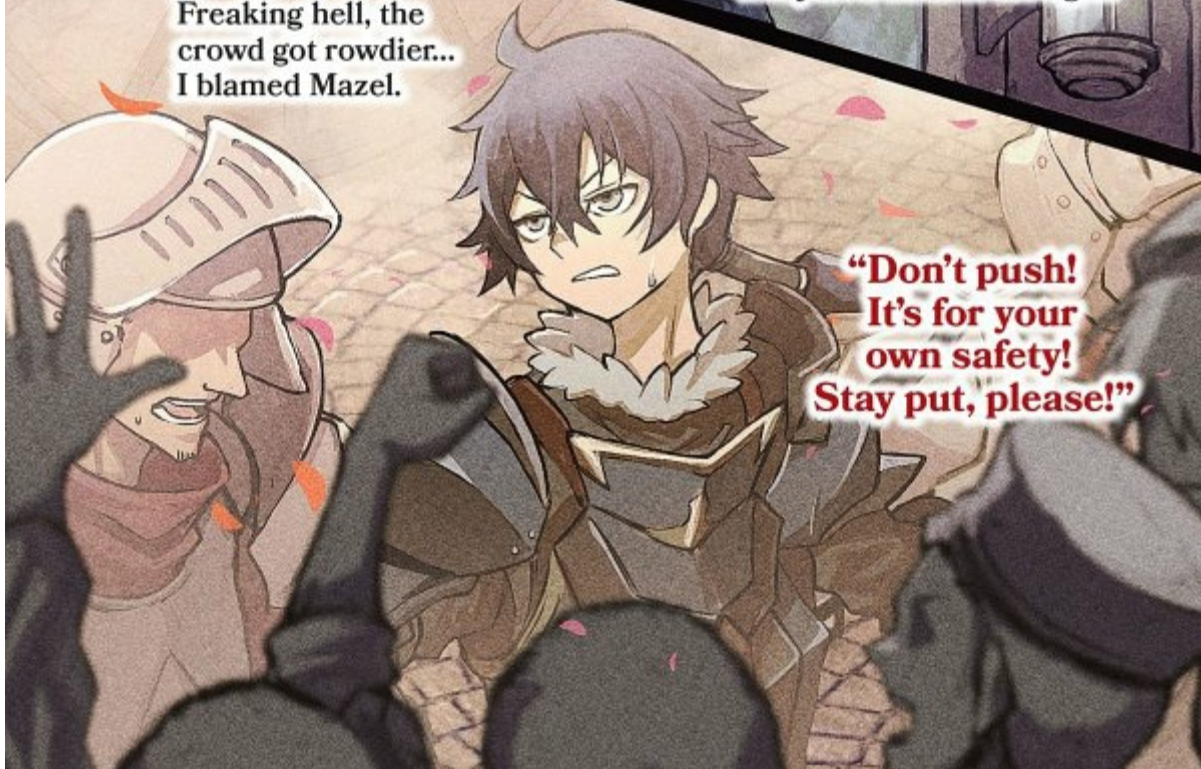
"He winked at me!"

"No, he winked at me!"

Mazel happened to pass in front of me. He turned in my direction, then smiled and winked in greeting. Without meaning to, I returned an awkward smile of my own.

Damn pretty boy. Much as I'd hate to admit it, he was the spitting image of a dashing hero. His teeth even seemed to sparkle, though I assured myself it was just a trick of the light.

Freaking hell, the crowd got rowdier... I blamed Mazel.

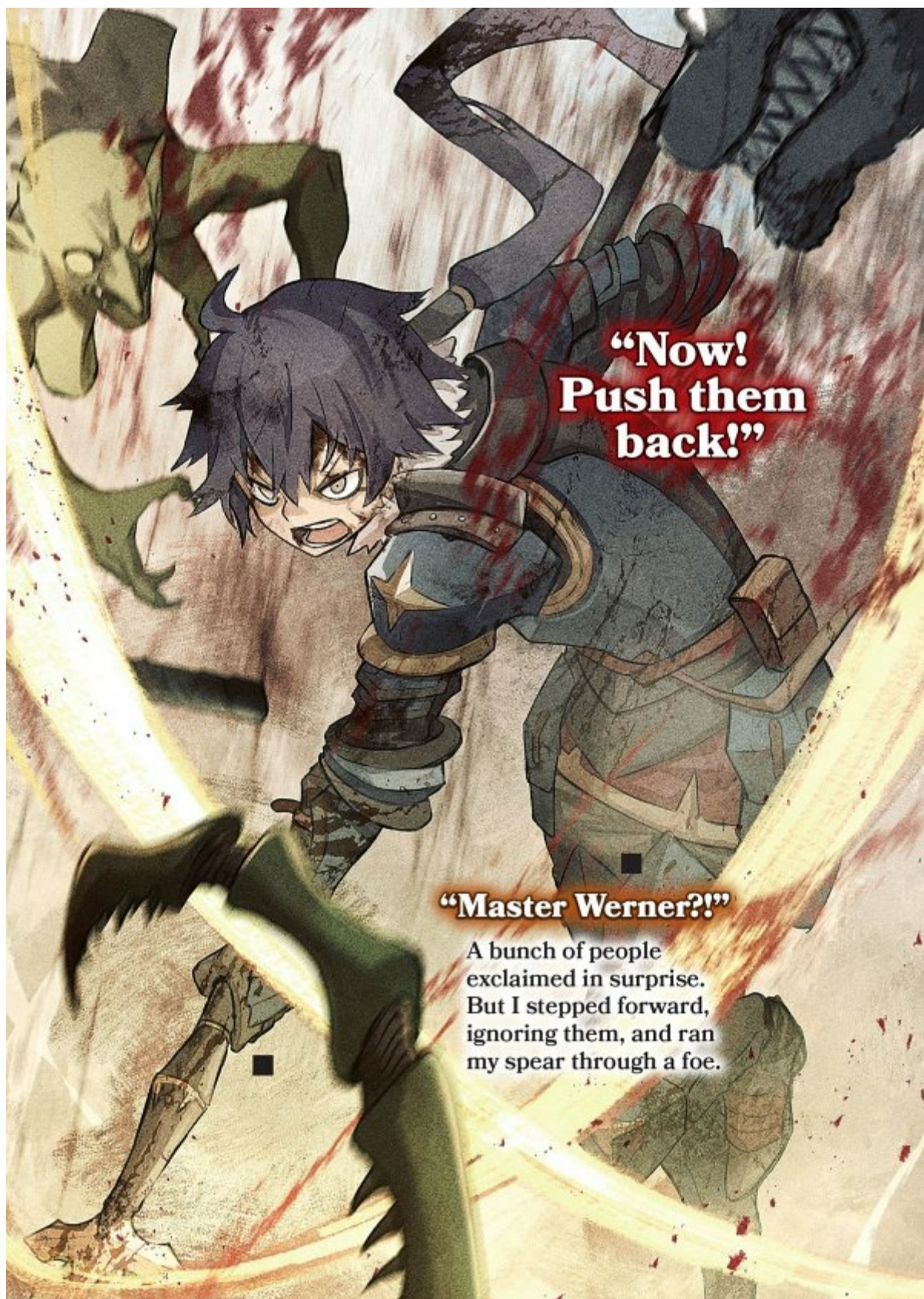


"Don't push!  
It's for your own safety!  
Stay put, please!"









**“Now!  
Push them  
back!”**

**“Master Werner?!”**

A bunch of people  
exclaimed in surprise.  
But I stepped forward,  
ignoring them, and ran  
my spear through a foe.

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NOVEL



WRITTEN BY  
**Yuki SUZUKI**

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**Sanshouuo**



*Seven Seas Entertainment*

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Running the Kingdom Behind the Scenes (Light Novel) Vol. 1  
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REINCARNATED INTO A GAME  
AS THE HERO'S FRIEND

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# Prologue

JUBILANT CHEERS OF PRAISE AND CELEBRATION rang in my ears as the knights returned to the capital, triumphant beneath a blue sky. Their brigade had just retaken a fort from the Demon army's grasp in what had proved a decisive victory—hence the current fanfare.

At the head of the brigade was the Royal Guard, led by His Highness, the crown prince himself. As he entered the city gates, majestic astride his horse, I couldn't help but admire his bearing. It was the kind of poise cultivated over a lifetime—dignity of a sort that was totally beyond me.

The Hero's party was next to appear before the citizens. They were inside a carriage pulled by warhorses. At first, surprise bloomed across the leader's face at the sheer number of people gathered, but he soon returned their enthusiasm with waves and smiles. The other party members were a step behind in following Mazel Harting's lead. When they waved at the crowd, the cheers became louder.

As for what I was doing at the feet of those radiant heroes...

"Watch out! Don't step past the line! Orgen, hold them back over there!"

"Yes, sir!"

I was busy directing my subordinates and controlling the traffic, right there in the thick of it.

A report arrived the day prior, stating that the operation to reclaim Fort Werisa had succeeded. This was good news by any measure, but no sooner had the messenger proclaimed the battle's outcome at the gate, than every citizen and their dog was echoing the news, resulting in an immediate commotion.

Nobody wanted this to be the start of a domino effect (an expression that didn't exist in this world, but I couldn't be bothered thinking of an alternative) where the citizens would get hurt, so to prepare for the troop's return, the nobles who had remained at the capital hastily mobilized their private forces to

control the crowds. Though they called us “private forces,” we were merely a slapdash group of knights, apprentice knights, soldiers, and other such professions. I got roped into it even though I had only just gotten back to the capital myself.

To prevent any squealing girls from stepping out of line, we formed a wall of people and pushed back against them. We could stop the civilians from pushing their way in, but we couldn’t do anything about the noise.

“Oh well. It’s no surprise they’d react this way.”

In a game, almost all townsfolk would either repeat the same things endlessly regardless of how far you’ve progressed in the story, or suddenly dish out different information depending on whether certain conditions had been triggered.

But here, where the people lived in fear of the monsters outside the walls, not even knowing when the Demon army would attack, it was only natural that defeating an enemy bigwig and reclaiming a fort would cause a stir. As much as I understood the whys and wherefores, this scene was more on the tedious end of the scale for an insignificant background character like me, who didn’t even merit a supporting role.

If people did get injured, where would we take them? Would we need carriages on standby in the side streets to anticipate that? Ambulances didn’t exist in this era, though the carriages had a similar enough vibe. But where would be the ideal spot to deploy them from? And even if we did arrange for them now, would they make it in time?

As I held back the tide of overeager citizens, head awhirl with such thoughts, Mazel happened to pass in front of me. He turned in my direction, then smiled and winked in greeting. Without meaning to, I returned an awkward smile of my own.

Damn pretty boy. Much as I hated to admit it, he was the spitting image of a dashing hero. His teeth even seemed to sparkle, though I assured myself it was just a trick of the light.

But I only had a split second to entertain those thoughts.



“Squeee! The Hero just looked at me!”

“He winked at me!”

“No, he winked at *me*!”

“Don’t push! It’s for your own safety! Stay put, please!”

Freaking hell, the crowd got rowdier... I blamed Mazel.

\*\*\*

In this world, so long as they were supervised by their parents or a guardian, one could drink alcohol at any age. And while I wasn’t about to serve booze to a baby, I don’t think there’d be any formal laws to stop me if I tried. And so that night, having fulfilled my duty of keeping the peace, I settled into a corner of the tavern, mug in hand, letting the sounds of laughter and clinking mugs wash over me. And that’s when *he* sat down across from me.

“Can I sit here?” asked the hooded figure.

“Say that *before* you’ve slapped your ass down,” I replied with a wry grin as I downed the last of my ale. “Are you sure you’re allowed to be in here, O Great Hero?”

“I could ask you the same thing, Viscount.”

We exchanged light barbs; we knew each other well enough for that.

“Good grief. Today had quite the crowd,” he remarked. He sounded slightly tired, but I could tell from his tone that he was in a good mood.

“It was proportional to your achievements. Not that *you* should be the one to say it.”

*You’re not wrong*, Mazel’s laugh told me, an affable smile on his face. I called the tavern owner over to order two fresh ales and some finger food to go with them. In the meantime, Mazel turned his seat toward the wall, ensuring nobody else could see his face before he finally took off his hood.

“I probably should’ve asked you this before I ordered,” I said, “but are you gonna eat?”

“I was busy using my mouth for talking instead of eating.”

This time, there was a note of sheepishness in his laugh. There were probably tons of people—especially among the noblewomen—who wanted the handsome Hero to tell them about his exploits. It probably didn't help that this world's cuisine could be quite unappetizing. Mazel, who was of common birth, was particularly prone to thinking that way. The ingredients in isolation were fine, but there were plenty of cooks who added weird seasoning to the food they served to the noble ranks.

Well, whatever his reasons, I figured that after weathering the formal festivities, we deserved a little celebration of our own. I downed the ale and dug into the snacks that had just arrived at our table—the sausages at this place were great.

It was a good thing that the middle-aged geezer who ran the tavern was perceptive enough not to say anything even after seeing some patrons' faces. I'd heard on the grapevine that the prince used to come here in his younger days for a furtive drink or two.

"A toast to your safe return."

"Cheers!"

We finished off our drinks. When we let out satisfied sighs at the exact same moment, we couldn't help but laugh.

"This jibes with me better, I have to say," he commented.

"To each their own."

Not that I disagreed. That's why I was drinking in the corner of a tavern to begin with. A noble banquet was a bit much for a former office worker like me.

\*\*\*

My name was Werner Von Zehrfeld. I was the son of a count, but before that, I hailed from Japan.

My background, I should add, was closer to lower class than middle class. I was born to an ordinary family, graduated from an ordinary school, and got an office job. I didn't have any major complaints about my company or the people in my life. Sure, there were some higher-ups who got on my nerves enough for



me to want to snap back at them, but that's life for you.

Society at large was going through an economic slump, and I hardly got any pay raises. I have to admit that I spent most of my money on hobbies, so I had basically nothing in the way of savings.

Somehow, this nobody woke up one day as a child in a world resembling medieval Europe. I had no idea how it happened. Fortunately, I did have some dim memories, but they were riddled with holes. Though, to be fair, there were a few things in my previous life I'd happily leave behind. While most of my situation was a mystery to me, I understood enough to know that this was the familiar "transported to another world" trope.

Or perhaps I should say that I had no choice but to accept the situation, whether I understood it or not. I was surprised, of course, but I didn't have the luxury of time to puzzle over it. Even now, years later, I still don't.

The memories of my life in Japan returned when I was seven years old. My family was traveling to the capital when the carriage with the children—that is, me and my older brother—abruptly toppled over. It was hardly a sensational incident. Not a bandit attack or a plot orchestrated by rival nobles. It was just a plain old accident, and when I hit my head, the memories of my past life came flooding back.

That was also the same moment I lost my brother.

Thanks to the magic of this world, it only took a matter of days to treat my wounds. So once my family had dealt with my brother's funeral, I threw myself into combat training and bodybuilding without delay. I could tell that my parents and the adults around me regarded me with pity after losing my brother. We had gotten along well before he died, and now I also bore the responsibility of becoming the next head of the house.

Of course, that wasn't the real reason I took up training. I mean, I *was* sad to lose the brother who had doted on me, but my problem was that with my newly returned memories, I had realized that this world was from a game I knew well. I had precious few years to spare before the events in the story started.

People expressed mixed opinions about this particular role-playing game. The

music and character designs were solid, but the setting was old-school, and the story lacked depth. Still, players tended to stick to the familiar, and as long as enough of them considered this “not a failure,” it made sense for games to tread old ground. Sure, they wouldn’t end up a standout success, but it’d keep them safe from the worst of criticism. And it sold decently well—not well enough to get a sequel, but it had its hardcore fans. I wasn’t hardcore myself, but... Anyway, end rant.

The problem was what happens *in* the story.

At around the midpoint, while the Hero’s party is embroiled in a battle with the third of the Demon Lord’s Four Fiends, the fourth commands their troops to launch a violent attack on the capital. The capital winds up in ruins, and the entire royal family is killed except for the second-oldest princess—she was a member of the Hero’s party. In a hard-hitting cutscene, we watch as the Hero returns to the capital on a high after defeating the third Fiend, only to find the city and castle in ruins. It’s basically there to set up the ending, where the Hero gets together with the princess (his love interest) and ascends to the throne.

When I was playing the game, I was fairly nonchalant about the whole thing. “Becoming the king is cool and all, but having to rebuild the kingdom would majorly suck” was about the extent of what I thought.

However, since being isekai’d, and realizing that I, being an aristocrat, would probably die if this situation came to pass, it suddenly wasn’t some other person’s problem anymore. I remembered that the game itself alluded to the deaths of many knights, ministers, and so on. It didn’t go into specifics about the nobles, but those were probably just unnecessary details as far as the writers were concerned. Nobody buys games for the flavor text, after all.

Yet now that I was living this reality, I couldn’t shrug it off as a joke. I’ll just come right out and say it: I didn’t want to die. While I *could* be fortunate enough to be away from the capital on that fateful day, I figured it was wise to look out for myself. That was my logic behind frantically raising my combat skills to a decent level before the events of the game began. Early childhood was usually not the time to start applying oneself so hard, but it did pay dividends, because by the time I was twelve, I got admitted into the academy at the capital based on merit.



In this world, a person's ability to fight monsters was determined by their class (in the RPG sense) and their innate skill (also in the RPG sense). Basically, if you belonged to the Mage class and your skill was a talent for magic, then your magic would have an increased effect. On the other hand, it could easily work against you if you had the skill but never raised your class level. To be fair, it was relatively harder to raise your class level. In spite of my low-rarity skill of Spearmanship, my hard work got me into the top class of an academy where I could study the fundamentals.

It was here that I was reminded of a certain important part of the original story when I came face-to-face with my classmate Mazel Harting, the Hero and protagonist of the game.

\*\*\*

Mazel Harting was, in a word, attractive. I don't just mean his face, either; his personality was guileless to an extent that was unusual these days. It basically screamed "I'm the good guy!" As a matter of fact, he was one of the reasons people said this game lacked depth.

Mazel had the Heroism skill—yes, Hero was his skill, not his class—so he got admitted as a special case. At first, I'd been worried about how I ought to interact with him. I didn't mind that he was a commoner; they weren't uncommon at the academy, and in any case, my origin as an officer worker put me about as far from the nobility as one could be. Still, I was scared of saying anything that could disrupt the game's story as I knew it.

But in the end, I talked to him anyway. I don't even remember what made me do it.

Chatting with him, I found that he lived up to his role as the protagonist. He possessed both good looks and charisma, as well as the kind of personality that could strike a fast friendship with practically anyone. Still, it was a good thing I took the initiative talking to him. He'd apparently held back from talking to me on account of my noble standing. Due to his own status as commoner, he'd apparently been rather self-conscious. Not that I'd have ever noticed his misgivings, given how well he conducted himself. It was a good thing that I broke the ice first.

You see, privilege really made all the difference in this world. Under most circumstances, commoners lacked the opportunity to even discover their skill. For one thing, there weren't many people around who could formally identify skills. There were some at the church, but you needed to pay a hefty fee in donations.

Somehow or other, Mazel had gotten his skill appraised at the behest of an employer and then scored a scholarship at the academy. However, since only a few people were aware of his Heroism skill's significance—the royal family through divine revelation, and myself through familiarity with the game—he was regarded as an oddity in these halls crowded by noble offspring.

According to Mazel, it was tough to act natural while feeling so out of place, but I don't know how true that was, given what he was normally like. He certainly studied like any regular person, but one of his unique skills was a photographic memory. What the hell? Technically, it was a skill that did exist on Earth, but damn, I was still jealous.

I had no significant leg up over other people. Because the humanities and languages were unique to this world, I had to learn it all from scratch. I had a low level of understanding when it came to the sciences, likely because magic was often used as a substitute, but that was a boon for me. I had vivid memories of taking entrance exams in my previous world, so I knew tricks for studying that made me more efficient at taking in knowledge than the average academy student. That was enough to secure me a spot as one of the top achievers.

At the same time, I really got a feel for just how ridiculously overpowered Mazel was, from his fundamental abilities to his Heroism skill.

The skill's effect was +1 to *any* class and skill, meaning he could pick up any weapon or magic with ease. That's right, no drawbacks. Whether he chose the path of a swordsman or that of a mage, he would grow stronger at an accelerated pace. Talk about protagonist privileges. Did he type in a cheat code at birth?

Naturally, there were some people who were jealous of him. While he had a talent for navigating social conflict, this was an aspect of school life where I

proved helpful to him. Not only was I the legitimate son of a minister and a member of the aristocracy, but I was on good terms with the preppy students too. My reputation as a top student was also a boon, as was my diligence, even if it was driven by fear for my life. Basically, my social standing granted me enough clout to ward off petty naysayers.

That said, there was one time when I had to deal with a scummy noble kid. I gathered proof of his misdeeds and got my father to lodge a complaint to the royal family. They conducted a proper investigation, which resulted in the guy losing out on his inheritance. The royals would not have liked it if the bearer of the prophesied Heroism skill got driven out of the school, and they couldn't very well ignore a complaint from a count's son.

As an aside, the bully and his lackeys tried to antagonize us again out of spite. When Mazel and I beat them black and blue, we got suspended for it. Even we had to admit that we went a bit overboard that time.

Thanks to my knowledge from the game, I knew that in a few years the Demon Lord would launch his invasion, throwing the world into chaos. I also knew all too well that I lacked the ability to become one of the Hero's esteemed party members in more ways than one. I merely excelled in my cohort, within the confines of school.

But even if this was a game world, this was no game to the people living in it. I had people I cared about here. I once went on a trip with my friends (sure, I wanted to see the difference between the game and the geography in the real world, but the point was that we went on a journey together). And that wasn't all. Whether it was fighting monsters, visiting festivals, studying before a test, or even getting hammered after that same test, we did it side by side. Given that this was a world with magic, I doubted that the teachers failed to notice our late-night binge drinking, but they had the decency to overlook it.

One time, we invited Mazel along to experience the aristocratic pastime of hunting. I would've liked to return the favor and visit his hometown, but since it was out in the sticks, I never did find the chance. As students, our group of friends was tight-knit. Even if my life was on the line, I knew from my previous life that I'd burn out if I didn't allow myself some amount of breathing room. At least...that was the impression I got. *Was I a shut-in back in my old world?*



Regardless, I was always aware that there was no changing my status as a background character here.

The most one could expect of me was to get snuffed out unceremoniously by a monster in a cutscene. Despite knowing that, I wanted to build my strength ahead of the attack on the capital and do everything I could to stick with Mazel. Apparently, my reputation as a hard-working nobleman even reached the royal family at one point. My parents were proud.

Yet in the midst of all my training and school activities, there was one dreadful event that I could not ignore, however much I wanted to.

The start of the game.

# Chapter 1:

## First Battle

### ~Demon Stampede Battle~

“WHAT’S THIS ‘DEMON STAMPEDE’?” MAZEL ASKED.

It was the first lesson of the day. As he cocked his head in confusion at the teacher’s explanation, I simply sat next to him, struggling to keep my face level. I only managed to pull it off because, being a nobleman’s son, I was trained in the art of poker faces.

*But of course*, I was thinking. The story kicks off when the Hero is still a student. There is a sudden monster outbreak in the capital’s vicinity, and the students come running to lend their aid.

In the game, the main character gets all the perks; if you talk to the teachers, they give you healing items for some reason. There were no handouts for me, of course. If they’d asked why I needed cheap potions when my family could provide for me, I wouldn’t have had a good answer. I *was* a noble, after all.

“It’s a large-scale monster outbreak that occurs about once every twenty years. It’s particularly rare for it to happen near the capital.”

The teacher explained the whole thing in detail; I decided to stay quiet and listen for now. It would suck if it turned out there were discrepancies from what I knew of the game.

Monsters in this world were grouped into three categories. Broadly speaking, animal and insect-like creatures that used their limbs to attack were called “Demonic Beasts.” The slightly smarter ones, which had some semblance of culture and society, were called “Demonic Beings.” Golems and undead also belonged to that category. Humanoid monsters that possessed intellect and wisdom...you know, those human-looking ones with wings on their backs and stuff? Anyway, if they could walk on two limbs and strategize, they were simply referred to as “Demons.”

The presence of magic wasn't really a distinguishing factor—there were even some Demonic Beasts that could use it, after all. It made things a bit fuzzy for anyone trying to categorize monsters. There were plenty of pointless debates, like whether monster birds qualified as Demonic Beasts or Demonic Beings. Come to think of it, people didn't use specific expressions like “Demonic Insect.” I suppose it was because that phrase didn't have much of a ring to it.

“Monster” was often used as a blanket term for every deadly creature, including the Demons. The term “Demon Stampede” encompassed both Demonic Beasts and Demonic Beings.

The teacher continued, “They come in large numbers, so we can't afford to leave them alone or else they'll destroy villages. They're not a huge threat if we deal with them quickly, though.”

He was right—or he would be, if we were talking about an ordinary stampede.

This time, the event would be influenced by the all-too-common RPG trope of the Demon Lord's revival. It *was* a threat because a Demon was pulling the strings. Not that anyone would believe me if I said so. Unfortunately, I didn't have that level of clout. This battle was a scripted defeat, and I didn't have the means or abilities to overturn the entire foundation of the story.

My only choice was to focus on self-preservation. It was possible that countless people I knew would perish in the battle, but I wasn't—no, I just *couldn't*—get hung up over it. With my current powers, it would take everything I had just to protect myself.

“Those of you who belong to a noble house, return to your homes in the capital and await orders from your families.”

“Understood,” several voices chorused in response.

Being the son of a count, I was one of those returning to the capital. It looked like I was still participating in this incident, though in a different capacity than I had in the game.

“Zehrfeld, try not to worry your father,” the teacher warned me.

“I won't.”



I could understand why the teacher was looking out for me. My grades were on the higher end of the scale, I supposed, and I was the only current student whose father was a minister or authority in the royal family. But it did make me wonder if they were trying to get in my father's good graces through me. Well, whatever.

I'd been fairly keen on this game in my previous life, but now that I'd lived in its world for over fifteen years, it occurred to me that literally thirty years had passed since I'd last played it. This event was jogging my memory, bringing back vague recollections. When the knight brigade got complacent in this first battle and suffered a grievous attack, the surviving members were unable to leave the capital. Because of this, the Hero's party wound up traveling around the continent and visiting other countries.

"Every student without a noble rank will be joining the support squad. You'll be transporting supplies and healing the injured. I doubt you'll see action, but keep your eyes peeled."

"Okay!" The responses, even Mazel's, were eager. They thought they were safe. Come to think of it, I don't think there were any stories in the past about students falling victim to Stampedes. My memory was fuzzy when it came to details like that. The game didn't really touch on the nobility to begin with.

To be fair, RPGs in those days didn't have such detailed settings. Sure, there were soldiers and priests, but I wasn't even sure if the game *had* sprites to represent civil officials. They were probably a waste of precious cartridge space.

"Something on your mind, Werner?" asked Mazel.

"Nothing important," I answered casually. Meanwhile, I turned over everything in the depths of my memories. Damn it, I had no clue. A teacher would announce after the event that the knight brigade had been destroyed. I had a feeling that was the extent of my knowledge.

...Wait, there was one other nugget of information.

As soon as I remembered it, I tried to steer the conversation to a different topic before my pallor could show. I couldn't blurt out the information here; not only would I be unable to explain *how* I knew it, I might even get scolded for sounding like a doomsayer.

“It looks like I’ll be going home and taking care of the injured. I think you should keep some potions on you. Why don’t you ask the teachers for some?”

“Good idea. Better safe than sorry, huh? You’re surprisingly cautious, Werner.”

“You didn’t need the ‘surprisingly’ part. Anyway, watch out for yourself.”

“You too.”

Instinct prompted me to respond with light ribbing, but I got the job done anyway. We fist-bumped before parting ways. As if on cue, a crowd gathered around Mazel. Most of them were commoners, but there were also some aristocrats here and there.





“Mazel, what should I do?”

“You’re good with a bow, Cranach. I think you should bring one along. You might be asked to guard the support squad.”

“I can see that happening. Oh dear...”

“It’ll be just like the monster exterminations we do for class. You’ll be fine.”

“You’re right.” She nodded. Faced with Mazel’s radiant smile, even the usually anxious Cranach seemed to cheer up.

Another female student called out to Mazel. “What should I do, Mazel?”

“Collina, you’re a mage, so you might be asked to help the injured... I think you should suit up in defensive gear just in case. Take care of yourself.”

“O-okay.” Collina seemed happy about Mazel showing concern for her, although he was like that with everyone.

“What should I do?” This time, a boy spoke up.

“Reiner, you should...”

And so on and so forth. Jeez, Mazel was as popular as ever. In spite of the situation, I found myself feeling half-impressed, half-exasperated. He’d memorized the faces and skills of *everyone*, even students from the other classes. I couldn’t help but smile awkwardly.

“Yo, Werner.”

“Oh, hey, Drechsler.”

He was part of the group Mazel and I hung out with from time to time. I got along with him pretty well. He belonged to a viscount’s family, but it was academy tradition to pay no heed to rank during one’s student years.

Drechsler clasped me by the shoulders. “Are you coming along?” he asked amiably.

“It’s my duty, so yeah.”

“Well, your house is a bunch of bureaucrats, so I doubt that even the teachers are expecting valiant deeds from you. Don’t push yourself, eh?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

Drechsler slapped my shoulder and went to join the group around Mazel. The guy had a point. As good as my grades were, I was merely a student in the grand scheme of things. There was no way I was going to stand out.

Mazel, on the other hand, would throw himself into the Stampede. He would receive his mission as the Hero to scout the enemy. Frankly, I thought it was a dumb idea to send a student behind enemy lines...but accompanied by an adventurer, he would discover and investigate a mysterious cavern. It was there he would have his first showdown against a Demon.

Say what you will about the script, but I honestly wasn’t in any position to nitpick it. I was nowhere near the meat of the plot, and my priority was to get through the day alive.

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“Father won’t take the field?”

“Indeed. He is at His Majesty’s side.”

It was good to see Norbert, the family butler, back at the Zehrfeld estate in the capital, but I had mixed feelings about what he said.

Well, I knew that there was no way my father would be involved in the fighting, seeing as he was both a count and the Minister of Ceremonies. Important as he was on a national and diplomatic level, his position demanded no military valor or trips to the battlefield. But this meant...

“On paper, you are now the commander of the count’s forces, Master Werner.”

“It figures...”

That was noblesse oblige for you. Of *course* the aristocracy would get involved in the Stampede. While propriety demanded I fill the role, I couldn’t get on board with the whole “commander” thing.

“Who makes a student take command?” I said before I could think better of it.

“The actual commander will be Max Lyman. Your participation will only be for show.”

Norbert was by no means belittling me. Being a good student was dubious grounds for military command, after all. The Zehrfelds were known as a house of bureaucrats, and objectively speaking, that's what we were. My late brother apparently had the Negotiation skill; if he'd had the chance to grow up, he might have become a diplomat. The fact that I was the only Zehrfeld to possess a combat-oriented skill was kind of heretical.

But everyone thought that this was just a small-scale Stampede at this point. I needed to do more than fulfill my compulsory duty. My life was on the line for a token effort. Scouring my mind for all I knew of this event from the game, I pulled together a list of the things I needed to do.

"Norbert, call Max over," I said after a pause. "Also, I need you to go shopping and put out some recruitment notices."

"Shopping and recruitment, you say?"

He looked at me skeptically, which was only understandable.

But since I knew we would lose the battle, I couldn't skimp on the preparations for survival.

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"Forward march!"

The army set forth at the sound of the crown prince's voice and the blare of bugles. There were around 4,200 foot soldiers in total, plus two hundred mercenaries and roughly a hundred students at the rear for support.

Because the battlefield was near the capital, there weren't many supply units around. This upped the marching speed, but since the forces under the regional lords couldn't possibly arrive on time, most of the troops were from the capital. Though they were called "Stampedes," they weren't normally too large in scale, so the human side was probably underestimating things. If I didn't know better, I would have been the same. The battlefield was a stone's throw from the capital, so you wouldn't think it would be hard to mobilize a decent number of people even without time to gather supplies.

The main force consisted of the first and second orders of the knight brigade for a total of 2,300 people. There were also three hundred elite members of the



Royal Guard. The rest consisted of around a thousand soldiers from assorted nobles' private armies and two hundred mercenaries. The figures might not seem to add up at first glance, but that was because they didn't include the private armies' slave soldiers. That said, hardly any slaves excelled at combat, so they were mostly there to pad the numbers.

I should mention that contrary to a subsection of games from my previous world, slaves in this world had considerable economic value and so were rarely handled violently. The average price for a slave would comfortably feed a commoner family of four for a year, and it would be a waste to beat them after spending that much. To use an analogy from my old world, it would be like taking a hammer to your shiny new car just to test its durability.

If anything, a slave who possessed standout technical skills would earn a higher wage than an unskilled soldier. They weren't allowed to move or get married, but their lives weren't terribly encumbered otherwise. In that sense, things were closer to the system in ancient Rome.

The Zehrfeld house didn't own any slaves, but that was because I insisted we didn't need them. I'd been surprised, upon regaining my past life memories, to learn that slavery existed here. The game had never mentioned it. It was, I suppose, irrelevant from a gameplay perspective. There were no major characters with a connection to slavery, after all. There were games that depicted slavery within their worlds, but they came later and had a lot more space on their cartridge.

Anyway, I was talking about the troops. To be precise, the armies under the nobles' control would consist of knights under a count's employ, plus the relatives of the count and the knights under *their* employ, and so forth. On average, an individual knight could bring in anywhere between three to five squires. Our family had fifteen knights and seventy-one soldiers, as well as some hunters and porters. This added up to 103 people in total—104 if you included me. Despite our lofty peerage, those were small numbers in the greater scheme of things. I wouldn't blame anyone for saying we were only showing up for appearances' sake.

Granted, the other noble houses had about the same number of troops. Given that Stampedes were sudden occurrences, you could say it was impressive for a

count to assemble a hundred people at the drop of a hat. The baron-class nobles were only able to assemble a few people when acting in an individual capacity. They weren't here for any other reason than obligation, much like the students. However, along with numbers, a count's forces brought along plenty of extra baggage, which resulted in some odd delegations.

"I must say, is it necessary to divide the forces this thoroughly?" asked Max Lyman. He was the one *actually* leading the troops in his capacity as knight commander of House Zehrfeld. Knights attached to noble houses didn't operate at scale with the knight brigade, but they shared the same customary terms of address.

Max was a man in his late forties with a large build; at first glance, he gave off the vibe of a buff fighting-game character. He was a capable knight with strong leadership skills and unimpeachable loyalty. Even my father held him in high esteem. But in this medieval Europe video game world, knights tended to regard personal valor as the be all and end all. I supposed it was because this was based on an RPG. In this context, however, thinking that way would screw you over.

"It would be a hassle if someone got injured out here."

"I suppose," he replied in a tone that said he still didn't understand. I couldn't explain the battle's outcome to him, and besides, I knew he wasn't going to disobey me, so I decided to just leave it at that.

The formation wasn't particularly complicated. The squires would surround the knights and support them in the battle. This was straightforward enough. On top of that, I grouped the knights into five-man teams and instructed them to obey their group leader's commands to the letter. These squads were then gathered into platoons of thirty people. When push came to shove, Max and I only had to convey orders to the three platoon leaders. By establishing clear chains of command, we could hopefully maintain order even as the battle turned against us, thereby increasing our chances of survival.

I don't know why, but in ancient Rome and China, the smallest military unit was made up of five people. Under a similar logic, armies were usually led by a team of five representatives. Likewise, the famed Sengoku warlord Takeda

Shingen established a five-man team with his four subordinates.

By the way, the Japanese word for corporal, *gochou*, comes from the fact that they were originally leaders of five-man teams. *Go* is the Japanese word for “five.”

It’s a smaller group than the so-called Dunbar’s number, but I would guess that the systems developed by the militaristic societies of ancient Rome and China would more accurately reflect reality than a number calculated by a scholar. Wars create chaotic situations, so I supposed that five people was about the limit of what one person could handle. Or perhaps, more to the point, that was the capacity for leaders managing soldiers on the ground. They didn’t have communication devices, after all.

The hunter support squad, who were under my direct command, trailed us at a distance. When the time came, I could just give them a signal and they would start pelting the enemy with their slings from the rear. I doubted that they would be able to handle more complicated orders than that.

“This seems somewhat underwhelming for the royal grandson’s first battle,” said Orgen opposite me. He was one of the platoon leaders.

“I suppose so,” I said, although I winced inwardly.

In this world, there were often two successors to the throne, with the second often called the “royal grandson.” Currently, it was the crown prince’s son, but there were times in history when, for instance, the king’s eldest son was the crown prince, but the royal grandson referred to someone like the prince’s uncle. It was all pretty confusing. This world’s nobles had many such peculiarities compared to those from my past life; I had to put it down to this being a different planet altogether.

As an aside, the crown prince was thirty-eight years old and his son—the royal grandson—was riding off into his first battle at the age of ten. The second-oldest princess, who would join the Hero’s party later, was sixteen. The reigning king had an impressive amount of vigor.

In the game, both the prince and his son were doomed to die in this battle. Their deaths, along with the destruction of the knight brigade, were bound to leave a long shadow. I wanted to do something to prevent that if I could, but

that was probably just wishful thinking.

“By the way, Master Werner, do you suppose now would be a good opportunity to pay respects to Count Fürst?” Max spoke up.

“Oh...” I grimaced.

I’d been avoiding this topic on purpose—I just couldn’t be bothered with it. So much for my poker face. I couldn’t even find the motivation to maintain that.

“Why does our formation have to be next to the Fürsts, anyway?”

“I would suppose it is so they can lend you aid should worse come to worst.”

I didn’t need their help. Sure, nobody expected anything of the Zehrfelds, while the Fürsts had plenty of soldiers at their disposal. If you asked me, bringing along their slave soldiers hurt more than it helped, but I guess they wanted to strut their stuff as a military family.

The domains of these two very different families were right next to each other. We had different economic specialties, and there was a system of mutual cooperation in place, so our relations weren’t terrible or anything. For the most part.

I sighed heavily. Though we were technically of the same peerage, their soldiers were led by the count himself, whereas I was standing in as a figurehead. Why did we have to go out of our way to pay respects first? I mean, I understood why, but still.

“There’s nothing else for it. Max, come with me. Orgen, I’m leaving command to you while I’m away.”

Time to rip off the Band-Aid.

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“Oh, you’re the son of Minister Zehrfeld, hmm? Nice to see you here.”

“I am Werner Von Zehrfeld. It has certainly been too long since we last crossed paths, Count Bastian Timo Fürst.”

I bowed my head as a courtesy. He was older than my father—probably somewhere in his fifties. He certainly had the vigilant air of a warrior.



The count was the sort of person who could condescend without malice. Rather than regard me with ill will, he barely even noted my presence. His eyes all but dismissed me as an errand boy.

“You are Max, are you not? I hope you can keep supporting Count Zehrfeld’s son.” Count Fürst likely held Max in higher esteem than me because he was the *actual* commander.

“I appreciate your regard.” Max bowed as well.

“Won’t you consider joining my father’s troops?” asked Tyrone, Count Fürst’s son and heir.

“That would be a little difficult to oblige.”

*For heaven’s sake—no!*

Tyrone hadn’t bad intentions, presumptuous though he was. He was dealing with people who were normally civil officials, so you could say his statement was meant more as a “kindness.” *The Zehrfelds aren’t suited for this, so why don’t you follow our orders instead?* As far as the Fürsts were concerned, royalty came first, followed by the military nobles, then the bureaucrat nobles, and finally, at a distant last place, were commoners.

“Brother, that’s an unreasonable thing to ask regardless of the circumstances.” A slightly prickly voice cut in.

“Okay, I get it.”

The newcomer to the conversation was Count Fürst’s second-oldest daughter...at least that was my guess. I believed her name was Hermine. She was older than me, so I had to remember to address her with due courtesy.

“Still, I heard that you are a student,” she said to me. “Please know that you are welcome to avail yourself to our rear.”

“I appreciate your concern.”

Even she wasn’t immune to her family’s hereditary arrogance. Her attitude made clear that she had no intention of relying on the Zehrfelds.

But hey, she was better than her older sister. “Now I don’t have to be the wife of a bureaucrat,” she’d said with glee at my brother’s funeral when my parents

weren't listening.

You see, my brother had been engaged to the eldest Fürst daughter, an agreement rendered moot when he died in the accident. I was seven at the time—hardly an age for marriage prospects. If they had made her wait until I'd come of age, people would have felt sorry for her. I, personally, was relieved to be spared from such entanglements.

Eventually, she did end up marrying into some militaristic noble house, though I didn't care to learn the details. Honestly, I was just grateful that she never became my sister-in-law, even if her way of thinking wasn't unusual among the noblewomen of this world.



“I appreciate your guidance, for I still have much to learn.”

“I see. As Mine said, you needn’t overexert yourself. Don’t hesitate to hide in the rear if at any point you find yourself in danger. You mustn’t give the Minister of Ceremonies any cause for concern.”

“Thank you very much.”

Responding with nothing but platitudes, I made my exit from the scene. The only good thing to come out of my poor brother’s death was that I had no family ties with the Fürsts. Now back to my own squad.

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After watching Werner and Max leave, Mine turned a slightly reproachful gaze to her brother.

“Brother, what you said back there was truly out of line.”

“Yeah, yeah,” replied Tyrone in a tone that said he wasn’t repentant in the slightest.

Even Count Fürst grimaced at his son’s attitude. “Lord Werner is a shining pupil at the academy, not merely an heir to his father’s title.”

“I’ve heard similar praise,” Mine chimed in. “I would have liked to teach him swordsmanship as my brother-in-law.” Her sentiments went no further than that. “It’s a pity that his skill is Spearmanship.”

Swords were generally considered fitting symbols for knights, while spears were looked down upon as weapons for apprentice knights and foot soldiers, to the extent that young knights weren’t allowed to use bladed swords in combat until they finished their training. In that sense, Werner’s skill of Spearmanship failed to impress.

“I wonder who would succeed House Zehrfeld if Lord Werner were to fall in combat?”

“Brother...” Mine’s expression folded in deep exasperation. Her brother’s expectations were so low that he appeared to think that Werner could die from the rabble in a Stampede.

While a student who lacked real-life combat experience certainly could put himself in danger by acting recklessly, the leader of Zehrfeld's knights was so talented it was almost a waste. Even if Werner made a mistake, it certainly wouldn't be fatal.

Mine felt a pang of sympathy for the younger noble. *The Zehrfeld boy probably wouldn't enjoy knowing how lightly he's being taken*, she thought.

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My unpleasant duty done, Max and I rode in silence until we reached a plain in front of a forest—the reported site of the Stampede. Glancing back, you could see the walls of the capital looking tiny in the distance, some three or four kilometers away. Too far for a soldier to run in full armor, though it was a different story on horseback.

Maybe it was my imagination, but the forest was giving off a foreboding vibe. My horse quivered from apparent fear. I gently stroked the back of its neck to calm it down.

At this point, the orders from the main army came in. Everyone got into formation: The first order of the knight brigade took the center, while the second order went to the right flank. The left flank was composed of the assorted nobles' armies and adventurers. I assumed the prince would be just behind the Royal Guard, near the center. I got the feeling that the left flank would be the first to rout, but that was probably my bias speaking.

Commanding the left flank was a certain Marquess Norpoth. He didn't appear in the game, and I hadn't been curious about him before now, so I didn't know what he was like. At a glance, he looked like a distinguished older gentleman. His house maintained order on the western border, and while this made him a *logical* choice, I couldn't see myself relying on him here. Ignorant of the full danger of the Stampede, he'd made the reckless decision to fight as an individual unit.

I turned to Max. "Right. Gather all the knights."

"Yes, sir."

Max immediately relayed my order to the platoon leaders, who then called



over the knights. Good, the chain of command seemed to be working for now.

When everyone arrived, I explained our battle strategy—the actions we would take to minimize our losses in the event of our inevitable defeat.

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“To be perfectly frank, I cannot wrap my head around your orders, Master Werner.”

“A monster cannot possibly take on knights. Would you pit a single lamb against a pack of wolves?”

What I proposed was for everyone to stick to a group strategy. A five-man team of knights and their squires would take down a single monster together. Once the kill was confirmed, they would assist a different team of knights. Simple yet effective.

The reason my troops were objecting might have been because of the ease with which they’d dispatched monsters in the past. This world was foolish for lionizing individual valor—no wonder they would get a tiny group of heroes to save the world. But normal battles didn’t follow video game logic.

“This may be just another Stampede, but we don’t actually know until it happens. If they come in larger numbers, we might be fighting all day, and no one has the stamina to keep that up. We’ve got to preserve our energy.”

Come to think of it, video game protagonists were super overpowered. They could keep walking all day without even eating or sleeping.

“There’s also a risk that we could get surrounded and we won’t be able to heal our injured fast enough. Ideally, we kill the enemy without any casualties on our side.”

“You have a point...” Orgen nodded, which prompted the other knights to swallow their objections. It was nice to have someone in authority agree in this sort of situation.

“This is the royal grandson’s first battle, first and foremost. Even if we do things a bit unconventionally, no one’s going to bat an eye.”

The royal grandson’s participation was a convenient justification for the

strategy. Since it was his first battle, anyone could be forgiven for trying to leave a good impression. For House Zehrfeld, whose detachment comprised a mere one-fortieth of the overall forces, even this sort of knavery was unlikely to get us noticed. We didn't have the numbers to stand out and even the most generous observer would find us unremarkable as combatants.

"Thus, our goal is to fight while conserving our strength and avoiding injuries. Let nobody fall in this battle."

Even I was skeptical that we could pull that off, but I had to say it anyway. After all, it would take a long while for the Hero to defeat the Demon Lord. In the meantime, the ordinary people had their own fight.

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My skin prickled with goosebumps. Was this what it felt like to be on a battlefield?

Our position was in the second row of the left flank, near the units in the center. I was grateful to be next to the knight brigade's elite, but with the eerie atmosphere hanging over the plain, I hardly felt safe at all. For now, I did my best to ignore the Fürsts, who were on the other side of us.

As I peered ahead in trepidation, there came an unsettling sound from the forest. At the same time, a cloud of dust stirred, and I felt a peculiar vibration oscillating in our direction.

Demonic Beasts swarmed my vision. Some, like the Hunter Wolves and Six-Legged Rabbits, liked to ambush humans, while others didn't normally stray from the forests. Then there were the insect beasts: fleas the size of large dogs, and cockroaches that were even more outsized—with fangs to boot. Just looking at them made you want to go, "For crying out loud!" An absolute horde of these beasts came at us in a scrabbling, wriggling mass not unlike a landslide.

"Dismount!"

"Get off your horses!"

The inevitable command rang out. Although some of the enemies were the size of goblins, many of the insects in particular were too low for the mounted knights to reach with their weapons. In any case, it wasn't so unusual for

knights to fight while dismounted even in my previous world. The lay of the land had a lot of influence on fighting styles.

When knights fought on foot, it was the squires' job to prevent their valuable horses from bolting. But that meant sacrificing manpower, so I told the squires to return once they had entrusted the reins to the porters. If I hadn't schooled them beforehand on where their teams were located, this might have been a tricky order for them to follow.

"Volley!" Multiple voices cried out.

The archers and mages launched their long-distance attacks. Arrows, fireballs, ice lances, and even the occasional lightning ball rained down upon the enemy mass. Purely in terms of aesthetics, it made for a magnificent sight.

Normally, this would be enough to spook the Demonic Beasts. These, however, continued their approach without flagging. *Ah, so this is why they call it a stampede.* As that thought flitted through my mind, I sensed that some on our side had begun trembling. They were starting to realize something was amiss.

Part of the left flank started to move forward, but I had the Zehrfeld troops hold their ground. Before long, the advancing troops collided with the horde—no, the *clump*—of monsters. And then, a moment later, it was the Zehrfelds' turn to face the enemy.

"Spears out!"

"Attaaaaaaack!"

At their leaders' orders, each fighter brandished their spears, impaling the oncoming Demonic Beasts. I, too, joined in the slaughter. But for each monster we felled, a new one appeared in its place.

The shock rattled me for a moment, but then my training kicked in and my body moved on reflex to strike down the new foes as they appeared. As soon as I hit one, yet another insect would spring up, bat-like head on a locust's body, jaws snapping at me. I couldn't believe that such grotesque creatures could even exist.

"This...is...a battlefield?!"

It was completely different from a one-on-one fight. The enemies kept showing up without tiring—it made you think that the battle would only end when you were impaled on the end of a demonic claw.

I cursed under my breath as I swung my spear and took down two or three more enemies. There were other knights around me, so things were still manageable for now; I could just focus on the foes in front of me. My troops were also felling beasts one after another, but this was doing nothing to thin the ranks. To make matters worse, some of the other nobles' armies were now encircled by monsters that had slipped past the vanguard.

Max barked out orders. "Don't swing your sword around like a toy! Strike in time with your allies!"

Following his lead, I issued orders of my own. "Stay in formation! Keep an eye on the people to your right!"

Supporting your allies and having them support you were the fundamentals of group tactics. I'd only given a quick verbal explanation beforehand, but I was glad to see my troops following my orders in the heat of battle. Everyone was alike in not wanting to die, I supposed.

I will say that there was a flaw in our tactic: we were getting slathered with the enemy's remains. Grit built up on our armor, while our grips grew slick with blood—or whatever fluids ran through their bodies. Some of the troops seemed perilously close to losing hold of their weapons, while others struggled not to trip. Worst of all, the stench was unbelievable. Not that we had the luxury to complain of the odor with rank upon rank of foes breathing in our faces.

"So basically," I grumbled in between frantic spear strikes, "the kingdom let its guard down the moment they decided to take on this Stampede in an open field."

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"Stay firm! These are mere fodder!"

Count Fürst's furious voice boomed over the ranks of his troops, but few of them roared in turn. They had been battling as individuals against the wave, and some had already lost limbs or sustained other grievous wounds. With

more and more people out of action, gaps had begun to appear in their frontline.

“Ugh...!”

“Brother!”

Tyrone tripped while fighting a Demonic Beast; Mine rushed to cover for him.

“Sorry. The ground here is more slippery than I thought.”

“That’s not the only thing to worry about...! Urk!”

When Mine looked up, she was hit by the stench of a Hunter Wolf’s breath. She just barely managed to block its strike, but with her sword stuck between the beast’s teeth, she was pinned to the spot. Another Hunter Wolf saw the opportunity to attack her from the side, but Tyrone came to the rescue, cleaving the monster in two. Meanwhile, Mine finished off the foe in front of her.

“This is very different from a duel,” she remarked.

“My thoughts exactly,” Tyrone said in turn.

In a one-on-one fight, blocking your opponent’s attack gave you options, as long as your strength was comparable. And even if you were the weaker one, you could still use technical finesse to turn the situation around.

But common practice among knights meant nothing in a chaotic battle against Demonic Beasts. One of them could pin you down while another struck at your blind spot. And unlike in single combat, small movements weren’t enough to escape a threat. Small beasts would target your feet or ankles, and if you jumped, a larger beast might take your neck. A knight’s style of fighting didn’t work at all against enemies with different body types and attack ranges.

Mine bristled in disgust as she impaled a beetle the size of a large dog. “Are Demon Stampedes always supposed to be like this?!”

“Don’t ask me!” Tyrone roared as he annihilated another foe.

Despite their setbacks, they were both accomplished fighters. They were also fortunate as nobles to be equipped with high-quality armor, which had helped them avoid any crippling wounds thus far. Unfortunately, the same could not be



said for the soldiers.

“Aaaaaargh!”

“H-heelp...! Ughhhhh!”

A soldier fell to the ground, a beast’s jaws around his ankles, while another monster sank its teeth into his windpipe. Next to him, a slave soldier tried to retreat in fright, only to get attacked in the back. Overwhelmed by sheer numbers, the formation had broken down; now, the isolated soldiers were getting picked off one by one.

“Father! We need to regroup!” Mine cried out.

Bastian barely managed to hear her through the din. “Right,” he started to say, only to snap his attention to the slave soldiers deserting their posts. “Hey, you! Stand your ground!”

But his shouting did nothing to stop them. Seeing that, even the braver soldiers began to break ranks.

“Hyaaa!”

Bastian sprang toward the collapsing frontline and cut down a Demonic Beast that was assailing a soldier. Freeman or slave, they were valuable to the family, and he would not let them die pointlessly. In the chaos of the onslaught, however, such bold movements left gaps in his defense.

“Gah!”

“Protect our lord!”

A Demonic Beast rammed itself against the count, flipping him onto his back. The knights and soldiers, along with Tyrone, rushed in to rescue him. Their desperate efforts paid off and they saved their lord’s life by a thread. But the event had given lie to House Fürst’s vaunted strength of arms.

“Damn...”

Surrounded by countless monsters, even Mine flinched for a moment. Regardless of the beasts’ individual qualities, their sheer numbers denied any possibility of escaping unscathed. It was then, as that sobering realization set in, that the ring of monsters began to fall apart and Mine saw knights not of her

own house rush in, cutting down their foes.

“Don’t overextend—hold your position. Are you all right, my lady Fürst?”

“Thank you... Who are you?” Mine asked the knight who was giving out the orders.

The man looked to be in his mid-thirties. His face was splattered with blood and guts, but he smiled and answered, “I apologize for not introducing myself sooner. I am Barkey of House Zehrfeld. I came to support you under Master Werner’s instruction.”

“Zehrfeld?” Mine parroted, thinking she had misheard. She couldn’t believe that a family of bureaucrats would have the leeway to support another house. But as she took stock of the situation, her own eyes confirmed that the Zehrfeld troops had neither advanced nor retreated from their starting point. They had steadfastly maintained their position on the battlefield.

In fact, several other nobles’ armies that had sustained losses were now rallying around the Zehrfelds. One army was trying to reassemble its formation on the backlines, while another group of knights fought the enemy in tandem with the Zehrfelds, looking right at home. Furthermore, the Zehrfelds even seemed to have fighters in reserve. The squad of hunters in their rear hadn’t even joined the fight yet. Mine was, for a moment, at a loss for words.

“Magnificent,” she said after a pause.

“It is all because Master Werner gave such judicious instructions beforehand. Might Lord Fürst wish to take shelter with us for the meantime and regroup?”

“R-right.”

Relying on the Zehrfelds would bring her father and brother no end of shame, but she was in no position to say anything of the sort aloud. Mine called over the soldiers and ran over to her father’s side so she could convince him of their next course of action.

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Something wasn’t right.

The prince frowned with open consternation as he scanned his surroundings.

The knights around him couldn't hide their trepidation either. Beside him, the royal grandson waited, his youthful features contorted in unease. When the battle started, the boy kept pestering the knights to let him go to the front lines. Now, however, he was meek as a lamb; even he had noticed the change in the atmosphere.

Messengers kept rushing in to inform them of how their allies were faring. They were choosing their words carefully, but it was evident that the news was not good; more often than not, they spoke of struggle and chaos on the front. And they had even more to say about the enemy's actions and morale.

"Your Highness, could it be...?"

"This does not appear to be an ordinary Stampede."

Stampedes were rare, though certainly not unheard of. Normally, the human side could generally get the monsters to disperse if they responded with enough violence. The monsters didn't have a commander; they were just a mindless horde. But this time, it was almost as if...

"They're a suicide squad," the prince's knight retainer said.

"I agree."

The prince scowled. The strongest evidence was how the enemy kept up the onslaught, heedless of their losses—it went against precedent. And by doing so, they brought the full might of their numbers to bear. It did not escape the prince's notice that the casualties were steadily climbing even in the knight brigade.

But despite the chaos, an abrupt withdrawal would be a disaster. Only by retreating cautiously could they escape intact, but no opportunity to do so presented itself. And so the clamorous battle dragged on, and before long, the din of the fighting reached the ears of the main force.

"Report from Marquess Norpoth!" cried a messenger who'd just sprinted onto the scene. "Viscount Kranke has been slain!"

The nearby knights stiffened in surprise. "What did you say?!"

The prince frowned in silence.

He was not terribly familiar with Viscount Kranke as an individual. But it was disturbing that the left flank had fallen into such disarray that a nobleman was among the casualties.

The main force of an army rarely had the means to monitor the entire battlefield, much less issue orders as the situation developed. That was especially true in chaotic engagements such as this. It was a true test of skill for frontline commanders to maintain their soldiers' positions long enough for the supreme commander's orders to reach them.

From that perspective, having lost its figurehead, Viscount Kranke's forces were nothing more than a disorganized rabble no matter how many survivors remained. It was an exception rather than the rule for individual units to have a second-in-command, like House Zehrfeld did.

Scarcely any time had passed when another report arrived saying that Baron Dohnányi had been injured and Viscount Mittag had gone missing. The air around the prince began to grow heavy.

No reports had arrived of any deaths among the knight brigade's field commanders, but both of the brigade's units had undoubtedly sustained casualties. Just as this thought crossed the prince's mind, cheers erupted from the right flank.

"What happened?"

The prince did not immediately receive an answer. Instead, there came another round of cheering, this time from in front of the main force even as the sounds of combat faded into the distance. A peculiar silence fell over the base of operations.

And then a messenger came running from the right flank.

"I'm here to report!"

"Speak, man!" a knight responded sharply.

As the man gave his report, the prince's circle exclaimed, first in confusion and then in relief. Apparently, the second order of the knight brigade defeated "a talking monster with a giant human body and a frog's head." Immediately after the creature fell, the Demonic Beasts began to retreat. The knights

retaliated, driving back the lesser monsters who till then had offered stiff resistance. Which explained the fading sounds of battle. And while no one was familiar with the frog-headed monster, the prince's circle believed, as did the soldiers on the field, that it had been an enemy commander.

"Father, let me take the field too!"

The royal grandson must have sensed that the situation had taken a turn for the better because he started nagging again. The prince did not respond immediately, uncertain of how wise it would be to let his young son onto the frontlines. After such a brutal battle, the field was sure to be a ghastly sight. Would it be an edifying experience? He was still deliberating this when a voice rang out from beyond the base of operations.

"Your Highness, please listen to my advice!"

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*A short while ago...*

Amid the chaos of battle, it took all we had to stick to our strategy. The Zehrfeld forces were in an unusually good position on the left flank, but there were only a hundred of us, myself included—just a pebble in the bucket. The only reason I'd had Barkey take his squad to aid the Fürsts was because we'd have been caught in a two-pronged assault had *their* front collapsed. We didn't have the capacity to help the armies further away.

The only reason the left flank hadn't broken down altogether was because the individual foes were far weaker than us. With every individual soldier doing their own thing, the line was just barely holding out. But it was only a matter of time before our side lost. We couldn't win a battle of endurance against such numbers. I even started wondering if they were pelting us with weaklings precisely to drag us into a war of attrition.

Come to think of it, all the Demon Lord ever sent into the Hero's starting area were trash mobs. Would I jinx myself by acknowledging that we were only alive because of the weak enemies? Then again, we were only in this situation because the knights had underestimated the threat to begin with, so I guess it evened out.



“Viscount Kranke is dead?”

“It appears so.”

As I was retracting my blood-stained spear, Max was bisecting a centipede with human arms in place of its legs. All the while, he was updating me on the battle’s progress. It wasn’t like I could do anything useful with the information, but it did drive home the gravity of the situation.

“It seems that you were right in your judgment, Master Werner!”

Next to me, a knight and their squires skewered a Three-Mouthed Wolf—a wolf beast with an extra head on each of its front paws—and moved onto the next foe without even glancing at the corpse. Their noses were bleeding—not out of excitement, but irritation from dust and the foul stench of the Demonic Beasts’ fluids and entrails. Their eyes were teary for the same reason. And it wasn’t just them; all around me, people swung their weapons while covered in dust, blood, and gunk. It was a good thing that the beasts’ fluids weren’t poisonous.

Another fun detail: the fallen enemies had their guts and excrement spilled across the ground. You can only imagine how that improved the odor. Anyone with damaged nasal mucosa was lucky not to have to smell any of it. Try as we might, there was no avoiding the blood, dust, fluids, and vapors that seeped into our eyes, noses, and skin. All the while, roars, shouts, and screams of pain assaulted our ears. This was nothing at all like the clean battles you’d see in a TV show or anime. It was so filthy you could practically feel the contagion in the air; you didn’t have to be a clean freak to want to flee this hive of filth.

With every move, you had to watch your step for dead bodies and splattered guts. And if you weren’t careful with your hands, you might lose your hold on your weapon, inadvertently disarming yourself. Seriously, just standing on the battlefield was mentally draining.

“If we weren’t fighting as a group, my body would have run out of energy long ago,” said a squire from beside me, fatigue creeping into his voice. Squires. He had already swapped out his previous weapon for a sword.

Spears were very useful weapons, but they weren’t suited for long-term use in massive melees like this one. For one thing, it was hard to find the space to

use them properly when you were bunched in from all sides. But that wasn't all—the lever principle meant that when you used your spear on something directly in front of you, keeping your balance became tricky. On top of that, swinging a spear dragged your body down thanks to all the momentum involved, which was a waste of stamina. Using it over and over wasn't a good idea, and in a drawn out fight, just holding the spear ready would become a massive strain on the arms.

Meanwhile, a longsword was basically a metal rod balanced for easy swinging. If we're talking about what's most efficient in terms of stamina and muscle strain, then umbrellas were easy to swing, while long mops made for sweeping the floor were a pain to use for long periods of time. It was the same idea with swords and spears.

The longer we stayed in this frenetic battle, the more people would switch out their spears for swords. If they didn't, then they wouldn't be able to stay active on the battlefield.

There was once a scholar who argued that the katanas from Japan's Sengoku period weren't useful, but they'd probably never held anything longer than an umbrella, let alone a broom. Even light fishing rods made of carbon numbed your arms after extended use. Propping a spear up on the ground in a standby position was one thing, but I dare you to find anyone who can keep swinging one for hours in battle. Remember that their grips are sturdy and heavy, and that they have metal tips. Imagine the torture of fighting at close quarters with one of those babies, from sunup to sundown.

I mean, there *were* people who could manage that, but they honed their bodies from a young age, had a proper diet, and spent a lot of time learning how to minimize wasteful movements. Basically, you had to belong to the ruling class like I did. It was beyond the reach of an ordinary soldier. Well, maybe it was viable if they were in an NHK period drama where the wars were less than half an hour long.

To be fair, I wouldn't have the stamina either if I didn't have the Spearmanship skill to beef up my limbs when wielding a spear. Yeah, skills in this world were weird like that. And while you could assemble an elite squad of skill bearers, it'd cost a lot of money to identify their skills in the first place.

While I was off in my own thoughts, trying to escape the reality where I was stabbing a monkey with the sickle arms of a praying mantis, a platoon some distance away got swallowed by a horde of monsters. I think those troops belonged to Viscount Mittag. They'd advanced too far for their own good.

We'd only put ourselves at risk if we ventured out to help them, so I just kept an eye on the surviving squires and knights as I drafted my next move. The knights who were still eager to fight were gathering into a ring around my squad. It might have looked like they were joining us temporarily, but since they weren't under my command, we couldn't actually push forward. At least we gave people somewhere to run to.

I wondered if the reason I could be so calm, despite the corpses piling up around me, was because I knew we were in a game world. Or maybe I'd gotten strangely callous after living here for ten-odd years. But I could think about that later. I'd lost track of the enemies I'd felled—it was pointless to even try to count them.

"Is the squad we hired still at the rear?" I asked.

"Yes, somehow," answered one of the knights, "although I suppose that might be because they can't escape even if they wanted to."

It would have sucked bad if the rear unit took our things and left; their absence alone would have screwed up my plans. But somehow or other, the hunters were still around, and we were still holding the line by the skin of our teeth. As much as I didn't want to call on them yet, I wondered if I should signal them to start using their slings. It was at that moment I heard cheering somewhere to my right.

"What's going on?"

"Master Werner, the enemy is withdrawing!"

This was patently obvious; I could see for myself that all the enemies were beating a sudden retreat. Far off in the distance, I could hear shouts: "The knight brigade took out the enemy leader!"

Relief flooded Max's face. "Looks like they saved our hides. Is this our victory?"

As I caught my breath, I chewed on Max's words. The knight brigade defeated the leader?

That wasn't possible. The scumbag controlling the Stampede was a Demon, and it was Mazel who would defeat them. At least, the game told you this when you were fighting the first boss. Also, the knight brigade had yet to be obliterated. From a story perspective, it was weirder for the enemy to back away.

I gazed once more at the monster horde. Why were they running away *all at once*?

Uh-oh. When I reached the logical conclusion, I felt my face turn cold.

"Max, we need to regroup! The rear unit has potions—make sure the injured take them! Prepare for a retreat!"

"H-huh?"

"But Master Werner, the enemy..."

"Hurry up and get going!" I shouted back to my perplexed knights. "I'm heading to the base!"

Then I kicked off into a full-blown sprint. Whew, it really sucked not having a horse.

Along the way, a few people asked me who I was, although for the most part, I was ignored. When I reached my destination, I scrunched up my stomach and yelled at the top of my lungs so my voice would reach inside the tent.

"Your Highness, please listen to my advice!"

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The knight brigade had already started their pursuit. When the voice came ringing in the base, it was a discordant note within the strangely placid atmosphere.

"I shall go out and inquire about this person."

"No need. Let him pass." The voice was oddly tense and desperate. Thinking that perhaps a commander from a high-ranking noble house had fallen in

battle, the prince bade the speaker enter. “Advice” was an unusual word choice, but the prince paid it little heed; he, too, had loosened up after the tense and difficult battle.

The knight who emerged was covered from head to toe in blood and muck. He looked young, but the dirt on him was so thick it obscured his features. It was obvious at a glance that he had been fighting on the front lines. Out of the corner of his eye, the prince saw his son gulp at the sight of the man. *He’s not old enough yet for the battlefield*, the prince decided. Then, to the newcomer he said, “Who are you?”

“I am Werner Von Zehrfeld of House Zehrfeld.”

“The son of the Minister of Ceremonies, then? Your name rings a bell. You are young yet distinguished at the academy.”

The young man had made a somewhat rude entrance, but this was a battlefield. There was no need to chastise him right now. Besides, it was important to nurture the young talent—so the prince thought as he followed up his greeting with a compliment. But the youth’s next words prompted him to frown in consternation.

“Your Highness, please order the troops to pull back.”

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“Your Highness, please order the troops to pull back.”

*Wow, so my reputation as a hard worker really did reach the royal family*, I thought as I made my appeal. Hearing the prince’s greeting, I had to congratulate past me for laying the groundwork so that I didn’t get thrown out immediately.

Predictably, the other knights’ expressions clouded over. *What is this guy on about?* they were probably asking themselves. I was surprised too—to think these frontline veterans, having once lost their composure, had fallen so easily for such a trick.





“Of all the...!”

“Wait. Lord Werner, elaborate.”

For better or worse, the prince was calm enough to notice my nervousness. He raised a hand to pacify the knights at his side. I might not have needed to come here if he’d received accurate information to begin with.

“The enemy’s movements are unusual.”

“Unusual, you say?”

“The knight brigade dispatched the monster we suspect to be the ringleader. What is so strange about that?” one of the observers retorted, but I ignored them.

“The enemy is not fleeing or retreating—they are merely falling back. All of them. Even the insect-type creatures that don’t possess any intelligence of their own.”

I laid the facts out plainly. The horde had retreated into the forest as one. This was not the same thing as scattering and dispersing.

Within the forest, the bugs and beasts would have a lot of freedom of movement. Contrast that with the knights in their heavy armor. What would happen if they entered the forest? The prince understood the meaning behind my words in an instant. He stood up, the color drained from his face.

“Sound the retreat bell! Call the knight brigade back! Get everyone remaining to reassemble the lines!”

“Y-your Highness?”

“Now!” The prince snapped his head in the knights’ direction, and they immediately flew out the tent.

I see, so that was the voice of someone who was used to giving orders. If he addressed me like that, I would instinctively snap to attention too. This thought ran through my head as I spoke up again, this time with a personal opinion.

“Please allow me to suggest that His Highness the Royal Grandson be left in the care of the guards at the capital gates.”

Implicitly, I was saying that the kid was a hindrance who should go home. Whether he took my words at face value or read the subtext, His Highness merely nodded.

“Sound advice. Mehring, Fassbinder—take Ruven to the guards at the capital, along with the supply unit and the injured soldiers.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Understood.”

The two knights escorted the disoriented child out. So, the royal grandson’s name was Ruven, huh? I didn’t know that; the game never mentioned him by name during his death scene.

“Lord Werner, join your troops with the main forces. There is more work for you to do.”

The high-pitched sound of the bell rang out while His Highness dropped that bomb on me. Not that I was going to refuse his orders, but *maaaan*.

“Understood. I will return to my troops at once.”

*Guess it’s back to the grind for now*, I sighed inwardly.

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“I can’t believe the monsters would pull a *tsurinobuse*,” I muttered as the Zehrfeld troops took position at the right of the main forces.

“What’s a *tsurinobuse*?” one of the knights asked.

“Never mind, I was just talking to myself.”

A *tsurinobuse* was a battle strategy that involved luring enemies in with a retreating decoy, and then having a reserve force surround the poor saps and start whaling on them. The Shimazu clan in the Satsuma province was famous for using this tactic during the Sengoku period. Now that I thought about it, why did the expression translate to “fishing in a field”? Couldn’t they have gone with forests?

The harsh peals of the retreat bell distracted my stray thoughts. Bells were good for alarms because high-pitched sounds travel farther, and the metallic

noises don't occur in nature. Conversely, the low sounds of a drum would resonate in your guts, building up your drive to fight, making it good for sounding an attack.

I'd heard about it before, but now that I was experiencing it the logic made a lot of sense to me. Even so, there was no getting around the time lag. If I had overpowered cheat-like abilities, I'd be using them around now to build a wireless communications system out of magic.

As these pointless thoughts ran through my head, I gazed in the forest's direction. An even more sinister aura than before was exuding from there, but instead of coming at us with a single roar, it felt more like it was oozing and creeping in our direction. It seemed the commands from the rear had made it just in time, though judging by the traffic of messengers from the front, the knight brigade hadn't escaped their doom unscathed.

Having failed to draw us into the forest, the enemy would be launching an all-out assault. Their reserve troops would come out from hiding and join the decoy army. If they attacked the retreating knights, then of course there would be casualties.

"The injured should head straight to the capital!"

"Everyone who can still fight, gather around the main force! I am assuming temporary command. If you've any objections, you can return to the capital."

His Highness's retainers were assembling everyone still in fighting condition into a combat formation, if a rather slapdash one. The prince himself remained at the base even as the main forces prepared to withdraw. It appeared he wasn't about to ditch his subordinates—an admirable trait for a commander.

"Lord Reinisch has finished reassembling the troops, Lord Werner," a knight reported.

"Lady Degenkolb and Sir Goecke's troops have also assembled under your command," added another.

"Okay, I understand."

I did *not* understand.

Why was a greenhorn like me acting commander for multiple units? Once again, this seemed to be His Highness's doing, but I couldn't wrap my head around it. People on both flanks would be coming to me for advice, and I wished I could simply tell them I was just some random kid.

"It seems that His Highness thinks highly of you for observing the enemy so calmly earlier," Lord Reinisch said to me, a smile poking through his dirtied face.

Hearing praise like that was just going to frazzle me further.

I mean, I already knew the answer beforehand. So when the enemy retreated at an odd time, all I had to do was put two and two together. It had nothing to do with calmness or whatever. If anything, I'd been paranoid about being abandoned at the rear. That probably wasn't going to happen now. Fingers crossed.

As an aside, people of the same social stratum used "lord" and "lady" to refer to subordinates. They were also general terms for nobles who weren't head of a house, which is why the prince and other nobles addressed me as "lord." The same went for Lord Reinisch and Lady Degenkolb; the heads of their houses were either their father or brother.

The stature of your family determined whether you were referred to by first name or surname. Only people of higher rank than my father could refer to me as Lord Werner; everyone else had to call me Lord Zehrfeld. If multiple members of the same house were present, then my full name would be used. Things were simpler for the head of the house, who was always referred to by their title and surname. If you didn't know the right term of address, it was generally safe to go with Lord/Lady Surname. Given my age, though, it wasn't uncommon for people to simply call me Werner.

Different terms of address were also used at court compared to on the battlefield, which made things kind of tricky. Lord or Lady First Name was the standard at court. I assumed that this world had a unique way of using the term, but maybe nobles back on Earth had their own conventions. I had to admit, the nobility's talent for memorizing tedious points of etiquette was almost impressive.

I should also note that Sir Oliver Goecke, the acting commander for the

adventurers and sellswords, was a mercenary who had once belonged to a noble house. Because he didn't possess a noble rank, he was referred to as "sir" or "mister." It was a pain in the ass.

As I grumbled inwardly, I assembled over two hundred people into the same five-man squad and platoon structure I'd used earlier. Furthermore, every three platoon leaders were assigned a field commander to whom they'd answer. I also hastily instated a messenger squad to maintain lines of command once the fighting started.

It was a slapdash measure at best, but then I'd never, in either of my lives, been responsible for two hundred people until now. The best I could do was issue orders to the field commanders and trust the knights and professional soldiers to handle themselves on the front.

"Report: The enemy has multiplied further, and they seem united to an extent," a knight said. "At the same time, their movements have been changing."

"How so?"

"They are not simply trying to break through. Some are also showing signs of aversion to magic."

I see, so the decoy squad was all Demonic Beasts because their job had been to draw aggro. And creatures acting on pure instinct wouldn't have been able to set up an ambush, so smarter monsters like goblins were picked to lie in wait.

"If they have intelligence and emotions, then we can intimidate them with our attacks. There's our chance."

At HQ's signal, the two orders of the knight brigade, which was currently still retreating, would split off to the left and right. Once the enemy stepped into the gap, the main forces would be able to strike from three directions. The idea was to stop the enemy in its tracks, build some distance, and gradually retreat to the capital while fending off subsequent attacks.

It was our only viable strategy considering our formations and lines of communication were in disarray, and we'd also sustained casualties.

Well, there *was* the stuff I bought before the battle. I still had cards on the



table. I had to do my best not to die before the attack on the capital even happened.

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The signal blared. On cue, the knights fighting up ahead split off left and right, running for the edges of the battlefield. It was amazing to see them so coordinated even in this situation—you really had to hand it to the professionals.

“Chaaaaarge!”

When I gave the command, my hastily assembled squad of two hundred moved in for the attack. The monster army, carried by its forward momentum in pursuit of the knights, charged heedlessly into us. A goblin got impaled by multiple spears and swords; it collapsed without even a scream, blood spurting from its body. I personally dispatched a human-dog hybrid monster—probably a kobold—stabbing it cleanly through the neck. At each platoon leader’s command, rows of soldiers readied their blades in unison. Each monster was skewered multiple times, collapsing into the growing pile of corpses.

“Good. Now retreat!” I shouted loudly enough for the field commanders to hear. They conveyed the order to the platoon leaders, and the troops began a hasty, if slightly disorganized, retreat.

From the base of operations, the mage squad started pelting spells at the now empty space. The few archers in the vicinity also loosed their arrows, completely stopping the enemy’s flank in its tracks.

“That was wonderful maneuvering.”

“No, I was just following His Highness’s instructions.”

It was the truth; I wasn’t being humble. I’d been told what to say beforehand, and I said it. Perhaps I looked calm because I took no delight in what we had just accomplished; I was just trying to stay alive.

While I was talking to a field commander, a messenger from the second order of the knight brigade approached us from the right-side edge of the battlefield. He looked surprised to see me.

“I am Wachtel of the second order of the knight brigade.”

“I’m Werner Von Zehrfeld of House Zehrfeld. Good work out there, Lord Wachtel.”

“You are Count Zehrfeld’s son? You’re quite young.”

My bad for being young, I guess. I didn’t know why I was in charge, either.

“I wish to inquire about the right flank’s next move,” he continued.

“Any orders from the base?” I was younger than Lord Wachtel, who looked to be about twenty, but given the circumstances, I supposed it was fine to speak a little brusquely. He didn’t seem to mind.

“They asked that you help us deliver the decisive blow and drive away the enemy.”

“Help, you say?” After a bit of thought, I asked, “What’s the level of fatigue among the second order?”

“I cannot say that we are in prime condition, but we should be able to keep going for a while longer.”

Wow, they really were tough cookies. Honestly, we should have been the ones relying on them.

“Okay. Tell your leader that you can join the right flank and protect the main force from there. My troops will support the forces in the center.”

After a short pause, Lord Wachtel said, “Understood.”

Though the main force was attempting a finishing blow, we were also at risk. Even the prince’s Royal Guard were now taking up their swords; if the monsters broke through to the center, then the Guard could be overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Because the knight brigade had split in two, the first order wasn’t there to supplement the vanguard of the main force. Instead, they had veered off to the left flank. They were probably fighting alongside Marquess Norpoth’s forces, but I had no idea how the fighting had gone there since the Zehrfeld forces left. Even if I did get a report, there was nothing I could do, so I decided to follow the Buddhist practice of not-knowing. (Not that the Buddha existed in this world.)

I suspect Lord Wachtel's awkward pause earlier was out of some sentiment that the knight brigade ought to stand in front of the Royal Guard. But as long as the brigade was split between the left and right flanks, they couldn't get in front of the main force without getting stuck in the crossfire and causing confusion among the other troops. Like a billiard ball next to the pocket, those of us on the immediate right would be able to move to the front of the main force much quicker.

"But are your troops not fatigued?" Lord Wachtel asked.

"Well, it's not all roses, I suppose."

To be perfectly honest, I didn't want to throw myself into danger like this. But if His Highness fell in battle, then we would lose our general and our entire army would crumble. The wave of monsters would swallow us all. I could only hope that the cheap trick I had up my sleeve would buy us enough time for Mazel to defeat the boss.

I did consider running away out of self-preservation—but now was probably not a great time to bring that up.

"There aren't any troops left with stamina to spare, so it's become a case of anyone who can do it, *has* to."

"I suppose you're right..." Lord Wachtel said, before lowering his head. "I am grateful for your decision, Lord Zehrfeld. We will endeavor to maintain the right flank."

"Hmm?"

I wondered why he was bowing so deeply—what had I done to deserve that? But before I could get an answer, Lord Wachtel straightened up and ran off.

"Is something the matter?" Max asked as he came up to my side, filling the void. The sheer amount of monster blood on him was terrifying.

"You're my second-in-command; you don't need to be out here...is what I would normally say, but your timing is perfect. The Zehrfeld troops will support the main forces at the center."

Max looked momentarily stunned by my order, but he quickly seemed to

accept it with a nod.

“I see. So you will become His Highness’s shield... I understand now why that knight of the brigade looked so moved.”

“Oh, is that, um, how it is?”

I was just thinking of buying time and fleeing if things went south. It didn’t feel right to be mistaken for a loyal and self-sacrificing soul. But there was no time to ponder further.

“We will push forward one more time and break past the enemy. Then we will use that moment to reach the center.”

“Understood!”

*Mazel, put your skates on, I’m begging you. If I survive this, I’ll shout you a lunch.*

Being a former Japanese person, I didn’t pray to God, but I did pray to the Hero as I readied my spear for combat again.

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Shouts. Screams. The splatter of guts on mud. My panting. All the noises around me were blending together into a nebulous haze.

It felt like I’d been at this for half an hour (going by my previous world’s measurements). How long it actually was I didn’t know. I was slipping further and further out of reality.

“Advance three steps!”

“Yeah!” several voices cried out in answer to my command. We moved forward and thrust our weapons at the foes in front of us. The monsters collapsed to the ground, instantly reduced to corpses.

“Contact the main forces and pull back slightly!”

“Yeah!”

I was impressed that I could keep shouting like this, if I did say so myself, though my voice was definitely getting raspy. Tomorrow, I might not be able to speak at all. Oblivious to my inner dilemma, the people in my troop responded

by retreating a short distance. They readied their weapons as they reassembled the line, all the while ducking out of the way of the rocks the enemy occasionally tossed at them.

Which idiot in my previous world said that stones were merely primitive weapons? Even if you had armor on, seeing a rock the size of a plastic bottle hurtling at you could still make you flinch. And if you smashed a rock in someone's face, you could do more than just injure them. That was the danger of monsters that could use their hands, like kobolds and goblins. There were even some goblins that could use magic, although they could still be a menace even without such abilities.

It was then that I truly understood how grueling it was to fight a battle on the retreat. There was no end in sight.

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My plan to squeeze my way to the front of the main forces went well. His Highness appeared to have sent the few archers and mages at his disposal to the left and right flanks. He believed in the strength of the Royal Guard, and he was not wrong in that respect. From what I could see, they were completely undaunted by the monsters.

Unlike the left and right flanks, there were no arrows or spells flying anywhere, so the enemies trying to push through were being held back by the strength of the Royal Guard alone.

Meanwhile, our forces managed to break through the left flank and drive back several of our foes all at once. When my unit slipped into position ahead of the main forces, we continued the assault on the frontline.

If I hadn't prepared potions for my troops, many of them would have fainted by now. Even playing soccer or basketball in full armor for hours without a rest would have been easier. The mental strain of putting your life on the line in a real war frayed your nerves fast. A large army with plenty of reserve fighters held a real advantage in these situations.

"I can see why the rear can break down."

War records and historical novels sometimes depicted moments when the

rear broke down, fighters fleeing in terror, leaving the frontlines in dire straits. Our situation was the exact opposite. With the Royal Guard at the rear, we couldn't quit the field unless they let us. As long as they stood, we had to fight. Still, there was a certain comfort in having them around. If things went south, they could take up the fight. Or, to put it another way, if we ever looked back and found that *they* had vanished... Well, that was the cue to turn tail and run.

With a swing of my spear, I took an enemy's legs out from under it. A nearby knight then moved in, plunging his weapon into the monster, making a corpse of it. The fallen included monsters that were merely injured, not dead, but since their bodies served to impede the enemy's march, we let them be as we continued our retreat.

I left the front line to Max and ordered the injured to fall back a few steps. When enough people got injured that it became difficult to maintain the line, I reordered the formation and adjusted the chain of command. The work of a commander was not limited to pointing at enemies and waving your weapon. If you didn't use your brain, you ended up in tight spots like this. But grumbling didn't change anything. For the moment, I had to juggle my duties as a commander with what the knights had to do and continue the retreating battle.

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Meanwhile, the knights on the left flank who still had the will to fight had consolidated under the royal army in a fighting retreat.

"Drive them back!"

A row of soldiers moved forward, massive shields in hand. They planted their feet in the ground and bashed their shields against the enemies rampaging at the retreating human forces. With their advance halted, the monsters were easy prey for the knights' swords and spears that darted out from over or between them. Ignoring the fallen monsters, the left flank gradually retreated intact.

Because the main force of the enemy consisted, by then, of goblins and kobolds rather than Demonic Beasts, the shields had finally become a viable battle strategy.

"Wonderful!" Marquess Norpoth exclaimed with genuine admiration. Then he



glanced at the second-oldest daughter of House Fürst, who was serving as a messenger in the headquarters of the left flank. “This is truly an excellent strategy. You’ve shown your mettle as a military family.”

Mine faltered at Norpoth’s praise, but taking credit for other peoples’ advice went against her pride as a knight. She decided to speak honestly.

“No, this plan was suggested by Lord Werner, Count Zehrfeld’s heir.”

“Oh?”

Norpoth narrowed his eyes slightly. The Zehrfelds had been under his own command on the left flank until just a short while ago, when they joined the main force at the prince’s invitation. Some of the noble houses had offered their own support as well, but due to the urgency of the situation, Werner had turned down Norpoth’s offer. Norpoth understood that it was the prince’s orders and that they were in a race against time, but he couldn’t say that the whole thing sat well with him, especially considering Werner’s previous remarks to the prince.

“You are certain it was Count Zehrfeld’s son?” Norpoth could hardly believe that a family of bureaucrats could conceive of such a plan. To say nothing of a mere student taking command. He could hardly swallow it.

Mine formed her words carefully, as if to reassure herself of the facts even as she spoke them. “Before Lord Werner joined with the main force, he brought this strategy before us.”

There were no lies in her statement. Even as her expression begged “Why me?” she explained the clear and elegant strategy: construct a wall of shields and make the particularly valiant knights hold them (because if the shield bearers broke down, the whole line would collapse). The regular soldiers and slave soldiers would attack through the gaps in the shields, and everyone would make use of the enemies’ bodies when retreating. It was all Werner’s idea.

Werner had derived this strategy from his hazy knowledge of phalanx units from his previous world. He knew it only as theory, rather than application, and without time to explain in detail, he’d only offered it as a tentative suggestion.

But when Bastian heard about the idea through Mine, he grimaced and said,

“This could work.” He then told Mine to relay the strategy to Norpoth. Werner’s idea was applied to the battlefield with some minor alterations, although there was no doubt that Bastian Fürst and Norpoth were talented commanders for being able to implement it at all.

“I see. He is more capable than I imagined.”

“He certainly is.”

Norpoth and his second-in-command exchanged awkward glances. There were some other things they wanted to say, but they could wait until after the retreat was done.

“I must report to the prince,” Marquess Norpoth muttered, before once again barking orders to the front line.

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I’d studied the enemy’s movements carefully with each incremental retreat, and seeing that they were pursuing as eagerly as ever, I shouted the next command: “Give the signal to the slingers!”

“Yes, sir!”

My soldiers waved a dirty and tattered flag—and a moment later, dozens of jars came flying through the air from the rear. They landed in front of the enemy’s vanguard and burst into flames.

They weren’t anything dramatic—just Molotov cocktails, but in jars instead of the more iconic bottles. Still, it was uncommon enough in a world where magic did the job better. Moreover, there wasn’t any gasoline to use as fuel.

But there *was* the essential oil turpentine. My father, being Minister of Ceremonies, had instructed me in its history first as medicine, then as a ceremonial balm. It would normally have been too expensive to use in this way, but my position enabled me to buy it in bulk. My father’s house had control over the distribution of turpentine because of its use in diplomatic functions, and being near the capital, it was in plentiful supply. I did expect a scolding someday for dropping my father’s name behind his back, but hey, it was better than dying.

Ultimately, we only had about ten slingers. They couldn't create a wall of flames, but unlike magical attacks, these flames would continue to burn. Why did magical fire stop on impact? The workings of magic were a mystery to me. But I wasn't going to quibble with the logic when I was making use of it.

The monsters who got a face full of Molotov jar collapsed, writhing in flames. Evidently, they couldn't take the heat. Still, perhaps because their Stampeding switch had been flipped, the remaining monsters pressed on regardless, often right into the burning morass.

The enemies broke rank, flaming limbs flailing as they scattered wildly. It was a gratifying sight. In their disarray, they left a gap between their first and second rows. Felling their front ranks would put much needed distance between us and the rest of the horde. It was time to drive them back all at once.

"Puuuush!"

"Yeah!"

"Eat this, you scumbags!"

We rinsed and repeated the same old tactic—I'd lost count of how many times we'd used it. My troops had coiled up the moment the jars went flying, so as I shouted the order, they sprang right into action. Upon obliterating the vanguard, they retreated a short distance.

In my heart of hearts, I wanted to get the hell out of there, but with our allies behind us, I had no choice but to hold my ground. Not that I could complain about them; they pulled their weight, especially in covering the injured as they returned to base.

Perhaps a bigger issue was that the Demonic Beasts could easily outrun a human. If the whole army just turned and ran, they'd be on us in an instant, with way more casualties guaranteed.

"Master Werner, we are running out of flame jars."

"Okay. We do still have some potions left, but you can tell the porters and hunters that they can fall back. Make sure they take our horses back to the Zehrfeld estate, at least."

My voice was hoarse, and I lacked the energy to bark any more orders. The enemy wasn't letting up the pressure, so I could feel my spirit flagging too. When I experienced this battle through the game, the monsters never stopped coming no matter how many of them you defeated. Come to think of it, where on Earth did they even come from?

We'd gotten fairly close to the capital gates, but it was beginning to sink in that we were well and truly cornered. Could we chuck the final Molotov jars as a last-ditch effort, then beat the monsters in a running contest?

Just as I was bracing myself for that contingency, an abrupt change came over the monsters in front of me. Some of them looked confused about why they were even here, while others seemed spooked by the sight of humans. There were even some insect-type creatures that started running into the other monsters.

I didn't *understand* the reason so much as *felt* it in my veins.

"Now! Push them back!"

"Master Werner?!" several people exclaimed in surprise. But I stepped forward, ignoring them, and ran my spear through a foe.

Having followed my orders faithfully since the start of the battle, the Zehrfeld knights and squires joined the fray after only the slightest delay. A beat later, the mercenary forces also started striking down the surrounding monsters. This resulted in my troops forming a spindle formation that mowed down rows of monsters. This was a Demon Stampede no more, just an ordinary group of creatures that had lost their will to fight.

To be honest, I could hardly remember what happened after that. From what I heard later, I struck down the monsters like a man possessed. I must have gone on a rampage—I had a lot of steam to let loose.

Sometime later, a report arrived from the knights who had escorted the royal grandson home. The capital dispatched a second army to help crush the enemy horde. The monsters were driven back to, quite literally, the forests whence they came.

"We won..."

“We woouooooooooon!”

“Victory!”

Shouts of glee bounded from all directions. In the midst of it all, I leaned on my spear in a desperate bid to stay on my feet.

*...What? No way? We won?!*

Just as I was bracing myself for the possibility that we’d made a mistake, my stamina ran out. My consciousness faded.

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Several days after the Demon Stampede, I woke up early and put on my ceremonial clothes. Inside the castle’s audience chamber, I knelt before the throne. Fortunately, I wasn’t alone, but I still couldn’t wrap my head around how I’d ended up there.

I snoozed away the entire day after the battle, utterly spent both physically and mentally. I wasn’t ill or anything, but everyone fussed over me—my parents, my butler, my extended family, the servants, and the maids. I chugged a bunch of potions to heal my throat after yelling it hoarse.

Apparently, some messengers from the palace even came to pay a visit, but I was sleeping like a log at the time, so my parents saw them in my place. I decided to pretend I didn’t know. I also heard that the Fürsts came by, but I deliberately ignored them and let my father handle it.

The day after that, I got an earful from my parents about my turpentine shopping spree. *Oopsies...* But, hey, it all worked out in the end, so they had some nice things to say as an afterthought.

Predictably, the reason the sudden change came over the enemies was that Mazel defeated the Demon and destroyed the crystal it was using to control the monsters. As far as I was concerned, he’d managed it in the nick of time.

The crystal shards were currently being analyzed. I wondered if that also happened in the game—I couldn’t remember.

“I also picked up a black jewel,” Mazel told me when he visited, “but I don’t know what it’s made of.”

“It’s not made of metal, so you’re just gonna call it a jewel for now, huh?”

Come to think of it, was jewel even the right term? If it was worth a lot, that probably worked, but it wouldn’t exactly be a treasure if it was cursed. Rather than a magic stone, I supposed it would be an evil or cursed stone? Not exactly an elegant description. Language was tough.

“Anyway, Werner, I was surprised about the Demon, but I was even more surprised when I came back and heard about your exploits.”

“It was a coincidence.”

The healing magic rid me of my injuries and muscle strain, but I still needed a lot of rest. Mazel had come by to fill me in on the situation as I recuperated.

He was sipping a cup of tea that our maids had prepared. They were quite good at it, and occasionally some of my friends came to my house specifically to have some. One of them was a lady who, though a little on the tall side, was quite soothing and gentle, making her popular among my friends. But I digress.

Mazel mentioned my *exploits*... None of which I’d done for any attention. But according to him, people at the academy were talking me up. A bunch of students were from noble families, so I supposed that some of their parents may have participated in the battle. Ugh, this line of conversation was really not my thing.

“They’re just stacking one tall tale on top of another,” I said.

“Hey, making a splash as a student is no mean feat,” Mazel replied with a laugh. “You saw through the enemy’s trap and counterattacked when they broke down. Apparently, His Highness said you have a wonderful eye for strategy.”

“For pity’s sake...” I wanted to flip a table, but then I’d be responsible for upsetting the tea and snacks. These tea biscuits were so good.

Restraining my violent urges, I turned my gaze to Mazel. “Hey, *you* defeated a Demon. Aren’t you getting showered with praise yourself?”

“Yeah, that’s why I’m here to get away from it.” He laughed as he casually dropped that audacious statement.

“Oh, c’mon,” I snipped back at him. Mazel looked apologetic, but he protested anyway.

“Yeah, I know what you mean, but I’m a commoner, you know.” He smiled sheepishly. “I don’t know how to turn down a noble’s invitation.”

“Okay, yeah, I get that.”

Nothing annoyed me quite like noble etiquette. It even made me wonder if the reason why nobles didn’t appear in the game was because their dialogue would bloat the data.

He could just say “I’m a student” and that would work perfectly fine as an excuse. But even if that thought did occur to Mazel, he was too nice to use it because he wouldn’t want to cause trouble for the academy. Mazel came to me for help not because of my family background but because I was his friend. This was probably his safest refuge.

Knowing that, I couldn’t very well refuse him. The fact that it could even occur to me to turn him down was probably the product of my upbringing as a noble. I had mixed feelings, but I would be a total asshole if I abandoned him.

So I couldn’t refuse him out of hand, but... Was this okay? Would it derail the game’s script?

“So yeah,” Mazel said, “I wanted your advice about my audience with the king tomorrow and the celebration banquet.”

“First off, you can wear your academy uniform.”

“I can?”

“It’s a formal outfit.”

Indeed it was. School uniforms were originally conceived with that purpose in mind. Wearing your uniform in casual settings would defeat its purpose as formal wear, which was why it was considered a faux pas. In Japan, there were plenty of adults who weren’t aware of that, so they only said that wearing a uniform on the streets was against the school rules. And so most students had no inkling either.

“Don’t think too hard on it. It’s not like it’s an international ceremony, and



besides, they understand your situation. Just make sure you know where to kneel and don't speak unless you're spoken to. Otherwise? Just ape what everyone around you is doing."

"And that's fine?"

"You're a student—they're not gonna chew your head off. It'd reflect poorly on them if they did."

While they might expect me to adhere to etiquette, nobles demanded no such thing of commoners, who in their snobbish view were too lowly as human beings to hold to such standards. If a noble reprimanded a student for their ignorance, then they would be putting themselves on the same level as the commoner, as far as their peers were concerned. These people would only pick fights with those they considered their equals. At worst, they would just offer a gentle warning to the commoner. This was one of those pesky little unspoken rules that came with being a noble.

As a student, I was a borderline case. I was probably fine, but because my father was the Minister of Ceremonies, I couldn't act as if I didn't know the etiquette. Ugh, this was a pain.

I gave two or three other pointers for the ceremony before changing the topic. "You're not gonna let your folks know, Mazel?" I asked.

"They wouldn't make it in time," he said with a strained smile.

Well, that made sense. Mazel's hometown was a considerable distance from the royal capital. Er, I may as well just say it—he was from the boonies. Pilgrims headed for the temple of the god Finoy would stay the night in the village as they passed through, but it was closer to the neighboring country than it was to the capital. The temple itself was sequestered in the middle of the mountains.

I remembered moving around quite a lot within the game, but the reality was that traveling in this world was a pain in the butt. People didn't go on trips nearly as often as they did in my previous life. It would have been a different story if you had the kind of magic items that showed up in the game, but they cost a pretty penny. Besides, they weren't generally sold outside the capital. Your only option was to go on foot, but there weren't enough days to allow for that. It was a pity for his family, considering what a big moment this was and all.

“Besides, they’re busy managing the shop.”

“Is that so?”

By “shop,” he was probably referring to the inn managed by his parents and his younger sister.

Mazel’s hometown of Arlea didn’t have any notable weapons or equipment, but you could stay at the inn for free because his family ran it. Using the village surroundings as a grinding spot was a video game staple. Once you’d raised your level, you could take on the temple and the Star-Counting Tower.

Now that I thought about it, whenever you went to the village the people there would talk about how they missed you, which implied that Mazel seldom returned home.

“Then I ought to use my house’s connections to send a message to your family.”

“Oh, don’t do that.” He waved his hand, flustered. I couldn’t help but crack a grin.

Admittedly, I did feel a *smidgeon* of frustration that this was my only way of getting back at him for his teasing. Nah, it was more than a smidgeon—I *had* to spread word that the Hero Mazel defeated a Demon. Was it childish of me? Whatever.

I had the feeling I was forgetting something, but I decided to think about it after tomorrow’s event. A royal audience was as much a pain in the ass for me as it was for Mazel.

## Chapter 2:

### Post-Battle Cleanu

### *Making Arrangements and Preparations*

“WE WILL NOW COMMEND THOSE PERSONS WHO most distinguished themselves in the battle,” the king intoned. “First, Hubertus Nahles Weiss Weinzierl. Congratulations.”

“I merely accomplished what I did through Your Majesty’s might.”

It took a bit of effort not to scoff at the sound of the king praising his own son. Well, it did make sense that the supreme commander would be honored above the rest. That was just how things went. A boss would take the credit for their staff’s achievements, which meant that our recent victory was all thanks to the prince. Hurrah for Prince Hubert, and all that.

Though he was the prince, he still received all the usual rewards for military valor. Besides money, he received a prized sword from the royal family, and his political position strengthened. Basically, he got clout.

“Next, I commend Ingo Fathi Zehrfeld. Your troops played a vital role in the battle, for which you deserve high praise.”

“I am delighted and honored by Your Majesty’s kind words.”

My father bowed his head. Although I’d taken to the field in my father’s stead, it was the house’s troops receiving the praise,

and so it was my father who would be commended. This was also a matter of course. I was somewhat relieved that we received a considerable cash reward—enough to make up for the turpentine and then some. As for the balm shortage... Well, it wasn’t like we’d have the time to hold a bunch of international banquets for a long while, anyway.

The Zehrfeld family received regular commendation for its civil service, but on this occasion, we had flipped the expectations on their head.

“Furthermore, I will allow your son Werner Von Zehrfeld to be titled a

viscount.”

“Words cannot express my gratitude for such a generous reward,” said my father diagonally from me.

“...I express my humble thanks for your great benevolence.”

And so I was brought before the audience. Now it was my turn in the spotlight, huh? This was my personal reward for being the commander on the field. As I chewed on those thoughts, I followed my father’s lead and bowed my head very, very deeply.

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This may sound a bit like a lecture, but I should clarify some things about this country’s peerage system.

In my previous world, nobles were generally divided into five ranks: duke, marquess, count, viscount, and baron. Sometimes, there were ranks below baron, like baronet, honorary nobles (whose status was awarded on merit), and esquires. Generally, though, it was just the top five.

I would love to say that the medieval kingdom of Wein also had five ranks... but annoyingly, there were six ranks. There were, of course, the aristocrats who worked within the royal court and the regional nobles who owned their own fiefs and territories, but there were also some slightly unusual ranks. They were different from the ranks as I understood them, which took me aback at first.

Barons weren’t much different from what you might imagine. The position was mostly honorary and could not be inherited. It was mostly a convenient means by which nobles of actual consequence could bestow honor upon individuals who’d proven their merit. For example: knights distinguished in battle and commoners who earned the king’s favor. They did enjoy privileges like lighter punishments for crimes, being harder to arrest, the ability to execute commoners, and reduced tax when moving between cities, but baron-level nobles didn’t find much opportunity to flex that.

Barons rarely owned territory, receiving at most some small provincial estate. With this limited income, the lavish lifestyles of stereotypical nobles were out of reach; some even tended their own fields. Honestly, the chief of a prosperous

village probably had a better time of it.

Barons also had some social privileges. They could, for instance, attend court banquets or royal weddings as a guest. Knights were only admitted as guards and weren't allowed to engage in conversation.

Then there were the viscounts. It would have been simple to just say that this was a title given to people who had achieved more than barons, but there was more to it than that. Because there were basically three types of viscounts.

The word "viscount" derived from its original supplementary position to a count. This was why some viscounts owned a small portion of a count's territory in remote areas, while others received high-ranking jobs as bureaucrats.

Viscounts of the latter sort were referred to as bureaucrat viscounts. They were generally the people who governed the royal territories. While barons were never appointed as ministers in this country, there were a few viscounts who were. Very few.

The viscounts who owned land in regional areas were called frontier or regional viscounts. Through some unwritten rule, those types of viscounts could never earn high government positions. Often, they would stay holed up in their estates, rarely even appearing at court. I was willing to bet that there wasn't a single person who could remember the faces of all the viscounts, not even among the viscounts themselves.

The lands they managed weren't terribly large. A viscount who owned as much as a single town was honestly on the more influential end. Most of them could only aspire to oversee a village, perhaps a large landholding with tenant farmers, but still short of a town.

Separately from this, the son of a marquess or count (like me) could be appointed a "deputy count." They had more or less the same stature as a viscount, but with some slight differences. The gist was closer to an honorary count, I supposed. You had to pay attention to the king's wording; if he said, "I bestow the rank of viscount," then you literally became a viscount. If he said, "I will allow you to be titled a viscount," then it meant that you were a deputy. Deputies used to exist as a formal rank, positioned slightly below a viscount, it seemed. In those days, there were seven ranks, rather than six.

Although I was now a deputy, there wasn't much tangible benefit for me. I got a modest salary, about as much as a baron got, but that was it. That would be nice if I had a family to provide for, but that wasn't the issue here.

The position was basically the royal family's way of acknowledging me as the successor of a high-ranking noble house. Because my father was a court official, I would be saddled with managing his land. Had my brother been alive, this would have solidified my position as the successor over him, but since I was currently the only child, there was no fear of a family feud.

The problem was what the role of deputy entailed. They were supposed to protect the territory, which meant commanding our private army whenever we were called to arms. The king was basically telling me, in so many words, "Your father is a minister, so you take the battlefield from now on. Good luck."

Also, the reason why I was a deputy yet called a viscount was simple. It was because historically, there was a lot of debates over who were more important: viscount-level deputies, or bona-fide viscounts.

A blunt way of putting it was that a deputy was only their father's aide, while a viscount with a high-ranking bureaucratic role related to central finances or politics had broader administrative reach. On the other hand, things were trickier if the deputy's father was a marquess or minister. In those cases, the deputy might not show deference to a bureaucrat noble, which led to a great deal of hand-wringing.

The debate was finally settled when it was put into writing that deputies would simply be called viscounts, and all viscounts would be treated alike. Their position at banquets would be determined by the individual's achievements, rank in society, their father's standing, the family they married into or were betrothed to, their age, and other sundry factors. Even then, viscounts seemed to quibble the most over the seat order.

I didn't know if that was the reason why, but it was also a fact that a lot of banquets only invited nobles with the rank of count or higher. Barons were one thing, but even viscounts didn't find much use in their rank.

Counts in this world were also quite different from those in my past one; basically, all they had in common was their name. Here, counts were sorted into

court counts, city counts, and regional counts. As you might have guessed, all counts owned land, and the categories indicated what sort of territory it was. Though there were some counts who owned total wastelands; usually that was because a predecessor had let it fall into ruin, so it wasn't always the individual's fault.

A city count usually owned a large town. Sometimes, they had farmland too, but not very much of it. Their income came mainly from taxes and tariffs on the town and merchants.

That might not sound impressive at first glance, but when a city lord owned the warships in a port town, it was nothing to sneeze at. Those who owned mining towns, on the other hand, often had contacts within Artisans' Guilds, since earning rapport kept business easy. Connections with merchants, meanwhile, offered insight into the flow of goods. Towns also attracted adventurers and mercenaries, so counts had ready access to quality recruits for their armies. Basically, they had a lot of influence you could miss at first glance. This was also very different from my previous world—city counts were on a lower level than viscounts there. That really threw me off at first.

Regional counts, meanwhile, owned vast tracts of arable land. By selling produce, livestock, and timber, they could bolster their domain. This was consistent with Earth's medieval era, but the population of agricultural villages was overwhelmingly larger in this world. Without industrial tools, it took an incredible number of people to do the work; I had no idea if there were magic-powered tractors or anything, but at this point in time, farmers made up the bread and butter of the labor force.

Accordingly, counts wielded considerable influence by virtue of their ability to mobilize the farmers in times of need. Even if they didn't excel in warfare, they derived power from their control of food supplies, means of transportation, and the labor that built public facilities, which was indispensable even in a world of magic. It was hard to deny the significance of a regional count.

Although the term "count" was first coined for nobles who owned land, court counts were rarely far from the king. Though they owned their own land, they were most prominent at the center of politics. That said, I had no idea whether my father was competent at his job.



Going by my previous world's standards, a regional count might be perceived as having the most power, but in this world, their positions were somewhat weak. On Earth, a regional count would be on about the same level as a marquess or a less influential duke.

The main thing with marquesses was that they owned vast urban domains. You wouldn't be wrong in thinking that a marquess owned the equivalent of multiple counts' territories. Despite this, marquesses were generally active in the capital. This was why you didn't hear expressions like "regional marquess." It wasn't as if they never returned to their territory, but they usually left the actual governing to a viscount or some other representative. In some special cases, they left the capital on diplomatic missions abroad, or to serve in war.

There were a lot of unspoken things among marquesses. They often served as the leaders of the knight brigade, war ministers, or some other military roles closely related to the country's politics. They were also the military commanders of the regions under their jurisdiction—a testament to just how many knights they had under their control. Even though they were usually at the capital, they were also largely in charge of securing the kingdom's borders.

Also, according to the system, only women from marquess peerage or higher could become queen. Well, it didn't matter so much for the second wife. Throughout history, it wasn't unheard of for women of count rank or lower to become queen through some underhanded means.

Marquesses also had another privilege: some of them were granted legislative powers. Basically, they were able to make their own laws unique to their jurisdictions. Counts didn't have such authority.

Once, a marquess made a law that all bandits were to be executed, and then all the bandits disappeared from the region. It did end up causing trouble for the neighboring fiefdom when all the bandits moved there, though.

Of course, in cases where royal law and the marquess's law were in conflict, royal law often took precedence, but there were cases where both laws were examined and the marquess's law was applied. That wasn't always a bad thing; whenever the royal law became outdated, the law that best matched the current situation took precedence, after all.

Next were dukes and princes. These terms were often translated with the same word in Japanese, but in this vaguely European world, they referred to two very different things.

In medieval Europe, “prince” generally denoted a royal title, rulership of a small nation, or close relation to a monarch. “Duke,” on the other hand, referred to a powerful lord—loftier than a marquess. It wasn’t unusual for them to own multiple large towns. Many aristocrats got promoted to this level by stacking up their military achievements. They had almost enough power to run their own countries, and some of them indeed went independent.

There were several reasons why all these differences came about. The number of people in the royal family was one of those reasons. In the Sinosphere, it wasn’t unusual for the leaders to have multiple wives, and their children were all treated as royalty or the imperial family.

By contrast, the church’s power swelled during Europe’s Dark Ages. The king’s son needed recognition from the church in order to become the next monarch. And owing to that famous Christian precept, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” the Church forbade people from having more than one partner (not that this always held up in practice).

This naturally had an influence on the royal family’s numbers. Any child born out of wedlock was straight-up disregarded from succession. Even if the king had a new child every year, it wouldn’t increase the numbers dramatically, so it was only inevitable that the distinguished nobles would be referred to as dukes, while the royal family would have princes. If anything, the separation made things easier to understand.

There were some complicating factors, though. Through political marriages, princes could gain succession rights in neighboring countries, which made things more confusing. Meanwhile, there were times throughout history when the church could claim that God had acknowledged a duke as the monarch. But for the most part, the line between duke and prince was clear. The system carried on through time with the divisions intact, and it seemed straightforward.

On the other hand, any son or daughter born from the leader in the

Sinosphere was acknowledged as a potential successor, regardless of who the mother was. Even if they exercised no actual authority, they were still important figureheads. For example, if a Chinese emperor had over twenty children, but only daughters, other families could marry in to attain “prince” status. That was an extreme example, but when an official’s son married an imperial princess, the succession rights themselves were treated as the dowry. This was the reason why those countries had no need to distinguish between princes and dukes. Drawing lines would only make things more confusing.

Thus, these important nobles fulfilled different roles depending on whether they existed in a monarchy or an imperial court, which made things utterly confusing in another way. In Japan, Yamagata Aritomo was referred to as a prince, but he had no prospect of becoming emperor. In the western sense, he was probably closer to a duke. The members of the Fujiwara clan in the Heian period were another example, I supposed; they also couldn’t become emperors. The treatment of the so-called “consort clans” was different in the east and west.

Also, the fact that a prince’s authority changed depending on the era was also particular to Sinosphere cultures. In China, when the country and the emperor changed, a person might be referred to as a “prince,” but the purpose they served was completely different. This was why translating the western “prince” or “duke” into Sino languages and vice versa was tricky; you didn’t know which era the words were referring to. Or if it might even result in people just conflating them all. The fact that Yamagata Aritomo wasn’t related to the emperor by blood would more or less fit with the western system.

Basically, the confusion came down to the Meiji period scholars transplanting the western political system onto Japan without much context.

To sum it all up *very* broadly:

West: Princes were blood relatives of the royal family, while dukes were not. Princes had succession rights.

East (excluding the Meiji period, which was modeled on the west): Almost every family had blood ties to royalty in some way. This did not have much effect on succession rights.

Basically, that was how it went. Even after writing all of that down, I still worry I'll get it all mixed up.

Up to a point, the Wein Kingdom was similar to the western system on Earth, but it did diverge. Princes were roughly the same in both, while dukes in Wein could also be referred to as “commander nobles.” This title was apparently created for highly distinguished generals. The son of a king was a prince, while a chancellor or someone of similar stature was a commander noble. Thus, the country had six ranks: Prince, Duke (commander), Marquess, Count, Viscount, and Baron.

Furthermore, the prince's name, Weiss, could only be given to the king or his heir. For example, the princess who would join the Hero's party had the full name of Laura Luise Weinzierl; there was no Weiss in it. When you heard the name Weiss, you would know it was the prince. It was this world's version of an “archduke,” I supposed, although archdukes had a different role in my previous world.

I'd studied all of this for a long time because I was an aristocrat living in this world, but I'll spare you the rest.

The point of all of this was that His Majesty told me, “You might still be a student, but you are indubitably the successor to your house, so go fulfill the count's military duties.”

How did it end up like this?

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Once the formalities were concluded, it was time for a standing buffet. A part of me wondered if it was smart to have a party right after a Demon Stampede. Perhaps there was some other purpose behind it. What I did know for certain was that I had become the center of my peers' attention.

“Okay, seriously though, how did it end up like this?”

“Werner, I think you're the only one who would be bothered over receiving a title,” replied the guy who'd been named the third most distinguished.

It *should* have been Mazel getting all the cred—the game's script had evidently derailed. In the first place, nobody should have been in the mood to

hold a banquet after the battle, given the prince's death. Even now, partying shouldn't have been a priority; there were many Demon-related incidents to come. But I couldn't exactly mention that without having to explain how I knew.

The prince and the king both quickly made themselves scarce. Maybe they had some other job to attend to. I didn't know what went on above the clouds, nor was I particularly curious to find out.

Anyway, though I was dressed in aristocratic formalwear and Mazel simply wore his school uniform, he looked way more dashing than I did. I could only think of it as a God-given privilege. Was it a paradox to believe in God's discrimination while not believing in God himself?

"There's gotta be at least *one* other disappointed schmuck...or maybe not?"

"Yeah, no way. Although I think you might find people at school who wish they were you."

Mazel made out that I was complaining about success. That was annoying of him, but I did kind of understand his reaction. It just happened to be the worst-case scenario for me, knowing what I knew. I was already tied to the royal capital for a long time as a student, but now that I'd obtained a noble title, it was looking more likely that I would be stuck here. That meant that there was a bigger possibility than ever that I would be around for the attack on the capital.



“Ugh, I feel like crap.”

“I was in the same boat yesterday,” Mazel said. “I think I had it worse.”

To me, he looked the same as ever, but it did seem as if a bit of the tension had lifted from his shoulders. I guess he *was* pretty concerned about etiquette after all. For all his hang-ups, though, his interaction with His Majesty had gone so smoothly it could have been lifted from a textbook. Being so effortlessly good at things had to be another one of his protagonist privileges.

Well, I wasn't in the mood to eat, so I guess it was a good thing I had a stomachache.

On that note, it was a trope in isekai stories for the protagonist to dislike the food in the other world. Sometimes, the reason was because the cuisine in that world was unconventional. Or, as happened all too often, a writer ignorant of medieval cuisine assumed it lacked seasoning or used subpar ingredients. Putting aside what the commoners ate, those assumptions did not hold true for the royalty and the aristocracy. They had luxurious meals suitable for their palates.

“Palate” was the operative word here. So yeah, the food did in fact taste bad.

Elite meant expensive, so expensive was what they ate. Preserved fruits from the north were a common choice, and one of the better options. In a landlocked country without even nearby salt mines, anything heavily salted was considered premium, which meant nobles' food would invariably send your blood pressure soaring. Salt was considered so sumptuous that there was a custom of putting a box of salt on a table next to the seat of honor.

It was said in my previous world that pepper was worth its weight in gold. This was around the Age of Discovery when Europeans had been notoriously obsessed with spices. Back then, pepper was considered a luxury, and people drowned everything in it, from soup to meat, and even wine. Talk about guaranteed gastric failure.

In actuality, though, pepper wasn't *that* valuable. Sugar sold for more on average, and with the aristocracy becoming more decadent after the Middle Ages, it's likely they started consuming more of it. That said, “the Middle Ages”



is quite a broad term, which spanned the equivalent of Japan's Kamakura period to the end of the Sengoku. And Western food had become more refined near the end of that stretch.

Also, there was a lot of regional variety. There was as much distance between England and Greece as there was between Hokkaido and Okinawa. Using Japanese history as an analogue, it was ridiculous to expect that the food in Kyoto, the Tohoku region, and the island of Kyushu would all taste the same during the Kamakura period.

Anyway, that was the reason why the court food was ridiculously over seasoned—everything tasted like salt, and the pepper would scorch your mouth.

As for the Wein Kingdom, while the food wasn't all that bad by itself, any time a rare spice was in fashion, they'd throw it in, leading to some truly inscrutable flavors. Using meat from a monster was one thing, but putting their brains into a soup was a whole other story. As unique as the flavor was, as soon as you found out what was in it, you were bound to lose your appetite. Ugh, this was bringing up bad memories. Speaking of which, I hadn't seen any dishes with raw sea cucumbers in this world. Not that I would eat it.

My thoughts petered off when I saw a tall man in a dignified outfit striding toward me. I recognized him—Marquess Norpoth.

"Lord Werner Von Zehrfeld, I must first extend my congratulations."

"I am honored, Marquess Norpoth." I took note of how he said the word "first." My honest reaction was *oh great, there's more*. I decided that I had better get my apology out of the way, and so I lowered my head and continued. "I must apologize for my actions on the battlefield the other day. I deeply regret my impropriety."

"Hmm."

He gave an infuriatingly vague reaction. But still, there was a proper order to these things, and I *had* acted out of turn. From the sidelines, Mazel gazed at us in puzzlement, which was only understandable considering that he wasn't there at the time.

As those thoughts ran through my head, Marquess Norpoth suddenly smiled. Smiles could be particularly disarming on older gentlemen like himself. Why were there so many good-looking guys around me?

“It is fine as long as you understand. His Highness has spoken similarly.”

“He has?”

“He bade me temper my rebuke on account of your youth. I thought I might perhaps say something if it were necessary, but that does not seem to be the case.”

“I am honored.”

*Meep.* It was somehow looking like the prince favored me. What was I supposed to do with this knowledge?

“Count Zehrfeld has brought you up well. I expect good things from you in the future.”

“I thank you for your kindness and consideration.” I bowed once again.

When I lifted my head, I saw Marquess Norpoth walking away. Honestly, I was a little relieved to be let off the hook so easily.

“What was that about?” asked Mazel finally, having sensibly kept his questions to himself during the conversation.

“Okay, so, basically...”

I explained the circumstances—how I had overstepped by running straight to the prince when I noticed the tsurinobuse. I should have reported first to Marquess Norpoth, the commander of the left flank, who would then have sent a messenger to the base.

“But wouldn’t that have been risky?”

“Yeah, I think so. I didn’t have the time to convince Marquess Norpoth.”

But still, rules were rules. It was like a middle manager going behind the department chief’s back to talk to the CEO—a gross violation of protocol. By all rights, I should have been rebuked.

“If people get the idea that breaking the rules is allowed so long as you get results, then it’ll hurt the army’s discipline.”

“That makes sense...”

Mazel gave me a strange look. What was with those googly eyes? It made me want to run away and hide behind something.

“Werner, are you really the same age as me? It took you explaining it for me to understand.”

“It comes down to the difference in our life experiences, my boy.”

That wasn’t a lie (if you counted my previous life). I was being one hundred percent accurate. Not that I could exactly say that, though, so I decided to pass it off as a joke.

As I was chatting with Mazel, two more people showed up, this time a man and woman. They were familiar—Lord Bastian of House Fürst and his daughter, Lady Hermine. Instead of a dress, Lady Hermine wore a female knight outfit, which made her look like a gallant woman in men’s clothes, depending on one’s perspective. The heir of the family, Lord Tyrone, wasn’t around.

“Lord Werner, you gave a splendid display in battle,” Lord Bastian complimented me.

“Oh, it was all thanks to the knights,” I replied.

That wasn’t modesty—it was the truth. It was impressive that we even survived with a greenhorn like me in charge.

“I apologize for my rudeness to you before the battle,” said Lord Bastian after a pause. He didn’t bow to me (that would have been a bit much), but he did give a light nod in my direction. It was honestly a surprise. You wouldn’t normally imagine that a count would apologize so sincerely to a viscount. It was also a bit of a shock to see Lady Hermine bow her head to me, but maybe I’d been presumptuous to think she was like her older sister.

“You did nothing to warrant an apology.”

“No, I made light of your abilities as a commander.”

So that was how it was. What a pain. Apologizing to my father directly would

have caused the count to lose face, so he decided to approach me as an individual and answer only for his conduct prior to the battle. An aristocrat's pride was a complicated thing.

"I understand and accept your words."

It was noble etiquette not to directly say the word "apology" in this context. To be precise, the person with the lower standing wasn't supposed to say it. This was out of consideration for the other party, so that they didn't lose face for apologizing. Like I said, these rules were annoying.

"By the way, where is Lord Tyrone?"

"My brother injured his foot, so he was unable to attend today's gathering," Hermine stated.

"Please give him my well wishes." I nodded in response.

The injury might have been real, but if he had really wanted to come, potions or magic would have been enough to patch him up. That said, the injury wasn't necessarily just an excuse not to attend. He might have gotten into big trouble after I left our flank. It was polite not to pry at times like these.

"Given the proximity of our territories," Count Fürst said, "I hope we can remain on good terms."

"Indeed. My father and I extend our warm regards."

I was basically telling him to go through my father directly instead of me. I mean, if I accidentally promised something or overreached with my words, I wouldn't be able to backpedal. The lip service common in Japanese society was a huge no-no among the aristocracy.

Lord Bastian nodded, and then left to go talk to some other people. When he was gone, Lady Hermine bowed lightly. "I hope that we can have a more leisurely chat at some point," she said.

"Thank you for your regards."

At least she didn't seem to be looking down on my status as civil official anymore. I wasn't in any real hurry to speak with her, but I did want to keep things cordial as neighbors.

Even after the two of them were gone, I still had to keep up the nodding. Ugh, this was really a pain.

“Seems like you’ve got a lot on your plate, Werner,” said Mazel, who must have sensed my tension.

“I guess,” I said tersely.

There wasn’t much more to say—footsteps clattered around us, signaling the approach of a crowd. Almost everyone was looking at Mazel. I guess they were champing at the bit to make connections with the Hero who purged the Demon. It looked like things were about to get hectic for a while...

...and they did.

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“And there you have it. I hope you can meet my daughter sometime, young Mazel.”

“If I recall correctly, Viscount Unger,” I interjected, “your daughter is three years old?”

Even Mazel couldn’t help but stiffen faintly. Wisely, however, he held himself back from shouting a rejection at the top of his lungs. After an awkward pause, he said evasively, “I am but a mere student. Perhaps one day in the future there will be a better opportunity.”

This was far from his first propositioning. It was one thing for the nobles to push girls our age onto Mazel, but I wished they’d quit pimping out ladies close to fifty and children younger than ten. It showed how delectable they found Mazel, a commoner who bore the Heroism skill and had vanquished the monster horde. This was especially the case for houses with sickly heirs or none at all.

It wasn’t as if nobody approached me at all, but pickings were slim while I was in Mazel’s orbit. Was it because of his looks? It had to be the looks. I wasn’t fussed about noble girls, though, so although it bruised my ego a little, I’d get over it.

But still, this whole thing was strange. There were no scenes like this in the

game. That made sense, considering that it had never even alluded to the affairs of the aristocracy to begin with. Besides, even if it had, most of them would have been caught up in the Demon Stampede. They certainly wouldn't have been in the mood for merrymaking after a losing battle. They didn't even really have time for this current frivolity, given what was still in store for them.

"You really helped me out back there," Mazel said. The bone-deep exhaustion was uncharacteristically plain on his face.

"Heh, just buy me lunch sometime."

"Do you want breakfast and dinner on top?"

I was tired as well. I'd been talking nonstop since the wave of well-wishes started. It was enough to hurt my throat, which had only just recovered from the other day. I had no idea that all the studying I'd done on court etiquette would come in so handy. You never knew what life would throw at you.

"But still," Mazel went on, "that was a *lot* of people to deal with."

"Shouldn't you be used to it? Everyone likes you at the academy."

It was true. Good looks, charming personality—he was a gentleman in the best sense of the word. Even the girls who just wanted to marry for the boost in status were fond of Mazel. "If only he had a noble rank," they would say to themselves. These girls accepted that love marriages just weren't a thing in this world, which kind of made me feel sorry for them—although that wasn't enough to make them approach me.

The point was that Mazel was a hot commodity, and demand for him would only go up, thanks to his monster-and Demon-slaying exploits. Normally, he shouldn't have to deal with court antics...er, *activities*. I couldn't wrap my head around this situation, and I couldn't imagine what would happen in the future.

"I am sorry to interrupt your pleasant chat," a woman broke in suddenly. She sounded familiar, and when I glanced at her face, I was stunned.

"Oh, hello there..." Mazel responded casually, apparently unaware of who she was.

I, however, completely lost my cool. "You were not interrupting anything, but

may I ask, if it please you, what you wish of—?”

I hurriedly tried to respond with politeness, but the girl smiled and waved a hand to stop me. “There is no need for such formality, Viscount Zehrfeld. Please be at ease.”

That was easy for her to say. I had no idea she was even in the palace. This beauty, who had been such a hot topic even as a fictional character, now stood before me in the flesh. Her long and beautiful golden hair swayed as she bowed, and her whole figure seemed to flow with each movement. This wasn’t the time to be wowed by seeing a bona fide curtsy, but *hot damn*, she was elegant. It was enough to make my knees turn to jelly.

“My name is Laura Luise Weinzierl. May I have a little of your time?”

The game’s main heroine had taken the stage.

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“She’s a pretty person,” Mazel whispered.

“It’s kind of a job requirement for royalty, I guess.”

As we trailed behind the princess, Mazel and I spoke to each other in hushed tones. It wasn’t like I could talk about genes in this world, so I gave a non-committal response.

I noticed that Mazel referred to her as a person rather than a girl; he was evidently trying to maintain propriety. It wasn’t hard to see where he was coming from. She had a dignified aura about her. You wouldn’t understand unless you met her.





But Mazel himself was handsome enough to be royalty. I wasn't jealous, but I did feel that this was a society where you could feel the difference between main characters and side characters. Did I even qualify as a side character? Crud. I had no idea why I was even invited.

"Please, come inside."

Passing the guards, she opened a set of double doors and gestured for us to enter. This may be trivial, but even the way she beckoned exuded refinement. The real deal was on a whole other level.

You know, when I used to read isekai reincarnation stories, I would imagine my favorite voice actors role-playing the characters, which made it a little disorienting now to actually hear them speak. The Japanese voices kind of conflicted with their European appearances, especially if the actor was known for other kinds of characters. Laura had her playful side; it was a pity that her voice didn't show it off.

I wondered if we were headed deep into the castle. In the game, you weren't allowed here so early on; this area was only accessible after the attack destroyed half the castle, allowing you to walk through the broken doors. Goes without saying that the guards weren't around then, either; you couldn't go any farther if those guys were around. Not that I could tell if they were the exact same people.

I was still lost in thought when we passed through a courtyard with a fountain in it. Roses bloomed across the garden, pretty enough to captivate even an oaf like me with no eye for art. The sculpting of the fountain was also very tasteful.

There was a gazebo near the fountain... Those only existed in the real world after the seventeenth century, so they weren't around in the Middle Ages...but this was a game, so whatever. Besides, this world was an anachronistic mess; it didn't even distinguish between palaces and castles. Anyway, inside the gazebo was a table, and seated there was a man I recognized immediately.

"Welcome, Viscount Werner Von Zehrfeld and young Mazel Harting. I apologize for bringing you all the way out here."

*Okay, why is the prince lying in wait for us?*

“Meek as a lamb” was probably the best way to describe me. But the prince had gone out of his way to invite us, so it wasn’t like I could go “Hi. Bye.” Thus, I took a seat, half-ready to flee at a moment’s notice. I probably made for quite a pathetic sight. Mazel, of course, seemed right at home—the protagonist’s privileges struck again.

It felt totally unreal to sit at a table with the prince, the main heroine, and the Hero. But that was because I was looking at this from the perspective of the game that I knew; as far as anyone else was concerned, Mazel was more like the odd one out. I did have my noble rank going for me, at least.

*That I knew?* Something about my previous thought was bugging me. But I had no way of figuring out what it was. Besides, my thoughts in general were a jumbled mess. This was no time to dwell on things, anyway—not with the prince in front of me.

“The two of you were a boon in the recent battle. Allow me to extend my gratitude.” Prince Hubert nodded his head lightly, setting the butterflies aflutter in my stomach.

“Oh, no,” I stammered, “it was a coincidence that things worked out so conveniently.”

“I only managed to accomplish anything because of the help of others,” Mazel said.

I decided to change the subject by addressing the princess. “Your Highness, um...”

“There is no need for court manners here. I won’t rebuke you for using my name.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly...”

“I do not mind.” She smiled and winked. “Just Laura is fine. Is it really so hard to call me that?”

An iconic line of hers—except she was supposed to say that to the Hero Mazel, not me. Anyway, I glanced in Prince Hubert’s direction, and he nodded. I

decided it was fine to go ahead, then. But man, there was such a big age gap between those siblings that they looked more like father and daughter.

“I did not realize that you were in the palace, Princess Laura. I had assumed you were in the temple of Finoy.”

“Oh, you knew about that, hmm?” Prince Hubert responded instead of Laura.

“I heard about it from my father.”

“The Minister of Ceremonies, correct? That makes sense.”

In truth, I knew about it from the game.

One of the three Demon Lord’s commanders would attack the temple of Finoy. Upon hearing that Laura was at the temple, Mazel would come rushing. That was where they were *supposed* to meet for the first time, except now they’d become acquainted with each other already. What was going on here?

Also, it didn’t cause any suspicion for me to pretend I knew about this from my father, because the Minister of Ceremonies was responsible for organizing the religious ceremony. As for the ritual itself, the church handled the praying part.

“Laura received a divine revelation,” Prince Hubert went on. “She returned to convey the message.”

“A divine revelation?”

“That the Demon Lord has returned.”

I deserved praise for not spitting out my tea right then and there. Hey, wasn’t this top secret information?

“Is this true?” Mazel asked, his expression dead serious.

The Demon Lord once destroyed the ancient kingdom, but although ruins of that civilization still existed, the average person regarded the story of the Demon Lord as nothing but a fairy tale. It wouldn’t have been unusual for Mazel to burst out laughing, but the conversation thus far had been serious, and besides—we were talking to royalty. Of course Mazel would take it with a straight face.

Prince Hubert spoke carefully and deliberately. “That Laura received a divine revelation is true. We do not, however, have enough information to confirm whether he has returned.”

He seemed more than halfway certain—closer to sixty or seventy percent.

Laura added, “It is not widely known, but there are steps involved in receiving a revelation. However, only the people who receive revelations are privy to them.”

She was meant to be the greatest holy woman in generations, which was why the Demons would target her. I was kind of tempted to tell her to get a bodyguard if she was such a VIP. This was standard fare for games, though.

“This revelation was one of grave importance, so I returned to the capital to convey it to His Majesty directly.”

“I see.”

I understood the logic up to that point. I didn’t know whether the king believed it, but with Prince Hubert encountering an unusual Demon Stampede, it was hardly unfounded. What I didn’t understand was why Mazel and I were being brought into the loop.

The doubt must have shown on my face because Laura continued: “Part of the divine revelation said that a Hero will play a highly important role in the events to come. I wanted to meet him for myself.”

Oh, now I got it. That specific revelation was a plot point even in the game. This was the reason why Mazel would be sent on an errand—er, journey—to vanquish the Demon Lord.

As I mentioned, most commoners never learned their own innate skill. You could do just fine raising only your class level, after all. While the Church could identify it, they charged a hefty fee; to be fair, they couldn’t live on prayers alone. When Mazel’s skill was identified, the crown had endorsed him to the academy, but clearly a divine revelation emphasized his significance in these times. After the Demon Stampede, Prince Hubert would have been convinced of the revelation and arranged for this meeting. He must have thought that this was a good opportunity. But in that case...

“A Hero... I understand Mazel’s part in this, but why did you need me here?”

Right, I still didn’t know why I’d been invited.

Prince Hubert answered my question. “To be perfectly frank, I wanted you here as both a liaison and a wall.”

This was getting even more confu... Oh, a liaison. I got it. “The matter still isn’t public, and you can’t summon a commoner like Mazel too frequently. Is that right?”

“I’m glad you catch on fast.”

In the scenario where the prince died, the story of the Demon Lord’s revival would be very persuasive, which would allow the king to summon the Hero directly. But things weren’t nearly as dire in this case.

If it came to light that the Demon Lord was back, it would cause a huge disturbance. I was the only one who knew that it was true at this point. I understood the need to proceed cautiously to prevent public outcry.

But the royals needed a pretext to call for Mazel; without an urgent matter at hand, they couldn’t let him pass through the castle gates willy-nilly. Though it was an imperfect solution, a viscount like me could get into the castle without a problem. In that sense, I was more of a messenger than a point of contact.

“What about the wall part?” Mazel asked, puzzled.

I figured I had the answer to that question too. “It’s to stop the other nobles from snatching you up like they were trying to do before.”

It would be a hassle for the royal family if Mazel got tangled up with another noble. In such a case, until the Demon Lord’s revival went public, they would have to negotiate with the nobles every time they wanted to mobilize the Hero. They were apprehensive about losing precious time on sluggish negotiations.

“Lord Werner, I don’t mind appointing young Mazel as your knight.”

“Please spare me.”

I shot down Prince Hubert’s suggestion immediately. If Mazel became my knight, that would only make things more complicated. No matter how many cool and heroic things he did, if a mere subordinate of the Zehrfelds got

involved with a princess—with Laura—then I could only see this causing an uproar. For the sake of the game's story and my self-preservation as a noble, I had to nip that idea in the bud.

"Mazel and I are friends. There are no power differences between us," I said. Crap, I was sweating. "Of course, I intend to follow all your commands. I also have no intention of monopolizing Mazel, so I'm not inclined to create a master and knight dynamic between us."

"It is possible for you to do it just for appearances' sake. I myself have friends in my service."

"I must still refuse, nonetheless." Things definitely wouldn't stop at appearances. Yikes. How would His Highness treat me when I was lord of his sister's boyfriend?

But man, he was strangely persistent... Wait, it made sense. He was afraid, so he wanted to eliminate any possible seeds of strife beforehand.

"Very well. But I want you to support young Mazel's actions in the capital."

"As you command."

If I had to be honest, I didn't want to do that either, but it would just cause problems if I turned down that suggestion too. What would happen if I crushed all the prince's hopes right here?

This was already diverging wildly from the game's plot. I had to prioritize my safety and preserve my freedom of movement. Fortunately, I hadn't been told to accompany Mazel on his quest, only to support him from my station as a noble. I figured I could manage that, at least.

But still, I never saw this coming at all. In the actual game, the Hero receives barely any support from the crown...for some reason. Even though the Hero embarks on a quest to vanquish the Demon Lord, the king doesn't even give him enough money to buy the most expensive armor at the shops. What an asshole.

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"So, how was he?"

“They seem to be genuine friends. At least, that was how he spoke of it.”

In a private room temporarily detached from matters of national politics, the monarch, Maximilian Reinisch Weiss Weinzierl, stroked his chin as he listened to his son’s report. “Did the count put any ideas into his head?”

“None that I could see. I did not sense any duplicity when he spoke of his wish to remain friends with the Hero.”

“I see. Then I suppose we should believe him for now.”

Although the royal family adopted a “wait and see” approach regarding the Demon Lord’s revival, they had been closely monitoring the existence of the bearer of the Heroism skill for some time. Upon seeing the skill’s worth, the royal house had launched another investigation into Mazel Harting and found that one of his new friends was the heir of House Zehrfeld.

They had also, of course, investigated other noble houses and quietly put a stop to any plotting.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, came the Demon Lord’s revival. The Heroism skill gained new significance, and Werner became a useful pawn to deal with the political situation for as long as the truth remained hidden from the public eye.

“If he has no intention of adopting the Hero into his house, then he will make an adequate go-between.”

“I agree, though he shows a lack of cunning for a noble.”

“You seem pleased about that.” A rare frown of confusion crept over the king’s face.

The prince smiled in response. “He is only slightly older than Ruven, and yet he has already earned his own title. He harbors no greed and is a talented military leader. He would not be a bad choice for an aide.”

“I see.”

The king put a hand to his chin in thought. As one might imagine from a man with a thirty-eight-year-old son, he was quite advanced in age. He wanted to assign a talented aide to his grandson, if possible. The Hero was an excellent



candidate, of course, but a talented aristocrat from a long noble line was also a fine choice. It would be a waste to simply make a messenger of him.

“Very well,” the king said, “Keep an eye on him for the time being.”

“I will.”

“Now, then, about the Demon Lord’s revival...”

“I fear that it would cause panic were we to reveal the matter before ascertaining the truth of it.”

“I agree. Proceed carefully with the investigation. Also, refortify Fort Werisa just in case.”

“As you command.”

Fort Werisa was half-abandoned because it was nowhere near the country’s borders, but it held strategic importance. In an emergency, it could supply reinforcements to the capital, as well as offer an escape route from the capital. Refortifying it was the logical next step after that bizarre Demon Stampede.

“Make sure to replenish the knight brigade’s ranks and confirm the strength of the civilian soldiers. Prioritize efficiency.”

“Understood.”

The king and the prince made their preparations. Yet they could not deny their apprehension about the situation. At that point, neither had high hopes for the Hero as an individual. It was only understandable when they had yet to see what he was truly capable of.

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“I’m really sorry about my brother.”

“It’s fine, truly. I didn’t mind at all.”

The prince had left the table ahead of us, and the moment he was gone, Laura began bowing and apologizing, prompting my flustered response. The prince hadn’t been particularly rude, all things considered.

But still, the princess’s modesty stood out to me. She’d been that way in the game too, but I wished she would stop bowing her head to me in real life. All

this exposure to her regal aura was making my stomach churn in anxiety.

“So, um...?” Mazel looked confused. Of course he would be. But I didn’t think it was necessary to tell him bluntly that the prince had been testing me to see whether I wanted to monopolize the Hero.

Wait, maybe this was a good opportunity for some alone time?

“By the way, I need to go to the restroom for a bit. I’ll leave the rest to you, Mazel.”

“What?!”

Heh, so Mazel could make panicked squeaks like the rest of us. I wanted to savor it, but I ignored him and bowed in Laura’s direction. Then I quickly commenced a strategic exit. To the knights and maids watching us from the sidelines, it probably looked like I was trying to run away after the princess bowed to me. They wouldn’t be wrong in thinking that, but my main reason was to set the mood for Mazel and Laura. A lot of things had already diverged from the game, but those two still made a nice couple.

I asked a nearby maid to guide me to the restroom. This was less because I didn’t know the way and more to signal that I had no intention of wandering where I didn’t belong. It was so bothersome having to take such steps just to avoid rousing suspicion.

I should mention that unlike the real-life medieval Europe, this world was fully equipped with baths and toilets. Thank goodness for that. I didn’t remember toilets being shown in the game, so I had no idea there was running water and sewerage.

Perhaps it was weirder for a world with magic *not* to have a water supply. And besides, the reason why medieval Europe lacked toilets was because of the church’s influence in the Dark Ages. The idea of never taking a bath in your entire life and *boasting* about it was completely freakish from a former Japanese person’s perspective.

That said, the lack of bathing culture only applied to the early years of the Middle Ages. In later years, it became more common in chivalric romances for traveling knights to take a bath before they met the king. In French tales, there

were even rose petals in the baths, which was a bit overkill. It was also true that peasants still didn't get access to proper hygiene until later.

Another thing worth mentioning was that soap had already been invented around the ninth century. But back then it apparently used animal fat instead of vegetable oil. I got the impression that this would rub off on the clothes and make them smell bad in a different way. Not that I had ever used it myself. This world was closer to Japan in the hygiene department, so it wasn't something I had to think about.

The palace, I should note, really lived up to its reputation. It had something of a Catholic style: austere on the outside yet lavish on the inside, reflecting the bounty of the human heart. There were chandeliers, white walls, tasteful gold ornaments, and glass... Oh right, glass was an expensive commodity in this world. I remembered that Mazel, coming from a rural background, was surprised to see glass at the academy. Knowing that this would all get destroyed, I couldn't help but feel bad about the waste—although there wasn't much I could do about that.

As those thoughts ran through my mind, the maid I had been trailing suddenly looked back over her shoulder at me.

"I apologize for speaking out of the blue, Viscount Zehrfeld, but there is something I wish to say."

"Y-yes... What is it?"

I'd just been thinking that the palace maids were pretty, so predictably I was a little tongue-tied when she addressed me all of a sudden.

But the maid's next action left me truly flabbergasted—she bowed her head to me.

"Please accept my sincerest gratitude."

"Huh? I mean, um, what did I do to deserve your thanks?"

What did I *dooooo*?

As I stood there in bewilderment, the maid looked up at me and explained. "My father and older brother belong to the knight brigade. They told me that

you saw through the monsters' trap. If you had not been present, they might have perished in battle."

"Ahh..."

I was speechless. *Oh, of course*, I thought. There had to be people who survived because of me.

I couldn't tell her that I had only been thinking of my own survival back then. I could only muster a vague, non-committal response, after which silence settled over us.

I had no idea what she thought about my reaction, but the maid bowed again. "I understand that it was unseemly of me to speak to you in a hallway. Yet I wanted to offer a word of thanks nonetheless."

"No, um, you're welcome."

My response ended up sounding stilted. I wanted to praise myself for mustering a reply at all, but I had the feeling that I would probably hate myself tomorrow for not thinking of a better way of expressing myself.

"I apologize again. Now then, please come this way," said the maid as we carried on to the bathroom.

I was still rattled—and not because a pretty lady had just thanked me. I had only thought of this place as a game world, but it was a place where people actually lived. My life here was entangled with others.

Even though I'd always understood that intellectually, I was now at a loss. I'd saved people without meaning to and had even been *thanked* for it. Was it right of me to write off all these people because they were from a game? Was this world really the game I knew?

My combat skills would never catch up to the Hero Mazel. I had no overpowered abilities. But I had my knowledge from the game. I was privileged enough to be an aristocrat instead of a commoner. It wasn't as if my hands were *completely* tied.

It was okay for me to have other goals besides saving myself...right?

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Going to the academy the next day was a hassle because my friends and teachers came up to me in droves first thing in the morning. The same thing went for Mazel, of course.

After my toilet break, the two of us had chatted with Princess Laura for a bit before heading home. She asked us enthusiastically about school; this was very characteristic of her playful personality. Mazel kept bringing up stories about me, which wasn't a big deal, but I wish he wouldn't. Yeah, I know that I got up to mischief despite my noble status, but come on.

At least there was no talk of arranging a royal marriage for Mazel, so thank goodness for that.

But yesterday was in the past. Today brought entirely new challenges. There weren't many students who had participated directly in the battle, but naturally, there were plenty who had heard about it from their parents.

I will admit that Mazel was a star among commoners, and I was an illustrious noble. That was more than enough to make a splash. There were even some girls, who had probably heard the story from their parents, who tried to seduce us. What a pain in the ass.

"They're not letting up, huh?"

"Yeah. For the first time ever, I'm looking forward to the start of classes."

Like me, Mazel was knackered before noon. He might have been peppier when chatting with Laura.

I told Mazel to turn down all invitations to tea parties, both yesterday and today. It wasn't out of the question for people to slip something into his drink and try to pin something on him after the fact. You couldn't let your guard down around noblewomen—or, I should say, nobles in general. They were brought up to accept heinous tactics without question. (I will admit that I was a little biased in that department.)

"By the way, Werner," Mazel whispered to me.

"What is it?" I replied. Talking during class wasn't a good look, but we hardly had the chance to do so otherwise.

“There’s someone I want you to meet,” Mazel said.

“Who is it?”

“A guy who helped me defeat the Demon.”

Oh, him. Yeah, I was familiar. Now that I thought about it, the party consisted of two people at this point in the story.

“I don’t mind, but why me?”

“I think he can help us.”

Well, he was a party member—Mazel’s judgment was right on the money. And if he was going to help fight the Demon Lord, it made sense for me, Mazel’s go-between with the crown, to meet him in person. I had no reason to turn him down.

“Sure. I have some things to tell him as well.”

“You mean about *that*, right?”

The Demon Lord’s revival was still a secret. We could only refer to it as *that*, but that was good enough for just the two of us. There were a lot of things I had to do, so I wanted to get the odd jobs out of the way quickly.

“Oh, that’s the bell.”

“Okay, let’s book it.”

Our first order of business was escaping from our fellow students. We had already used the courtyard, and there was nowhere to run if we got cornered in the library. The roof was forbidden, so maybe the indoor sword-training hall was the way to go? We’d be able to squeeze through a window and head for the back entrance.

After a quick strategy meeting, Mazel and I commenced our flight. Remembering how I was scolded for running in the hallways in my previous life, I couldn’t help but smile. Our classmates were more intimidating than the monsters.

In the end, the fuss didn’t settle down even after several days. I wondered if I should have pretended to be sick. But that would have left Mazel to fend for

himself, which was unfair. Some parts of this academy were a microcosm of aristocratic society, after all.

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“I’m Luguentz. Nice to meet ya.”

The guy Mazel wanted me to meet was just who I’d expected: Luguentz Laser. According to the game, he was in his mid-twenties.

Sitting in a tavern, he certainly looked the part of an adventurer. As for me, although I wasn’t wearing my uniform, my outfit still gave off the vibe of a student. Did this count as traveling incognito? I mean, I was a viscount, so it wasn’t that outlandish for me to sneak around. But I was genuinely a student, so this would have been an awful choice of disguise.

Luguentz was a big-bro-type figure for Mazel—or rather, the game protagonist—to lean on. As an archetypal warrior, he wasn’t quite at the Hero’s level. With his Weaponmaster skill, he boasted powerful physical attacks, but he couldn’t use any magic. He remained a party member from the first dungeon all the way to the final battle. Though he wasn’t a cute girl, I had the feeling that he was fairly popular. The voice actor did a good job with his gruff voice. Alas, he didn’t appear much in the cutscenes.

“Likewise. My name is Werner,” I said, bowing modestly.

“Oho.” Luguentz’s expression flickered in surprise at my bow. Yep, that was the kind of character he was.

Off to the side, Mazel smiled in a way that said, *I told you so*. “See?”

“Heh, you’re just like Mazel said. A nobleman who ain’t snobby.”

I’d withheld my surname precisely because I expected this sort of reaction. Emphasizing my house’s stature would have come off as pompous, so rather than focus on station, I just treated him as Mazel’s friend without acting too servile. His brashness made him get along strangely well with Laura...though she was an unusual type among royalty.





“I heard some stuff about ya, but it’s sorta different meetin’ ya in the flesh.”

“You’ve heard of me?”

“Yeah, from my pal Goecke. He said you were good with a spear.”

He was talking about Oliver Goecke. We didn’t talk much, but he had done remarkably well as a platoon commander during the Demon Stampede. My father mentioned that he got a special reward because of his performance. I had no idea that he was connected to Luguentz, although it did make sense; mercenaries and adventurers flocked together.

“Mazel said ya wanted to see my face, so here I am, but I’m guessin’ this pretty mug ain’t the only reason, eh?” Luguentz cut to the chase as he ordered some alcohol. He was quick on the uptake.

“Mercenaries and adventurers can keep secrets, right?” I asked.

“Comes with the job,” Luguentz replied, as if I was stating the obvious. He took a swig of his mug.

“It seems that the Demon Lord has returned.”

Oh, he choked on his beer. I wasn’t surprised.

“Ya need to work on your jokes.”

“Sorry, it’s not a joke,” Mazel answered for me.

This time, Luguentz glared at me. Then, in a prudently muted voice, said, “If you’re really talkin’ the truth, is this really the place to spill it?”

Mazel thought the same way he did. But in its own way, this tavern was a good place for keeping secrets. With all the hubbub, you could barely even make out the words of a conversation one table over, and that was only if you strained your ears. It was much easier to keep a secret with a single adventurer here than if I had invited him to a manor. I could count on Luguentz, the Hero’s party member, to keep a lid on things. Besides, I figured it was only a matter of time before the masses heard about it. If anything, I wanted the time to prepare.

“I’m not planning to shout it from the rooftops, but I do want to make some

preparations before the situation goes public. The crown is taking steps to prepare as well.”

“Mazel was right. You don’t act like a student.”

*Mazel, what were you saying about me?* When I glanced inadvertently in his direction, he looked away, pretending to be innocent. That jerk had been making stuff up about me for sure.

“Okay,” said Luguentz. “So what do you want me to do?”

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“Werner, you are *such* a weirdo.”

“Am not.”

What I asked Luguentz to do was handpick some mercenaries and adventurers for an escort mission; they had to be tight-lipped and used to traveling. I wrapped things up by saying I would pass the message along to Goecke.

I explained my plan and by the end, Luguentz was satisfied. When I told him that I would be counting on him and Mazel from now on, he dropped his signature line from the game: “I’m lookin’ forward to Mazel’s growth.” It was pretty funny to end things on that note.

And now Mazel was in the middle of proffering his extremely uncalled-for opinions.

“But you’re such a geography freak. You pinpointed so many towns. I’ve never even looked at a map.”

“I don’t know all of them.”

It was probably more accurate to say I didn’t *remember* them. I didn’t have perfect recollection of a game I played around thirty years ago. But I generally knew the locations of towns where important cutscenes happened and where the good equipment was sold. It was just vague stuff like go west, go north, go east, cross the river—though it was better than nothing.

Come to think of it, a map is another thing that stupid king didn’t bother giving you in the game. Fortunately, I had a strategy guide to get me through

(this was back in the days before online walkthroughs).

Within the context of this world, I could understand that access to accurate maps was carefully restricted for the sake of national security. Still, not having one made things harder for me, so I created a rough approximation based on memory. Look, I did my best.

I realized at this point that there were an awful lot of towns in this world that never appeared in the game. Or rather, there were only a very few that did show up. Basically, only the ones where major events took place. My own hometown was a no-show. At first, I'd thought it was because it was way out in the country, but seeing it this way, it's probably just because no game scenes took place there.

Oh, right, there were no nobles in the game at all. Were there even any mansions belonging to a town lord or the nobility? Hmm, there was one. It was in a neighboring country, in a town where the feudal lord had swapped places with a Demon.

The game had glossed right over every town that wasn't a backdrop to events like that. That was why creating a map based on my game knowledge and current knowledge made my head spin. Luguentz said that he could sell this map as is, but the very thought made me cringe.

"Where are you going to get the money from?"

"My house will draw up the budget, although we'll get the crown to pay for it in the end."

"You'll *get* them to pay...?" Mazel's mouth twitched.

Yeah, of course he would be weirded out. But when you looked at things realistically, only the crown could make any moves.

My father had already approved; I'd told him that the prince would be calling on me for certain matters. He already knew about the Demon Lord's revival, being a minister and all. We even strategized together about how to deal with the situation.

"I'm doing what I can on my end, so you should focus on honing yourself, Mazel."

“I guess that’s all I can do.”

Indeed. It was ultimately down to him and his party to defeat the Demon Lord.

With that said, however, I knew all too well that there were problems with pinning all hope on the Hero. It was nice to have a guy who could conveniently solve all the problems. I knew that my own way of thinking was kind of pathetic, in its own way. But still, I couldn’t achieve it through my own strength. If anything, I would drag him down. So I limited myself to only doing what I could do.

“If you head a little south, you’ll find a river. Turn east there and keep going until you see a forest to your left. In the forest, there’s a little wayside shrine where monsters sometimes pop up. Think you can handle them?”

“Sure. I really want to keep pace with Mister Luguentz. I’ll go there when I don’t have class.”

“Okay, take care of yourself.”

The old shrine was a great grinding spot in the early game. The drops were garbage, but the encounter rate was high; the experience was pretty good for that point.

By the way, this world also had seven-day weeks, but the days were named after different concepts: fishing/agriculture, commerce, smithing, hunting, arts, prayer, and nativity. Forestry was lumped into hunting day for some reason. The day of nativity was equivalent to Earth’s Sunday, but this world had its own particular superstitions. For example, concerts were held on the day of arts and weddings were on the day of prayer. But once again, I digress.

While Mazel and Luguentz grinded their levels, I had things to do myself.

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“Hmm...” The prince retreated into his thoughts as he looked over the proposal document. Even the royal family had time off on nativity day, but he’d graciously agreed to a one-on-one meeting in his office. His subordinates were present too, but you could hardly call them participants since they never spoke. Well, it only made sense for me to be the only one talking in this scenario. The

butterflies were back in my stomach.

“I understand the gist,” the prince said, “though I will reserve judgment until I see it for myself. Are you fine with that?”

“Of course. I merely wished to convey the plan to you ahead of time.”

It was important to lay the groundwork. It would be a problem if I just went ahead with things without any advance notice. We weren’t in Japan, but this was a Japanese game, so they’d probably do things the same way, right?

“But can you really obtain such high-quality weapons?”

“They exist as far as I know, although in what numbers I can’t say for certain.”

“Understandable.”

I’d wondered about this from time to time, but in RPGs—especially the ones where you start at the royal capital—why do remote villages sell all the high-level equipment? How did those towns get their hands on it? And who would even be around to buy it?

When I was pondering these things, I asked around and discovered a surprising truth. To put it simply, it was because they were excavated items. Or to put it in even *simpler* terms, it was because of grave robbing.

Well, this *was* a world with ruins and dungeons, so it wasn’t necessarily against the law to sell the things you excavated. But apparently, people would occasionally find mass graves that weren’t part of ruins or dungeons.

Perhaps it had been a custom of the ancient kingdom destroyed by the last Demon Lord, but back in the day, soldiers and knights were all buried together—still in their armor. By digging up those graves, you could get your hands on a considerable array of equipment.

Thousands of people in a unit were interred with weapons and armor, and at least some among the number wore high-end gear. As a result, the areas nearby that were relatively easy to live in had their own cottage industries for excavated items. Crazy, right?

I did wonder if some of the equipment was cursed, but apparently not. For example, if adventurers died in a dungeon, their equipment wouldn’t

necessarily be cursed either. I just had to accept that.

I also wondered how the shops got by through only selling expensive items. As it turned out, they were basically hardware stores, to use a term from my old world. Most of their sales came from things like knives and pots. It seemed weird to think of kitchenware sharing space with excavated armor, but it was normal for this world. And not just those, either. The rare items these stores carried could include mementos buried with the dead, like a flute that summoned monsters. What was up with that? What did the ancient kingdom even make those for? Even then it seemed kind of screwed up to blow on a flute dug out from a grave—good thing it was Mazel in the game who did it, not me. And when I think about how they'd break if you used them too much, was that even because of magic or—well, who knows? Either way, it made you buy more of them. Was that good game design or not? I decided not to think too hard about all that.

“Very well,” said the prince as he handed me back the document. “You may give it a try.”

“Thank you very much.”

It was good that I had his written approval—things would have gotten messy without it.

There was one more thing I asked for regarding the refortification of Fort Werisa. I asked him to provide the construction workers with smoke and signal flares for communicating at night. I proposed it as a contingency plan, but it was a fact that the Demon army would attack the fort. I just wasn't certain about when. I didn't want to seem like a shady fortune teller, so I refrained from precise predictions about the time.

I made a swift exit once the conversation was over. This was more nerve-racking than entering the CEO's office in my old life. Well, no wonder. If His Highness felt like it, he could literally make my head fly.

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After leaving the palace, I headed for the Merchants' Guild. The movement of

goods was in their purview, and since I didn't want to make enemies of them, it was best to go through official channels. One might wonder if nobles even needed the guild, but they were crucial to keeping up appearances. For example, say you're celebrating a fellow aristocrat's wedding. You'd lose face if you presented something plain or boring. You needed the guild to get your hands on rare finds. I supposed it was akin to leaving things to a specialist.

Or maybe it was a little different?

"Thank you for your generous purchase the other day."

Mister Bierstedt was a prominent merchant in the guild. Nobles tended to address merchants as "mister" or "madam" in conversation, but I didn't mind referring to them that way mentally as well. I'd caused quite a bit of hassle when I was buying up the turpentine, but he'd probably made a profit since we didn't bother haggling. Merchants were like that. In this regard, they weren't much different from the corporations in my old world.

"I must thank *you*," I replied, "for obliging my sudden request."

*It was Norbert who actually did the negotiations*, I added mentally as I sat down in front of a man whose proportions were eerily similar to a barrel.

"What brings you here today?" Mister Bierstedt asked.

"There are some things I'd like you to purchase from distant towns. I'd like to assemble a cohort of trustworthy merchants. I'll provide guards for you."

"My, oh my."

He looked at me with searching eyes. Though I was a viscount, I was also just a student. It wasn't hard to understand what he was thinking; I was aware that I came off as a kid too big for his boots.

"Here's a list of towns I'd like you to go to. I've also written down the items that should be up for purchase. Each town has its own selection, which I'd like you to confirm."

"I will look over it."

I handed over parchment made from monster skin. The Earth equivalent would have been made from sheepskin or calfskin, but thanks to the abundance

of monsters in this world and how frequently they were hunted for magic stones, it was cheaper to use their skins. Only a certain subsection of Demonic Beasts could be used for this—it was honestly understandable that they would resent humans for hunting them for their meat or hides. Oh, and their innards were used as fertilizer on farmland.

It's been said since time immemorial, but humans are the scariest monsters of all, huh?

After taking what felt like five whole minutes to peruse the sheet, Mister Bierstedt lifted his head. "This is rather unusual...or perhaps I should say, the scale is quite larger than I imagined."

His reaction made sense. Most items in circulation could be purchased in the capital. This was almost like an expedition—heading out to new places for things that weren't normally sold. Quite the ambitious proposal for a nobleman to bring before you.

"As you may already know, the Demon Stampede the other day was unlike the others."

"Indeed, I am aware."

How much did he know? The merchants' information network was no joke. There were doubtless some loose tongues at the palace, and they'd only get looser with alcohol and women around.

"A Demon caused the disturbance. If they can do that, we must assume they will attempt it a second or third time."

This was about as much as I could say without causing a fuss. Although this man might have already known about the Demon Lord, I wasn't going to volunteer that information. And if he knew it, he wouldn't bring it up himself.

"Also, for some reason, I now have a reputation as a military man."

"Your achievements the other day reached my ears. Though you are young, your judgment was most prudent."

"Thank you."



His flattery was transparent, but modesty was no virtue in this world. It wouldn't do for an aristocrat to diminish himself in front of a merchant. I just let his comments bounce off me.

“And that's the reason why I want to procure equipment. Does my explanation make sense to you?”

The risk of a second Demon Stampede. The sudden obligation to take an active role in military matters. I couldn't put together a team of talented knights out of nowhere, but I could at least have good equipment. However I might say it aloud, I was basically trying to procure endgame equipment ahead of schedule.

“Oh yes, I completely understand. Although please understand that this is not a simple request, so there may be extra costs involved.”

“That is fine by me. For now, I would like you to collect these eight weapons and armor from the list and send them to House Zehrfeld. We will cover the expenses.”

I also wanted to deck out the soldiers at the palace as well, if possible, but that would be the next step. At this point in time, even my own house wasn't properly equipped. These things cost money, after all.

I would present half the acquired items to the prince. For some reason, the higher-ups in this country were unaware of how good the equipment was, so my priority was to show them the light. I had to make sure that the knights and soldiers were in the best possible position before the attack on the palace.

“Would you allow me to prepare more than the requested amount?”

“If you can carry them, then yes. If you purchase the extras with your own funds, then you are welcome to sell them as you please. That goes without saying.”

I didn't care about exclusivity. Besides, it wouldn't be a bad idea for people to be able to buy high-end equipment at the capital. Given the current circumstances, just spreading awareness was important. If it raised our fighting capabilities all around, then it might even turn the tables.

But I doubted they could carry so much armor. Sure, you could carry a whole

bunch of it in a game; I even remembered farming a bunch of drops to sell for high prices. In this case, however, I wondered if the merchants would use magic bags to fit all that bulk. They were pretty expensive, but if anyone would have them, it would be a man like Mister Bierstedt.

“I must say, there are many towns I have never even heard of on this list.”

“I have a map, along with permission from His Highness to travel beyond the border.”

Predictably, the merchant’s eyes started gleaming at the word “map.” The fact that this big-shot guy couldn’t hide his interest in front of a young customer like me really drove home the value of those things.

“And will you be supplying us with said map?”

“One of my people will bring it. I imagine you won’t need directions after the first time.”

“You are quite right.”

He sure backed down meekly. I supposed he was scared that if he rubbed me the wrong way, I would take my business to a different merchant. He didn’t ask why I had a map in the first place. That had been answered earlier when I told him about receiving permission to cross the border. He must have figured that the crown had entrusted it to me as part of a secret mission. I didn’t know how long the assumption would hold when it came to this sly fox of a merchant, though.

“I must also say that I cannot guarantee the quality of the equipment you are expecting until we have been there ourselves.”

“Naturally.”

Those items had been on sale in the game, but I didn’t know whether they still existed in this world. I was anticipating a scenario where they didn’t exist. But I figured we had a shot; although the field monsters at that point in the game were strong, those towns and villages with tiny populations never got attacked because they had the magic items to create barriers. If that was the case, then it shouldn’t be too hard to get what we needed.

The other problem was time. Even if the crown realized the quality of the equipment and started to move, the fields would only get more dangerous as the events in the story unfolded. At that point, some places that were accessible now could get walled off. I wanted to make an impact now, before that happened. *Time is money.*

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From the Merchants' Guild, I headed for the Adventurers' and Mercenaries' Guilds. As the names implied, they were places for adventurers and mercenaries to gather.

The organizations used to be separate—and technically, they still were—but because their work had a lot of overlap, the two facilities were managed within the same large building. The whole thing was a place to exchange information and network. The first floor was a tavern, which was about what you would expect from an establishment like this. I wondered if the reason the guild only existed in the capital was because this was originally a game. It looked like I'd have to investigate what happened to those towns that didn't show up in the game.

When I swung open the doors, my idle musing was interrupted by the weight of several gazes falling upon me. Fortunately, those didn't last longer than a few seconds. I was guessing I'd avoided the customary newcomer heckling because of my achievements at the Demon Stampede. I had been swinging my spear on the front lines the whole time while handing out potions to the troops. I didn't know how far the stories about me had spread, but here, at least, I was kind of a celebrity.

Adventurers and mercenaries were scrupulous about their information. Why wouldn't they be? They didn't want to stick their necks out for an eccentric or foolish employer. Then again, maybe some of them would, as long as they could charge extra on top.

"Welcome to the Adventurers' Guild. What is your business today?"

"I'm looking to hire."

“So you are making a request. Please come this way, then.”

The receptionist was a beautiful lady. I wondered if she was able to handle roughhousing adventurers. Though I guess guys like that could be surprisingly submissive around beautiful women.

She led me into one of the back rooms. It was soundproofed to prevent information from leaking. A male employee heard my request—I wasn’t disappointed by that at all, nope.

“Could you tell me more about what you need?”

“I’m organizing an investigation and I need enough skilled scouts to do the job.”

“Could you be more specific about the number?”

“They’ll be investigating multiple locations. It’s hard to determine an exact number. I’m anticipating around twenty people, but if there are those skilled at working alone, then we could send just one person to each location.”

“I see.”

The man wrote some things down on a board in his hands. Writing over parchment on those record boards made the letters show up faintly on the wood, doubling its effect as a notebook. You could use the wood shavings for kindling fires, so people scolded you if you threw it away. It was eco-friendly in the sense that you didn’t need wastepaper bins.

It also wasn’t unheard of to use styluses and wax boards, but since the quality of wax could be hit or miss, they were less common. This made me realize how privileged I was to be able to use parchment freely as a noble.

“I’ve listed the objectives in order of priority,” I continued. “This should help you sort out the people who want to be hired in groups and those who want to work alone.”

“Thank you. Do they have the option to turn down the mission after hearing about it?”

“Yes, they do. Not all of them will be safe—I’ll provide hazard pay, of course.”

The man nodded as his quill dashed across the board. The feather came from

a bird-type Demonic Beast. I didn't get why, but it was apparently easier to write with one of those than an ordinary bird's feather. Fantasy logic, I supposed.

I could see ink filling the spots he carved into the board. Even the ink came from a monster—in this case, its blood. It served as a cheap flammable oil, which you could handily use to burn and dispose of the boards quickly. It was like a flammable version of squid ink. People found a lot of uses for monster materials.

There were things like blackboards in this world too. Unfortunately, they were hard to use because the chalk was of poor quality, which meant that even the slightest brush against it made it hard to read. The high-quality chalk came from burning the bones of a bull-horse Demonic Beast with the ludicrous name of Black Bull Horse. I decided not to think too hard about it.

“However, this way we cannot display the reward.”

“You can display the minimum amount, with a footnote adding that more will be paid depending on where they're deployed. The guild can take its usual cut from that as well, of course.”

“Thank you very much.”

This should go without saying, but the guild wasn't a volunteer organization. The staff needed to get paid too. The guild also invested its own money into scouting monsters ahead of time, and it cost a fair amount of money to maintain the building, especially when drunken ruffians ended up damaging the property.

Moreover, it was the guild that paid for joint funerals for deceased adventurers who didn't have close relatives. You might ask if it was necessary to do that, and the answer is yes. Dead bodies could spread diseases, which were a problem for the living.

It was for related reasons that children were barred from the guild. Since funerals were their problem, they had no interest in registering anyone who looked like they'd die in their first encounter.

The guild's income came mainly from processing fees and profits from

monster materials that they purchased cheaply. So when it came to tricky requests like mine, I had to pay the guild a big cut. The unwritten rule was for it to be around twenty percent.

Also, the guild did do the stereotypical thing of posting bills on a job board, but in general these listed the bare minimum information. Well, that was obvious. It would have taken up too much space to include all the fine print. There were also cases where they couldn't openly display the information because of the client's whims, or because they needed an undercover bodyguard—things like that.

This was why adventurers always went to the desk to hear about the finer details of a job before they took it. In anticipation of that, the client provided the guild with all the necessary information. It took quite some time to iron everything out; it wasn't uncommon for request briefings to run several hours.

On a related note, the wall postings were codified to make them easier to parse. A double-circle mark in the right-hand corner indicated a monster-slaying quest, while a triangle and circle mark was for bodyguard requests. This way, even adventurers who couldn't read could at least get the gist of the request.

Beyond that, there were a bunch of miscellaneous guild rules. It took a surprising amount of time for a request to get processed, including paying the fees, although perhaps it wouldn't take quite so long if you just wanted to find a lost cat.

When they couldn't explain all the finer points, the guild would tell the adventurers to contact the client directly. That would be the case for this current request of mine.

"Where will these scouting missions take place? Could you give some examples?"

"For now, I can say that it will involve looking into the monster encounter rate outside Guberg, the encounter rate at the Heat Haze Ruins near Dehlmerun, and the security levels at Bieleritz Bridge."

When a bunch of names from foreign countries came up, the guild employee shot an inquisitive glance in my direction. He would be forgiven for wondering whether this was in preparation for a war.

The reason he asked about the locations was because it would have been troublesome for the guild if I had been investigating the actions of domestic nobles. Except for cases where there was clear evidence, the guild took the prudent position of distancing itself from civil strife.

“It’s necessary in order to procure a wider range of goods, you see. We are sending out merchant groups, but there was an unusual Demon Stampede the other day.”

“Oh, I see.”

Naturally, even the guild knew that a Demon had been pulling the strings behind the Stampede. We had to reckon with the idea that it could happen in other regions. If it was just a matter of bandits expanding their activities in an incompetently managed fief, then we could just purchase that information from the guild, but in this case, we had to keep up with the developments in real time or we’d be in trouble.

“That’s why I want the scouts to gather information while they’re staying in the area. When the merchant corps arrives, they can join up and share information, then return with the merchants when they’re done.”

“I understand. And the money?”

“If they join the merchant corps, I will pay a daily wage for their contributions. But they will get penalized if they leak any important information about their original mission.”

“Do they have permission to return to the capital first?”

“They do, as long as they report to the person in charge of the corps. In that case, they will only receive the reward from the initial contract.”

“That is understandable. What about the work expenses?”

“It depends on the location. I don’t think it’ll just be a matter of listening to some rumors in town, but it’s not exhaustive either. The individuals can consult with us on their needs.”

And thus I conveyed the finer details of the request to the guild. It was kind of a chore trying to cover every possible scenario while keeping mum about the

things I couldn't divulge.

The scouts would probably report the latest information to the guild after they returned. I had to accept this as a matter of course. Besides, it was a fact that the Demon Lord's revival would radically change how often monsters appeared and where they spread. It was actually a good thing for the guild to obtain this information. Fewer people would die if they had access to the proper facts.

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The intricacies of discussion had worn me down by the time I left, but there was still work to do, so I shuffled over to the Mercenaries' Guild next door (though I guess "next door" is overstating it since they were just elsewhere in the same building). Was it just my bias, or did this place reek even more of alcohol?

"Welcome to the Mercenaries' Guild. What's your business today?"

"I want to commission some guards for a group of merchants."

"Come inside."

Unlike at the Adventurers' Guild, the person who attended to me was a crusty old guy. I supposed they didn't need the appeal of the fairer sex given the whole premise of this place was selling violence. This old guy was probably a former mercenary who had gotten too old or injured somewhere down the line. I wouldn't go as far as calling it employee welfare, but one of the philosophies of the guild was to help veterans make a career pivot.

The difference between mercenaries and adventurers was a bit difficult to explain. You wouldn't be entirely off base if you boiled it down to "adventurers go into dungeons and mercenaries work in the field."

I supposed that the biggest difference came down to versatility. Adventurers were basically jacks-of-all-trades. They could explore dungeons and do investigations of the type I described earlier. On the flip side, they mostly worked in small numbers. Also, they needed the sort of individual expertise and experience to respond to a wide variety of situations. The cold hard truth was that those who were lacking would die off fast.



Mercenaries generally took on work under the assumption that they would participate in battles. Hardly any mercenaries did scouting, herb collecting, dungeon-crawling, or any of those other odd jobs. They didn't explore ruins either—unless they were hired as bodyguards for the professors leading the exploration, I supposed. Also, there were some adventurers who weren't fond of fighting other humans, and they would sometimes refuse jobs like exterminating bandits. Mercenaries had no such qualms; combat was their specialty, after all.

Other than that, mercenaries were known to take on jobs like maintaining city-wide security and suppressing civil unrest, so there were plenty with long-term contracts. Adventurers tended to spread their work around multiple quick jobs.

For my request, I could have gone with adventurers if I'd just wanted them to escort the merchants from town A to town B. Mercenaries were the better choice if I wanted them to stick with the merchants for a long while, going from towns A to B to C, and D, then stopping by E on the way back to A. It wasn't a hard-and-fast rule, just the trend; if the adventurers got along well with the merchants, then they wouldn't have had a problem accepting a long-term posting either.

Most patrons hired mercenaries as a group. Mercenary bands were typically self-sufficient organizations with clear internal structures and chains of command. Because the teams were already assembled, you didn't have to waste time assigning leadership roles. Meanwhile, there were plenty of adventurers who preferred working solo.

But when it came to mercenary bands, it was important to do your research; each group's abilities differed wildly depending on their commander's capability. There were trustworthy groups, and then there were ones that were indistinguishable from bandits. Those guys only had their brawn to boast of; while they were useful in conflicts between nations, they were widely disliked.

“So, an escort mission.”

“Yes. To be more specific...” I listed the towns that the merchant corps would be visiting. Then we hammered out the details: the range of the merchants’

movements, the daily schedule, taking monster encounter rates into account and the time they would need to conduct business at each stop.

As he listened to me, disbelief gradually colored the man's face. He'd probably written me off at first, on account of my youth, but by now he must have realized I was serious. I didn't hold his prior assumptions against him.

"Okay, how many people will need escorting?"

"There will be about seven or eight carts. That should make around forty people, including the porters. I'm counting the pack horses separately."

"I would suggest you hire more guards than there are merchants, because they need to work in shifts."

"Makes sense. How about 150 people or so in total, or maybe a little lower than that?"

That sounded about right for a group that would be hopping through multiple towns in a dangerous region. This wasn't necessarily a huge operation—at least from the perspective of a count-level aristocrat. Someone like Mazel would probably think differently.

The reason there was so much luggage was because of the distribution of goods. In rural areas, clothes were valued items. Since clothing wasn't mass-produced until the industrial revolution, they were all made to order in this world. Even servants' uniforms, which all used the same design, would be relatively expensive when they were new. Just creating the fabric required time and labor.

Perhaps because of their worth, a subsection of nobles would flaunt their wealth by never wearing the same outfit twice. At that point, I couldn't help but think it was just a waste of money. Who were those nouveau riche and villainess types trying to impress?

The average urbanite, meanwhile, usually bought secondhand clothing from palace servants and so forth. In towns where there were plenty of people with custom-made uniforms, there was a pretty high circulation of used clothing on the market. The commoners would often patch the old clothes up before wearing them, so they still fetched a high price. Work uniforms, though, would

only be sold once they had been cut up into fabric scraps. This prevented people from using them to impersonate legitimate staff. Naturally, this meant you'd have to divide the scraps among multiple buyers. In fact, one could say that selling a formal suit or dress wholesale was less of a hassle.

But I'm getting off topic again. The point was that in towns without a secondhand clothes economy, people would have to make the fabric themselves or go shopping in a town that did sell them. As a result, you could make a pretty penny by bringing beautiful used clothes to a rural town. Mister Bierstedt was eager to do exactly that.

Incidentally, nobody sold just clothing on its own. Instead, they crammed old clothes and cloth into pottery as cushioning material to make the most of limited cart space. Pack horses, meanwhile, would carry things like salt and sugar. That way, if something happened, you could ditch the carts and just escape on the pack horses. You'd at least protect what was on them, and you could sell those wares to a different merchant. As long as you weren't fussy about the prices, you could sell salt in pretty much any town.

Well, since they were bringing guards along for this mission, that worst-case scenario wouldn't happen. Probably. God, I hoped not.

"Do you have anyone in particular in mind for this?"

"I've asked Luguentz Laser and Oliver Goecke to choose some people beforehand."

"Those two, I see. Impressive."

I had no idea what was so impressive about that. I wrote off the comment as flattery and continued. "That's the gist of everything."

"I understand. All that's left is to fill the numbers."

"I'm counting on you."

*Ugh, I've got so much crap to do,* I thought as I left the Mercenaries' Guild behind me.

Just then, I heard a voice call out to me from the side. It sounded cheerful and familiar.

“Hey there, Mister Viscount. I heard you got a job?”

Whoa. Laura was one thing, but this guy was in the capital too?

“My name’s Feli. Wanna tell me about your job?”

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Feli—full name Felix Ernert. He played the scout role in the Hero’s party. According to the game, he was fourteen years old, but his skills were first-rate. There were some dungeons that were so full of traps that having him in your party was basically mandatory.

Though his appearance was on the cuter side, he was definitely a boy. Had the game been made twenty years later, the devs probably would have made him a girl.

Trivia: his design was totally inspired by the flying boy from a certain famous American animated film that I watched as a kid.

Those thoughts ran through my mind as I once more took a seat at one of the Adventurers’ Guild tables—this time with Feli. On the table were some dried fruits, nuts, and juice (though I would’ve been fine with alcohol) that I’d ordered and paid for. I still had things to do, but I figured there was no downside to making a connection.

“I’m impressed that you recognized my face.”

“Viscounts are celebrities, yep,” replied Feli, his feet swaying as he spoke. He was so short that his feet didn’t quite reach the floor when he sat on an adult-sized chair.

“So what were you up to, Mister Viscount?”

“Shopping, basically,” I said, before rehashing the superficial explanations for my venture that I’d given Mister Bierstedt. Putting all talk about the Demon Lord aside, I knew that Feli was bound to look into the whole matter of collecting equipment, so I didn’t see the need to hide it.

“Oho? You’re scooping up equipment from those towns?”

“‘Scooping up’ is not the best way of putting it.”

“Panic buying, then.”

“That’s even more wrong.”

I had no idea how serious he was. Feri was just that kind of person—a jokester, but you couldn’t bring yourself to dislike him. He was good at closing the distance between himself and others.

He was also good at doing it in a more literal sense, although I doubted he’d try picking my pocket in this situation. If he tried it in the Adventurers’ Guild, he’d probably get chased out. But there were occasions where his pickpocketing came in handy. When I thought about it, his ability to swipe key items was pretty novel at the time.

“That sounds like fun. I might wanna come along?”

“Why are you saying that like it’s a question?”

“It sounds fun going to faraway towns, but I don’t know if I wanna go all that distance just for that.”

Well, yeah. Why would he when he didn’t know about the Demon Lord’s revival?

Okay, I had to think. What was the best way to use a valuable pawn like Feli? True, I did need people who could quietly support my intel-gathering work in the capital. Feli seemed like a good fit for that.

On the other hand, I could also make him accompany the merchants to learn the geography and locations. This would make him more useful to Mazel when he joined the party. Though they could only be used once, Skywalk boots could teleport you to a place you’ve already been. If I bought some of those, not only would Feli’s options expand, but we could bring the merchants to the towns where they were sold. It required a few extra steps, but it would ultimately make Mazel’s life easier.

“What do you want to do, Feli?”

The question itself was blunt, although it was kind of mean of me to be that roundabout.

But Feli responded nonchalantly. “Anything, I guess. So long as it’s fun.”

“That’s fairly straightforward, in its own way.”

But at the same time, it was an inscrutable answer. What I gathered was that he was the type to deliberately spring a trap just because he thought it was a laugh. He was the most annoying type of person, in a way. Every time we got an employee like this at my old company, they’d been a pain in the ass.

“So would you take an annoying yet thrilling job?”

“Oho? What kind?”

“Accompanying those aforementioned merchants as a scout.” Then I explained the Demon Stampede and how we needed to investigate the monster encounter rate in other regions in case it happened elsewhere. In truth, it was an inevitability rather than a mere possibility, but the only person who knew that at this stage was me. “Basically, our safe roads aren’t going to be so safe anymore. All sorts of monsters are showing up as well. We need to keep our guard up.”

“That job does sound like a pain. It’ll probably take ages.”

“On the other hand, you can buy exclusive things from new towns and eat rare foods.”

Yep, I could see his expression change slightly. As I had suspected of a boy his age, it was easier to appeal to his appetite for food than his appetite for sex. Speaking of sex appeal, I knew that the capital had a red-light district, but I wasn’t sure if they existed in rural towns as well. I’d never given this topic much thought.

“If you want, I can give you a separate stipend for food shopping on top of your daily wage.”

“That does sound like a delicious proposal.”

“I’d do anything if it helps those merchants get back safely. The money is a drop in the bucket, as far as I’m concerned.”

This was the complete, unvarnished truth. I’d be screwed if they didn’t return. Putting Feli on the case would increase their safety. These endless preparations at the capital may have seemed trifling, but the ripples would build into a wave.

What I invested in Feli now would pay off exponentially in Mazel's future.

However, his expression was telling me that he wasn't yet at the point of volunteering to go. I needed to dig into his character to give him that final push.

"There will be a gathering at the Zehrfeld manor in a few days where we can talk in detail. You're welcome to attend."

"Maybe if I feel like it."

"This should pay for the transport."

I dropped a bag of gold and silver coins on the table. The clinking alone would tell anyone what was inside.

Feli gaped. "Whoa there, I know you're a viscount at all, but isn't this overkill?"

"I'm not that much of a spendthrift. I'm just a noble in name alone."

This was only half true. Almost all the money belonged to my father, the count. For now, I was a leech on my parents, but this would serve as a preliminary investment.

"But now that I've given it to you, it's yours to do what you want with it. I won't care if you give it away."

Feli's eyes flickered in surprise.

If I recalled correctly, he was raised in an orphanage. It wasn't explicitly shown in the game, and the building didn't exist on the game map, but that was his motivation for joining the Hero's party. There was no way he would forsake them. Of course, if he realized I knew of his upbringing, he might put his guard up. But that was a risk worth taking.

"We're having the meeting on hunting day. Until next time."

I left him no more room for questions. The ball was in his court now. My funds had run out by then, so that would be the end of my activities for the day.

Normally, nativity day was supposed to be for rest, yet I spent the whole time working. With a sigh, I decided to spend some time practicing with my spear before going to bed.

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My schedule had been jam-packed since noon: I presented myself at the palace, had meetings with the prince and my father, filed a commission at the Adventurers' Guild, and trained with my spear. I was supposed to be a student, but suddenly I felt like I was living in a manga. There were so many things I wanted to point at and go, "Why is this a thing?"

In a game, you could pick an expedition leader and they would depart the next day, but in real life it wasn't so simple. For starters, you needed to make sure that everyone would have accommodations at each town, that they had enough food and consumables, and that they had the right gifts for the courtesy calls they'd need to make to the nobles of each town they passed through. Even a week was not enough time to get everything in order. I was only able to do it because of those special dispensations nobles got that let them rope others into their plans. Any onlooker would wonder why we were in such a rush.

The busy days ticked by, and hunting day soon came around.

"Okay, I know this is a pain, but let's do a round of introductions. I'm Werner Von Zehrfeld."

"My name's Mazel Harting. I'm a student."

"I'm Luguentz Laser. Adventurer."

"Oliver Goecke. I'm a mercenary."

"I am Avant from the Bierstedt merchant house. I will be in charge of the merchant corps."

"I'm Felix. Call me Feli."

It was a peculiar combination of three main characters and three anonymous schmucks. Almost everyone regarded Feli with strained expressions, though, as if he was the odd one out.

The oldest person here was Avant, but even he was only in his thirties. There were two students and Feli, who was in his early teens. At least everybody seemed satisfied with our maids' tea-making skills. Feli kept piling the sugar into his tea without a hint of reservation. Sugar was expensive, damn it.



“I’d love to say thanks for coming, but we’re all busy folks here, so I’ll skip the formalities. No need to stand on ceremony. Just speak frankly.”

I took an axe to societal conventions. But I kind of had to do that because the only person here who seemed used to diplomatic language was Avant. Feli would probably get fed up and leave before long. I had to keep the ball rolling.

“First, Mazel and Luguentz. Could you sum up how things went at the old shrine last week?”

“Sure.”

While I’d been setting things up for the merchant corps, Mazel and Luguentz had taken my advice and tested their strength at the old shrine. They hadn’t encountered any problems in that department, but apparently Luguentz had noticed something strange about the area and done his own digging.

“I’ll keep it brief. There was something weird about the roads. I’ve been through there a bunch of times, but there were monsters around that I’d never seen before.”

“I wondered at first if they were remnants from the Demon Stampede, but it didn’t seem so,” said Mazel.

“I have heard similar things from my fellow merchants. Unusual monsters have been spotted even within the vicinity of the capital,” Avant added. Information sure traveled fast among merchants.

Feli and Goecke wordlessly sipped their tea, but their expressions were grave.

“Looks like the situation is more troublesome than we anticipated. Lord Avant, Goecke, and Feli—the merchant corps could be quite at risk.”

That was only half-true—I *had* anticipated this. My choice of phrasing was deliberate.

Goecke set his teacup down and said, simply, “As far as the job goes, there shouldn’t be a problem. We just have to shore up the security.”

I was rather surprised when I heard that Goecke had taken on the role of leading the merchants’ bodyguards. It seemed that I made a good impression on him during the Stampede. There were upsides and downsides to working

with nobility, but he decided to take on this delicate job anyway.

I hadn't expected it, but I was grateful. The fact that he was able to hold the troops together in that chaotic battle was testament to his skill as a leader. But he also happened to be rather handsome. I again wondered why I was surrounded by so many good-looking people.

"I don't care either way. More security and we might get attacked—that's it, right?" Feli said breezily. The others stared at him incredulously. Which was understandable—he was basically a nobody at this point. He seemed impervious to the stares.

"It's not my place to say this," I said, "but it could be tough for you."

"I'm doing it." Feli's reply was instant. That was all he said as he started munching on a snack.

I didn't know where his motivation had come from, but it was honestly fine by me. Goecke and Luguentz said nothing, perhaps out of respect for his resolve.

It was Mazel who spoke in a whisper. "Werner, will he be okay?"

"Yeah. He's got the skills."

"If you say so. I trust your judgment."

Why did Mazel accept that so easily? Well, it wasn't *my* problem if he got hoodwinked by a shady cult. Or maybe he instinctively guessed that Feli would join his party later.

Anyway, there was something I had to ask Feli. "By the way, you seem pretty motivated. Mind you, I'm grateful for it."

Feli lowered the snack from his mouth and looked at me. His eyes were dead serious. I instinctively straightened up.

"Well, you see, when I talked to you that day..."

"Yes, I remember." This was a bit out of the blue, but okay.

"There was a sick kid at the orphanage. We didn't have the money for a doctor or medicine, so I was looking for a job."

Oh, that explained it. This was why he was so lackadaisical at the start of the

conversation, but then changed his tune as soon as I handed him money. That day, Feli had been desperate for instant cash rather than a job that took a long time to complete.

“There were gold coins in that bag, so we were able to pay for all the medical stuff. You helped me.”



He met my gaze squarely. Even though he was only fourteen at this point, the strength of his resolve sent shivers down my spine. So this was the power held in the gaze of a Hero's companion...

"I owe you one, Mister Viscount. So I'll do it. That's all."

"Okay. But quit calling me Mister Viscount. Also, I didn't give you that money so you'd feel indebted to me."

"Mm."

Was that last bit even an answer? But anyway, I now understood his feelings. I didn't think that my investment would pay dividends in this form, but since things ended up working out, I was content to leave it there. Partway through Feli's explanation, Mazel started nodding lightly; I supposed he empathized. As Feli went back to chewing on his snack, I turned my gaze to Avant.

"I am also willing to go," he said with a firm nod, as if summoning his resolve.

He was the least battle-inclined person among us, so I asked, just to make sure, "You sure you'll be fine?"

"Yes. If things do get dangerous, I have plenty of things to sell."

This was a merchant's grit, powerful in its own way. The people of this world had a lot of backbone, risking their lives for the sake of commerce. I was truly impressed, although it was time to move on to the next topic.

"Let's talk about the situation here," I said, unfurling a map. It didn't show the entire continent, just the area around the mission locations. I'd marked the names of the towns and important landmarks like bridges, plus the names of several people.

"Dispatch the scouts to this town and the village around this bridge. Have them confirm the lay of the land. If things look dangerous, change your route accordingly."

"Who gets the final say over the route?"

"A Zehrfeld steward will accompany you, but I think that someone on the ground will have a better sense of the danger. I'll leave the final say to you, Goecke. I'll put that in writing too."

If anything, a steward might be too eager to face danger for the sake of the house, although I kept that to myself. People who were zealous about their loyalty were tricky to handle in their own way. Was it Takeda Shingen who said that scouting was best left to cowards? Well, honestly, anyone could do it. For now, I was going to select “Fight Wisely” on the tactics menu.

“You have helped us considerably with all of these arrangements.” Avant nodded, seemingly impressed. His eyes were all but pleading *Gimme the map!* I wished he’d give it a rest.

Anyway, it was about time to bring things to a close.

“You’re as un-student-like as ever, Werner,” Mazel commented.

“No kidding.” Even Luguentz was nodding. What were they talking about? It was important to manage the labor force. If you were facing a sizeable task, it was just common sense to have people in their roles ahead of schedule.

“Also, did you know that they’ve started refortifying Fort Werisa?” I asked.

“Yes,” responded Goecke. He was the representative, but I was pretty sure that everyone here knew about it. Ostensibly, this was in anticipation of a second Demon Stampede. Only Mazel and I knew differently.

“If you ask me, it’s a bad move.”

“How so?”

“It’s an evacuation spot from the capital, but its defenses are sloppy. Its only advantage is its proximity. If I were a Demon, I would wait until our side built up its fortifications a bit, then seize it to use as a bridgehead.”

I was just spoiling the plot. But when the fort fell, the only people besides me who would be nearby were Mazel and Luguentz. I had my reasons for going out of my way to mention it.

“I can’t say it’s impossible,” Goecke said.

“Sounds like a right pain in the ass,” Luguentz agreed.

The two looked at each other and groaned. Mercenaries and adventurers had a certain intuition for spotting danger. I supposed that Goecke was particularly attuned to the fort’s strategic worth because he was a former noble.

Feli swallowed his snack and opened his mouth. "So what ya gonna do, Big Bro?"

*Who are you calling Big Bro?* I wanted to retort, but I decided to just answer his question. "I can put in a word of caution, but other than that, my hands are tied. What I want to tell you is the plan of action after it comes to pass."

I took a breath.

"First of all, when you hear news about the fall of the fort, don't cancel our ongoing plans. There is no need for the merchant corps to hurry back home."

"Why?" asked Goecke.

"Because the equipment will help us take back the fortress," I stated crisply. "It's for our own good."

That wasn't the only reason, but this logic was easier to accept.

Contrary to my expectations, however, Mazel didn't look fully convinced. "I'm not so sure," he commented.

"If it turns out that retaking Fort Werisa is easy, then I'm happy to be wrong," I said. "But the Demons aren't stupid. Do you think they'd be content to sit on their laurels after conquering the fort?"

Understanding dawned on Mazel's face. "They might attack the capital next."

"It's a matter of when, not if. Rather than wait for us to try and retake it, they'd have an easier time using the fort as a springboard for their own attack."

This was contrary to how I actually thought. Mazel *had* to be the one to retake the fortress or we'd be in trouble. This event was supposed to entrench his reputation as the Hero. I needed him to have the best equipment to ensure his success.

In the game, the Demons didn't attack the capital at this point, and I didn't think that they would do it in reality either. Hopefully. To try and make sense of it: since the knight brigade hadn't suffered grievous losses to the Demon Stampede, I couldn't anticipate how the crown would act. It was looking like they'd rely on the knights, holding Mazel in reserve until he was indisputably the strongest. That approach would hurt more than it would help.

“So it’s fine to come back a little later, as long as you’re in time for the counterattack. Make sure you’ve procured the best possible equipment by the time you return.”

“Understood.” Avant nodded, as did Goecke. This made my life easier.

“Mazel, Luguentz, you need to train in preparation. I want you guys to participate in the counterattack.”

“Got it. I’ll let loose when it’s my time to shine.”

“I get the picture, but what about the people at the fort?” asked Mazel. That was him, all right, ever the kind and caring protagonist.

“There will probably be some amount of casualties, but I have offered His Highness suggestions to limit the damage just in case. We can only pray that he’ll act on them.”

This time, I was telling the whole truth. I wanted to limit casualties as much as possible, but I was aware that there were limits to my authority. I could make some preparations to reduce the deaths, but I would undoubtedly make some enemies along the way.

I knew what was going to happen, and yet I chose to stay silent about it. People would probably resent me for that. But I didn’t know if anyone would believe me even if I did speak up. And if people did, that would be scary in its own way. It would suck if rival nobles suspected me of being in league with the Demons because of what I knew and tried to drag me down for it. Aristocratic society was frightening; people didn’t accept things simply based on truth or fact. The game was mercifully much simpler in their absence.

“Anyway, we’re only human, so we can’t do everything. Let’s just do what we can.”

And with that, I called the meeting to an end. There was no point pining over what we couldn’t have. We just had to do everything we could to avoid a game over.

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Two hectic weeks passed, during which I saw off the merchant corps and had



meetings with the prince. I ramped up my personal training and participated in group exercises with the Zehrfeld knights and squires.

During that time, some big news came in: a town called Subritz in the neighboring country had fallen to the Demon army. This tangible development was what allowed the kingdom to finally reveal the return of the Demon Lord to the public. I remembered that in the game, when you reached Subritz, it was an archetypical ghost town filled with hidden treasures. I thought it was pretty dumb of the Demon army to just destroy the place without ransacking the houses.

I decided to shrug off the plot contrivances; it was Mazel who would benefit from them rather than me, anyway. Besides, I had my hands full thinking about how to handle the developments after the news went public. I needed to come up with a plan to help rescue the workers at Fort Werisa.

“So basically, my biggest problem is Marquess Kneipp.”

Oliver Heinrich Kneipp. He was a prominent and big-hearted marquess who, at the very least, didn’t look down on the weak. With the Demon Lord’s revival now public, he had been newly appointed as Fort Werisa’s overseer. He was tasked with bolstering its defenses and given command of all its knights, soldiers and laborers. He was serious enough about the job to conduct it onsite rather than issue orders from the capital.

He was also, to be blunt, a muscle-brain with no aptitude for politics. And unfortunately, as he was a military lord and my father was a civil minister, their factions put them at odds with each other. From his perspective, I was the son of a rival lord—and a greenhorn at that. He would not listen to a word I said. There was a limit to how much I could force the issue; all I could do was give advice surreptitiously through the prince. And if I did that too often, it would make me look suspicious.

I tried to stay philosophical about all of this. If anything, it would be a bigger problem if Fort Werisa *didn’t* fall. I had nothing against Marquess Kneipp personally, but I was content to let him fail. I just wanted to do something within my power for the laborers, guards, and knights who were diligently at work on the refortification.

As I made certain of the facts of the situation, I racked my brains. For better or worse, Marquess Kneipp was no slacker, so there was a reliable stream of status reports. The project was apparently about ninety percent complete. The game didn't really give the impression that Fort Werisa was under construction, so I suspected that the attack would take place around the time it was complete. As an aside, the fort didn't have a toilet in the game map. That was the only part of it which felt distinctly medieval. Yeesh.

All kinds of thoughts ran through my head as I counted the days until the work was complete. When I was nigh certain that they would wrap things up before the next week, I approached His Highness with a request.

"A drill?" he asked, skeptically.

"Yes, I would like to rehearse a group battle situation," I answered with a smile.

Today, as always, his royal guards stood silently on the sidelines. It was a rather intimidating sight. But that was simply how things were in this world, so it would be weird for me to pay them much mind. Even if I hadn't received an early promotion to deputy-count-slash-viscount, it was conceivable that I would have ended up in a situation like this at some point. I would stand by silently as my father, the Minister of Ceremonies, spoke with royalty; by attending to the conversations between such lofty personages, I would build up my knowledge and experience. That was all irrelevant to the current conversation, though.

"But of course," I said, "that is not the only reason."

"You refer to Fort Werisa? The marquess has already been cautioned of a potential attack."

"I am grateful for that. May I ask how seriously he is approaching this matter?"

"I would say he half-believes it."

That figured. I breathed a sigh, taking care not to seem rude. With effort, I managed to conceal the fact that I was about to roll my eyes.

"And what are you proposing?" the prince pressed.

We'd talked often enough that we could delve right into things. But man, I didn't know whether it was because he was a prince or what, but he was brilliant at anticipating the next step in a conversation. His mind worked ridiculously fast—though perhaps that was only to be expected of a man of his age and standing.

I wondered if foolhardy royals only existed in stories... No, wait, there were plenty of examples in reality: the kings of the House of Angelos, Wang Mang of the Xin dynasty, and Huizong of the Song dynasty (though they were emperors rather than kings). Not that any of this mattered.

"If I may speak candidly, should the Demon army attack while the fortification is still in progress, the entire force there would crumble."

His Highness nodded. "Even if the knights and soldiers could hold their own, the common laborers would certainly succumb." It was human nature to fall into a panic. Since the laborers outnumbered the soldiers, their reactions would naturally hamper the soldiers too, which would only increase the casualties.

"The best plan is to deter an attack on the fort by having soldiers nearby. The next best option is to evacuate the people inside when the chaos starts."

"Not coming to the rescue?"

"I am not confident that we would be able to suppress the panic an attack would bring."

"You have a point. I agree."

My honest thought was *there's no freaking way*. People in a panic were in no state to take in information. They wouldn't even hear someone telling them to stop, stand their ground, or fight. It was wiser to guide them all to a safe spot. Not that this mattered, but it was funny how the brain is conscious of information necessary for escaping at times like that. Maybe that was a sort of ESP?

Anyway, whether the information was correct was another matter entirely. You could blindly follow someone saying, "This way" and run straight into a dead end.

My thoughts were veering off track.

“Also, even if they were to escape from Fort Werisa, there is a risk that they could lose their lives if they are attacked on the way back to the capital,” I pointed out.

“Because they are not soldiers, indeed.”

In games, civilians always seemed to successfully evacuate unscathed. Such a mystery.

“Of course, there is also a possibility that the troops outside the fort could get attacked.”

“How would they make contact with Fort Werisa in that case?”

“If they have been specifically drilled for it, they should be able to work alone to some extent. It would be ideal, though, if the troops at the fort could come to their aid.”

“I see. A fighting force without laborers would not so easily break down.”

“That is my hope.”

If I had one fear, it was that the Demon army would attack both fronts, though I doubted they would. They would probably prioritize the fort so that they could build pressure against the human countries, though I did suppose it was possible for them to come after us once they’d finished off the troops at the fort. I wanted to help as many people as possible before that happened, then escape myself.

“It would be nice if Fort Werisa didn’t get attacked at all,” I remarked, “but if it *were* to happen, then it would be at most risk right before the work is complete.”

“I see. Your logic makes sense. Hence the ‘drill’ you suggest. Do you believe it possible for an attack to happen after the refortification is complete?”

“It is possible, but I think the people at the fort would be in a better position to defend themselves in that case.”

I was a little concerned that background characters wouldn’t be able to hack it, though. I mean, those soldiers and knights got crushed in the game. But I also thought that they stood a better chance if the noncombatants were out of the

picture. And besides, I really did want to reduce the casualties among them as much as I could.

“I see. But from the Demon army’s perspective, they could seize the fort after it is fortified in order to apply even more pressure.”

“In that case, though it would be a waste of reinforcements, we should count ourselves fortunate if none of the laborers fall victim. It is best to prepare for the worst-case scenario.”

“Indeed. The people would not be happy if the fort fell.”

Yeah, the people’s fury would be terrible indeed, let alone the hellfire that would come from the politicians. On the other hand, even now, it was undeniable that people still underestimated the Demon army. That was certainly the case for the palace nobles, the prince and Laura aside.

Drastic measures would be needed to awaken them to the gravity of the threat, but I was resolved to take them. The thought of the sacrifices to be made nauseated me, but complacency frightened me even more. Even more people would die that way.

“Still, I think it would be a better option than letting the laborers and knights all perish,” said the prince.

“It would be best if the Demon army waited for us to finish up, but the next best course is to prepare contingencies, hmm?”

This was why I wanted to deploy troops in the area under the pretext of a drill. My biggest priority was helping the evacuees. I wrote off the fort as a lost cause, even. The prince probably got the implication that reinforcements wouldn’t help in the event of an attack.

“There is one other thing I would like to discuss with you,” I said.

“Say it.”

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Standing in a field halfway between the capital and Fort Werisa, it struck me that I’d finally found a legitimate excuse for skipping classes. Wait, that wasn’t the point here.

In the game, this was a nameless field, but in this world, it was called Hildea Plains. The surroundings were also different from the game, although that might have just been because the game lacked detail.

We had three hundred regular troops in total—albeit a slapdash mix of knights and soldiers. We were standing here in the field for a week's worth of group drills.

Three hundred wasn't a huge number for an army, but it still necessitated a lot of supplies. Assuming each person ate one piece of bread for a meal, that meant three pieces per day, per person, which equaled nine hundred pieces for three hundred people. In a week, that would total 6,300 pieces of bread, and that was assuming bread was the only thing they ate. If you added cheese, a slice of meat, or some wine to the package, then you'd have an exhaustive amount of luggage just for meals.

Then you needed to consider the supply squad as well as the horses.

Suddenly, the baggage swelled exponentially. Generally speaking, supply squads were useless in a fight, so they needed guards. At that point, even just the amount of food became difficult to calculate.

Also, since you needed weapons, armor, rain gear, and things to ward off the cold, armies essentially became a money sink. This probably didn't matter at all to people who didn't care about where they got people and money. In my old world, there were those who said you could just keep printing money. (This world used gold coins as currency, but whatever, my point stands.)

But I digress. The purpose of the drill was to rehearse a battle to protect Fort Werisa, but at the same time I wanted to practice group tactics and anti-area-of-effect magic tactics. If it did get used on the day, then maybe it was more appropriate to call it the resist-area-of-effect magic strategy? That sounded unwieldy, so I was just going to call it the anti-magic strategy.

If you only looked at the knights and soldiers, you would place this world somewhere between the Middle Ages and the early modern period. But area-of-effect magic was closer to modern weapons of war like hand grenades, napalm bombs, and flamethrowers. While the trash mobs near the capital (aka the start of the game) wouldn't use AOE spells, those in dungeons or

accompanying the Four Fiends most likely would. That meant if I wanted to prevent the destruction of the palace, as well as the massive loss of lives that would entail, I had to develop an anti-magic strategy.

I hadn't thought too deeply about how exactly people would escape from the capital thus far, but I could no longer afford to avert my eyes from the problem. I needed to think about it seriously.

The challenge was daunting. On an open field, you might adapt trench warfare to counter enemy magic—though getting the knights to build trenches would be a challenge.

But siege battles were different. You couldn't dig trenches in palace floors, and though anti-magic spells did exist, they wouldn't be viable against a mass magical assault. There were more monsters that could use magic than humans who could counter it.

I'd researched magic systems at the academy hoping to find a loophole. I'd even talked to court mages and some of the country's most influential people. Throughout the past week, I'd done enough research to make my brain cells go on strike. If the chancellor could implement the countermeasures, then the Wein Kingdom's powers would rise another notch, but I wasn't holding my breath.

"Now then, let us begin the exercise," the mage Vogt called out to us.

"Yes, go ahead."

Vogt was a young and skilled court mage. Though he was considered young, he was still ten years older than me. I was practically still in my diapers, huh?

The person who answered him, meanwhile, was the commander, Count Kress Georg Schanderl. At forty or so, the count cut yet another dashing figure on the field. I wasn't salty, I swear.

This time, I was just here as a centurion. But the Zehrfeld troops were considered experts in group tactics—though I very much wanted to deny that—so we were the nucleus of the troops.

Although I was designated a centurion, I was in charge of sixty people. As for the other 240 people, 220 had been picked by Schanderl and other nobles, ten

others were young court mages of varying levels of skill, and the last ten were scribes and administrators titled “battlefield secretaries.” The term made sense, but it was also difficult to wrap one’s head around.

“Viscount Zehrfeld, is that a good distance for the target?”

“Everyone’s spells have to be able to reach it.”

“Is that so?”

Why was Lady Hermine here? Not just her—ten knights from the Fürst family had also come along for the ride, leading to this awkward atmosphere. Apparently, Lord Bastian had requested this of Count Schanderl. No clue why.

As I privately wondered what the Fürsts were thinking, the ten mages fired off attack spells in unison. A series of blasts, brilliant and thunderous, consumed the target, inflicting remarkable damage. The effects of any given spell differed in scale based on the caster’s ability, leading to unavoidable inconsistencies in the damage. I wondered if the randomness was due to this being a game system.

Next to me, Count Schanderl and his aide, Viscount Gröllmann, nodded as they surveyed the remnants of the target.

“An impressive amount of damage.”

“’Tis the fruit of diligent study.”

*Well, I guess.* I nodded too, though inwardly I was underwhelmed. I mean, the destructive power was there; it was definitely more than what a neophyte like me could scrounge up. But thinking about the Hero’s party and the Demons we were about to fight, I couldn’t help but feel it was kind of lacking. Of course, I was the only one who knew this.

Also, this was constrained by the limits of what I knew; I couldn’t tell if their powers were off by an order of magnitude. I didn’t remember how strong the enemies in the game were, and without an appraisal skill, I couldn’t tell how strong the mages were. Damn, it would’ve been nice to have a cheat skill.

As I wallowed in negative thoughts, the secretaries appeared to finish setting up a new target. Count Schanderl’s voice rang out once more.



“Begin the second exercise!”

“Mage squad, prepare your stance!”

I spoke up as well. “All units get into position. Assemble the magic items.”

This experiment wasn’t anything too extravagant. Even a miscalculation wouldn’t be a big deal. We could try it again later, on a larger scale.

“Everyone is in position.”

“Activate the magic items.”

“They’re working.”

The mages and the people surrounding the target activated their magic items in unison. There were plenty of rather uninspiring items, which was only to be expected given that we exclusively assembled a bunch of crap. But I have to say it was pretty funny to see the knights clutching things like magic-powered lamps and hot irons, or stones that produced heat like a stove. Next to me, Lady Hermine regarded the proceedings with similar bemusement.

“Cast.”

When the count gave the order, the mages fired off the same spells and plumes of magic once more exploded around the target. However, the sounds of the blast seemed somewhat muted this time.

When the smoke finally cleared, the target was battered all over yet still intact in its original shape.

“Whoa...”

“It was a success.”

“I can’t believe it...”

Voices of surprise, marvel, and disbelief rang out. One of the knights stared in bewilderment at the iron in his hands. Hey, it was dangerous to touch that without turning off the switch.

We still needed to repeat the experiment many times over, but it looked like the hypothesis was correct.

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*What is magic?* When I first asked myself that question, what befuddled me was the existence of magic recovery potions. Their very existence was an anomaly.

If a mage's MP ran out, they wouldn't need to take a particularly large or bulky recovery potion to regain enough magic to wipe out a whole group of foes. This was useful within a video game context.

Yet though it was convenient, magic flew in the face of the law of conservation of energy. If potions had that much magic power, then they would cause way more damage if you just chunked them at the enemy. I wondered if potions were like gasoline in the sense that it was like a fuel that needed to be extracted in some form before it could be put to use.

When I started thinking along those lines, I realized I'd stumbled upon something close to the truth. I figured that there were two types of magic.

To use an analogy, it was like the relationship between smartphones and the internet. Without a battery, a smartphone wouldn't be able to access the internet's vast array of information—it would just be a box. Or a slab, I guess?

On the flip side, without a smartphone, the net was just an assembly of signals. Signals by themselves couldn't be used for anything.

This meant that, assuming a magic recovery potion was like a smartphone battery, then magic, which corresponded to internet signals, couldn't be used without a battery.

For the sake of the argument, let's call the two types "human magic" and "nature magic." Nature magic couldn't be evoked unless you channeled human magic through it. A potion had the effect of restoring magic within the human body—an external battery, if you will.

Much like how a smartphone converts internet signals into information, the magic within the human body transformed nature magic into elements like fire and blizzards.

Classes and skills were like operating systems and apps in how they upped efficiency in a specific direction. By possessing the Spearmanship skill, I could sharply reduce my fatigue when wielding a spear. In terms of the OS and app

analogy, I wouldn't know which one was more like a class and which was more like a skill. I would have to do more experimenting, but I decided to leave that be for now.

Anyway, if you used a bunch of smartphones simultaneously in a small area, the signals would get muddled, and the internet would get slower. I wondered if the same thing would happen for magic. Would the download speed of magic get slower? Or would it cause the network to crash and become unusable? That was the point of this experiment.

We assembled whatever magic items we could get our hands on so that we could consume nature magic—though perhaps I should say “waste” rather than “consume.” With all the magic in a limited space being activated at once, the result was a noticeably lower output. It was not unlike a website that *could* load, but only without the pictures.

In other words, there was a limit to the amount of nature magic that could be used within a specific area, though we needed more research to determine whether the results were replicable in different terrains and areas with a high concentration of magic.

This tactic had a flaw, of course—it would reduce the magic output on our end as well. By wasting magic in a specific range, it may become impossible to activate altogether.

But I could certainly see some upsides to it. It should go without saying that an offensive magic spell has more oomph than a magic iron, but the offensive spell's effect was also reduced by a larger margin. The order in which a spell was activated appeared to have a striking influence.

And most importantly, even people without magical energy could use magic items. By using a high density of magic items, or items that guzzled a lot of magic, we could block the *enemy's* magic. We had to examine whether this affected skills as well, but we didn't need an open field to experiment on that.

Also, going by what I knew, I suspected that the amount of nature magic within a given area was not that high. If that weren't the case, then the Hero's party should have been susceptible to saturation attacks as well. Perhaps they were able to activate their abilities at full throttle because they were so few in

number.

I also checked out records of the Demon Stampedes, but very few of those rampaging monsters used magic. Single-target attacks were one thing, but none of them used AOE spells at all. Given how large those hordes were, perhaps it was difficult for them to even use AOE spells. I wondered if it was like the game, where casting spells in quick succession would make it impossible to activate magic for a while.

When that thought occurred to me, I realized that wasting nature magic could be my breakthrough strategy for defending the palace.

I knew there was a barrier, but if that were enough of a solution, then the game's tragedy wouldn't have happened in the first place. Besides, barriers never seemed to be reliable in cutscenes. The attacking monsters, including the Four Fiends, all used magic. (On that note, the three Demon army commanders were physical attackers.) If the magic-type enemies were involved in the attack, then our little trick could prove surprisingly effective.

Of course, there were no items that could use up all the nature magic across the entire palace. But still, we were up against enemies whom ordinary people simply stood no chance. Since I couldn't survive a frontal attack, this strategy was my beacon in the darkness. I needed to flesh out this tactic some more.

"What a splendid idea, Viscount Zehrfeld."

"I am truly amazed."

Here came Count Schanderl and the mage Vogt with their respective praise. I decided to respond sincerely. "Thank you very much. It worked out better than I anticipated, for which I am deeply relieved."

"Oho, this is quite the new finding," Vogt said. "If we were to fight mages from an enemy nation, then throwing magic items at them would lower their attacking power."

It was worrisome that Vogt's first thought was to employ it against other nations, rather than the Demons, but that was politics for you. I was pretty sure that the other nations would quickly follow suit, though. It was a historical fact that when Country A successfully developed a weapon, then Country B would

ape it.

No duh, right? Country B already knew the end goal, so they would have an easier time of it—although it was perhaps a different story if they were trying to copy a genius inventor like Archimedes. It was unfortunate that we didn't know the names of the craftsmen who developed the weapons from Archimedes's blueprints. I wondered if they understood the principles behind what they were making. That side of things was way more interesting to me.

"We need to develop magic items that consume a lot of magic," remarked the count.

"Yes, I will research this without delay," replied Vogt.

I was curious about how they planned to use this tactic, but I didn't feel inclined to speak up. If anything, I just wanted them to get on with the research. It was way easier for me to just think about the implementation. I had no talent for developing something from scratch.

"But still," I said. "I'm curious. Why has the topic of reducing magic power in a group battle never come up before?"

"It was never scrutinized to begin with, I believe."

Vogt's answer made sense. Without a hypothesis, there wouldn't be an experiment. In a real battle, it was impossible to distinguish between the effects of armor and defensive magic when it came to reducing magic damage. You couldn't cheerfully inspect such things in a life-or-death situation, anyway. I realized for myself back in the Demon Stampede how it felt to have both my hands tied.

People did pour research into defensive magic, but the idea hadn't occurred to anyone to interfere with the casting itself, or to reduce damage via tools instead of armor. I was mulling this over when Lady Hermine spoke up.

"How did you conceive of this idea, my lord?" She sounded puzzled.

"Ohh... After the Demon Stampede, I started wondering what would happen if different types of enemies showed up. So yeah."

Guh. Now that I'd been named a viscount, it was Lady Hermine who had to

Speak to me deferentially, since she was just a mere knight and the daughter of a count. She was still older than me, but I had to remind myself not to speak to her the way I always had. Talking to her had become rather awkward.

I avoided further conversation by turning to Count Schanderl. "Now that the experiments have concluded, I would like to commence the drill."

"Ah, right."

He talked like it had slipped his mind, but damn it, this was important too.

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We stashed away the magic irons for the moment and returned to more orthodox drills.

Group tactics were next, but honestly, I had no clue how those were done in the modern era. In my previous life, I was just a random office worker, not a member of the Japan Self-Defense Forces. It probably wasn't like So-and-so's Bootcamp either. I didn't have any experience playing survival games; being a sedentary sort, I never had any interest in outdoor games to begin with... Oh crap, was I really a shut-in?

I put a lid on those disruptive thoughts, tied a weight to them, and dropped them into the Mariana Trench. Time to focus on guiding the troops. But first, I had to sort everyone into five-man teams again.

I was reminded yet again that this was a world where individual valor meant all. Well, maybe knights were just inherently like that. I had to admit that a weak knight didn't exactly cut a dashing figure. But it was pointless to challenge a monster to a one-on-one duel. Far from following the tenets of knighthood, the other party only saw humans as snacks. If a knight took on a monster in a show of bravado and lost, then their loved ones would only wind up in the monster's stomach.

"So you move as a group and defeat the enemies as a group."

"Indeed. Unlike battles against humans, there's no point in hostages."

This was probably one of the reasons why people put group battles on the backburner in favor of duels. One of the main sources of income for a knight

was ransom money. Yes, you read that right. In wars between nations, you could take an enemy knight or noble hostage and demand a ransom. This was a particularly big deal for knights who didn't own their own land. They were basically no different from bandits, just minus the killing. Oof.

Anyway, the point was that knights and nobles prioritized capturing their enemies instead of killing them. They generally avoided ganging up on their foes because there was a risk of inadvertently killing them.

There were plenty of cases where captured knights lost everything they had and fell into debt. This and gambling were the two most common reasons knights lost their titles. Moreso even, than dying on the battlefield.

You wouldn't necessarily lose your title just from getting captured, but there were cases where knights had no choice but to sell off their titles to resolve the debt. That is, if we were talking about ordinary warfare.

"If you're captured by the Demon army," I said, "They won't even try to negotiate with you."

Despite this confident pronouncement, I did wonder how true that was. Did Demons negotiate? They probably didn't. If they did, they wouldn't be giving us this much grief. Come to think of it, the Demon Lord's objective was never revealed in the game. Not that it mattered much at this point.

A knight addressed me as I pondered this. "This is the target?"

A bunch of thin branches in bundles thick as a human torso were tied to the tails of some horses. The horses would pull them along as they ran. It would have been nice to use a straw man, but there was no use fussing over what we didn't have. The branches would have to do.

But I had to say—a horse's tail was pretty darn thick. It was about the size of a human arm.

"It won't attack, so you can focus on learning how to strike as a group. Just make sure not to hit the horses themselves, eh?"

"Well, of course."

Twenty horses, twigs tied behind them and Zehrfeld riders astride them,

stood in a line across from the other troops. The riders from my house usually played the part of attacker; today, they seemed quite excited to play the opposite role. Hopefully, they wouldn't get too ahead of themselves.

Meanwhile, I had the other knights and foot soldiers form up. Among them were the Fürst knights, led by Lady Hermine. I hoped she wouldn't be injured. That said, their job was simple: strike the targets as the horses pulled them away. Actually, it wasn't so simple, though I may have nudged them into thinking as much.

When I waved the signal flag, the twenty horses kicked off, their twig trains sending up a surprising amount of dust. In an instant, the dust cloud swarmed into view.

"It stands out more than I expected."

"It looks like an approaching army." I was rather bewildered by the unexpected sight. On dry land, these fake troops were surprisingly effective. If there were soldiers standing directly behind them, they would have gotten sand in their eyes.

The horses ran parallel to the troops undergoing their training. The formation ran out in pursuit of the targets...and fell into chaos within the blink of an eye.

"Watch out!"

"No, that's not the target! It's this one!"

"Whoa."

Soldiers tumbled about, shoving those before them, jostling those beside them, some even clipping their comrades with arms or weapons. Some even collided headfirst into neighboring units. It was a good thing their weapons were sheathed.

Next to me, Count Schanderl and the other officers stood with mouths agape.

"This is more chaotic than I expected."

"This can happen when you're used to one-on-ones."

It was the scary thing about group battles. Unless you gave out precise orders on what to target, the group members wouldn't get it. Meanwhile, people who



were used to one-on-ones would shout out vague things like “over there!” or “that guy!” The underlings also had a bad habit of moving on their own accord.

You couldn’t command a squad by feel, but it was hard to get that fact across—especially to knights with an excess of self-confidence. This was why I let them screw up the first time. The knights of this world were way too partial to single combat. Imagine an entire world of freakin’ muscle-heads. That said, the knights driving the targets seemed to be having the time of their lives.

I signaled the riders to halt for the moment. After watching their subordinates make fools of themselves, the count and the other nobles were at a loss. Oh, and Lady Hermine had plopped herself down, covered in dirt. Nobody had expected that they would all be run so ragged.

“Next, the Zehrfeld troops will show you how they do things, so please switch out the riders.”

People will learn if you demonstrate for them. Then you can explain it, let them try it for themselves, and give positive reinforcement. Now that I had made them understand the importance of seeing the Zehrfeld troops in action, the real lecture on group strategy could begin.

With my lack of overpowered cheat skills, nullifying area-of-effect magic and improving the efficiency of group battles was the best I could do to allay my fears.

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On the second day of drills, we stopped by a small village to replenish our water so we’d have enough when we set up camp.

To explain water replenishment simply, if a single person needed one liter, then a hundred people needed a hundred liters. To put that in perspective, you would need fifty of those two-liter bottles. We had three hundred people with us, so that meant triple. We would have to carry all of that without a truck—not even counting the weight of the containers.

If anything, just drawing water was tedious, backbreaking work. It was common to make the soldiers (not just the squires) do it or hire villagers to help out.

It was common to draw water from rivers, specifically to boil for cooking, but it was also common to draw from wells, of which there were two types, broadly speaking.

Shallow wells collected rainfall and runoff from nearby rivers. The water pooled in them fluctuated in volume, and even drawing a single bucket could bring the pool's level down. These wells would dry up in a shortage, which would be quite a problem.

Deep wells, meanwhile, tapped into subterranean reserves of groundwater, often collected from rain or snow on the mountains over long periods of time. In my old world, extracting large amounts of water for industrial use could cause subsidence, but that wasn't a concern in this world—at least, not yet.

These deep wells were, as the name implied, quite deep. There were wells at old castles from medieval Europe that plunged 120 meters. That was an extreme example, but even ten meters was nothing to sneeze at. At those depths, drawing out 150 two-liter bottles, or their equivalent, would take ages. We would have to rely on the villagers if we were going to use a deep well.

This world did have magic items that could draw out water, but magic stones were inefficient. It was hard to compare them to anything in my previous world, but from my reckoning, you would need two large truckloads of magic stones to produce enough water to fill a single small wagon. Imagine using two bicycle-powered batteries to operate a smartphone. The efficiency was so bad that you wouldn't use it except in an emergency, though apparently people still insisted on researching this.

Thus, for want of water, I made my way to a village with carts full of empty barrels in tow. I would be the negotiator, while Lady Hermine would serve as my aide.

Lady Hermine and I greeted the village chief personally and then put in our request. Unfortunately, I quickly gathered from the conversation that the well was a shallow one. It would be difficult to secure the amount we needed. I asked if there was a nearby river or spring and prepared a formal request for the smallest possible amount of water we could subsist on.

Our request would be recorded in a formal document signed by the chief.

Because of such procedures, it was common enough for village chiefs and their family members to know how to read and write. Priests, too, if there were a church around, but this village didn't seem to have one. In some cases, we would exchange goods instead of paying by cash, but this chief wanted to be paid in gold and silver coins. A tiny village like this one had no money.

Then again, it was common for people in the European Middle Ages to pay their taxes in coins from around the midpoint onward. Though tiny agricultural areas would still pay tribute in goods, independent farmer families became more affluent as their land increased in value. This was especially the trend in areas where the fief lords developed the land.

This was unlike Japan's Middle Ages, where people had to use poor quality coins for the longest time. There were a host of possible reasons: an abundance of coinage in circulation, the payoff of the three-field system, the twice-yearly harvest causing problems for people paying in physical produce, the increased yield in produce other than grain (like fruit), and so on and so forth.

In a show of rustic pride, the people were busy drawing well water with a pulley and transferring it to the barrels, which the soldiers carried to the carts. As I watched all of this, Lady Hermine's attention drifted to the villagers working the fields.

"What a quiet and peaceful town," she murmured as she observed the villagers at work.

*Hmm, I dunno about that one, chief.* Oh well, the fact that people could be so unalert while Demonic Beasts were on the prowl was peaceful in a certain sense. "I suppose it *looks* peaceful."

"What do you mean?" she asked me, half in confusion, half in ever-so-faint sullenness.

I gazed around the village one more time before I spoke. "Children are supposed to be curious."

When I gave that murmuring response, Lady Hermine's eyes widened as she scanned the surroundings. Then a soft groan escaped her lips.

"Now that you mention it, there are no children around..."

“Even if they were told not to leave the house, you’d expect to see them peeking at us from inside. There’s no church around, which probably means that they haven’t been rounded up to study the scriptures or anything, either.”

With a nonchalant air, I took in the whole view. For better or worse, children in this world were a legitimate source of labor. But not seeing children of any age was disconcerting. I mean, you had to consider how short the average lifespan was here.

“Things seem calm, but there’s something strange about this village. Though if they’re not telling us, it’s probably something they want to hide. And you know what old villages are like.”

When developing the land for a new village, the people in charge drew clear divisions in the fields and built proper roads. This made things simpler for collecting taxes.

However, in cases where a village organically came into being, people developed the land from the places where it was easiest. As a result, the divisions in the field were crooked and the roads looked slipshod from an outsider’s point of view. As long as the roads got you to fields, who cared if they zigzagged all over the place? That was the case here. I would guess that when an administrator got involved, they expanded the farmland in quasi-illegal ways.

These types of villages were known for their idiosyncratic local rules. Things could get messy if you poked your head where it didn’t belong. Given that I didn’t know how things worked around here, I could find myself stirring up a hornet’s nest if I didn’t tread lightly.

“They may be hiding something, but there’s no telling what might happen if we act without first observing. Our best course of action is to report to the count.”

Those were my parting words to Lady Hermine. I left the village and headed for the nearby well, pretending to have nothing on my mind except replenishing our water supplies.

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*What am I looking at?*

I found myself watching Viscount Zehrfeld's retreating figure in a daze.

He was five years younger than me, and yet he dutifully carried out the task of replenishing the water, a job that nobles often assigned to their subordinates, without showing a hint of dissatisfaction. Moreover, he was vigilant enough to watch keenly for unusual happenings and inconsistencies. He was a world apart from me, who dismissed this as a simple task as soon as the negotiations concluded. Yet was his example not what knights and nobles ought to aspire?

"...If only my brother were here."

I recalled with some unease and displeasure the uncharitable things Tyrone had said about the viscount prior to these military exercises. I was aware of my brother's feelings for Princess Laura, yet when I heard that she had invited the viscount and the Hero to tea after her ritual, I thought that perhaps it was wrong to feel upset about that.

My brother never thought highly of House Zehrfeld, a family of civil servants. Furthermore, the object of his frustrations was a younger boy, still a student when he was named a viscount. I could understand what he was feeling, but...

"...No, now is not the time for this."

I was still on duty. Though resupplying the camp's water carried no real risks, I wanted to take this opportunity to study Viscount Zehrfeld's mindset. I schooled myself to pay no heed to the tenderness of his years. And as I hastened to follow him, I began mentally drafting a report for Count Schanderl to deliver when we arrived at our base of operations.

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We left the village for the time being, pulling cartloads of barrels that were now heavy with water. When we were out of sight of the villagers, I ordered some soldiers to keep watch over the area. Then we rejoined the main force and promptly explained the state of affairs. Lady Hermine made things easier for me by taking it upon herself to deliver the report.

"I see. That is indeed strange," Count Schanderl remarked.

"Yes," I said. "I had some soldiers remain near the village to keep watch over it."

“A prudent decision.” The count nodded.

He ordered more soldiers to carry out surveillance, just in case. The rest of the troops started preparing to camp for the night, but I focused my attention on the added lookouts’ assignments.

Much like in my previous world, it was important to be vigilant for wild animals, but this world also had monsters, which were far more vexing. You always needed multiple soldiers on lookout at any given time. The problem, however, was where and how to station them. If there were too many people, the villagers might spot them, rendering their efforts meaningless. Yet undershooting could cause people to fall victim to the monsters—not a laughing matter. Honestly, it was making me queasy.

“You should put someone in this spot as well.”

“Understood.”

I drew up the positions based on a simple diagram drawn by Lady Hermine. Her artistic skills exceeded mine, so her diagram was easier to understand than my scribbles. See, I did have nice things to say about her.

She also offered to have her own soldiers assist, so I borrowed them without hesitation. Incidentally a white-haired baron by the name of Kupfernagel took over the water replenishing duties at the nearby river. He was slender but looked quite toned.

I suspected that something would happen over at the village tonight, but it was tough knowing we couldn’t make any rash moves.

“I should’ve incorporated scouts into the army, but no use crying over spilled milk, I guess,” I muttered to myself.

I took a quick break once all the lookouts had their assignments. As I scooped a bland vegetable soup into my mouth, I got to thinking. One of the nice things about this world was that there weren’t many picky eaters. Sure, there were some aristocrats who were used to the lap of luxury, but almost all the nobles I knew would stoically put up with frugal meals when the time came for battle. Maybe it was because the meals in this world didn’t have as much variety or types of seasoning.

If gourmet culture were to spread, it might just perpetuate the decadence of knights and the nobility. Such idle thoughts were running through my mind when I heard a voice call out to me.

“Please excuse me, my lord.”

“What is it?”

“The count is calling for you.”

“Okay.” I gulped down what was left of my soup and headed for our base with the soldier-cum-messenger in tow. After getting permission from the soldiers outside Count Schanderl’s tent, we proceeded into the room. If a tent counts as a room.

“I apologize for calling you out here, Viscount.”

“I do not mind. Did something happen?”

He wouldn’t call me over nothing. Obviously, I couldn’t say that, so I just waited for his reaction. Viscount Gröllmann, a military officer, placed a mark on Hermine’s diagram—right outside the village.

“There is a cluster of stone buildings around here. A man emerged from those buildings and entered the village. Shortly after, the man returned with a woman from the village and went inside.”

“What did they look like?”

“The woman was a villager, though the man did not appear to be one.”

Hmm, a bunch of stone buildings, eh?

“Perhaps those buildings are ruins. A hideout for robber knights.”

“So it appears.”

“Robber knight” was an odd expression, but they existed in my previous world as well, during the turbulent era before the establishment of a centralized monarchy.

In Japan’s late Heian period and early Kamakura period, there were people who referred to themselves as a band of warriors even when they were just a lord and his servant. In much the same way, in Europe’s early medieval period,

there were groups that called themselves knights when they consisted only of a few people from the same family, plus their lackeys. Some groups had as little as four or five members.

With numbers like that, they obviously didn't own any fiefs. Maybe they owned their kitchen gardens, who knows? What they did have were weapons and armor in abundance. The result was what you'd expect: they would arbitrarily declare that they owned the roads to and from small villages, then impose a tax on anyone passing through.

Villagers and merchants would either have to pay up the extortion fee as a sort of tax or have their belongings and livestock forcibly taken from them—hence the name “robber knight.” The Capetian king Louis VI, known in France as *le Batailleur*, apparently spent his whole life fighting those “towers” of sin.

I say “tower” because military strongholds in France at the time often had stone buildings called rectangular keeps. These looked a bit like skyscrapers.

“According to our soldiers’ reports, the area that appears to be ruins has several buildings enclosed by walls. Judging by the size of those buildings, there could be about fifteen to twenty people living there.”

In this world, robber knights were on their way out—this was about the extent of their activities. You could say that society had reached the point where they could no longer get away with what they were doing.

“Monitor anyone who comes or goes from the village,” I said. “Whether they’re bandits or robbers, I think it is safe to assume that they have repurposed those ruins as a hideout.”

“I agree. How would you deal with this?”

I figured he would ask me that question. Well, we couldn't exactly ditch the village—since it was within the vicinity of the capital, I doubted that would go down well with the people. That said, Fort Werisa was our main priority here. We didn't have time to dally.

“I suspect that the village children are being kept hostage there. Using large numbers to surround the hideout may be risky. I think we should send in a small squad to sneak in and ensure the safety of the hostages.”



“I see.”

Judging by his reaction, it seemed I’d passed the test. Phew. I felt like I’d been quizzed by a lecturer. As I inwardly glowed with the satisfaction of nailing the right answer, Count Schanderl spoke up.

“In that case, I have a task for you.”

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Late that night, we found the hideout without any apparent sentries, though the doors were shut, probably to keep monsters out. Hey, if they were gonna slip up on their end, I’d take it. It was a good thing we had distanced ourselves from the village and held off on further action.

Fortunately, the moon was out, so we weren’t totally without light to see by. That said, it was still undeniably dark—though that had its own advantages. We’d be harder to spot. I weighed these thoughts in my head as I sized up the fifteen members of our squad. Everyone was geared up in light armor like leather instead of anything metallic.

“Everything is ready.”

“Okay. Group B, ready your crossbows and remain on standby. Group A, follow me. Don’t forget the rope.”

“Yes, sir.”

“When you climb, don’t pull yourself up with just your arm strength. Arrange yourself into a triangle with both your arms and legs. Use one of your legs to shift your position, then repeat the process.”

“Understood.”

“All right, let’s go.”

The stone in the walls was craggy, offering plenty of footholds, but just to be safe I stuck a thick-bladed shortsword into the gaps between the stones and used it to climb even higher. Even a five-meter wall could be tough to climb, depending on its makeup.

The top of the wall had about ten centimeters of space to walk on, so I crouched there and examined the scene. There were a bunch of buildings

around, giving the impression of a courtyard, but there were no people around. As I scoped the place out, the other soldiers finished climbing up behind me.

“My lord, have you scaled a castle before?” a soldier whispered to me.

“No.”

Of course I hadn't. All I'd done was beef up my body to survive. The idea of using your leg strength instead of your arm strength was something I'd learned from an acquaintance who was into bouldering in my previous world. I gave an immediate honest no to the soldier's question, but for some reason he looked surprised.

If there had been someone on the walls, the crossbows could have made quick work of them, but I was relieved to encounter no complications. It would have blown our plans if the sentry made a noise when getting hit by a bolt.

“Anyway, just lower the ropes already.”

“Yes, sir.”

We let down ropes for the second group. Once we'd made sure that everyone had grabbed hold, the brawniest soldiers slung the ropes around their shoulders and grasped them tightly.

“Make sure you're holding on tight,” I called out to the people below.

“Yes, we are.”

“Okay, pull.”

We lowered ropes down on the side of the hideout as well and got everyone down the wall. It was tough supporting a person's weight, but by turning the soldiers atop the wall into pulleys, it became easier to withstand the weight than if we'd used our arms alone. The guys on the outside were also helping with pulling.

Once they had let me and three others down the wall's inner side, the soldiers on the wall were relieved of their burden. They went back down the outside of the wall using the foothold I'd created earlier. Meanwhile, those of us inside headed for the gate, all the while ducking to stay out of sight.

“Just a latch holding the gate closed,” a soldier reported.

“Okay, open it up a crack.”

We got the gate open just wide enough for the others to file inside, then quickly closed it before anyone else could notice. Just as I’d hoped, this way was smooth going.

“Everyone in one piece?”

“Yes.”

After making sure that everyone was inside, I scanned the surroundings again. There were five buildings encircling the courtyard. The one farthest in the back was in the best shape—the kind you’d expect the leader to occupy. The robber knights’ chief must have been in there. The closest building, meanwhile, had no windows, which meant it was probably a storehouse. It was quite decrepit, but the door looked to have been recently replaced.

“Okay. Two people in Group A wait near the doors of that building. Immobilize anyone who comes out the door.”

“R-right.”

“There’s a strong possibility that there are hostages inside. They probably won’t be coming out, so be on guard in case the robbers show their faces. Don’t hesitate to kill them. Then you can secure the building to ensure that no other robbers enter.”

“Understood.”

The cluster of buildings the robber knights occupied consisted of the lord’s residence, several communal dwellings, a barn, and a storehouse. It was pretty standard as far as these things went, and it didn’t look like they had any horses, given that the barn was in shambles. This made me think that everyone besides the boss was sleeping in the communal houses.

“You two hide in the shadow of that big building over there. If you see anyone, stop them from going inside the building. We don’t want anyone holding out inside.”

“Yes, sir.”

“People might also try to come out from the inside, so watch out for that.”

“Understood, sir.”

“You two from Group B, throw a torch into the right building when I give the signal.”

“Are you fine with enemy casualties?”

“Yeah. If we let them live, they’ll just set up shop somewhere else. Eliminate them.”

“Understood.”

“The remaining four, ready your crossbows. They’ll come rushing out when the fire starts raging—that’s when you shoot them. Then draw your swords and cut them down. You two with the torches should also get ready for hand-to-hand combat as soon as the fire’s going.”

“Okay.”

People in my previous world often said that medieval European swords were used for bludgeoning, but they could easily be used for stabbing too. Just sharpening a kitchen knife against a metal press would make it possible to cut meat, so obviously a sword tempered by a blacksmith would be sharp enough to do the job. There were even stories of knights losing an arm on the battlefield and having to live out the rest of their lives with an artificial hand.

“I’ll start off in the left building, but I’ll move to the innermost building if someone comes out of it. When I move, I’ll leave it to you two to handle whoever comes out of the left building. Anyone who flees through the gate you can leave to the squad outside. That’s all. Get in position.”

“Yes, sir!”

After relaying some quick orders, everyone hurried to their positions. Oooh, they definitely lived up to their reputation as the count’s handpicked elites. Even in the dark, they moved fast.

The two guys who approached the building on the right used a magic item to light their torches. In the game, the dungeons would immediately light up when you entered them, but in reality it was because people prepared lights in advance like this.

I lost focus for a while there, but I snapped my attention back to the task at hand. When the two soldiers looked to me, I gave them the signal. The torches flew through the window into the building inside.

“Whaaa—?!”

“Fire...! Aaaargh!”

Two people fled the right-hand building, only to become a pincushion at the doorway. Their voices resounded across the complex, and several people spilled out of the left building where I was lurking. Some of them were unarmed—they hadn’t even conceived of an enemy attack.

Without hesitation, I struck a man down with the butt of my spear. Spears are associated with stabbing, but there was a certain satisfaction in the centrifugal force of a good whack. Besides, it hit harder that way and set you up for the next attack.

“An enemy...?!”

Too slow. I withdrew the spear I’d been using as a bludgeon and ran it through the newcomer, before twisting the haft halfway round in his stomach.

“Guh...!”

Human bodies were quite sturdy. When people got stabbed, their muscles tightened, making it harder to extract the spear. Turning the spear at the moment of insertion simultaneously widened the wound and made it easier to pull out the tip. This was the reason retracting a spear was regarded as more difficult than stabbing.

Fortunately for me, this was a night ambush; the enemy wasn’t wearing any armor. Plus, I had the Spearmanship skill. There was no way I could lose in this scenario. I stabbed another outlaw and they fell to the ground where they stood. They were a nonissue now, though I supposed they could survive if they were lucky.

“Rat bastards! Who are you?!” a guttural voice rang out from the largest building. The speaker emerged from the building as I was finishing off another foe.

Okay, so. It was all well and good of him to have a weapon, but he didn't have a stitch of clothing on him besides his underwear. Not exactly my idea of fanservice.

Regardless, we couldn't have him killing any hostages. The ambush had gone our way so far, but we couldn't let our guards down. This was still a powder keg, and one move from him or his lackeys could set it all ablaze.

"I'll give you a slow and sweet introduction later!" I said—more of a provocation than a placation—as I broke out sprinting.

I tried to stab the guy who looked like the leader, but he deftly avoided my spear. Well, he saw me coming, so that was no surprise. Two soldiers sprang out to block the entrance, just like I ordered them to. Good, this meant that the guy couldn't escape back inside.

"You brat!" He drew his sword.

"Big words when it's a brat who's kicking your ass!"

I goaded him further to keep his mind off the hostages. As his sword came in, I deflected it with the haft of my spear then swung the butt into his side. Spears were often presumed unwieldy for close-range combat, but if you gripped them halfway down the shaft, you could use them like a staff. They were still tricky to use in tight spaces, but large swords were no different in that regard.

The boss, for his part, seemed accustomed to fighting. He avoided my blow with practiced ease before launching an attack of his own. I had to grip the shaft of my spear with both hands to block it. He pressed his sword down, attempting to turn this into a contest of strength. His style was one of brute force, used for killing people who knew nothing of battle. I was not strong as him, but, with a bit of strategy, I didn't need to be.

"Guh?!"

As he bore down on me, I channeled all the strength in my upper body and swept my feet under him. A guy in only his underpants was bound to recoil from a kick. Without missing a beat, I stabbed my spear through his right shoulder as he stumbled. A rather unseemly cry of anguish erupted from his throat.

The two soldiers who'd been blocking his escape ran up to us.

"Okay, tie him up," I said.

"Yes, sir." The man looked up at me, his face dark with resentment.

"You played dirty."

"It's your own fault you let your guard down."

My way was much better than fighting cleanly and dying for it. Knights regularly included foot techniques in their sparring, and it would have been absurd not to use them in an actual fight. If I'd tried my half-assed foot sweep on Mazel, he would have seen through it immediately. But I digress.

"Well, you ought to prepare yourself," I told him.

"What are you talking about?"

"You'll see."

In this medieval-like world, criminals had no human rights. He had better prepare himself indeed.

But still, my spirits sank thinking about what would happen next. Tomorrow, the troops would be gathering data for group magic warfare, so I didn't need to be physically present. In exchange, I would have to see this incident through to its end. I sighed inwardly as I ordered the soldiers to slay the remaining enemies and rescue the hostages.

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"How am I supposed to thank you, truly?"

"It's just part of the job."

That was all I could say as the village chief bowed low before me. Force of habit from my old life made me want to bow in return, but it was a faux pas for nobles to bow to commoners in this world. It made my stomach churn.

Apparently, the oldest of the captured kids had been taking care of the youngest ones. Based on the leader's state of undress, I suspected he'd plans for the young women once they passed a certain age. The village woman we'd spotted entering the complex earlier had been in that predicament; we rescued

her from his hive as well.

One of the lackeys who had been keeping watch in the village tried to run off with a woman, although he did not get very far. Lady Hermine, who had been stationed in the village, cut him down. She apologized for not being able to apprehend him alive, although it wasn't anything to lose sleep over.

And now the leader and two other unfortunate sods were in the middle of receiving their comeuppance.

"Like I said before, don't kill them," the village chief told me. "Killing is my job."

"I totally understand."

Despite what we said, some of the thugs already looked like they had one foot in the grave. They'd been nailed to a tree to keep them from moving, and the villagers were viciously quick in pelting them with stones and the occasional farm tool. The stones alone looked like they could kill.

In my old world, this would have been considered a lynching under the law. But this sort of spectacle was not unheard of in the medieval world. *Nokogiribiki* was a form of execution in medieval Japan, where villagers would collectively attempt to saw off a criminal's head. The social practice of  *Murahachibu*  was another form of collective punishment that saw the perpetrator ostracized. As an aside, European societies during the same period would hold a soldering iron next to criminals chained to a stand. It was similar to nokogiribiki as a form of mob justice.

You could see this as a flaw in the legal system, but given the ruling class's alternative was to seek justice through duels, you could argue that this was better. When the law itself carried little weight, you ended up with stark extremes such as these. And for as long as I lived in this medieval-like world, I would have to accept their way of doing things.

Since regaining my previous world memories, I'd received an aristocrat's education, so I was able to rationalize the difference in values to some extent. But I wondered how I would have come to terms with the culture shock if I'd been reincarnated as a commoner. I didn't want to imagine it.



“Okay, time to give it a rest. We must return to the main force.”

Some of the villagers whose wives and children had been affected still looked eager to go at it, but there would be deaths if things continued. That was my reasoning behind stopping them, but as soon as I said that, the leader of the thugs let out a groan and glared at me and Lady Hermine.

“H-how...are we...different from you...?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m saying...these villagers...are assaulting us...!” he declared with ragged breaths.

I fixed the nobleman’s mask back upon my head. “Don’t get the wrong idea. You louts were killed by *my* hand.”

“Wh-what...?”

“I don’t think well of defiling corpses, but it’s understandable as far as the victims feel. I took responsibility and allowed them their justice.”

I had merely reversed the order of things. On paper, the execution happened first, and the villagers vented later.

“Y-you think that’s justice...?! You wretched nobles...leech with taxes...!”

“You have gotten the wrong idea once again,” I answered with a stone-cold poker face.

As a commander of the troops and a noble with my own fief and people, I could not afford to falter here.



“Sure, there are some real scumbags among the nobles. There might even be some villagers engaged in larceny. But that has nothing to do with this.”

I drew my sword. I could feel the stares of the villagers against my back. I let out a short breath before meeting the man’s gaze.

“No matter how many criminals there are in the world, it doesn’t lessen your sin,” I declared. “This is what you get for the actions *you* have wrought. Don’t bring others into it!”

A flash of steel. The leader’s head fell to the ground. Without hesitation, I cut down the other two in the same way. I felt the weight of taking a person’s life outside the heat of the battlefield, but I could not let this show on my face. After sheathing my sword, I turned back to the village chief.

“You may split the thugs’ possessions among you. If any nearby villages have victims, then alert the fief lord. I will ensure that this incident is in their records.”

“Th-thank you so much.”

In this medieval—or rather, medieval-ish—world, there wasn’t any social security system to speak of, so the villagers wouldn’t receive any tangible support for their losses. But just as I was about to write this off with *C’est la vie*, it occurred to me that with a little nudge, things could take a turn for the better.

After all, now that the Demon Lord was back, the realm would be in constant danger. This village was not only just a few days away from the capital, it was also close to Fort Werisa, an area of strategic importance. It wouldn’t hurt to win the people over.

“I leave it to you to dispose of the bodies. Don’t take shortcuts—you don’t want to risk a disease.”

“R-right.”

Part of me scoffed at this meager level of support (relative to my previous world), but this was the done thing in this world. Even as a part of me rolled its eyes at this muscle-brained video game world, I accepted that this was where I lived. I had to demonstrate my resolve, if only as a facade.

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players, huh?”

“Hmm?” Hermine made a puzzled sound.

“It’s nothing.” I brushed her off.

That was a Shakespeare quote. Funnily enough, though, he was far from the only person to make such an observation.

“Good work today, everyone. Let’s get back to the main force.”

“Yes, sir.”

The knights, all of whom were my seniors, bowed to me in unison and sprang to action. Even the knights under Lady Hermine’s command joined in. Oh boy. This was *not* doing wonders for my stomach.

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“Hey, is Viscount Zehrfeld still just a student?”

“That’s what I’ve heard...”

“He is an extraordinarily decisive individual.”

“Enough whispering,” Mine chided.

On our way to rejoin the main force, the soldiers chatted among themselves. And despite her scolding, Mine shared their sentiments.

Mine herself had chosen the path of a knight and had no qualms about cutting down lowlifes. But she was struck by the young man’s resolute countenance. It was one thing to strike down outlaws in the thick of battle, and quite another to execute them in cold blood.

He had also shown remarkable deftness in seizing the hideout. An ordinary knight would have made a frontal assault, which might have complicated the situation. Instead, he had employed his own methods of subterfuge. Every one of his actions distinguished him from the knights Mine knew and the nobles in their age range.

“Where does he get that resolve from, I wonder?” she muttered to herself.

She got the impression that it wasn’t simply because he was a noble or a knight—there was something somehow *different* about his resolve. But she

couldn't fathom what it was. Yet there was no doubt that he possessed that special something that made him suitable for his noble rank, his age and physical appearance notwithstanding. Inwardly, Mine nodded. The troops seconded to them by Count Schanderl probably felt the same way. It was almost certain that among them were close aides to the count himself.

At the same time, Mine started thinking about what she could do to repair her relationship with the Zehrfeld family after her elder sister had soured things. Her father had always wanted to maintain a good relationship with the neighboring house, but she felt the need to reevaluate her opinion of Werner as an individual. Such thoughts pressed on her mind as she followed the future count.

If Werner himself knew what her heart was whispering, he would no doubt refute the excessive praise.

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Two days had passed after the incident in the village. Smoke from the campfire blotted the night sky as soldiers and officers alike exchanged food and laughter. It was nice to rest my weary bones, though it didn't ease the burden of being constantly surrounded by people all older than me. If it wasn't for all that time I spent learning the ways of nobles, I would have collapsed a long time ago.

"You are quite the industrious worker, Lord Werner."

"I would not say so." If I didn't do all of this, I would die. Yep. What was wrong with not wanting to die?

I needed to be competent enough to protect myself, but I wouldn't be able to survive to the end just by myself. Video game protagonists were total cheaters.

The knight brigade continued its group tactics training. They'd been using targets until yesterday, but today they started taking on monsters in the fields near the capital. Though it also served the purpose of protecting the realm, it was also a large-scale monster hunt depending on how you looked at it. I didn't have any sympathy for the monsters that would get hunted for the sake of practice. Honestly, it was weirder that they attacked us, given that we numbered over a hundred. It made me worry for the merchant corps.

The mage troops pulled an all-nighter to write up a report. After that got sent to the capital, each and every member participated in the training. Communication with the mages would be vital in group battles going forward, after all. The kind of support they offered in that context would be completely different from a battle involving individual knights.

The training continued even into the night. As we camped, the troops would take turns keeping watch. Nobody had experience keeping night watch against monsters where there was a risk of being attacked by flying beasts—quite a far cry from human invaders.

It was a pity that the know-how from the previous era of the Demon Lord hadn't stuck around, but it only made sense for it to fade over time as it became irrelevant to actual warfare. This was plain as day if you looked at the books written by Edo period military scholars. So many of those guys just wrote out of their asses. Today's drill would also serve the purpose of verifying what kind of night-watch tactics worked best in actual practice.

"An aerial attack would definitely be a problem at this point."

"I suspect that even a fence would be useless against a large Demonic Beast."

"That's why I've been saying that there's no point building walls when you're making encampments. It wouldn't do anything against the flying monsters."

"We need to think about carrying magic items that can cast simple barriers."

When we set up an encampment, we became painfully aware of all the gaps in our defenses that would be all too obvious to an attacker. Foolproof defense was impossible, of course, but our current efforts were so flimsy as to be pointless. Thus, the nightly experiments continued. We couldn't kid around; just moving from an open field to a riverside encampment opened a whole new can of worms. In these kinds of situations, just being a bystander would make it seem like you had nothing of worth to say, so I participated from time to time.

Predictably, the biggest point of contention was what to do if we got pelted by area-of-effect magic from the outside. After considering the problem, I wondered if we might limit casualties by taking the field in small groups, like the Hero's own party, rather than as a massed army. You could even say it was realistic from the perspective of suppressing losses—although the probability of

success was a different matter. Video game logic could make a surprising amount of sense at times.

Magic-sealing spells existed inside the game as well. I couldn't say it aloud, but I was pretty sure that Laura could use them. In the game, though, their range was restricted to the enemies on-screen; I had no idea whether it could work on an entire field. Even if it did work, it wasn't the kind of thing that could last all night long.

Some magic items could prevent random monster encounters while you were on the move, but those effects didn't last long either. The barrier at the castle stopped your garden-variety monsters from getting inside, but it apparently wasn't portable. If only the magic items that could cast simple barriers were easier to use.

"No matter how keenly you watch the sky, you cannot keep using a bow at night."

I wasn't overly familiar with bows, but the ones in this world were made of natural materials rather than carbon fiber or anything like that. This meant that they were susceptible to changes in the temperature and humidity. It was also easy to hurt yourself when drawing or unstringing a bow. Tools were tricky to handle in any world.

We considered all sorts of countermeasures, but we could only conclude that our current options were limited. Well, of course. In a medieval world of only swords, spears, bows, and horses, it was unthinkable for troops to show up with grenades and machine guns. Magic rivaled the destructive power of a grenade, but you couldn't wait for the enemy to run out of supplies. AOE magic was so unfair like that.

And to make matters worse, the monster side was more used to fighting. They were like a modern army facing off against a group with nothing but wooden swords—and they were the ones on the offensive. Our only solace was that they were complacent.

When all was said and done, we had to acknowledge that we couldn't rely on cheap tricks. Among the few options left to us was bolstering our mages and priests, but if that were so easy, we wouldn't be in this pickle to begin with. And

on top of all that, we still had to improve our lookouts.

Was there anything we could turn to other than cheap tricks? Or was it time to think of something absurd to turn the tables...? As I sat at the meeting, mulling this over, there was a sudden commotion outside.

“I have a report.”

“What is it?” Viscount Gröllmann asked instead of Count Schanderl.

The answer was, in a certain sense, rather predictable.

“Pillars of flame have appeared at Fort Werisa. One of them was turquoise... though we are still ascertaining what we saw.”

There was no need for them to say anything further. The count stood up and raised his voice. “All officers rise! Prepare to depart!”

“My lord?”

“His Highness spoke to me secretly about keeping an eye out on Werisa. Viscount Zehrfeld, as you have the most troops, you will take the vanguard.”

“R-right.”

All the commanders and knights at the meeting stood up in unison. I sensed keenly that events were now in motion. The undeniable coward in me wished that I’d distanced myself from this battlefield, but I had to leave my personal feelings at the door.

“Do not enter the fortress, Viscount. Keep watch from outside. Take heed not to advance rashly.”

“Understood.”

The count’s orders were a natural extension of all the discussions we’d held with the prince. Things would only get out of hand if we rushed in recklessly.

All of the officers sprang from the tent at once, myself included. To think that this would be a night battle... From the game, I only knew that the fort was bound to fall at some point. I was glad that we’d prepared a signal as part of the contingency measures.

Fireworks turned turquoise due to a chemical change in copper. I didn’t know



the science behind it. What mattered was that the end result was prominent enough to be seen at a distance even by the naked eye.

You could create the signal by preparing the materials and chucking them into a campfire. This included wolf droppings, copper powder, and a drying agent against humidity, all wrapped up in a bag made from cow innards. I had the prince send one such bundle of materials to Marquess Kneipp. The idea was for them to throw it into a fire as soon as they needed to send a signal.

Yet another aside, the drying agent was made from dust extracted from the core of a slime. Slimes absorbed any moisture. You could find them scattered across roads and footpaths after rain or snow; in the latter case, the dust would ooze and burble in a rather sinister way. Not that any of this mattered.

“Rouse yourselves, everyone! We head for Fort Werisa!”

Now then, it was time for a supporting character’s battle to start.

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As we drew near to the fort, we grasped the full extent of the disturbance. Pillars of flame that we didn’t spot at first had flared all over the place. Even from a distance, we could hear the din resounding from the fort. I didn’t want to imagine what was going on inside.

In the game, it was just a straight walk inside, but in reality, you had to take a detour around the moat in front of the gate.

The detour served to prolong the time an approaching force spent with their right side turned to the fort. As people generally held their shield in their left hand, this approach left them vulnerable to the defenders’ arrows. The battle would start before the enemy even reached the walls.

Whether it was because they knew reinforcements had come or because they had been trying to escape even before we arrived, the people in the fort sprang to action. The drawbridge screeched as it lowered across the moat. At the same time, the wooden gates opened on both sides.

The people who emerged were in civilian livery—clearly not fighters. Marquess Kneipp was evidently not the type to force noncombatants into the fray.

“Cut the chains! I don’t care!”

“Okay!”

“Someone bring an axe!”

If the monsters had their wits about them, they would try to pull up the drawbridge again. We would be in trouble if they did that. That would apply not just now but when Mazel entered later. Thus, in a desperate bid to avoid that, we cut the chains of the drawbridge and fixed it in place. I could come up with any number of justifications later. Probably.

Viscount Davrak’s forces held up torches to guide the people fleeing across the bridge. A funny thing about humans is that we’re instinctively inclined toward bright places. As more and more people billowed out of the fort, the troops lit up their path further. This was because, after leaving a dark place, the human eye slowly becomes accustomed to the light, making it harder for them to see their surroundings.

Leading the noncombatants straight into the troops would cause our lines to break down, so we were walking a surprisingly tight line. Once the civilians had gone a certain distance, Baron Kupfernagel’s troops would escort them, ensuring they kept their composure. The baron had clearly gotten the short end of the stick by handling the injured, but he would have to deal with it.

“Orgen’s troops head to the left of the bridge! Barkey’s, line up at the right! Ready your crossbows!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Loose the first volley on my command. Everyone has to shoot as one.”

“Understood, sir.”

Where Max had a giant frame to match his larger-than-life persona, Orgen was of medium build and young at heart, the sort to sally forth in high spirits. Barkey was the taller one between them and had a cooler, sharper personality. Since Max was away, I made the other two my subcommanders this time. Both were in their thirties, but Orgen had more experience, so I made him my primary aide.

By this point, I'd now gotten quite accustomed to issuing orders to my seniors. Though maybe I was the older one if we took my previous life into account. Not that it did anything for my queasiness.

"Get ready."

A group of young laborers checked to see if the bridge was down before sprinting across it. Hot on their heels was an assemblage of two-legged creatures that weren't quite human. It was hard to see more than their silhouettes against the fires blazing in the fort, but I knew what they were: Skeleton Warriors and the Living Dead. Just as I suspected, this would be *his* battlefield.

Fires raged within the fort, making it difficult to see anything more than their silhouettes, but I knew what they were.



“Volley!”

At the signal, over twenty arrows rained down on the monsters near the gate. Crossbows were plenty accurate even when you weren't used to handling them. The monsters turned into pincushions and collapsed on the spot. I knew I'd told them to shoot, but it surprised me to see that arrows worked against Skeleton Warriors.

Meanwhile, I heard some tremulous voices among my allies.

“Living Dead and...oh, are those skeletons?”

“Aw heck, I've only heard of them through stories...”

“Stay focused! They can be felled like any creature!” Orgen insisted hotly.

When he ordered everyone to prepare a new volley, the knights and squires hastily complied. They'd been startled but, fortunately, not spooked.

The reactions of your average knight and squire made sense. Even after hearing about the Demon Lord's return, reality wouldn't sink in until they saw unfamiliar monsters with their own eyes. Most of the monsters that had spawned around the capital thus far had been Demonic Beasts, but after Fort Werisa, there would be new foes to handle.

The boss of this area—Dreax, one of the three Demon army commanders—was said to be a weakling. In all honesty, the random-encounter enemies in the later dungeons were stronger than him. How the hell did that bozo become a commander?

Still, he was quite a tough opponent when they brought him back for the boss rush before the final battle. It made me shake my head—why did the beasts never get weaker when they were revived? On that note, it was funny that the three commanders came back but not the Four Fiends.

Not that this mattered, but it was a mystery why the names of the people here were German, but the monsters were written in English. Was that also because of video game logic?

I didn't let those idle thoughts stop me from supporting another group making its exit. At the same time, I had the mage Vogt come in to lend a hand.

Fortunately, we got in touch straight away. It did help that we were mostly defending a stable position as we helped people flee the fortress.

“What do you need, sir?”

“I’m glad you’re here. I need something from the mage troops.”

When I asked him to destroy the hinges on the right side of the fortress doors, which would prevent them from being closed, his eyes predictably widened.

“Will that not be a problem later?”

“If intelligent monsters were to close the door, the people inside could wind up in a massacre. Given the circumstances, we need to ensure an escape route.”

Superficially, my logic made sense, but I also wanted to make the fort easier to enter afterward. In the game, you could waltz right in, but there was no guarantee of that in reality.

I wondered why you could so easily get into the Demon Lord’s castle by just walking across the field. It was the enemy stronghold, for crying out loud. Was it because the Demon army underestimated its foes? Although I could see it getting tedious if you had to do an infiltration mission every time you entered a new area.

“I understand.”

“Make sure you indicate in your report that it was me who asked you.”

He wasn’t exactly gung ho, so I decided to win him over by indicating that any blame would fall on me. I wasn’t going to make him take responsibility for this, I swear.

The mage squad channeled an explosion into a single spot. The door sagged but didn’t fall off its hinge entirely, at which point my troops loosed their arrows. A look of suspicion started to take hold on Vogt’s face as he scanned the battlefield.

“They’re not leaving the fort.”

“I suppose they’ve been ordered to suppress the inside.” I pretended to look bemused, but I was pretty sure it was because this counted as a different field

in the game. Not that I could say that out loud—nor mention that the fort’s interior was now Dreax’s domain.

While I was musing to myself, more people ran out. There were several knights and one person in flamboyant attire... Oh, this looked like it was going to be a pain. I decided to just leave them to other people and support the other escapees for now.

“Hey! Who’s your commander?” bellowed one of the knights once he’d crossed the bridge. “Where is he?”

In the middle of the knights was a handsome and well-dressed young guy with bloodshot eyes. He looked to be their leader.

“We are the forces of Viscount Zehrfeld, though our commander is Count Schanderl. Could you make your way a little further outside?” Barkey responded coolly. Vogt seemed dumbfounded, perhaps because these guys were totally different from the other escapees thus far.

“Zehrfelds, eh? I have no business with you bureaucrats.”

The group spat their retort well within earshot before making for the main force. I wasn’t about to snipe them in the back, nor would I bother helping them if they happened to take a tumble.

“Um...”

Vogt looked like he was about to say something, but I ignored him.

“Support the other escapees. Orgen, Barkey, ready the crossbows. It’s about time to consider switching with the other troops.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Understood.”

We prepared for the enemy attack. It couldn’t just be the Zehrfeld troops taking the brunt of the enemy offensive. We had to coordinate with the troops we were switching with, and I didn’t want to overload my brain thinking about too many things. Let someone else sweat the small stuff.

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The young man strode into the command center and immediately shouted at the commander to pass the reins of the army to him. Predictably, several cold stares fell upon him.

“Have you no desire to rescue my father, who remains in the fort?! I am Mangold Goslich Kneipp, heir to the marquess!”

“This army has been entrusted to me. I have no reason to hand it over to anyone else,” Count Schanderl replied, clearly vexed. The count was merely speaking the obvious, but it only enraged the marquess’s son further.

“You are faced with a most opportune moment to seize control of the fort, and you would stand idly by? With your numbers?! What cowards you are! Have you no shame?!”

“There is a difference between bravery and foolhardiness, Sir Mangold.”

There was a certain snideness in referring to the young man as “sir” instead of “lord.” Fitting treatment for such brazenness.

Though Marquess Kneipp had the aggressiveness typical of his military background, he was never one to forget his manners. His son, however, seemed unable to distinguish between his house’s achievements and his own. Even considering that his father was still fighting inside the fort, Mangold’s attitude was nothing short of arrogant.

He looked about five years older than Viscount Zehrfeld, Schanderl surmised, but in all the ways that mattered—stillness of mind and balance of temper—there was no competition.

Of course, the count had no way of knowing that the reason why Werner appeared so calm was because he knew for certain that the fort would fall.

Regardless, it affirmed in Count Schanderl’s mind the reason the prince so favored the young viscount. In contrast, Mangold, with his fitful screeching, had already overstayed his welcome. The count took hold of a box of papers and from it retrieved a document.

“What?! You lowly count! You would spurn me, a future marquess, and busy yourself with mere trifles?!”



“This is the official notice from His Highness declaring me the commander of these troops.”

That single curt statement was enough to douse Mangold’s head in cold water. Even the marquess’s knights, who had done nothing to stop Mangold in his tirade, turned pale. Whether they were unable to control him or simply unwilling, they were all useless, Count Schanderl decided coolly.

“Please explain to me,” he continued, “why I must follow your command despite this direct notice from His Highness.”

“Er, um, that is... Wait, um, in the first place, why...?”

He probably wanted to ask why they went to the trouble of carrying the prince’s notice all the way to the battlefield. But that also begged the question of why there was an army out here to begin with. One could only think it was too convenient.

The count let out a long sigh. Deciding that it was absurd to humor a man so lost for words, he turned to his own knights, who had stayed silent throughout the farce.

“Escort him out.”

“Yes, sir.”

The count’s knights expelled Mangold and his lackey with somewhat more force than the word “escort” implied. Shaking his head, the count returned the document to its box.

“Marquess Kneipp was lax in his son’s education. But I wonder if His Highness foresaw this situation when he delivered this notice.”

“I suspect that it was a contingency in case the marquess sought to take command. He is not a man who would easily accept defeat,” Viscount Gröllmann replied, looking just as astonished as Schanderl felt.

On his face, there was sympathy. In all the years since the kingdom’s founding, never before had there been a crisis of this level. But a sense of hesitancy persisted—there were people who still wanted to believe that this was just a misunderstanding. But even so, this was cruel.

If the Demon Lord's revival was accepted as truth, then they couldn't afford to stay still. The crown was making moves; having anticipated the possibility that Fort Werisa would come under attack, they intended to make use of the incident.

The prince hadn't gone as far as to consider eliminating Count Schanderl or Marquess Kneipp. On the other hand, he felt that the nobles who failed to grasp the danger—ironically starting with Marquess Kneipp himself—needed a wake-up call to accept the bitter pill. In this regard, one could say that Werner and the prince were of one mind.

“Even so, I have full confidence in Marquess Kneipp's loyalty.”

“I hope he escapes alive.”

However, unlike Werner, the prince and the nobles thought that Marquess Kneipp's failure itself would be enough to get him off his high horse. If, heavens forbid, he were to fall in battle, it would put a damper on the more influential nobles. Neither option was a problem for the royal family.

In that sense, one could say they were still underestimating the danger.

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“Lady Hermine, I want you to take these troops and evacuate to the rear.”

“Understood,” Hermine said, then turned to her soldiers. “Make haste!”

I continued firing off orders as we evacuated the laborers and injured knights and soldiers away from the fort.

Although I referred to it as evacuating, some people were too injured or paralyzed with fear to run. You'd need a certain mental imbalance to keep your head amid such moaning and cries of pain, so it was imperative I move the injured elsewhere. Left where they were, they'd drag morale into the dirt.

That being the case, I was sending the immobile people to safety, but this was time-consuming work. Some of the injured included knights in armor; they each needed two or three people to carry them. Though I was grateful to Lady Hermine and Count Fürst's troops for helping ferry people about, it would be remiss of me not to pull my weight as well. Long story short: I was busy over

here. It was best to leave that arrogant pup to a person of higher standing.

Over and over, we safeguarded the escapees, switched with the other troops for a short rest, and then jumped back into the fray. An awful lot of time passed as we repeated this process. It seemed that getting a sore throat would be a regular thing. I remembered hearing that sergeants in my previous world tended to have deep voices; I wondered if it was simply because they yelled so much that their vocal cords expanded.

We managed to get quite a lot of people to safety. Once the number of evacuees had started to dwindle, I asked Orgen, "How are you holding up?"

We'd arrived in the dead of the night, but by then I could see a faint glow just beyond the mountains.

"I'm near my limit, I think."

"That figures."

I felt like we'd had this conversation before. A notable difference, though, was that arrows were consumable items. Given that we'd been afield for a training drill, we didn't bring that many. I could only nod at Orgen's reply. Vogt and the other mages were also starting to show their fatigue.

Just as I was thinking that it was about time to call it a day, I noticed a figure appear on the other side of the bridge. Though the fires inside the fort had started dying out, the far side of the stronghold was darker than our side. In the backlight, all I could discern was a silhouette. Judging by that robe, I could guess...

"Geh."

"Master Werner?"

"Everyone, pull back! Make some distance!"

I had no time to explain further. Following my lead, the troops retreated from the bridge in unison.

Yes, all of them. Maybe it was because their brains had flagged thanks to fatigue, or maybe my tone conveyed a suitable amount of tension. The retreat went surprisingly smoothly, even among the troops not under my direct

command.

Not a single moment later, a booming sound rang out and a massive swirling fire appeared on our side of the bridge. Some people got caught in the blast's shock waves and tumbled over. Startled cries and voices raised near to screaming sounded all around me.

"Wh-what was that?!"

"Magic. Is everyone okay?!"

"I am fine!"

Fire magic. Come to think of it, the mid-boss of Fort Werisa, who lurked between the second and third floors, was a black mage who could use AOE spells. This awakened some painful memories of when I thought I'd encountered a rare enemy, only to face a nasty shock since the relevant information wasn't displayed.

Sure, they were just memories from the game, but for a moment I found myself lost in them. The next moment, however, something happened that the gamer in me never saw coming.

"Oho. Someone among you has good intuition."

"It talked...?"

Ripples of shock spread around me. Oh, right. Some Demons could speak our languages.

Mazel would already know this, having fought a Demon himself, but to most people, this was a revelation.

Wait. Did that mean that this enemy was a Demon? It wasn't just a random mid-boss?

The black mage sneered, heedless of my inner turmoil. "Rejoice, those who yet draw breath. Thy deaths shall be postponed for now. Such is the will of Dreax of the *four* commanders. Make haste and deliver this message to thy leader."

Okay, so the boss was Dreax. If I recalled correctly, he was a Living Armor. The calm part of me was weighing up my knowledge from the game, but I could

have just been escaping from reality.

The black mage probably had no interest in the humans' reactions or attitudes. He cast a quick glance over his shoulder into the fort, and then a devious smile lit up his face.

"I bequeath a gift. A memento for thine efforts."

As his voice boomed out, several people walked out of the fort. Wait, were they human? The one on the far right only had one arm, and the guy next to him was kind of swaying... *Oh crap.*

"H-his body..."

"It's...not connected..."

Indeed. The knights, Lady Hermine, and Vogt had all realized it too. One approaching figure had been sliced in half, right at the torso. His upper body had simply been placed over the lower body, which marched forward despite everything.

The reason his chest looked like it was swaying was because his upper body would likely fall off if he upset his balance. A grotesque magic trick gone the way of a splatter film.

And among those coming over the bridge was Marquess Kneipp—or, I should say, the man who *had been* Marquess Kneipp. Only half his head was there, and he slowly shuffled toward us in a way that could only be described as unsettling.

Everyone else was dead as doornails too. It was preposterous for living people to be able to keep walking with half their guts spilling out. There were scraping sounds coming from them, only their upper bodies intact. Their eyes were all hollow without exception, as if they were harbingers of death.

All the troops were frozen in place, not moving even a hair's breadth. Or more precisely, we *couldn't*. Some of the nearby squires were retching, but I didn't have it in me to scold them. I felt sick to my stomach too.

"Fear not. As I have proclaimed, thy deaths are forestalled," the black mage told us sardonically.

I heard what he was saying, but I was hardly confident that it got through.

The bodies of Marquess Kneipp and his soldiers crossed the bridge, paying no heed to us. We could only watch as they feebly crawled their way forward, right up to our noses. Then, with a sudden noise, they collapsed into a heap. Blood and other foul odors wafted from their remains, assaulting our noses.

Nobody moved. Not the bodies of the dead, and not us.

“To thine king deliver the words of Lord Dreax: Next, we shall claim thy castle.”

Those were the final words the robed figure spoke before disappearing back into the fort. Though the enemies had vanished, I was still rooted to the spot, my listless gaze taking in nothing at all.

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We were still out of sorts when we made our report to Count Schanderl. Predictably, he and the others paled at the news. As soon as we retrieved the bodies of Marquess Kneipp and the others, splitting the work between the forces, we wasted no time in putting distance between ourselves and Fort Werisa.

We put the laborers and the injured at the center of the formation. Though we were vigilant of Demonic Beasts, our goal was to return to the capital at top speed. We exchanged only the bare minimum of words.

It was not just because we lost the fort, I felt. There were some people who had already lost heart entirely—especially among those who saw the display at the end. I had never expected that the same spectacle in game and reality would be so starkly different.

It was the middle of the night when we arrived at the palace. In spite of our best efforts, carrying the injured soldiers and corpses made for slow going, and we’d also been impeded by Demonic Beasts along the way. The monsters as a whole seemed a measure more savage than before, but I wanted to believe that was simply my mind playing tricks.

No sooner did we arrive at the palace than Viscount Gröllmann submitted an urgent report to His Majesty and the crown prince. The rest of us remained busy all night long, tending to the injured and counting the dead.

“Viscount Zehrfeld.”

“Lady Hermine, I thank you for your diligence... Or, perhaps I should say, I am sorry you had to experience such an ordeal.”

Things were just about settling down for the night when Lady Hermine spoke to me. There weren't any other people around, so I decided to respond to her with the politeness that our differences in years warranted. This was easier for me, but Lady Hermine shook her head in response.

“Please, I am but a mere knight, and so you may address me as such.”

“If you say so, but—”

“As a matter of fact, I would prefer you forget how you previously conducted yourself around me.”

She wouldn't budge. I supposed that female knights were rather rigid like that. That reminded me of something: although there were plenty of aspiring female knights at the academy, there were practically no female knights in the service.

“Okay, I get it. Was there something you wanted to ask?”

“When we were in front of the fort, you seemed to have realized that the robed enemy was about to use magic.”

Oof, she noticed. How was I supposed to handle this? I couldn't exactly tell her that I knew it from a game.

“W-weeeell... I looked into a bunch of things, you know. But it's not like I knew for certain.”

“To approach your preliminary research with such diligence... Astounding.”

I had no idea whether she swallowed my explanation that easily or if she was masking her skepticism. I was relieved either way, but it still made me queasy.

“I have come to realize how lacking my education has been. I hope that you can continue to guide me in the future,” Lady Hermine said with a bow.

What was that attitude? Honestly, seeing a member of the Fürst family act so servile gave me jitters.

“I’m still learning the ropes myself, so I can’t say I’ll live up to your expectations...”

“Thank you for your guidance.”

Hey, I said I had no clue what I was doing. *Listen to me, darn it!* This was turning into something of a pain. How did things wind up like this?

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The next morning, Vogt and I were summoned for a full debriefing before an audience that included the king, the prince, the chancellor, and all the ministers. As I gave the report, I was fuming inside—why did they have to make me sift through those ghastly memories with a fine-tooth comb?

“That concludes the report.”

“Good work.”

For real. That sure was some backbreaking and mind-bending labor. I never wanted to do that again.

The listeners took the news with varying degrees of visible dismay, but nobody came out of it with a healthy complexion. Well, duh. If anything, the king’s relative calmness was more of a surprise.

“At ease, Zehrfeld and Vogt. Ladies and gentlemen, let us first mourn the death of Marquess Kneipp.”

Vogt and I spared no time in taking His Majesty’s leave to excuse ourselves. As we exited the room, heads low in deference, I saw the gathered nobles through the closing doors, their hands clasped in prayer. Count Schanderl was among them, probably because he had been in charge throughout this particular incident.

When the doors closed, I lifted my head. The guards were watching us somewhat pityingly. I turned my back to them and walked silently down the corridor for a while.

“I feel queasy.” My discontent spilled out, unbidden.

“Me too,” Vogt responded with a strained smile.



In truth, some part of me must have been clinging to optimism on account of this being a game world. I had never fathomed that a nameless mid-boss from the early game would hit us with such a grim pronouncement.

*A nameless mid-boss, huh.* In other words, he was an unimportant side character. Just like me.

A vague hypothesis was starting to form in my head as we walked along, when Vogt suddenly broke the silence, as if he had been deliberating upon something himself. His tone was different now.

“My lord.”

“What is it?”

“To be perfectly candid, I admire your insight.”

“Excuse me?”

What was he talking about?

Blithe to my inner confusion, Vogt turned to me, his erudite face composed in deep respect. Wasn’t this some kind of misunderstanding?

“Loath as I am to admit it, it was not until very recently that I saw the need for haste in developing countermeasures against area-of-effect magic.”

*Ohhh.* Okay, I kind of got it. Hardly any of the monsters that appeared around the capital used magic. Although there were cases of adventurers encountering magic-wielding monsters in dungeons, it was easy for most people to shrug that off as a theoretical threat at worst. It was hard to feel the danger.

“When I saw the enemy’s spell at Fort Werisa, I understood with painful clarity the dangers of a heretic’s magic.”

“Mm, I expect it won’t just be one or two of them.”

After all, that black mage was a random-encounter trash enemy in the midgame dungeons. They were so plentiful that I got sick of them.

“And that knave said they would attack the palace next. It made me realize the urgency of developing countermeasures.”

“Yeah, it’s a graver situation than I imagined.”

“I myself lacked the imagination to even fathom it.”

A lightbulb flicked on in my head. I finally understood what he was so impressed by—although it was pretty ironic that I was slowest on the uptake here.

“If not for your foresight, my lord, we would only have started the research after the fact.”

“I’m just a coward.”

Those were my honest feelings. No, it was a fact. I didn’t want to die.

“They say that wisdom is born from cowardice. That you did not turn your eyes away from your cowardice is noble in itself.”

“Please stop.”

It was making me blush hearing such praise from a guy who was not only older than me but also had the high standing of a court mage. Besides, my idea didn’t sprout from my own intelligence; I was just working backward from my game knowledge. Humility wasn’t even a thing in this culture, so why was he looking at me as if I was just putting myself down to be polite?

“In any case, the mage corps will have to pool its strength and grapple with this problem.”

“Vogt,” a voice cut in from the side just as the mage was speaking.

I looked and saw a man around the same age as Vogt, also dressed in court mage attire. His outward demeanor gave off the impression of a cool and collected aristocrat. He would probably look good in glasses.

“Pückler, did something happen?”

“I want to ask your opinion on something.” The mage performed a single courtesy bow at me before launching into a discussion with Vogt. There was so much jargon involved that I didn’t have the foggiest idea what they were talking about. The singular system of magic waves? What was that?

“I apologize, my lord,” Vogt said. “I must head to the laboratory now, so I will take my leave here.”

“No problem. I hope we can meet again. If we do, I’ll be relying on you.”

“Please leave the anti-magic research to me.”

“Thank you, and Godspeed.”

With that, Vogt and I parted ways. As the two mages walked off together, I could see that they had immediately resumed their vigorous discussion. If he was serious about developing countermeasures for AOE magic, that would be a huge boon. I would have to rely on the work of other people in that department.

When I returned to my mansion in the capital, my father wasn’t there, and I didn’t feel like going to the academy either. I decided to take a walk—there were some thoughts I needed to chew through.

# Epilogue

I COULDN'T RECALL WHERE I HEARD THIS FROM, BUT this country's palace was divided into three sections: one public, one used for offices, and one strictly private. There wasn't a written rule or anything, but when you moved between the spaces, the guards would ask you to confirm your identity.

And though it was called the "public" area, this only really applied to the nobles and knights. Anyway, this area was relatively freer than the others. As long as you had a noble rank, you could walk around the outer gardens without anyone yelling at you. It had quite a large surface area, making it something like a plaza. This was where parades were held. The station for the knight brigade was also around here, and it was where soldiers could train, and knights could ride their horses. It was popular among the nobles as a venue for liaisons, and it was home to a salon where you could have tea with coveted courtesans.

As the name implied, the office area was a place for administrative work. Here, the king and the ministers conspired and plotted... I mean, conducted politics. In a way, this was the place I least wanted to be in.

The office area was indoors, as one might imagine, though it did have a courtyard. Well, I say "courtyard," though it was only big enough to fit a tiny cottage. In a place where even tea parties had a strong political angle, the courtyard served as a place for important people to meet discreetly. This was where I had chatted with Laura not so long ago. The dance hall and salon within the office area also served a dual purpose for diplomatic meetings.

As an aside, the main headquarters of the knight brigade and the mage corps' laboratory were also here. I supposed that this was also where they sorted the prisoners before throwing them into the dungeons.

You could say that the private area was exclusively for the royal family. It was where the inner palace was situated. Incompetent kings had been known to turtle up in the private area, refusing to come out. Fortunately, our current king wasn't that bad.

Incidentally, monogamy was the rule in this world, but it wasn't unusual for people in power, like nobles, to have a second or third spouse. A king would also bring his mistress to stay here. I figured that the prince's chambers and the chambers for retired royalty were around here as well.

Apparently, this was also the location of the royal treasury. What belonged to the country belonged to the king, it seemed.

I took a break in the outer garden of the public area. I sat on one of the benches and inadvertently let out a sigh. Excuse me, I had no resemblance to an old man in a park, no sirree.

As I basked in the sun and stared absently into the distance, I tried to put my thoughts in order.

The biggest anomaly from that last incident was the black mage. He was a mid-boss at Fort Werisa and a humble random-encounter monster in the midgame. He didn't have any lines of dialogue—an existence that didn't even qualify as a “side character.” I needed to reevaluate the way I was thinking about all of this. It was the game that was based on this world, not the other way around. That sounded about right.

Case in point: I had my own agency. Though I didn't have any choice about my skills and abilities, it was hard to say how much they ultimately influenced my actions. The inverse was also true: my actions could change the outcome. Like how the prince was alive now. In that case, there was a possibility that I could change the scene where the capital gets attacked.

There was one other thing that was gnawing at my mind: the names.

This should go without saying, but the people who lived in this world had their own names, though there were many occasions where I passed people by and didn't bother thinking of them by their names. Much like in my old world, I didn't know what the person who owned the weapon shop or the employees at a bakery were called, and that wasn't necessarily a big deal. I wasn't going to approach random people to get them to introduce themselves.

The problem was that I wasn't aware of the names of people who should have been eminently important. In some cases, it wasn't that weird for me not to have learned them, but in other situations, it was totally inexplicable.

The crown prince and the royal grandson had been living in this world the entire time—they had names. And yet for some reason, I didn't know them until the Demon Stampede happened. It was strange when I thought about it. I knew Laura, the second-oldest princess, but perhaps that was because it was from the game. On the other hand, though I knew that she had an older sister, I couldn't think of the name of this eldest princess no matter how much I racked my brains. As a noble, I should have heard it before.

There seemed to be some kind of separation between my game knowledge and my awareness of the world as one of its residents. But if that was the case, what did it mean?

"Um..."

I was so deep in thought that it took me a second to notice that someone was speaking to me. When I finally looked his way and saw who he was, I stiffened in fright.

"Y-Your Highness, the royal grandson! Please forgive my rudeness!"

"Oh, um, it is fine, Viscount Zehrfeld."

What the heck was he doing here? I was rocked with confusion but managed to find my feet and offer a bow. The royal grandson greeted me politely in turn. Laura was one thing, but this entire royal family was so humble.

First of all, I couldn't make royalty stand up, so I let Ruven take the bench while I stood in front of him. I could feel someone staring at me from somewhere—His Highness hadn't come without escort, then.

"I am honored that you would speak with me, but may I ask what you require of me?"

"Oh, I just wanted to talk with the hero of the Demon Stampede."

"*Hero? What hero?*" I almost blurted out. Luckily I caught myself there. "I am much obliged, but I must demur to any claim that I am a hero."

"My father smiled and told me that you have the makings of one."

*Your Highness, what jokes were you filling your son's head with?* Whatever he'd heard, the kid had taken it at face value. This was getting out of hand. It

was *Mazel* whom people should be calling the hero. But on the other hand, it would be rude to keep denying the royal grandson to his face.

“Back then, I didn’t have the courage to go to the front lines. If only I had your courage, Viscount.”

No, it was weirder for a ten-year-old to be on the battlefield. But maybe I was just projecting knowledge from my previous world onto him? When I thought about it, maybe that wasn’t quite right either. Minamoto no Yoritomo was thirteen at his first battle. Besides, if he was just being escorted into a battlefield, then it wouldn’t be strange for him to be even younger. Some people like Kikkawa Motoharu insisted on venturing to the field themselves, but he was the exception rather than the rule.

“Your Highness, when I was your age, I believe I would have been just as frightened as you.”

“Really?”

“It is normal to be afraid. Once you grow accustomed to the fear, then perhaps, you’ll find courage stirring naturally within you.”

So I said, although I felt like it would be a problem if the kid developed an appetite for war.s

But anyway, it was amazing how he seemed to think it quite natural that he should hold a whole conversation where he was the only one sitting down. That was royalty for you. I also accepted it as the natural course of things.

“I have been told that I am not suited for the battlefield.”

“You mustn’t heed what others say.”

I tried to allay His Highness’s fears but was struck with the thought that if he dressed up as a girl he could pass as Laura’s “little sister.” He would definitely be a beauty when he grew up. Not that I could say this out loud.

“From what I have heard, even men who were called princesses when they were young have gone on to become famed military commanders. There is nothing for you to worry about,” I said instead.

Chousokabe Motochika’s nickname was Himewako, meaning “Little Princess.”

Technically, that was because of his personality rather than his outer appearance, but I wasn't lying. Yep.

"Really?"

"Really. The results are what matter in the end. You need only prove your mettle—I am sure that it will be within your grasp in five years."

Why was I talking like such a know-it-all adult? Even as I shook my head at myself, it occurred to me that I was old enough to be His Highness's father if you added all the years from my previous life to those I'd spent in this one. It was kind of a weird thing to consider.

I was pondering these things when a voice called out to His Highness. It wasn't that of an adult, but a cutesy one, like the twittering of a bird.

"Ru—" The girl seemed to have just barely stopped herself from calling His Highness by his first name. "Your Highness, so this is where you were."

She looked to be about the same age as him. Unlike the blond prince, she had pretty black hair. When she noticed me, she greeted me with a deft curtsy that made her seem older than she was.

"I apologize for inter...interrupting your conversation. I am Rosemary Elle Schramm."

"Thank you for your courtesy. My name is Werner Von Zehrfeld." I returned the courtesy with a bow and scrape of my own. As a favor, I decided to ignore the fact that she almost stumbled over her pronunciation.

"I have heard tell of you, Viscount."

"I am humbled."

*Let's just leave it at that.* I was reminded that Schramm was the name of a marquess's house. But still, this girl looked about ten or so. Nobles could be terrifying—it was hard to imagine knowing much about a mere son of a count like me, and yet she mentioned that she'd heard of me. She must have had noble manners hammered into her. And yet despite that, she seemed like she was on intimate enough terms with His Highness to refer to him by his first name... Heh. Well, I wasn't going to pry.



“Viscount, I am sorry for the interruption.” His Highness bowed to me, which made me think that he had arranged to meet up with Lady Rosemary.

“No, no, I am very satisfied with the time we spent. Besides, I just remembered that I have business of my own to attend to.”

His Highness didn’t seem ill at ease about Lady Rosemary’s entrance, so I figured I was the third wheel here.

After exchanging further courtesies, I exited the scene. On my way out, I glanced over my shoulder and saw the blond boy and black-haired girl walking amiably together before disappearing into a building.

I felt like I’d just glimpsed a heartwarming scene, but then a sobering thought struck me, filling me with a strange sensation. No such girl existed in the game, clear proof that the royal grandson was very much a part of this world, with his own web of relationships. Would she have wept if he had perished in the Demon Stampede? If I’d feigned ignorance and run away from that fight, would I have made her cry? I knew it wouldn’t be my fault, but still...

And what about the attack on the palace? Would she get caught up in it and perish? If the monsters invaded now, would those children be but two more corpses—two notches on the tally of death? Where would it happen? How would they look in death?

An adult could read in a newspaper that a hundred thousand kids were dying of starvation and simply shrug in apathy. But if they saw a sick child on television who lacked the money to pay for their surgery in a foreign country, they would rush to donate. I’d seen this play out countless times in my old world—that was what human psychology was like. The people we saw with our own eyes made a stronger impression than numbers. Stories moved people, not stats.

Case in point: I had no idea how many people would join the mountains of nameless victims in the attack on the capital, but it wasn’t that thought that shook me to the core, but the image of those two kids left lifeless. I wondered whether it was hypocritical of me to not want to see their dead faces.

“What’s wrong with being a hypocrite?”

Far better to be a hypocrite who took action than a saint who did nothing. I couldn't deny that the thought of those two kids dying affected me more than the Stampede casualties or the loss of Marquess Kneipp. I wouldn't blame myself for it either. Maybe I just had a habit of casting myself in a bad light, but I didn't care a whit about what other people thought of me in that regard.

I figured this was why people would sometimes smile in a way that didn't reach their eyes—because of times like this. As I made my excuses where nobody could hear, I strode out of the courtyard and left the palace altogether. There was something I wanted to investigate.

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At the castle gates, I bumped into two familiar faces.

"Werner."

"Oh, hey there, Mazel... Luguentz, you're here too?"

"Yeah. Looks like you lived to see another day."

When I thought about it, nearly a hundred people had come staggering back to the palace after Werisa, so there was no point hiding that something had happened.

Luguentz talked like a smartass, but I could tell from his expression that he was worried about me.

"What happened with you two?"

"I heard that you were at Fort Werisa," Mazel began.

Luguentz immediately picked up the baton. "So, the fort has fallen?" he asked quietly.

*Oh, I see.* They wanted to know for certain whether we lost Fort Werisa. Mazel also seemed to be worried about me because I'd been caught up in the whole mess. It sure was nice to have friends.

"Yes, unfortunately. A high-ranking noble passed away as well."

I wasn't at liberty to disclose details, as one might imagine. A marquess wasn't quite at the level of a prime minister, but he was near in importance to a

cabinet minister or military leader. If I were asked directly, I'd have a hard time figuring out what to say.

"So things must have turned out just like you predicted," Mazel said.

When I nodded, Luguentz groaned. "Even a bigwig bit the dust, huh. This ain't no joke... Mazel, time to crank up the training."

"Yeah, I know. And not just the old shrine—we gotta go to other places too."

"Don't overdo it, you two."

It looked like they were keen to resume their training—or, in video game terms, grind levels—but it would be a problem if they overexerted themselves at this point. I was tempted to drive the point home...but I couldn't raise a stink here. Oh well, Mazel would probably be fine with Luguentz around. I had a feeling that those two would just keep getting stronger regardless of what I said or did.

As the conversation continued, I glanced at the two guys, lost in my own thoughts. Going by the game, the tale had just begun, and I couldn't see what was coming next. Yet that was no reason to stand still and die.

Until Mazel defeated the Demon Lord, I would fight tooth and nail—so that we could live to see another day.

**Bonus Story:**  
**The Royal Academy**  
**~The Hero and the Aristocrats~**

**P**EOPLE CALLED WERNER VON ZEHRFELD AN HONORS STUDENT.

It wasn't always a compliment.

In the entrance exam, his Spearmanship skills would have earned him the top rank in the practical section, though his horse-riding abilities dragged him down to eighth. He was the top scorer in writing, sums, and other academic fields, though he only ranked seventh overall in magic and religious studies. Although his grades were undoubtedly excellent, the teachers would grimace if someone asked about him.

Then they would say: "His talents are well above average, but he only studies by himself. I sense little ambition in him."

Or: "He lends a hand to any who ask, whether they be noble or commoner, but he never approaches others on his own accord."

He was often seen in the classroom or the training grounds, studying or practicing the spear by himself. By all appearances, he was a diligent student, but it was hard to say that he got along well with other people. Overall, he gave the distinct impression of someone who preferred his own company.

This state of affairs arose from Werner's personal philosophy. His thoughts were consumed by the looming attack on the palace and how to survive it. Any bonds he formed at the academy could end up liabilities, and he didn't want to answer to anyone else should worse come to worst in the attack. In such a scenario, he was prepared to focus entirely on self-preservation.

There was also his position within the academy to consider. There were several heirs of high-ranking noble families enrolled, but Werner alone was heir to a minister. As a result, people tended to give him exceptional treatment; some were all too stiff around him, others jostled for his attention, and some

did all they could to avoid him altogether. Even the teachers were overly wary of him, what with his noble house's shadow always looming over them. Werner regarded such fetters as a nuisance.

But the biggest reason Werner never took initiative was because of a certain young man in his class.

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"Hey, Zehrfeld. Got your nose in a book again? You're as studious as ever."

Werner was at his desk near the window, reading a travel book authored by a prominent merchant, when his classmate called out to him in a lightly jocular tone.

Werner looked up. "I wouldn't say I'm studious or anything, Drechsler," he replied with a smooth shrug.

"If you're not studious, then the rest of us are flunkies."

Drechsler was the second son of a viscount. Because his older brother would inherit the family, he aimed to become a knight. He was a bit of an oddball, having enrolled in the academy with the goal of slaying monsters across the land and gaining combat experience. True to his focus, his sword skills were top-notch among the students. He was the type to get carried away easily, though he was amiable enough.

Normally, classes were separated by subjects, but when there were shared classes or assemblies, all the students in the cohort would gather in one spot.

The cohort was separated by grades. The low-ranking students were taught how to read and write from the ground up, and so on, while the high-ranking students learned about court decorum and law. Although Drechsler was in the higher class along with Werner, classroom learning didn't seem to be his forte.

Despite his carefree manner, Drechsler was quite popular among the female students. When it came to the practical exams, he excelled in other areas besides the sword. In this muscle-brain world (as Werner liked to put it), he held considerable status among his peers and teachers. Werner was slightly envious of how his more relaxed position as a second son allowed him to be so casual with others.

“You know, there are girls in the other classes who are into you ’cause of your big brains.”

“It’s not me they want, it’s the Zehrfeld name. Besides, if we’re talking about popularity...” Werner trailed off as he cast a sideways glance at a buzzing circle of people. It was a rather familiar sight.

When Drechsler saw the person in the middle of it, understanding dawned on his face. He folded his hands behind his head. “Yeah, you can’t beat Harting.”

“Yeah.”

Mazel Harting. Never mind the class—he was far and away the most famous person at the academy, full stop.

Normally, skills were considered personal information, best kept private. There was no shortage of nobles who went out of their way to conceal theirs out of fear that they would lose a trump card.

But everybody at the academy knew all about Mazel’s Heroism skill. Though he had been invited to the school at the crown’s behest, it was unclear how the information about his skill had leaked.

Not that it mattered too much—a clumsy attempt to contain the knowledge within a select circle of nobility might have tempted some of them to use it as a leash on him. Perhaps the information had been leaked in order to stop any subterfuge.

“I have a feeling he’ll always manage to come out on top thanks to his protagonist power-up privileges.”

“His what now?”

“Oh, never mind.” Werner shrugged once more. As he inwardly scolded himself for his habit of blurting out whatever was on his mind, he cast Drechsler a meaningful look. “So what did you want?”

“You’re blunt as ever, I see. Okay, so there’s this thing from political studies that I don’t get.”

“I don’t know what you don’t know,” said Werner as he waved his hand. His attitude pretty much said, “*Be specific.*”

Drechsler opened the textbook on the desk behind him, gazing at Werner with reverence all the while.

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“Put a lid on it, you lot.”

Mengelberg attempted to ward off the gaggle of students, but Mazel stopped him with a smile. He, along with another fellow named Sommerfeldt, were young nobles who had been tasked by the crown to support Mazel’s student life.

“They’re not bothering me,” Mazel said. Regardless of his personal protection, Mazel didn’t want to adopt an unpleasant attitude toward his fellow students, but the two nobles tended to look down on commoners, and often barred them from approaching him.

Part of the reason for this was because the world’s current state allowed for it. At this point, there wasn’t even a murmur of the Demon Lord’s revival. Werner was the only person in the entire Wein Kingdom who knew that the Demon Lord would eventually return.

Consequently, the crown had not invested much in Mazel’s support. They kept an eye on him, but his value as a Hero was still in question. So Mengelberg and Sommerfeldt, themselves members of fairly minor houses, were the ones chosen to watch him.

For their part, the two noble families couldn’t overlook the chance they had to climb up the social ladder. They even considered having Mazel get involved with their houses, if possible. To such ends, the family heads had urged their sons to meddle in Mazel’s life beyond the requirements of their obligation, which they dutifully obeyed. Mazel, conscious of his own commoner background, couldn’t easily speak up against the nobles.

As he amicably fielded questions from a female classmate, Mazel’s gaze flickered ever so slightly to the side.

In the eyes of Mazel Harting, Werner Von Zehrfeld was a mysterious presence—an unusual individual.

Werner, the top scorer of their grade, was the sole exception to the gulf

between noble and commoner. Though he seemed to go out of his way to avoid speaking to Mazel, he treated the other commoner students without any prejudice. Whenever other people came up to him to ask a question or get advice, he was rather pleasant.

Mazel himself was no fool. He could see that Werner's reluctance to let people near him wasn't simply a function of his lofty station as a minister's son. He came across as something of a lonely figure.

It was within this context that the first incident happened.

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There were several ways to enroll in the Wein Kingdom's royal academy, which I was currently attending. The first was the entrance exam; just as the name implied, you had to pass a series of tests. Passing the practical exam was enough to get you in, but for some reason that was beyond me, the same didn't hold true for the written tests. Perhaps there was some kind of precedent? Most people of knight rank or higher enrolled through this method.

The next way to enter was through a referral. Since the literacy rate wasn't high in this world, commoners didn't have many chances to study. But in some rare cases, there were commoners who showed notable talent thanks to their skill. If they got a referral from their village or town chief and the head of their church, they were allowed to enroll and learn how to read and write later. Interestingly, the referral system didn't apply to the nobility. No backdoor entry allowed, in other words.

Finally, admission could be granted as a reward for some valiant deed like military accomplishments or rescuing people from a settlement under threat. Unlike the other forms of admission, this right did not just apply to the individual in question; they could bequeath it to their children or other family members. Interestingly enough, this was how adventurers and similar folk would get in—by vanquishing a massive monster or some such.

However, if you happened to enroll in that way, your uniform would bear a slightly different mark, which was instantly recognizable among people in the school. Noblemen who took that route would have their grades evaluated particularly harshly. This was because there were some people who, despite



their sloppy grades, bought their way in from adventurers. Lots of adventurers were happier with a cash reward than with the prospect of enrolling, which was probably why that type of admission could be bought and sold.

Besides that, there were exchange students from foreign countries who were accepted as special cases. This was only to be expected—history and geography differed across countries, which meant that the contents of their exams had to change accordingly.

The crown paid the enrollment fee for students who were admitted on referral or as a reward. Otherwise, some people wouldn't be able to afford it. The academy could also provide writing implements to those who needed them, though it was common for aristocrats to pay out of pocket as a matter of pride.

There were also dorms, which served free food. Only the bread and soup at the cafeteria were free, while everything else cost money. The soup was fine for sustenance, so self-sufficient students could subsist on having it thrice a day as long as they weren't fussy about the taste.

On the other hand, you could feast on some pretty good food at the cafeteria if you paid up. You could even organize tea parties by making a reservation. The girls from aristocratic houses would often hold afternoon tea parties among themselves, and people who were engaged to be married would have tea and cakes together. Every so often, there were parties hosted for matchmaking, but I steadfastly avoided them. They were a pain in the ass.

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That day, I was sitting in the cafeteria after classes, reading the memoirs of a foreign diplomat noble from a few years ago. Though maps in this world were state secrets, merchants and diplomats would record the names of places, local products, and trade routes within the countries they operated in. You could glean quite a lot of useful information from them.

Whenever I saw the name of a location I remembered from the game, I would recall the cutscenes that took place there. My memory was hazy, but I could also just about remember where the dungeons were in those parts. Not that I had the desire or the means to go there myself.

When I happened to glance up for no particular reason, I noticed something strange out of the corner of my eye. I watched dispassionately as a young lady ordered her friends about in preparing afternoon tea. When I noticed her take something out of a bottle and bring it to her mouth, I knew this had turned into a sticky situation.

I continued observing, careful not to arouse the girls' suspicions. As I predicted, the girls soon ushered the Hero Mazel into the cafeteria. When I saw him sit down in the seat they indicated for him, I closed my book and stood up. The girls, who had been attempting to stand around Mazel to block his escape, glared daggers at me when I approached.

It seemed that they recognized me. Their faces twitched with unease, and I took the opportunity to pass right by them.

I plastered on a nobleman's smile and cleared my throat just as Mazel was about to put the tea to his mouth.

"I apologize for interrupting your pleasant chat."

Rather than actively participating out of his own volition, it was more accurate to say that Mazel had trouble refusing the invitation. His teacup froze on the way to his mouth as his eyes flickered in my direction. Sitting across from him was a rather obstinate-looking girl, who turned on me with a scowl.

"I've no idea who you are, but are you not aware that he is here on my invitation?"

"I am well aware that this is your valuable teatime, but one of the teachers has asked for Mister Harting, so I ask your forbearance for this interruption."

"Who, me?" Mazel put down the teacup and gazed at me in confusion.

I gave him a quick nod. Ignoring the female student, I said to Mazel, "Sorry, teach is calling. Could you come with me real quick?"

"Okay, sure. It's not like I can refuse." As one would expect from an institution of learning, a teacher's word brooked no protest. Mazel bowed quickly at his scowling host and stood up. "My deepest apologies, but I must go."

His manners were impeccable, so much so that it was hard to believe that he

was a commoner with no prior familiarity with etiquette.

Together, we escaped the cafeteria. As soon as the door shut behind us, Mazel spoke up.

“She seemed kind of upset.”

“Well, yeah. I’d be mad too if I went to the trouble of drugging your drink and it didn’t pan out,” I responded with a light shrug.

“What?” Mazel’s jaw dropped.

I figured I’d better give a quick explainer. “I’m pretty sure she’s an exchange student from the neighboring country of Salzanach.”

“Really...? Hmm, yeah, she did mention that. She said she’s the daughter of the duke of Salzanach and she’s in her fourth year at the academy.” With a strained smile on his face, Mazel offered some extra information about the girl. He was still wincing as he asked, “But...drugs, you say? At an academy?”

“The snacks on the table were all from Salzanach, you know.” I didn’t know much about snacks, but I had a pretty good intuition for courtly maneuvers. She’d been deliberate in setting her trap after class. “If your body had a reaction, she could claim it was her responsibility because it was food from her country. Then she and her lackeys could strap you into a carriage and whisk you away to the embassy. Come the next morning, you and she would be found naked in a room together. Everyone would think you’d slept with a duke’s daughter.”

There was even a possibility that she didn’t just have an antidote at the embassy but aphrodisiacs as well. That was just speculation, though, and I sure didn’t feel like putting that thought into words.

As he listened to my explanation, Mazel’s shock deepened. He seemed to be under the assumption that the academy was a safe place.

“Sure, you may be fellow students, but a commoner spending the night with a duke’s daughter would cause a huge scandal. You might end up being taken away to Salzanach.”

“Ohh...”

Now that I'd spelled the whole thing out for him, even Mazel visibly shuddered for a moment. Glancing at his pale face from the side, I continued, "That girl swallowed a drug right before you entered the cafeteria. I suspect that she took the antidote in advance so that she could eat the same things as you. That way, only you would succumb to the drugs—or at least that's how it would look."

Noblewomen could be downright ruthless at times.

"She would eat it too? She'd go that far...?"

"That's how nobles play the game."

I shrugged again. Then I turned a cold eye at the corner of the hallway, where I saw two young men approaching us in agitation. Had their faces been pale from the start, or did they turn that way when I—the son of a minister—intervened? Either way, they were sweating buckets.

"Lords Mengelberg and Sommerfeldt, you lack vigilance."

"Uh, well, you see, that is..."

"Sh-she's an exchange student and a duke's daughter. It would have turned into a diplomatic issue..."

"Fools."

It seemed they knowingly let Mazel walk into danger. Now all they could do was shuffle around and look sheepish. Normally, they wore the mantle of their authority as nobles to push around the commoners, but they sure were pitiful when the tables were turned. With the change in situation, those two—and their families—would have a lot to answer for.

"What do we have the country and ministers for? What do we have schools and teachers for? It's to protect people as a group when individual effort fails. If you didn't think you could win alone, you should have sought help. Don't drag your feet until it's too late."

If the Hero Mazel had been abducted through such devious means, it would have turned into a diplomatic incident in a whole other sense. The ruthless exchange student was dumb, but so were these numbskulls.

After thinking about it a little, I decided that this was something I could leave to someone else. I didn't want to get involved with Mazel before the game even started. As the son of a minister, I couldn't stand idly by, but I could do without getting ensnared in other people's troubles in the future.

"Harting, go to the staff room and explain to them what I told you."

"Er, um, what about you? Uh, Zehrfeld?"

I was surprised that he knew my name. Sure, we'd done introductions on the first day of class, but I'd been keeping my distance in every other way. He had to possess an unusually good memory.

"I'm going back to my house. I'm sure they're destroying the evidence right now, but a failed attempt still merits an official report."

I had to use my family to convey the information to the crown. There had to be a reason why someone would go to such lengths to drag away the Hero. I didn't know whether it was because of a monster inside the kingdom or some political imbalance in the Salzanach court, but it felt remiss to leave things here just because we'd skirted danger this time.

Besides, there was another problem that I couldn't speak about to anyone. If tension arose between countries at this point, then it could impede Mazel's journey after the Demon Lord's return.

As far as the game's story was concerned, it probably was better to wrap up the incident with a neat bow instead of pursuing the evidence and worsening the relations between countries.

"There should be a Salzanach carriage in front of the front gates. You two stick with Harting until that carriage goes away. You can all hang around the staff room. Once they've heard about what happened, I doubt the teachers will just stand by doing nothing."

The teachers at this academy weren't that incompetent. That was my thinking when I pushed the aftermath onto the teachers and the academy.

Several days later, the headmaster called me in and ordered me to be the one to support Mazel's school life.

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“You’re asking me, sir?”

I managed to maintain my poker face through sheer force of will, but I knew I couldn’t quite hide the consternation in my voice. How did things end up like this?

“He should have Lords Mengelberg and Sommerfeldt with him...”

“Both their families have withdrawn from the duty,” the vice-headmaster explained from the side.

I couldn’t help but shrug inwardly. Theirs was a very aristocratic way of taking responsibility.

The problem here was that if some kind of disturbance broke out between Mazel and that exchange student, the academy leaders’ heads would go on the chopping block. It also wasn’t hard to imagine that the families who had been previously supporting Mazel would get crushed as well. The Zehrfeld family had actually received gifts of gratitude from both families. Apparently, the teachers had to do quite a lot of running around later, but that was none of my concern.

“Fortunately, you have your position as the son of the Minister of Ceremonies, and there is no issue with your grades or etiquette. You also take many of the same classes he does. There should be no problem with you serving as his aide.”

It was true that my schedule overlapped a lot with Mazel’s. It was a stretch to call us equals when I’d been homeschooled and he was a commoner, but that was saying more about Mazel’s excellence than mine.

I couldn’t help but suspect that I’d just had a burden foisted onto me. After a moment’s thought, I managed to produce a crisp response.

“It is a great honor, but I must unfortunately decline.”

I could not deny that my motivation was self-preservation. But even more than that, I was scared of messing with the story as I knew it before the game had even started. When I thought about it that way, it was my earnest desire to distance myself from Mazel. But there was no way I could say that aloud.

“The Mengelberg and Sommerfeldt families took on the duty because it was the royal family that asked it of them. Though both families have submitted a withdrawal notice, it is not up to the academy to make the decision.”

The headmaster listened silently to my explanation, only urging me with his gaze to continue.

“It also would not be good for Harting himself. I believe it is more important for him to spend his time as a student than be stifled under the wing of someone’s protection.”

“I see. So you think that instead of openly attaching an aide to him, he should be allowed to live a normal life.”

“If anything, attaching a nobleman to him could risk drawing unwelcome attention in his direction.”

“You have a point.” The vice-headmaster nodded, which emboldened me to continue.

“Of course, I do not think he ought to be abandoned, but instead of attaching an aide, he should be allowed to live freely as a student.”

“I see. I understand your reasoning. You may go.”

“Then please excuse me.”

Judging by the headmaster’s choice of words, it looked like he understood that I, as a representative of the Zehrfelds, had no intention of taking the Hero under my wing. That I had no desire to do so, even. That was what I assumed, but—

“Zehrfeld, there’s something I want to ask you about,” Mazel said suddenly.

“What is it?”

Okay, it didn’t cross my mind that Mazel himself would ask for my help. I couldn’t exactly ditch him if he went out of his way to entreat me. *Oh, brother.*

“Could you tell me what to look out for when it comes to aristocrats?”

“Jeez, you can’t narrow that down a bit?”

Even as I grumbled, I understood well enough that it would suck if a similar

problem cropped up in the future. It was looking like I had to lend Mazel a smidgeon of assistance if I wanted him to stay in this country.

I answered a whole bunch of his questions. Later, he joined the other students in asking me for advice, and before I knew it, he and I were the best of buddies. How the freaking hell did it end up like this?

More than a year passed in that way.

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Generally speaking, if you worked hard at it, you could hone your abilities in this world to a certain level. The same thing applied to magic; even without a skill, an elderly mage or priest could still produce results if they put the hard yards in. Admittedly, it wasn't smooth sailing for most people, and a lot of people chose to live quietly in the countryside.

On the other hand, if you honed your skill when young, you could improve those abilities to a more impressive degree. There were plenty of student-aged people who could use magic as adroitly as a veteran mage. Thus, those with skills related to magic or the priesthood often received training from a young age. To put it in blunt terms, the idea was "get 'em while they're young."

But after all that effort to teach and provide for all those students, many of them wound up in the employ of the nobles. It was an inconvenient situation for the country in more ways than one.

There were a lot of problems related to priests especially. Because it was the church's jurisdiction to appoint people to the regional churches, the clergy often expressed grievances whenever students with a talent for recovery magic ended up in a noble house. That was a problem because churches in this world often doubled as hospitals, so if they didn't have priests, those in regional areas would lose out on access to healthcare.

That being the case, it was forbidden to poach a student by force or coercion. At least, that was how it was on the surface—the act of recruitment itself was tacitly allowed.

"Those guys are out in force, huh? I shouldn't be surprised."

"What's up, Zehrfeld?"



“Oh, Drechsler.”

As I gazed out the window, Drechsler sidled up next to me. Both of us gazed out at the training hall, where we could see the clash of weapons.

The academy had its enrollment period in spring, which I suspected was an artifact of its video game origins, but other than that, it was more like a university than anything. Anyone above the age of ten could enroll if they passed the exams, and there were even people over twenty who studied diligently to get in. Nobles often had the fundamentals drilled into them by their home tutors, so it was typical for them to apply when they were about fifteen or so.

Accordingly, there wasn't a “year level” in the strict sense. If you raised your grades through the practical and written tests, then you were allowed to take lectures from a higher rank and study high-level subjects. An aristocrat who had been thoroughly homeschooled would often move up from the bronze rank to at least a silver just a week after enrolling.

Your overall grades also determined whether you could graduate. If you speed-ran your way to gold rank and kept up the necessary grades, then you could even graduate in the same year you enrolled. Someone like me had the grades to graduate, but I elected to stay and continue my studies.

This was all beside the point. For bronze-rank students in the knight course, the biggest hurdle was getting above a ninety in heraldry, a classroom subject. You could pass all the other subjects, but if you slipped up on heraldry, then you could stay as a bronze rank for four whole years. Mazel was an unusual case for getting a perfect score on the first try.

Because of the system, most of the teen students were known to possess a skill. Even if they didn't reveal the specifics, the very fact that they had the grades to enroll, pass the tests, get a referral, or produce results that put an adult to shame made it all but evident. There were even some cases like Mazel where everyone knew what his skill was or other cases like mine where my excellence in the spear left little room for interpretation.

New students were called “buds.” You could only tell them apart during the enrollment period—first years wore a different colored collar. Everyone in their

second year or above was called a “sapling.” Since you had at most ten years to graduate, you could be a sapling from anywhere between one to nine years. The incident between Mazel and the exchange student happened when he was a bud.

“Look there.” I pointed, prompting Drechsler to let out a strange, inscrutable sound.

“Oh.”

In the shadow of a building, secluded from prying eyes, two slender female students were encircled by four male students. Though they might have been trying to show the girls around the school, it all but looked like a pickup was taking place.

The girls were buds—new students, in other words—while the boys were saplings. To make matters worse, the girls looked about twelve or thirteen, while the boys were about seventeen or eighteen. They had the sophisticated looks of people of noble or knightly pedigree. An intimidating bunch indeed.

“Oh, those girls look like they’re in the mage and priest courses. Plus, they’re pretty cute.”

“I heard they’re top students.”

I figured that they were probably thinking of snatching them up early. When I heard that these elementary/junior-high-aged girls were talented, my gaze turned ever so slightly colder. Seeing my face, Drechsler opened his mouth, his face carefully neutral.

“You don’t think anything about this, Zehrfeld?”

“Well, it’s a common enough story.”

Honestly, I did pity them, but I suspected that things could get sticky if I intervened. I was the heir of a count and the only current student who was the son of a minister. The school, in principle, was supposed to be a level field where my lineage held no sway, but the shadow of my father loomed over me regardless. It was a tricky situation to be in.

Just as I’d made up my mind on the whole thing, a guy who was in an even

trickier situation than mine walked out of the building and laid eyes on the scene. I could only sigh. *Jeez*. That guy was more the ideal student than I would ever be.

“Drechsler,” I said.

“Oh? You gonna rush to their aid and woo them yourself?”

“Don’t be stupid. Lend me some coin.”

These were elementary school students (in my old world terms) we were talking about. I had no intention of *wooing* anyone that age.

“Coin? How much?”

“Everything you have on you.”

“Huh?”

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“What are you doing?” Mazel cut in, his tone accusatory.

“The hell? This ain’t your business,” a sneering voice answered him from the group of boys.

Though they knew that the Hero was at the school, they did not appear to know his face.

Another boy came in with an explanation, his face the picture of exasperation. “You should know the name of Count Gahmlich, at least. It’s a sweet deal for the girls, since they’ll be getting the backing of a count.”

“The academy does not allow coercion.”

Mazel’s statement was correct, but to the male students, it only looked like slavish devotion to the letter of the law. The four of them exchanged glances, smiled, and then nodded in unison. They might have just been about to beat up Mazel and use that as fodder to threaten the female students behind him. But the next moment...

“Guuuh?!”

One of the boys crumpled to the ground. Everyone looked at the fallen boy in shock as a pouch of coins dropped from his face to the ground with a heavy

thunk.

“Oops, my bad. My hand slipped,” a voice said mildly.

“Werner.”

Mazel stared in amazement as Werner drew near with Drechsler in tow. Meanwhile, the other boys stiffened. They knew the name of Werner Von Zehrfeld, heir to the Minister of Ceremonies.

Calmly, Werner walked over and picked up the heavy coin pouch. Though it was just an assortment of coins, they were heavier than pebbles. He and Drechsler had managed to pool thirty coins between them, turning the pouch into a formidable weapon in its own right. The hapless student discovered that for himself when the pouch hit his face at full speed.

Werner turned his gaze to the other boys.

“H-hey,” one of them said. “Let’s go.”

“Y-yeah.”

The boys chuckled uneasily as they picked up their fallen companion and fled the scene. What should have been four-on-one had turned into an even three-on-three. On top of that, one of the opponents came from a distinguished family; clearly, their best option was to run. *At least their decision-making abilities aren’t impaired*, Werner thought with a chuckle.

“Thanks, you really helped out.” Mazel expressed his gratitude as he watched Drechsler out of the corner of his eye. The other boy had wasted no time in calling out to the girls.

“You should’ve said something before poking your head in by yourself.” Werner shrugged in response.

Inwardly, Werner thought that it was really the four boys who got a lucky break. If Mazel had fought them seriously, they wouldn’t have gotten out of it with just a light scrape.

This time, Werner watched from the corner of his eye as the red-faced girls thanked Mazel. Figuring that it was best to wrap things up here, he returned Drechsler’s money from the pouch.

After that, the girls thanked Werner as well, but he just waved his hand as if the whole thing was a mild annoyance. That made Mazel break out into a sheepish grin, while Drechsler shrugged his shoulders. Their expressions plainly said that Werner could stand to be a bit more sociable.

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That day, I returned home and told my father, the count, an abridged version of the day's events. Given that the academy was like a mini court, there were times when things happened there that would affect the family outside. At that point, my father told me about the situation with Count Gahmlich, and I let out an inadvertent sigh. It looked like the troubles weren't over yet.

The next day, I swung by the staff room immediately after I got to the academy and explained what had happened to the teachers. Even now, there were people in charge of keeping an eye on Mazel, ostensibly to support his school life, so I figured things would be fine as long as the information reached them. Count Gahmlich seemed to be plotting something on his own end, so after I told the story to a few staff members, I impressed on them the importance of relaying it to the academy's upper management.

"Hey, Zehrfeld, what are you gonna do about lunch today?"

"I'll have something at the cafeteria," I said in reply to Drechsler.

"Cool, then let's go with Harting."

It seemed that Drechsler had also realized that something was up. He had a pretty good intuition in his own way.

When we entered the cafeteria, I picked up on some slight murmurs. Mazel obviously attracted a stir wherever he went, but Drechsler was also a strong and handsome noble. And though I didn't want to admit it, I was a top student and the son of a minister.

Also, to varying degrees, we all shared a commonality: we didn't look down on commoners or people with noncombat skills. In this muscle-brain world, people who didn't participate directly in combat were often looked down upon, but even Drechsler was pretty agreeable toward them (for Mazel, of course, it went without saying). I didn't go out of my way to interact with them, though it

wasn't like I turned anyone down when they asked me for help.

"The girls say you're cool and diligent, Zehrfeld," Drechsler said.

"Cool and diligent? Who's that?" I retorted flatly.

"To be fair, you *are* always studying, and you take the practical classes seriously. So yeah, I would say you look diligent," Mazel chimed in.

"That's way off the mark."

I just happened to be the only person who knew how powerless I would be in the future, when the capital would be attacked. If only I'd been born with the Oracle skill, then I could have warned the world about it, but there was nothing a mere student could do, even if I was the son of a count.

"Can I sit next to you?"

As I was brooding, a student approached, holding a plate. He had the clean-cut look of an honors student who would be handsome in glasses.

"Be my guest."

"Thanks." The preppy kid took a seat next to me. His ears were primed to attention, ready to casually eavesdrop on me. Now that our guest of honor was here, I figured it was time to change the subject.

"By the way, Mazel, you know that Count Gahmlich guy from yesterday?"

"Yeah."

I explained all there was to know about the count. He owned land in the mountain ranges, where it was difficult to raise livestock. Because there wasn't any ore to mine or flowing water either, his stature wasn't too high, but he did enjoy the reputation of what one might call a hunter count.

In this world, monster materials could be bought and sold for large sums of money, which meant that monster hunting was a major source of income, up there with agriculture and mining. Though it was somewhat like how individual hunters could make a living off animal skins, rare monsters could drop items that were equivalent to large gems and ore.

But this wasn't a steady form of income, and people could die if the monsters

lashed back. Thus, the job was generally left to adventurers, though there were some noble houses that took up hunting themselves. They didn't have to go through any middlemen, which meant they could reap all the rewards from the monster materials.

"So, I don't know what exactly happened, but Count Gahmlich's house recently had a major screwup. A bunch of their knights apparently died, even."

"So they're trying to rebuild the house by recruiting buds," Drechsler said exasperatedly. Being something of a monster hunter himself, he probably thought that they deserved what they got.

But given their circumstances, it was more than likely that they would set their eyes on the Hero. Just as I was thinking this, the preppy student sitting next to me interjected.

"Sorry for butting in. This is just what I've heard, but apparently Count Gahmlich's heir has been rather aggressive about scouting students."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, apparently they've resorted to threats. It's becoming a problem among the noble houses. It's just a rumor, though. I don't have any proof."

I kept my poker face on. A tavern was good for gathering information around town, but when it came to rumors among the students, the cafeteria was the best place for it. Although this guy outwardly had the appearance of a student, he was definitely an agent under orders from the crown to observe matters within the academy. It would be a problem if Mazel got abducted by some noble, after all. I suspected that he had come here today to warn me to keep an eye on Mazel.

I then glanced casually about and spotted some guys attempting a furtive exit. It didn't seem like they were throwing enmity in my direction; it felt more like they were trying not to be seen. Hmm.

"Werner?"

"There's something I'd like to confer upon right now. It's fine if you keep eating, just listen."

Mazel cocked his head in confusion, blinked three times in succession, and nodded. It was one of his weird habits. The preppy kid also looked mystified. As for Drechsler, he seemed thoroughly amused, even if he did possess a good nose for detecting trouble.

“Well, the fact that they gave up on the smaller fish means they’ve spotted a bigger catch.”

There was plenty of reason to assume that once they learned it was the Hero who interfered with them, their target would switch to him. That said, it would be difficult for them to threaten him directly. There was no way they’d draw attention to themselves in such an obvious way. I wondered what kind of move they would pull.

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If we were just talking about that Gahmlich guy, it would have been fine to just write him off as a fool, but an aristocrat’s subordinates had a way of sticking their noses into their betters’ business. Because people of martial prowess were more popular in this world, I figured that there were a lot of guys who would lend Gahmlich a hand. It seemed that he had some goons who were convinced of their own cleverness.

The next evening, before he headed home, Mazel surreptitiously dropped something in front of me. It was a small bit of cloth. Although it was generally more expensive than the thick and stiff parchment made from monster hide, cloth was more useful for communicating at times like this. In my old world, this would have been a good time to use a Post-It note.

I picked up the cloth and read it. Spotting what I was doing, Drechsler came near. “Did something happen?”

“Something sure did.”

I handed over the memo. When Drechsler finished reading it, he burst out laughing. I asked him to call over the preppy kid from the other day. We needed a witness for this.

Because the academy higher-ups were involved with Mazel, those goons probably decided to make their move before the academy could interfere.



Besides, Mazel was the kind of person who couldn't turn down a female student's request or abandon anyone. You could figure that much out with just a bit of asking around. But this was still...

"Using a girl's love letter to lure him out... Mazel sure is a stud."

I couldn't help but grimace. The reason why the location was different from the other day was because they wanted to prevent me from interfering again. But I could easily imagine what sort of secluded place they would use if they were going to try something. Whether the female student who was working as an accomplice would be able to maintain the facade was another story.

I watched a pale-faced female classmate leave the room—it was time for the hunter to become the hunted. Mazel was there so I probably didn't need a weapon, but I packed one just in case.

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Mazel was called to the second school building, which not many people used after school.

Unlike the schools in Werner's previous world, there was nothing that could be called "club activities" after a day's classes. But there were gatherings for like-minded people, and close friends would get together to study. They would often head for the classrooms, the library, or the training grounds. Nobles would frequently return to their mansions and study with their tutors, and self-sufficient students would go to work.

Either way, the second school building was far from the specialized classrooms, which made it unsuitable for self-study. It often played host to clandestine meetings between lovers. The academy was probably aware of this to some extent, but they let it go undetected.

"I'm here," Mazel announced in an unconcerned tone.

When he ventured to the back of the building, he was greeted by the sounds of multiple footsteps approaching his direction. For a moment, a look of suspicion flickered across Mazel's face. He noticed a great deal of inconsistency between the sounds of the footsteps.

"Heh, you commoners are just as dumb as I expected."

Mazel swung around at the sound of the voice. It was perhaps little wonder that his face twisted in surprise. There were more people now—six male students. They dragged along the two new students from the other day, bound in ropes. And behind them was the writer of the letter—his classmate, who looked ready to burst into tears as she stared Mazel in the face.

The Hero's expression grew more severe. He had not expected that these people would go to such lengths. But before he could do anything, the male student who had been dragging the captive students whipped out a knife and pointed it at him.

"Not so fast there. This thing here is sharp."

"Do you think you can get away with this?"

"Heh. It's not anything for *you* to worry about."

Even the academy wouldn't stay quiet if they learned what had just transpired. But with such a delectable catch in front of him—the mage, the priest, and now the *Hero*—the son of Count Gahmlich had lost all restraint. But he had kept enough of his wits about him to avoid showing himself directly.

"Why are you doing all this?"

"I suppose I can fill you in," the oldest-looking student declared.

It all started when a chimera appeared in Count Gahmlich's territory. It was said that chimeras originated from the era of the ancient kingdom. They were Demonic Beasts that had been created to fight their fellow monsters, but they had escaped and turned feral. They were a rare sight in the days before the Demon Lord's revival.

Once severed, their heads commanded a high price. Their poisons were useful for hunting other monsters, and their magic stones were valuable as well. Even their meat and hides were prized highly.

"If it was just one of them, it wouldn't have been such an ordeal. But..."

Bitterly, the boy continued the tale. There had been two chimeras, a male and a female. Count Gahmlich's knights had inflicted a fairly deep wound on one of the beasts at their nest. Yet just when they assumed that victory was theirs, the

other returned and struck viciously from behind. The result was a massacre among the knights and the count's precious mages. Because of the looming possibility that the wounded chimera would also come back for revenge, there was an urgent drive to rebuild the troops with new blood.

"The Hero has plenty of worth for his fighting power, even if he is a commoner. As long as you come quietly and sign the pledge at Count Gahmlich's house, nothing will happen to these girls," one of the boys said as he brought out a document. It was a written pledge that Mazel would support the count's house.

"M-Mazel... I'm so sorry..."

The one girl who wasn't bound apologized with a tearful face. When one looked closely at her, it was possible to see a close resemblance to one of the captured girls.

"Is she related to you? Your sister, maybe?" Mazel asked.

The girl nodded frantically. One of the male students kicked her. Mazel took a step forward, only for the knife-wielding boy to press the blade up further against his hostage.

"Won't the outcome be the same if I tell the school later?"

"I know you won't do that. A commoner like you couldn't possibly abandon this girl." The boy sneered.

Mazel was silent for a moment before he said under his breath, "Then I just have to act first and ask questions later."

Right on cue, two people dropped on the male students' backs from above.

Werner and Drechsler had jumped from the window of the second school building. So long as you honed your body properly in the practical classes, then you wouldn't get an injury jumping from that height.

Mazel would probably have kept his cool if he saw the two of them approach the boys from behind, but it might have been written all over the girls' faces. Taking that into account, Werner and Drechsler decided to jump from the second floor.

“Take the brown-haired one on the left!”

Reacting to Werner’s voice, Mazel sank his fist into the stomach of the guy who had kicked his classmate. The boy’s body quite literally flew through the air.

Meanwhile, Werner and Drechsler knocked out the two boys who had been holding the new students hostage, and then quickly brought the girls to safety. It all went exactly as they’d planned before the jump. Watching the scene from the second floor, they struggled to suppress their rage. They didn’t hesitate to use their weapons—blunt though they were—and they didn’t hold back either.

“Don’t think you can get away!” Mazel declared, his voice rippling with anger. As he spoke, he struck down another of the cads. Werner and Drechsler took care of the remaining two, who promptly collapsed where they stood. Just for good measure, Drechsler slammed his foot into the stomach of one who was moaning on the ground.

It took a while to explain the circumstances to the three girls. Mazel spoke to them while Werner and Drechsler undid their bonds. It was only then, as if a spell had been undone, that they burst into tears.

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“Yo there, playboy.”

Mazel grimaced at my words as if that was the only thing he could do. “That love letter was fake and you know it.”

In front of him was his classmate, Collina. The girl had sunk to the floor, crying her heart out.

Surprisingly enough, Collina was the older sister of the priest girl who had gotten entangled in the incident from the other day. We didn’t have time to research everyone involved that thoroughly.

“So, basically, some different guys from the other day called out those two girls and abducted them. Then they forced Collina to call out Mazel by threatening her sister.”

“Th-that’s right. I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Collina continued her tearful apology. I left it to Drechsler to comfort her as I glared coldly at the boys sprawled out at my feet.

There were four of them last time, but now there were six. The two new guys had pretended to be involved with the school. They'd approached the girls yesterday, telling them they'd heard about Mazel's situation and wanted to hear their side of the story. Sure, the girls had let their guards down, but I would have been kind of an asshole if I blamed them for it. They were only around elementary or middle school age, and they weren't familiar with the academy's workings to begin with.

"Wow, Zehrfeld, you have a gift for prescience," Drechsler commented.

"You're the smart one for finding out those girls' names and stuff," I said in exasperation. No, seriously, when did that guy find the time to do all that research?

Finally, there was the preppy guy. As he comforted the two crying girls, who had been bound only moments earlier, he gazed at us with an almost dumbfounded expression.

"Ammerbach, sorry for making you witness all of that."

"Er, um, it's fine, but..."

I'd asked the preppy kid—aka the son of Baron Ammerbach—to come with us because I'd predicted this would happen. I needed him to submit a "fair report" to the academy. Thus, I needed him to see that it was the other guys, and not Mazel, who had captured the girls.

But still, I could understand his dazed reaction when he saw Mazel snap. When he punched that guy in the stomach and sent him flying, even Drechsler had been taken aback.

"Now then, there are a lot of things I want to ask you guys."

"..."

I took their belongings as evidence. They responded with magnificent silence. For people who had tied up girls and threatened the Hero, their devotion to their leader was, at least, laudable. Not that they had a good reason to go along

with any of it.

“Drechsler, pass me that knife.”

“You got it.”

I was talking about the knife which had formerly been in the boys’ possession. I eyed where it had fallen to the ground. Drechsler nodded casually before picking it up and passing it to me.

“What are you planning to do?”

“For starters, I’m thinking of slashing everything these schmucks are wearing.”

“That’s your kink?”

“As if!” I said hotly. Darn, I didn’t mean to say something that would get misinterpreted so badly. “If the guys who tied up those two girls got carried out in their birthday suits, forget the academy—it’d be the talk of the entire capital within days.”

At this point, their lives as students were essentially over, but if rumors dogged their existences, they wouldn’t be able to roam the capital either. In the worst-case scenario, there was even a possibility that Count Gahmlich would take moves to silence them before his son could be associated with a bunch of attempted rapists. The boys turned pale.

I didn’t actually plan to carry out my threat. If rumors of that sort took off, it would negatively impact the girls as well. Still, I kept up the poker face of an aristocrat as I uttered my indirect threat.

“Well, we can only hope that your lord is a kind person who is quick to forgive. Don’t take it personally.”

“Stop, we’ll talk. I mean, please let us explain.”

They capitulated fast after hearing that. Listening to them, I discovered that the mastermind was indeed Count Gahmlich’s son, Gunner Melchior Gahmlich. Though his father had ordered him to scout fresh young recruits, his methods were much too forceful.

Collina and her sister were from the capital, but their adventurer father was

an absent figure in their lives, and their mother worked at a small item shop in the capital. Gahmlich threatened to wipe out the store using his influence as a noble. Collina was attached to the store because even the old couple that ran the place doted on her like a grandchild. Thus, she was faced with threats on two fronts: her sister's safety, and the existence of the store. Gahmlich made her promise to lure out Mazel and get him to join the count's house.

As for the mage girl, she was born in Gahmlich territory, but she apparently wanted to continue studying at the capital after she graduated from the academy. She rejected the call to support Gahmlich, which infuriated him. You could say that she was the spark for the whole incident. She apologized tearfully to Collina and the others, but I didn't think any of it was truly her fault.

"Hey, Mazel, try not to look so bloodthirsty."

"...Sorry."

The more the story went on, the more intense the aura around Mazel became. I understood his feelings, though. I was downright pissed off too.

"Anyway, it's a fact that those two girls were restrained. I have to tell the academy that the Zehrfeld house has confirmed the facts. Drechsler, I need you with me as a witness."

"Okay, sure." Drechsler nodded.

I wanted to make out that it was my family that sorted out the incident since we were such bigwigs and all. I pocketed the pledge document that the goons had tried to make Mazel sign. Ammerbach practically sprinted off, either to the staffroom or the headmaster's office.

"Now I can just leave it to the school."

The goons had already spilled all the beans, and there were the victims to consider, so I didn't feel the need to say anything more. Mazel looked unsatisfied, but when I smiled at him casually and assured him that he could leave things to me, he nodded silently.

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That day, Werner returned to his mansion and spent all night writing a report.

Early the next morning, he submitted the account to the crown through his father, the Minister of Ceremonies. He had added a note to the end of the written pledge, which served as tangible proof of the crime: “The academy will also submit a report, so please confirm that on your end.”

As soon as all the teachers at the academy grasped the situation, the royal family would seek a detailed report from them. Count Gahmlich’s side would not have time to exert any kind of influence on the academy. Before they knew it, the scandal would spread. Even Werner was surprised that it took only five days for the count to announce that Gunner would no longer be his heir.

“It looks like they’ve finally stopped covering his ass. The church might’ve expedited things by airing their own grievances since it was their recruits being swiped from under their noses.”

That was how Werner chose to appraise the situation, although he was aware that he was the outlier here. No matter how much knowledge he might have amassed as a noble, it was not typical to expect a student to write up a report in half a day and submit it to the crown.

In his previous life, Werner had been an office worker, so he was more familiar than the average student with the worth of promptly filed paperwork. Not only did he remember how to write administrative reports, he also felt no resistance whatsoever to doing paperwork while juggling his student life. Neither Count Gahmlich nor the school had anticipated this, hence the rapid results.

“So, Mazel, you gonna do it? Maybe they’ve learned their lesson and won’t make a peep.”

“I’ll do it.”

Werner asked the question, but all he was really doing was prodding for confirmation. Mazel responded with an exasperated roll of his eyes. Their final strategy meeting at the academy was short and sweet.

That day, after school, Werner took a detour back to the count’s mansion, while Mazel immediately filed a request to the dorm to spend a night outside. The idea was that on the day after, he would head directly from the place he was staying to the academy.



After dinner, Mazel passed the time in his dorm, waiting until nightfall. Then he borrowed a lamp and left the dorm. He took some deliberate detours and walked around in circles for a while, before abruptly breaking out into a sprint. The sound of countless thudding footsteps followed after Mazel's lamp. Mazel took note of what was happening as he ran. Eventually, he came to a stop by the wall of a long, narrow street with a dead end.

"We've got you now, commoner."

An assembly of over twenty thugs brandished their weapons, knife-like blades among them. From behind them emerged a brawny young man. Multiple men held up lamps of their own, so that only the dead-end path was illuminated.

Mazel checked to see if there were no other students around as he wordlessly continued to thrust his lamp about. The man, who was dressed not in a school uniform but in an aristocrat's outfit, crowed in victory. He appeared to have concluded that Mazel's silence was indicative of his fear.

"You pitiful country bumpkin. You don't even know the lay of the capital, it seems. I will at least congratulate you on noticing us."

"And who might you be, you scoundrel who won't even tell his name to this poor country bumpkin?"

Anyone who knew Mazel well would have been startled by his cold voice. But the ringleader, with his strength of numbers, only showed unease for the briefest of seconds. If anything, he was elated to announce his own name.

"I am Gunner Melchior Gahmlich. If not for your meddling, I would still have been Count Gahmlich's heir..." The sound of him grinding his teeth was almost imperceptible. His face quickly resumed a victorious expression as he glared at Mazel. "The Minister of Ceremonies is even organizing a ceremony to appoint my little brother the heir. Zehrfeld is that damned man's son. If I went after him, I wouldn't be able to escape suspicion. But you, on the other hand, are a commoner..."

"It seems that you understand how unsuitable you are for the house of a count," Mazel interrupted him coldly. Ignoring the disgruntlement on Gunner's face, he set his lamp down on a barrel next to the wall and continued. "And I don't suppose you could have come to me to complain unless you brought a

whole gang with you.”

“Hey, you peasant! What can you do against these numbers barehanded...?”  
Gunner began, as if to taunt Mazel.

But just then, right in front of his eyes, Mazel drew out a wooden sword from behind the barrel. Werner had stashed it there earlier on one of his detours before dusk had fallen.

“My friend prepared this weapon for me while it was still light out. I walked around in circles so that your friends had no choice but to chase me as a group. This is a narrow alley, which means that even if you have numbers on your side, only a few of you can come at me at a time. And...”

Mazel checked the entrance of the dead-end street to make sure that a familiar figure was standing behind the group.

“You didn’t notice that you were all dancing to our tune.” He smiled.

A startled Gunner looked over his shoulder. Werner grinned back at him, training spear in hand. He had cut off the entire group from behind.

\*\*\*

“Guh...!”

As the guy loosed a vulgar cry, I struck his throat with my spear, toppling him over. It was a training spear with a wooden ball on the end, but striking someone’s throat with enough force could still kill them. I pulled my punch in that respect, but I would make this guy sit things out for a while.



A narrow dead-end street. It was only wide enough for two people to stand abreast. Mazel was strong enough to best even the teachers, while I had superior reach with my spear.

A thug flung his knife at me in desperation, but I easily anticipated that. I swung my spear downward, deflecting it. With momentum on my side, I continued to bring the spear down, slamming it into his shoulders with enough strength to break bone. Then I quickly repeated the process, butting another person in the stomach with the spear's tip.

Meanwhile, Mazel took down multiple guys at once. This was a testament not only to the superior reach of his wooden sword compared to knives, but also to the sheer gap in strength between him and his opponents. The bigger worry was whether the wooden sword would break. Though the thugs were more than accustomed to violence, you could only say that they had a bad roll of the dice by having Mazel as an opponent.

In no time flat, we'd beat up all the small fry and started closing in from both sides. Gahmlich himself came from a martial background. Even when faltering, he wouldn't just sink to the ground. But his undoing came a moment later.

"Aaaargh!"

He chose to face off against Mazel rather than me, presumably because he still regarded the former as just a mere commoner. This was pretty darn stupid of him, considering that even if Mazel was powerless, there was only a dead end behind him. Also, I was the weaker one between the two of us.

The instant they clashed, Mazel's wooden sword struck him down with a single blow—even though Gunner carried a metal sword. There was something kind of beautiful about watching a guy get taken down by the protagonist.

"Gaaaah!"

As Gunner crumpled to the ground, Mazel and I stood on either side of him. He glared up at us as he nursed his wrist. Judging by the look of things, he had probably broken a bone. Mazel had not been kidding around with that strike.

"W-wait! If you want money, you can have it."

That was faintly ridiculous coming from a guy who had lost out on his inheritance because of his laundry list of misdeeds. “You think your family will pay for you?” Mazel glared down icily at Gunner. “I heard you said some rather awful things to those first-year girls.”

*Hoo boy*, was he mad. Well, Mazel was hardly the only one who’d be enraged if they heard that some guy was picking up twelve- or thirteen-year-old girls, telling them he’d make mistresses of them. This reminded me that Mazel had a little sister himself.

“Th-that was a joke...”

“Mazel,” I cut in. Gunner looked ready to elaborate, but the guards would be here at any moment, and I didn’t want him calling for their help. That would only make things messy.

Mazel and I nodded at each other before throwing another glare down at Gunner.

“A-aaah! Wai—!”

Before he could say “Wait!” Mazel and I whacked Gunner’s body with our wooden weapons. The sound echoed down the dead-end street, and it was honestly pretty satisfying. Gunner’s eyes rolled back to their whites as he crumpled on the spot. Oh, looks like I’d been madder than I’d thought. I’d struck his vitals without a hint of hesitation.

“What are you two ruffians doing?!”

The capital’s guards arrived on the scene. Mazel and I quietly gave up our weapons. Now then, how would we talk our way out of this one?

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The group that attacked us had belonged to the count’s house, but the count’s first-born son had also suffered from the attack. To make matters more complicated, one side was a problem student and his goons, while the other side was the Hero and a top student. Well, to be perfectly frank, I couldn’t honestly say that I was an innocent victim here. If anything, I was more of the aggressor, probably.

Thus, although the charge technically didn't exist in this world, our situation could be described as excessive self-defense. Still, after taking into account the other party's egregious faults, we were let off with a verbal reprimand and detention.

It sucked having to stay cooped up in the academy dorm for three days. There was nothing to do besides eat the food they delivered to me. I decided to make the best of things by spending the time on muscle training. It seemed that Mazel came to a similar conclusion. From what I heard later, the fact that we stayed put throughout the detention period improved our reputation within the academy's administration.

We also heard that the crown was taking measures to help Collina and the other victims. When Mazel found out about that, an expression of deepest relief bloomed on his face. Inwardly, I thought he could stand to be a little angrier at Collina, given that she'd sold him out and all. He probably couldn't help it, being a Goody Two-shoes protagonist and all.

Finally, our detention came to an end.

"I guess you're going back to your mansion for a bit, Werner?"

"Yeah. I'm expecting another lecture from my parents."

Even if my father was away at court, my mother was bound to be furious. Just the thought of it made my stomach churn. In exchange, I would be leaving Mazel to face an ordeal of his own.

"See ya later, then."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

Aware of the awkwardness of exchanging farewells so early in the morning, Mazel and I smiled at each other. Then I left the academy building.

On the way to the gates, the sound of cheering reached my ears from the building. Looking over my shoulder, I could see my class was bubbling with excitement. I figured that we would be popular for teaching a lesson to that bully of an aristocrat.

Though Mazel and I had received our punishments at the same time,

Drechsler and Collina were in our class. There were plenty of ways for the information to get out there, so I knew what we would be in for when we went into the classroom. Come tomorrow, everyone would have used up all their energy on Mazel, so I probably wouldn't be that much of a celebrity. It was just fine for Mazel to be the popular one.

I wondered if I would return tomorrow to a show of anger for having foisted all the attention onto him. Oh well, it wasn't too big of a deal; I was sure he'd resign himself to the task.

"But still, I wonder if this will be part of the Hero's legend."

I imagined Mazel squirming in embarrassment as the mob closed in on him. With a spring in my step, I took off for the Zehrfeld mansion.

## Afterword

TO EVERYONE READING THIS STORY FOR THE FIRST TIME, I'm so pleased to meet you. To everyone who reviewed, rated, bookmarked the web version of this novel, or showed any other form of support, I am so delighted to be able to greet you in this form.

The web version of this story is published on the *Shousetsuka ni Narou* ("Let's Be Novelists") website. Although I received a lot of warm support from my readers, I never imagined at the beginning that this would become a printed book. I simply began writing this story because I wanted to provide explanations for the video game logic in old-school RPGs and depict a side character's perspective as he supports the protagonist. Specifically, exploring what happens to the kingdom after the Hero steps away from the scene was perhaps my biggest reason for writing this.

Because of that, this story may only have a niche appeal. It may even come across as just an inside joke. But if you're familiar with that era of games, you might chuckle at the tropes or be entertained by some of the explanations. At least, that was my humble hope, but to my great luck, this story enjoyed more acclaim than I was ever expecting. It even reached the attention of Overlap's editorial department, and now it has become a full-fledged book.

I am stunned that something I wrote got published, and I am so moved by the wonderful illustrations. I've had so many surprising experiences through this. If I may speak perfectly frankly, I do have my fears that people will throw stones at this light novel because it is so dense with explanations about the setting...

(laughs)

I am completely and utterly grateful to everyone who has supported me thus far. I am going to keep doing my best with this novel, even if it does have a shortage of female characters (something that both the editorial department and my readers have pointed out), and the true heroine hasn't even appeared as of the end of volume one. I hope you can keep supporting the tale of Werner Von Zehrfeld "the supporting character," Mazel, and the people of the world



they live in. Of course, I intend to keep working on the web version too.

Finally, I would like to use this space to extend my deepest thanks to the web readers who have cheered me on since I started posting this story and to the new readers laying hands on this book for the first time. I would also like to thank Yoshida-sama, my editor, and the illustrator Sanshouuo. At the time of writing this afterword, the name of the artist handling the manga adaptation hasn't been announced yet, but I would also like to thank them as well.

I pray that I can see you again in the second volume afterword.

Yuki SUZUKI  
February 2022



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