



REINCARNATED INTO A GAME AS THE HERO'S FRIEND

RUNNING THE KINGDOM BEHIND THE SCENES

WRITTEN BY
Yuki SUZUKI

NOVEL

2

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Sanshouuo

Table of Contents

[Color Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Fall of the Neighboring Kingdom](#)


[Chapter 2: Escorting Refugees](#)

[Chapter 3: Affairs in the Area](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Newsletter](#)




The image depicts two anime-style characters in full plate armor. On the left, a young woman with short, light-colored hair and yellow eyes looks towards the right. On the right, a young man with dark hair and a white fur collar looks back at her. They are both holding a long, curved sword. The background is a hazy, greenish-yellow field with faint silhouettes of trees or structures in the distance.

**“Viscount Zehrfeld,
do you struggle
with horses?”**

**“I just don’t
practice
enough.”**



With a single flash of his sword, Mazel sent a Living Dead's head flying. Carried by the momentum, he instantly went for a Skeleton Warrior next. At his side, Luguentz swung his massive sword, cleaving a second Living Dead in two.



“Good luck out there, Werner.”

“You too.”

This was probably the moment when Mazel entered the game route in earnest. I, on the other hand, had no script for anything prior to the attack on the capital.



But.

“I ain’t letting a video game writer walk all over me.”

REINCARNATED INTO A GAME AS THE HERO'S FRIEND

RUNNING THE KINGDOM BEHIND THE SCENES

NOVEL



WRITTEN BY
Yuki SUZUKI

ILLUSTRATED BY
Sanshouuo



Seven Seas Entertainment

Reincarnated Into a Game as the Hero's Friend:
Running the Kingdom Behind the Scenes (Light Novel) Vol. 2
© 2022 Yuki SUZUKI
First published in Japan in 2022 by OVERLAP Inc., Ltd., Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with OVERLAP Inc., Ltd., Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Kim Morrissy
ADAPTATION: Arisia Santiago
LOGO DESIGN: Mariel Dágá
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COPY EDITOR: Leighanna DeRouen
PROOFREADER: Mark DeJoy
EDITOR: Callum May
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-88843-661-5
Printed in Canada
First Printing: July 2024
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



REINCARNATED INTO A GAME
AS THE HERO'S FRIEND

CONTENTS



PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1

FALL OF THE NEIGHBORING KINGDOM

~Waterways and Irrigation~

CHAPTER 2

ESCORTING REFUGEES

~Guarding and Interception~

CHAPTER 3

AFFAIRS IN THE AREA

~Duty and Care~

EPILOGUE

AFTERWORD





Prologue

THE DAY AFTER THE RESCUE/RETREAT OPERATION from Fort Werisa found me knuckling down before noon even hit.

At the crack of dawn, I gave an extensive report to the king and his ministers. After that, I had a heart-to-heart talk with the royal grandson, Ruven. Admittedly, “heart-to-heart” might be a bit of an exaggeration, but he did ask for my advice on some things. Afterward, I bumped into Mazel and Luguentz and had a brief chat with them. Before I knew it, noon was upon me, and I hadn’t even had breakfast yet.

After parting ways with Mazel and Luguentz, I made a brief stop at my family estate. As I scrounged up some soup and bread, I asked Norbert to get a certain something ready for me.

As soon as he was done packing my bag, I set out for the capital’s emergency ward, where I surmised the church would be tending to the soldiers and laborers injured in the fight the other day. In the game, just sleeping for one night in an inn would patch you right back up, but that wasn’t the case in this world—yet another difference between games and reality. I mean, it would be weirder if staying a night at an inn actually did heal your wounds. Maybe it would be a different story if a healer attended to you overnight.

The knights and nobles were being healed in a separate facility. Take a wild guess as to why they were separate and why the quality of their treatment was so different.

It was common for healers to be stationed at churches as part of the public services that priests provided, although that was hardly unique to this world. Where knights and the nobility were concerned, the church offered personalized services upon request. Meanwhile, common soldiers would cram themselves elbow to elbow in state-commissioned emergency wards. It was hard to say whether the different organizations exerted their influence over the

church or if it was the other way around. I wasn't too familiar with the power dynamics.

We'd managed to rescue over a hundred people, but only a few dozen were capable of fighting. The noncombatants who had been working as laborers were one thing, but we hadn't managed to extract all that many knights or soldiers. Perhaps that was a reflection of Marquess Kneipp's chivalric will. Thank goodness none of our troops who went to their aid suffered casualties.

As useful as this place was as a healing station, what I really wanted was to hear the survivors' accounts of what happened on the battlefield. The defeated nobles said the enemy outnumbered them by about thirty percent, though it was quite possible they were overstating the enemy's strength to avoid losing face. In the context of this muscle-brain world, the logic was at least understandable.

"Welcome to the emergency ward. What is your business here?"

"I am Werner Von Zehrfeld. I'd like to speak to the injured from Fort Werisa about what happened the other day."

"Is that right?"

"I'll also be making a donation to the ward." I handed over some money that had been in my bag. This, not the food, was the reason I'd taken the time to drop by the manor. Seeing my *sincerity* expressed in cash, the workers became noticeably more receptive.

"Thank you very much for your kind consideration. If you'd like to speak with the patients, then come this way."

They showed me into a room whose occupants were only lightly injured. That suited my purposes just fine—it was pointless to talk to people who were moaning in pain, not to mention emotionally taxing.

"I am Werner Von Zehrfeld."

Several people tried to stand as soon as they noticed a nobleman had entered

the room, but I was quick to forestall them.

“You needn’t worry about formalities with me.” It’d be a pain in the ass for me too, otherwise. “Excuse the imposition, but there are some things I want to ask you.”

“What about?”

I sensed that people were slightly on guard around a nobleman, but I went ahead and asked my questions anyway. What did the enemies look like? How many of them were around? And also, most importantly, what did the fort look like on the inside? I was reluctant to dredge up bad memories, but it was crucial to gather information on the enemy.

Even if I were to study the fort’s blueprints, I’d have no way of knowing how Marquess Kneipp had modified the interior unless I spoke to the people who’d worked at the scene. Besides, I wasn’t even sure if I could *get* permission to look at the blueprints. It was classified information, after all. So I carried on, asking in detail about where the doors were positioned, where the monsters - attacked before things were installed, and which rooms were used as storage for the sake of the refurbishing work.

Long story short: there weren’t any drastic differences from the game when it came to what types of enemies appeared. Of course, I had no way of gauging their strength.

My drawing of the fort’s interior was rough but workable. It might have been a different story if the monsters could build new doors, but given that they were generally undead, I doubted that they’d be so inclined.

Also, the map of the fort was obviously very different from the game. The game map did not make the fort feel lived in. The real one had a toilet in the northwest corner, huh? Duly noted. The monsters probably wouldn’t have much reason to use it.

“Sorry for my intrusion. Take this money as a get-well-soon gift. Make sure you keep this conversation between us.”

I passed out some silver coins to the people in the room. This would probably be enough to pay for their medical fees. The state apparently subsidized the costs, but not enough to cover everything.

At the same time, I didn't want people flocking around me for coins, so for my own protection, I asked them to keep it a secret. I could've offered the coin up front to loosen their tongues, but that might have just motivated them to say what they thought I wanted to hear, regardless of the truth, on the off chance it'd get them more money. Hearsay and subjective impressions would have just been a distraction in this context. It was difficult figuring out where to draw the line in that department.

I was contemplating asking around in the next room to corroborate the info when I inadvertently drew to a halt. Right there, tending to the injured, was someone I knew—or rather, had memories of.

Right, this would be around the time *he* joined the Hero's party. Wait. That would mean I'd have to make him stick around, right?

So I called out to him. "Excuse me. Do you have a bit of time right now?"

"Yes, I don't mind. I have just finished with this patient."

He had a firmly built body and a warm expression on his face. There was no mistaking him.

It was Erich Kluger, member of the Hero's party.

Erich Kluger was a monk character, which was atypical for games of that era. His backstory was that he was on a journey seeking enlightenment. Since he could use both healing magic and fight on the frontlines, he was very useful from the early game up to around the midpoint. He was relegated to just a healer, though, when you raised Laura's magic power, and she started learning how to use attacking spells.

My gratitude for his intermediate heal-all spell was immense and

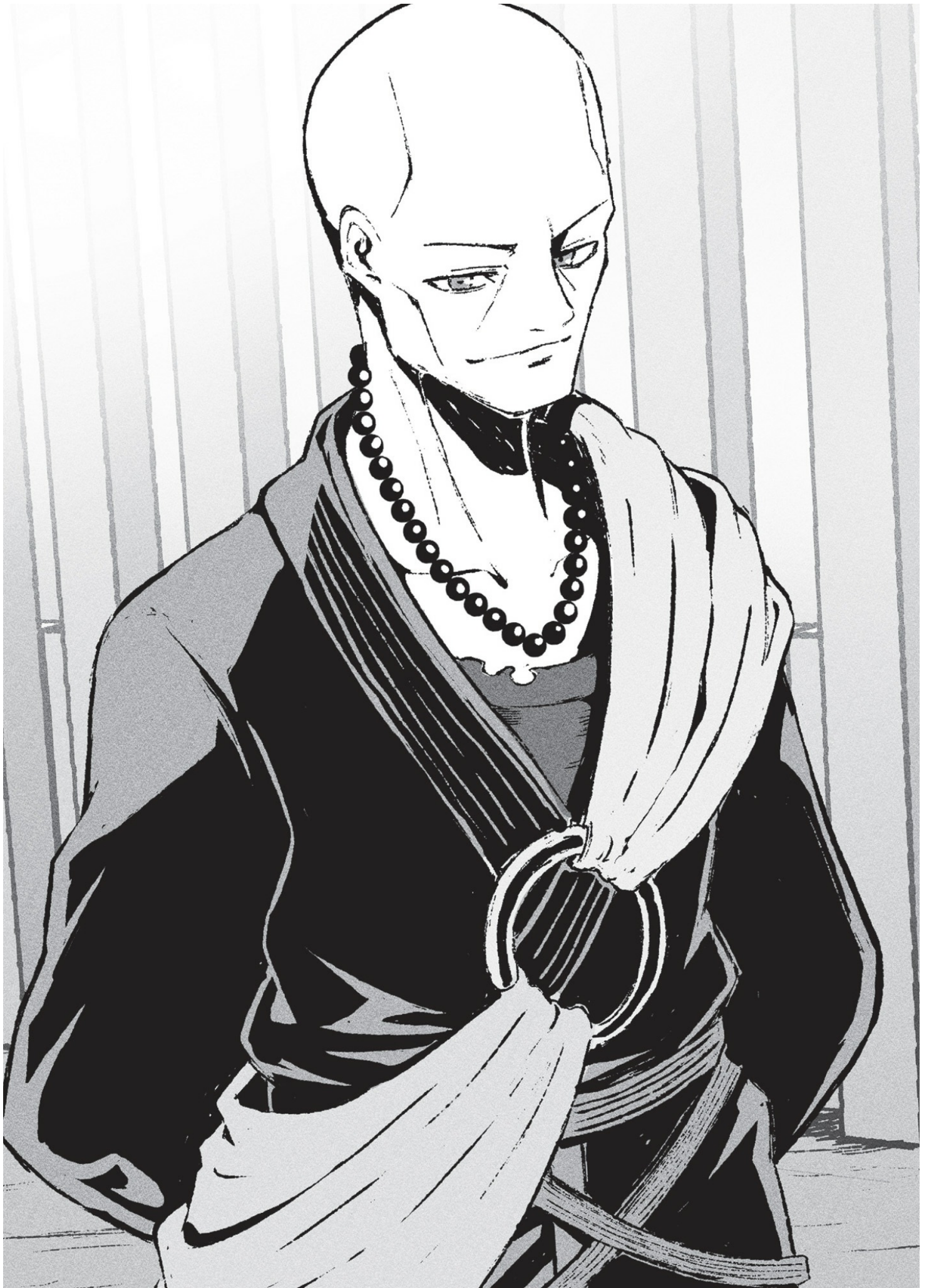
unshakeable. Er, not that it mattered in the slightest in this situation.

“I am Werner Von Zehrfeld.”

I felt like I'd been saying that line all day. If there were business cards in this world, I would have just about handed out all the ones in my case. Figures this would happen when you showed up to a new place.

“My name is Erich Kluger. I am on a journey to study the ascetic ways.”

“It seemed that you were healing the injured. As an aristocrat of this country, I must offer you my thanks.”



When I bowed my head in response to him, I saw his expression flicker with faint bemusement. I had to admit that my attitude was not very stereotypical for a noble. It did accurately reflect the age gap between us, though.

“Please, no need to thank me. Though I must say that you are, well...”

“That I do not act my age?”

Or that I didn’t act enough like a noble? I couldn’t help but smile sheepishly. I mean, I was pretty self-aware about it—in the sense that I was an old man acting my age.

“Personally, I believe it’s very modest of you. I think well of it.”

“I appreciate you saying so. By the way...”

I jumped at the opportunity to ask him about recent matters. Taking care not to reveal what I knew, I asked him about how the injured were doing and what their scars were like. I was also curious about the enemies’ weapons and what to look out for in battle. I noted down only his most confident opinions.

“I see. This will be very useful to know,” I said.

“You’re welcome. Though I must ask: is it a grave situation, losing the fort?”

“It is definitely a problem...”

The story was bound to leak eventually. I could trust a member of the Hero’s party more than anyone else not to blab. With that in mind, I told him the details about Marquess Kneipp’s final moments—or more like post-final moments? Erich’s expression rapidly turned grim.

“To make matters worse,” I continued, “they said that the capital would be next. We cannot afford to relax.”

“You are quite right... I would never have imagined that they would commit such atrocities against humanity.”

That was all Erich said before he fell into silence. This was promising. I prayed that he would say what I wanted him to say.

“Would you be willing to discuss this a little further? Perhaps my skills can be of use to you.”

Yesssss! I cheered inwardly. Since I didn’t have the confidence in my acting skills to hide my reaction entirely, I pretended to widen my eyes in surprise. For better or worse, this was something I had learned to do in my office worker days. Ah, I was truly a sly adult in the skin of a student.

“I would be very grateful for your help, but are you sure?”

“I am. I cannot look the other way after hearing such a woeful tale.”

That was a Hero’s party member for you. How honorable and just. This was a windfall for me.

“I understand. Where will you be staying tonight, Mister Kluger?”

“I have a room at the Road to Tomorrow Inn near the front gates of the capital.”

“Is that right? The hour is getting quite late, so would you be willing to discuss this further tomorrow? I would also like to introduce you to a friend of mine, so I can meet you at your lodgings.”

“I understand. Then we shall reconvene on the morrow.”

Good, I could tick this off the list. I would definitely be able to get him in touch with Mazel the next day. I tried hard not to show it on my face, but inwardly I was breathing a sigh of relief.

In the game, Erich meets Mazel when the monk stops at the capital to see if he can somehow help in the stead of the vanquished knight brigade. In the current scenario, however, the knight brigade was very much intact. With no reason to stop at the capital, he could very well have set off on his journey once more—which would have been a nightmare for me. So I wanted to do what I could to stop him in his tracks.

I wouldn’t need to resort to such heavy-handed tactics if the game had a way of keeping things on the rails, but I had only just come to realize how dangerous

it was to rely excessively on the fact that this was a game.

I was still lost in thought when I made my way back home. My father's sudden declaration, however, was enough to completely snap me out of my reverie.

"Werner, this is urgent. I need you to take the day off school tomorrow. You must lead the forces."

"Wait, what?"

How did things wind up like this?

Chapter 1:

Fall of the Neighboring Kingdom

~Waterways and Irrigation~

MY FATHER'S ABRUPT STATEMENT LEFT ME SOMEWHAT at a loss for words. What? How? Why?

"Er, uh, what's this about?"

I could be forgiven the crude reaction. My father, for his part, wasn't mad. He just urged me to sit, which led me to suspect our discussion would be a long and tiresome one. I decided to make myself comfy on the settee.

My father sat across from me. A maid set down some tea and exited, after which my father's butler Norbert appeared as if to replace her. That was when I knew that this conversation was not going to leave this room.

"So..." I said after an awkward pause. "What happened?"

"It cannot be revealed to the public at this stage, though the people will know of it soon enough..." Between the ridiculously high-handed phrasing and the sigh that came seeping out his mouth, I felt the pressure not to demur. To be fair, he might have done all that precisely so I'd brace myself.

But even though I was on guard, his next words still took me by surprise.

"Triot has fallen to the Demon army."

"...Excuse me?"

Triot was a neighboring country southwest of the Wein Kingdom, smaller in territory and inferior in military might. Though it was called a country, it was kind of like a satellite state.

In the game, the region known in this world as Triot was just a big open field, with no towns or anything to speak of. I remembered getting fed up with how long it took to walk to the next town the first time I moved around the map. I

figured that it didn't show up in the game because there were no story events there, but maybe that was actually because it had been destroyed...?

"What happened?"

"Triot's royal capital got attacked. Nearly everyone of note, including the royal family and the knight brigade, was obliterated. I have heard reports that the residents escaped with no more than the clothes on their backs."

"Nearly everyone, you said?"

"There are some who haven't been confirmed as either dead or alive... But as far as I have heard from the reports, their chances of survival are slim."

That sounded eerily like what was in store for our capital in the future, although of course I wasn't going to say that aloud.

"What does that have to do with me commanding the soldiers?"

"Refugees from Triot are headed to our kingdom. I expect there will be a veritable flood of them."

They couldn't live in a destroyed city, after all. I could easily imagine the citizens being pursued from the capital to the nearby towns and villages. This would probably cause a snowball effect, as more and more people left their homes to escape along with them.

This was only to be expected. Without a knight brigade around, the entire system for maintaining social order would collapse. It wasn't unheard of for the remnants of a defeated army to turn to banditry. Besides, those powerless citizens were facing down monsters capable of destroying their knight brigade—of course their only choice was to run.

"We're going to accept the refugees?" I asked.

"There's hardly a choice. We can't afford violence at the borders."

"You are quite right."

Even the kingdom wasn't cold-blooded enough to watch impassively as

monsters devoured people. I hadn't heard of monsters multiplying or getting stronger from gorging themselves on humans, but I sure as hell wasn't inclined to make an experiment of it. It would also be a problem if the refugees turned to crime in a reckless bid for survival.

It was up to the people at the top to deal with the troubles of actually accepting the refugees. As we could hardly chase them away, we'd instead need troops to contain the situation—and I would have to take command.

“So it's a matter of meeting with those refugees to protect both sides' interests. But why are Zehrfeld troops involved?”

I saw the sense in using armed forces to discourage the refugees from going off the rails. And I knew the soldiers would also protect refugees from further monster attacks, which could whip them into a panic. What I didn't get was why our people had to be the ones handling it.

My father's response was easy to understand, in a certain sense. “Here's one reason: the territory bordering Triot belongs to Marquess Kneipp.”

“Ohhh...”

Now that he mentioned it...yeah. The reason Marquess Kneipp had been tasked with bolstering Fort Werisa in the first place was because the good standing between Triot and Wein had never required many soldiers stationed at the border.

In other words, those refugees would be flooding into a region where the guy in charge, his knights, and the governing body were all absent, thanks to their involvement with the fort's defenses. And to make matters worse, the marquess himself had been slain in battle.

“In that case, wouldn't the person in charge be the eldest son?” I asked.

“That is not necessarily the case either.”

I sighed.

From what I had heard, Marquess Kneipp's eldest son, Mangold Goslich

Kneipp, had made a fool of himself the other day shouting at Count Schanderl. Public opinion of him had fallen to an all-time low. Even I thought he was a dumbass.

What was more, I'd heard rumors that people in Marquess Kneipp's own faction had been saying for some time that for all of Mangold's valor, he lacked manners and administrative talent. In short, he was a muscle-head. Putting someone like him in charge of the refugees would spell nothing but trouble. This was probably why they handed the reins to someone else.

"Who, then?"

"Taking into account the urgency of the situation, the late Marquess Kneipp's younger brother will be the next head."

"Will the son accept that his uncle has taken his seat?"

"I doubt it," said my father without a moment's hesitation, his response firm with the certitude of a seasoned minister. "Accordingly, Lord Mangold will remain at the capital. Marquess Kneipp's younger brother will take the surviving soldiers, knights, and injured civilians to their fief and work to maintain public order."

This made sense. By separating the soldiers from their irritant, they could avoid further conflict. It really drove home how much of a nuisance the firstborn was in the eyes of the people. I resolved never to be like him.

"I see. If the knights remain in the fief," I commented, "then there needs to be a separate force to protect the refugees."

"Indeed. Of course, the job of protecting and supporting them will not fall to our house alone."

"I see."

I had no idea how many of Marquess Kneipp's knights had perished, but with their territory under threat of monsters from the former Triot region, we couldn't very well tie their hands up with holding order.

And since Marquess Kneipp's knights couldn't do both at once, managing the refugees had to go to a separate taskforce. I figured that the Zehrfelds were chosen to help out because we had the people to spare without a corresponding excess of ego.

Judging by the fact that we were given this thankless, pain-in-the-ass job, I felt like I'd caught a glimpse of the Zehrfelds' place in the pecking order. Admittedly, it was hard to assign us the jobs that needed lots of people when we weren't a duke or marquess family.

"Who will be the person in charge?" I asked.

"That would be Duke Seyfert."

That old war dog, huh? His full name was Jech Altig Seyfert. If I recall correctly, he was the king's cousin from his mother's side and the former commander of the palace's defenses. I felt like I'd seen him from a distance before.

Although he wasn't in line for the throne, he was a duke-class noble who held military command. I'd heard he'd been offered some big-time minister post, but he was apparently an oddball who preferred to stick close to the action for as long as humanly possible. Although he admittedly wasn't very aristocratic, he was a bigwig for sure.

Though he had effectively retired from public office, a veteran was joining the fray. And whereas there might have been trouble if they'd chosen someone equal in rank to the marquess, a duke with blood ties to the king would have a lot of weight in his words.

He was the natural choice in other ways too. While it wasn't full-blown army intelligence, the post would involve surveilling Triot and making judgment calls as the situation developed. His actions would determine whether or not House Kneipp would be able to handle the border by itself.

"Okay, I understand. Though I do have to say, they have been finding quite a lot of use for our house."

“It is thanks to you for making such an impression on His Highness the Crown Prince,” he said with a strained smile.

Oh, don't you say it. I didn't have the foggiest clue how things ended up like this either. Was it a good thing that we weren't just made to do menial work? As much as following the royal family was our duty, I didn't want to just be a lapdog.

We were fortunate not to be saddled with the sort of foolish king who threw his weight around just because he was royalty. In the game, after the attack on the capital, he entrusted everything to the Hero and then made himself scarce... Wait, maybe I shouldn't have high hopes for him...

That train of thought was veering close to lèse-majesté territory, so I decided to abandon it. Actually, I didn't have much time in general for navel gazing. More doing, less thinking.

Though I had a handle on things, these drastic changes were a hindrance to my plans in more ways than one. Fortunately, my father seemed to have taken care of all the preparations for our own troops. I had things of my own that I wanted to do, after all.

First, I got Norbert to hire a bunch of scouts from the adventurers' guild. If a Demonic Beast were to get into the midst of the refugees, it would throw them into a panic, which could cause deaths among the troops too. The primary goal, then, was to keep monsters from getting close in the first place. This meant that people who could keep surveillance on the area were absolutely indispensable. And it was simplest to leave that job to the pros.

While we were at it, we needed a map too, so I dispatched some servants to the palace with a request to reproduce one of the maps there. This also needed to go through the crown or else there would be trouble. And if maps were military secrets, well, this was a military operation.

Meanwhile, I sent another messenger to bring Mazel over to my manor. I

hoped Luguentz would be able to make it too, but if not, just Mazel would suffice. Fortunately, he was still living in the student dorms, so it wasn't too difficult to get a hold of him. It was going to be hard to contact him soon enough when he left on his journey. I wanted to stay in touch with him, but alas we had no smartphones.

I read over the list of equipment and other items we needed to prepare. A secretary sure would have been handy around now. Not that I had one in my previous life either, but I was busier now than I was then, so I deserved nice things, darn it. Yeah, sure, I looked like a student, but still.

Amid my pointless mental grumblings, Mazel arrived at the manor and, luckily for me, Luguentz was with him. Actually, it seemed like Mazel had gone out of his way to bring him. By then, it was almost night. I felt bad for calling him at such an odd hour, but I was compelled to, since my noon meeting with Erich had introduced a strange new development.

"What's with the weird timing? Did something come up?" Mazel asked.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to put you out. You too, Luguentz."

"Eh, doesn't bother me."

The fact that he said that while a sword was strapped to his hip was pretty eyebrow raising. It was a testament to how adventurers lived their daily lives on a battlefield. For his part, Mazel dressed lightly—I wasn't sure which of them was the normal one.

"Werner, I actually kind of have a favor to ask you," Mazel said apologetically after the two of them sat down.

"What is it?"

"Sorry for always asking you about this, but I want you to take this," he said as he took out a bag.

There were gold or silver coins inside. *Hmm, I see.* It looked like his reward from the Demon Stampede and his recent earnings as an adventurer.

In this world, there were a ton of ways to earn money in the capital or the cities. So it wasn't unusual for people working in urban areas to send remittances to their hometowns. I'd heard lots of stories like this, not just from this world but from Earth's Middle Ages and even the modern day. In some of the absolute worst cases, people would even sell their children.

"You want me to send this to Arlea Village, right?"

"Yeah. Sorry, but can I leave it to you?"

"Sure, no problem."

Postal delivery in this world was slow. Part of that was because the literacy rate wasn't all that high to begin with, which meant that it was unusual to write and send letters over long distances.

Towns of a certain size were one thing, but when it came to tiny villages, the literacy rate hinged on the presence of someone to educate the youth. If a village was sadly lacking in that department, then it wasn't rare for the only literate people to be the village chief, who learned from their parents, and the priest dispatched from the church. Mazel's village, fortunately, had educational resources in that sense.

Beyond the question of literacy, however, the fact of the matter was that most long-distance correspondence occurred between fellow nobles, or between nobles at court and their fiefs. The overwhelming majority of letters were practical announcements and quasi-official documents. Aristocrats who were engaged to each other were also known to exchange love letters between their respective fiefs.

The next most common correspondences were among members of the guilds and the church. This often consisted of market information for the guilds, and a lot of declarations and petitions for the church. One of the few exceptions was the "butcher post," in which butchers delivered mail to the towns where they sourced their livestock.

Given the circumstances, it was difficult and unusual for a peasant to send

letters. I've said it before, but there weren't any people dedicated to delivering the post. In the Middle Ages, farmers were made to serve as couriers as a form of forced labor, which inevitably meant that commoners had few means of exchanging letters.

One method was to ask travelers or merchants to carry a letter if they happened to be passing near the recipient's address. It wouldn't be much trouble if it were just a simple letter, but sending money complicated things. You needed to trust the courier, and that made it difficult to ask. People generally paid them a thank-you fee, but there was never a guarantee that the money would be delivered intact.

Besides, there was a strong element of luck involved in whether a traveler or merchant would conveniently pass through the letter's destination. Often, you might not find anyone to deliver a letter at all.

The next method was admittedly expensive but a relatively surefire strategy: asking an adventurer. As a matter of fact, next to herb-picking, delivering letters was a major source of jobs for novice adventurers. As long as you stuck to the highways, you wouldn't normally come across super dangerous monsters, and it was a good way of racking up traveling experience. Apparently, even the guild recommended it as a way for beginners to rank up.

On the other hand, the biggest problem was that the adventurers would ask to be reimbursed for their accommodation. Basically, not only would you have to pay for the job itself and the guild's markup, you would also have to pitch in for the adventurer's lodgings, which was no small financial burden. If the distance was far enough, then just the accommodation fees alone added up to a hefty amount.

Nevertheless, in a world with monsters, it was the most secure option available. If you had a fixed income but couldn't leave your workplace for long periods of time, or if you had something expensive you wanted to deliver, then asking an adventurer was your safest bet.

The final method was asking the church, which was the slowest yet cheapest route. Each regional church sent out reports around once a month to the temple of Finoy. You could ask the messenger to take a letter along with their report. The church saw it as providing aid to a believer, so it didn't cost anything beyond gratitude.

However, this option was very circuitous. For example, if you were to send a letter from the capital to Arlea Village this way, first the messenger would have to take the letter to the temple, then hand it over to a church emissary who would pass through Arlea. It was only then that the letter would finally reach its destination.

Basically, this was all well and good if you were lucky and the timing with the messengers worked out all right, but if the church emissary headed to Arlea Village happened to depart the temple early, then the letter would have to be kept in storage in the temple until the messengers came back the next month with their reports. In other words, a long time would pass between when you wrote a letter and when it reached its recipient. Not exactly an express option.

By contrast, messengers working for an aristocrat generally had freedom of movement within the kingdom. Although messengers might face minor harassment traveling through a rival's turf, they generally went unimpeded. Not only were they never stopped within the country, they could even travel outside its borders if they followed the right procedures.

This wasn't simply a privilege of the aristocracy. If anything, it was the crown's will at work. For instance, messengers could also have a hidden objective of investigating the roots of a neighboring fief's prosperity. By allowing those messengers to move freely, the crown could encourage fiefs to compete in developing their lands.

Putting aside all the hidden machinations, if you wanted to send money and not just letters, then asking a nobleman was the quickest and most reliable method—provided you had the connections. As a matter of fact, when the commoner students at the academy got their nobleman friends to deliver

things for them, it was up to my house to secure the channels of communication, more often than not.

Mazel came to me for advice when he was racking his brains on how to send letters and money to his family. Ever since then, he had been using House Zehrfeld's messengers to his heart's content. Thankfully, since our messengers could be used to gather information from other fiefs on the way, my father had no qualms about dispatching them.

Unfortunately, even an aristocrat's messengers would face danger on the roads going forward. Given the circumstances, it would be hard to promise things without careful consideration first. This time, I would ask my father for a favor, but I would have to think about how best to handle this in the future.

For now, I accepted Mazel's package for his family. Meanwhile, Tillura the maid poured us some tea with expert finesse and left the room. She was already very familiar with Mazel and Luguentz's faces. I helped myself to some tea and well-made biscuits.

Likewise, Mazel took a sip of tea before looking me squarely in the face.

"So what's the deal today?"

"Don't tell anyone, but Triot got attacked and destroyed."

A *klung* rang out across the room. It was the sound of Mazel and Luguentz dropping their teacups into their saucers. *Don't break them, man!*

"...What did you say?" Luguentz's voice was guttural.

"Apparently, there are droves of refugees. I have to go attend to them," I responded, trying to make myself sound calm.

I wished he wouldn't glare at me—it wasn't like I knew much about the situation either.

Mazel looked at me, his face a picture of solemnity. "If you're going, then *something* must have happened."

"So it seems. But I don't know how long I'll be away. So..."

I had to arrange a meeting with Erich. Normally, I would have shown up personally, but I didn't have time for that now. I was going to have to make Mazel meet up with him directly.

"I got acquainted with a guy who seems reliable. Neither of you two are good at healing magic, right?"

For now, at least. Mazel would learn a decent amount later. Whether it was because of his Hero status or just the inherent advantage of being a protagonist, he would end up as a decent all-rounder if the game was any indication.

"I can use it a bit, but not well enough to call it my forte."

"You serious?"

What a surprise. Was Mazel's level higher than I thought? When I glanced at Luguentz, he shook his head silently, although I had no idea whether that was him saying "Don't ask me, I'm no magic user," or if he was also marveling at how Mazel defied expectations. Well, whatever.

"Anyway, this guy can apparently use healing magic, so I reckon he'll be handy to have around. I'd love to introduce him to you, but the timing is a bit off. Hence why I'm telling you about him now."

"Okay, Werner. If you can vouch for him, then I'll go see him."

Him being so guileless saved a load of trouble, but was he gonna be okay? I worried about him. He *was* rather naive. Oh well, video game protagonists were like that, I guess. When I was playing the game, I never doubted the information I heard in town. The fact that nobody ever abused his trust might have been another layer in his plot armor.

"His name is Erich Kruger. He's staying at the Road to Tomorrow Inn. I'll send him a notice that you're coming."

"Got it," Mazel said.

"I'll come along too," Luguentz added.

“I was actually going to ask you. Plus...” Given that Luguentz was apparently coming along too, I figured that I could bring up another thing for him to do while he was meeting Erich. This was also important, as far as I was concerned. “I’ve made preparations, and I’ll be sure to tell my father and Norbert beforehand, but if the merchant corps get back to the capital before I do, I want you to take whatever weapons and armor look good to you.”

“Huh?” Mazel and Luguentz’s voices were strangely in unison. Did I really say something weird enough to warrant the reaction?

“You can’t be sayin’ that was all for Mazel,” Luguentz said incredulously.

“Well, of course...that’s exactly what I did it for.”

“Are you serious?” Mazel and Luguentz shot back, as if they still didn’t get what I was saying.

But that was exactly what I’d been trying to do from the start.

“I didn’t buy them as pretty accessories. I’m fine with just one spear. I’ll buy another when I need one.”

Given that my skill was Spearmanship, a high-quality sword would be wasted on me. I mean, I could wield a sword to an average level—I basically considered myself a dilettante. At the academy, my grades in the swordsmanship classes were lower-middle or square middle at best. I wasn’t even in the same league as Mazel.

Besides, I’d asked the merchant corps to procure a sample for the royal family. If we could prove the utility of the items in battle, that would be all the better. If there was some problem with them in practice, then we would just have to shrug and stuff them into storage, but the best course of action was to put them in the hands of people who could use them.

“If it bothers you, just think of it as me lending them to you. As far as I’m concerned, it’s worth it if it makes you both stronger.”

“This crossed my mind before, but...” Confusion was engraved deep on

Luguentz's face. "Why are ya goin' this far for us?"

"I don't know how far you mean by 'this far,' but... Personally, it's because Mazel is my friend."

This was no lie. It might have been the force of his charisma, but I felt no resistance to lending Mazel a hand. He was a good guy in general. Come to think of it, everyone was friendly toward the main character in the game. There were plenty who went way out of their way to be helpful.

To begin with, nobody in the towns in the game ever deceived the main character. You could even waltz into people's houses and pilfer things without getting arrested or even questioned for your crimes. And the pilfering part was definitely a crime. Thankfully, Mazel didn't seem to do any of that here. Thinking about it, it was one of the things that weirded me out about the game world.

"Officially, the crown prince has tasked me with assisting Mazel. Although I would still help him out regardless."

"What about me?" Luguentz demanded.

"You seem trustworthy, and the more people who can fight against Demons, the better."

I couldn't exactly say that I was investing in them so that they could beat the Demon Lord. Besides, most people in this world didn't even say the word 'investment.' Anyway, it wasn't a lie that I wanted to help a friend and his friend.

But, well... It was surprisingly difficult to explain myself when I couldn't say that I knew what would happen from a video game plot. Luguentz, for his part, remained silent—until finally he let out a groan, his expression utterly inscrutable.

"You and Mazel are peas in a pod. Ya sure like to trust folks."

"Feels like you're saying that like it's a bad thing."

My reaction was a bit roundabout, but those were my honest feelings. I wasn't as good a person as Mazel was. My general plan in life was to focus on survival. I could explain away what I was doing as noblesse oblige, but that probably wouldn't go over well with Luguentz.

As I deliberated over my reaction, Mazel looked me in the eyes. "I'll take you up on your offer, Werner," he said. "I'll pay you back one day."

"Sure thing. Knock yourself out."

No need to pay me back, Mazel. One day, you'll come back with a Demon Lord's head.

After the Zehrfeld butler saw them off, Mazel and Luguentz stepped out of the manor and into the black of the night. By pure coincidence, they both looked back at the building in unison and let out a sigh at the same time.

"He's a strange duck," Luguentz muttered with a groan.

"I question your choice of phrasing," answered Mazel with a strained smile, "but I get what you're trying to say."

Although they were friends, even Mazel had trouble keeping up with Werner's train of thought. That was only to be expected, though. Werner's way of thinking was drawn from his game knowledge and his past experiences as a Japanese man. Moreover, he was aware that this was a fantasy world, and his goal was to avoid a scripted death. Not only did he appear to weigh advantages and disadvantages by a different standard from this world's norm, the fundamental values guiding his actions were difficult for others to understand.

"Wonder if that's what a true nobleman is like," Luguentz muttered.

"Or maybe he's a bona fide genius."

If Werner heard this, he might have spat out his tea. Far from a genius, he thought of himself as a thoroughly mediocre person. He would also cheerfully admit that he deviated far from the standards of nobility.

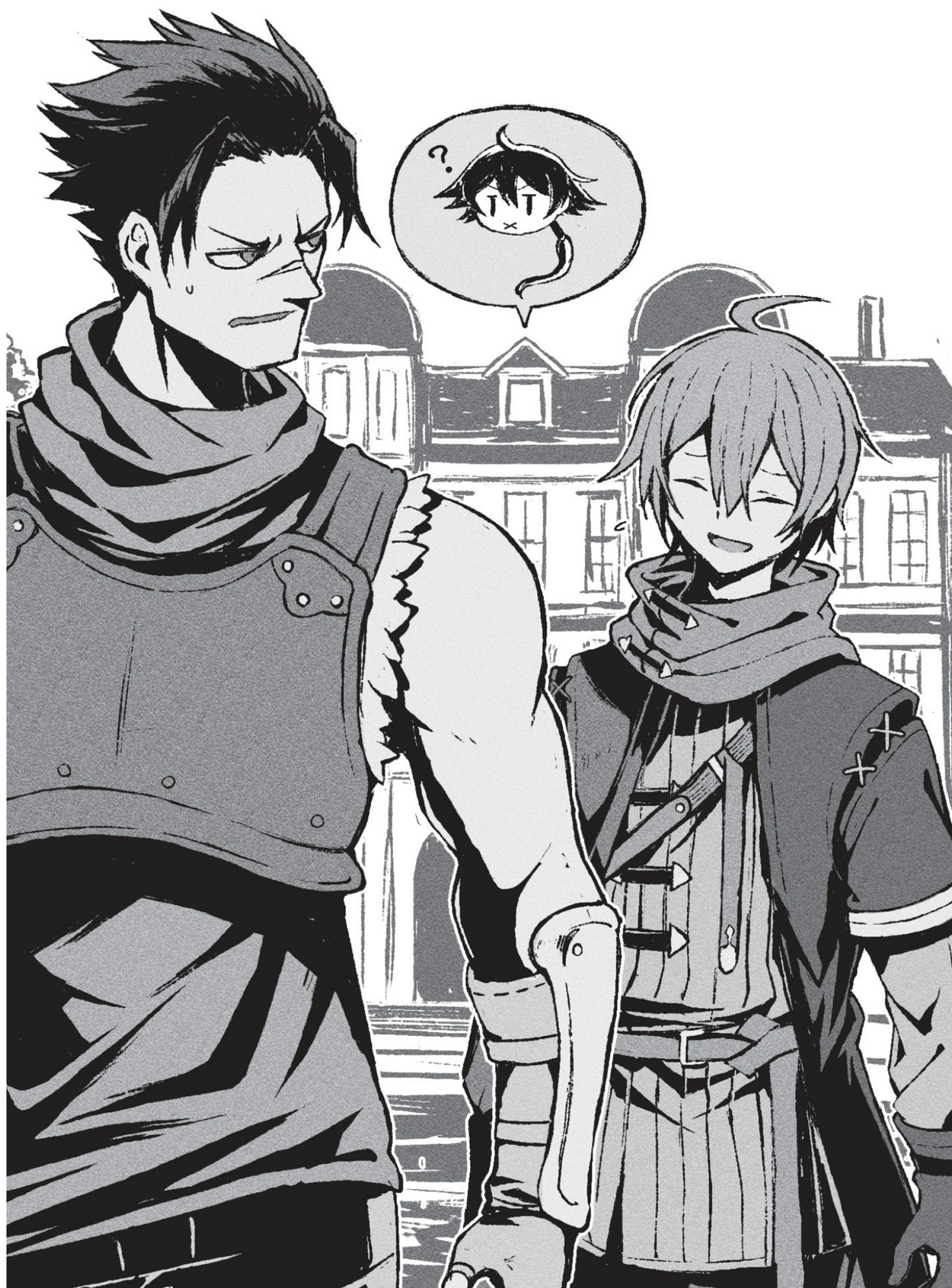
But things were different from Mazel and Luguentz's perspective.

Werner had no way of knowing this, but when Mazel and Luguentz defeated the Demon behind the Stampede, it indicated with its dying breath that the knight brigade had been obliterated.

But when they hurried back to the main army, they found that the knight brigade—though not without its losses—was still very much intact. They also heard that Werner's actions were responsible for limiting the casualties far beyond the realm of expectation. The two of them could only be amazed that the Demon's scheme had been thwarted so directly.

Afterward, Werner smoothly prepared a map and the personnel to form the merchant corps. Then, as he predicted, Fort Werisa fell before the corps even departed. As far as Mazel and Luguentz were concerned, Werner had such foresight that he might as well have been a prophet. Not knowing that he was tracing the events of a game's script, the two of them understandably made some leaps in logic.

"It's hard to keep up with him, but I'll do my best for as long as he calls me his friend."



“Tough act to follow, eh?” Luguentz smiled gently at Mazel’s resolve.

Although Werner operated under the assumption that he would never be able to live up to the protagonist Mazel, Mazel did his utmost to chase after Werner. His level surprised Werner, but that was because Werner’s actions had directly inspired him to work hard. From an omniscient, objective perspective, the two of them were so hugely out of sync that it might have been comical.

“A-anyway, about this guy we gotta meet...”

“Right. I wonder what kind of person he is,” Mazel said. He was optimistic; if Werner recommended this person, he was probably okay.

Seeing that expression of complete and utter faith on Mazel’s face, Luguentz could not help but rib him. “If you were a girl, you’d be head over heels for Werner.”

“Uhhh, you think? I can’t say I see the appeal in his nobleman status or his face.”

When Mazel gave an actual serious response, it was Luguentz’s turn to give a strained smile. Oblivious to the other man’s expression, Mazel went on.

“Oh, but he is surprisingly popular among the girls.”

“Ah, I can sorta see it.”

In this world, individuals with martial prowess were held in particularly high esteem. Because of this, Werner didn’t have a terribly good reputation immediately after he enrolled at the academy, when the only thing he had to his name was being the son of the Minister of Ceremonies. His reputation did steadily climb over time through his conduct at school, but it was only very recently that it underwent a sharp upward swing.

It all started when he made a name for himself at the Demon Stampede. Afterward, he displayed sound judgment as a commander at Fort Werisa. Among the knight brigade, the Zehrfeld heir was known as a young yet capable military leader, and this reputation spread among the academy students and

their immediate families.

On top of that, by assigning him the role of deputy count, the royal family had publicly acknowledged him as the next head of his house. There were rumors going around that the crown prince himself regarded him as a favorite. To put it cynically, he was suddenly perceived as a “good catch” among the noble ladies.

Ironically, Werner himself had been so busy lately that he didn’t even have time to show up at school. He had no opportunity to hear about his newfound reputation, and thus had not noticed a single change.

“We have to look into that thing he gave us at the end,” Mazel said.

“Yeah.”

Just as they were leaving, Werner had handed them a “work-in-progress” diagram of Fort Werisa’s interior. It was just a simple affair of lines and scribbles, but that was probably because it was only a rough draft. That said, Werner’s lack of drawing ability was very much evident.

It required a fair bit of decoding work, but they didn’t see the harm in taking it and using it to its fullest extent. It was supposed to be classified as a state secret, but the three of them didn’t need to know that to keep the information to themselves.

“Werner is pretty fussy about diagrams,” Mazel remarked.

“He sure is.”

Perhaps because he was influenced by his game knowledge, Werner was very keen on using maps. This made him something of an oddity among the people of this world.

Blueprints were one thing, but the concept of using diagrams to communicate ideas didn’t exist in this world. This was what made Werner’s fixation on them come across as eccentric. This was only understandable in a context where there was a shortage of things that merited the use of things like aerial photography and survey maps.

“Either way, this is a riot,” Luguentz snickered.

“I feel like Werner would probably ask, ‘What’s so funny?’”

The two laughed as they walked home down the moonlit path. The next day, they would meet Erich Kruger, and they would both be convinced to ask him to join their party.

I went to the castle first thing the next morning. This was usually the time to head for the academy, but I had to pass on that, the circumstances being what they were.

Part of me chuckled at how I was much more diligent now than I ever was in my office worker days, but then again, who knew what would happen if I didn’t follow the royal family’s commands? Compared to my old job, where there were people who collected a paycheck without even lifting a finger... Ah, no point dwelling on it.

“Viscount Zehrfeld has arrived.”

I was attending a joint military briefing with the knight brigade. Rather than announce myself, I waited as a member of the royal guard did so on my behalf.

“Let him in.”

As soon as that answer came from within, the door swung open. It was a protocol thing.

I marveled at how big this palace was. It wasn’t just the military that had its own rooms, there were also conference areas for financial and judicial affairs, among other things. In the game, it was nowhere near this huge. If you were to convert this into pixels, a lot of the objects would serve no purpose, and navigating big maps without anything to do in them was always a pain in the ass.

“I am Werner Von Zehrfeld.”

“Well met,” Duke Seyfert said. “You may sit.”

The duke was in his late sixties or perhaps his seventies. He gave off the

outward impression of an obstinate old fart, just as the rumors said, but there was a certain quality that shone through, hearkening to the fine man he must have been in his youth. I'd also heard people say that he was surprisingly receptive to others' ideas. I wondered which was closer to the truth—I'd never had any interaction with him whatsoever until now.

Seated next to him was his second-in-command for this operation, Count Engelbert. He was a stern-faced man in his forties with a calm and collected bearing. Others described him as sharp and capable. To be perfectly honest, I didn't get along well with types like him. I mean, he was better-looking than the norm.

There were around thirty or so other people, including civil officials, sitting at the table with documents at hand. It was a somewhat steep number for a military strategy meeting. Were we going to discuss the refugee issue here too?

Either way, it was a good thing that a greenhorn like me wasn't the last person to show up. I sat down at an unoccupied seat and let out a furtive sigh of relief.

There were plenty of civil officials scurrying about handing out documents, though there were a fair few elementary school aged boys as well. These boys were heirs to noble houses. Although they weren't allowed to speak at the conference, they participated in a capacity somewhere between secretary and gofer. Young boys often served these roles, not just in military conferences, but in financial and diplomatic ones as well. Call it on-the-job training.

It wasn't just a matter of understanding the affairs of the state, but also learning the unwritten rules of conduct firsthand, like how and when to speak. I myself had participated in many such conferences before I enrolled in the academy. To use an analogy from my old world, it was similar to how students at a military academy became adjutants to high-ranking officers.

Being the son or brother of an aristocrat meant that there were plenty of ways to learn about politics, diplomacy, and etiquette, even outside the

academy. Yet, in spite of everything, the system occasionally produced some unbelievably stupid idiots. Was it the power of privilege?

“It appears that everyone is now in attendance,” said Duke Seyfert when all the seats had been filled.

This snapped me out of my ponderous thoughts. Everyone rose, brought their right hands to their chests, and bowed lightly. This was sufficient since we weren’t having an audience with the king.

Personally, I’d been quite partial to salutes in my previous life, I mused as the duke motioned for us all to sit.

This time, just like all the other times, I was completely surrounded by older people. I could tell that I was here as my father’s representative—someone his age would have fit right in.

“Now then, gentlemen, as you may have already heard, Triot has fallen.”

“So it is true?” a nobleman sitting in one of the upper seats asked in response to the duke’s declaration.

At this point, people in the middle or lower seats did not have the right to speak. It wasn’t as if they would stay mute the entire time, but only the upper echelons could ask questions at the very start.

“There is no question,” Count Engelbert replied. He seemed to be serving as chief of staff, in addition to his other duties. “In fact, the refugees have already entered our domain. It matches almost exactly with the reports.”

“There is much to resolve,” he continued calmly. “The refugee problem is an obvious one, though we must also consider the state of affairs in Triot, border security, maintaining order, preparing for an encounter with the enemy, and other such things. Unfortunately, we are pressed for time.”

All of those points he brought up sounded identical, but they were all different. The “state of affairs” referred to the possibility of a second wave of refugees. Border security concerned the problems caused by the current

refugees. Their country no longer existed, but this issue did tentatively fall under international relations.

Meanwhile, maintaining order referred to domestic affairs. This involved halting the spread of groundless rumors and apprehending bandits who would take advantage of the confusion to attack the refugees. It was only logical that thugs would gather where there was prey. "Preparing for an encounter with the enemy" didn't need an explanation.

By my reckoning, the highest priority was dealing with the enemy, followed by maintaining order. We could leave the issue of Triot's affairs for now. As for border security, that could be lumped in with dealing with the enemy.

We had to decide the priorities carefully before we could move on to the next stage of discussion. Keeping a clear order to these proceedings would also be edifying for the young boys standing nervously by the wall. These experiences needed to be carved into their minds. I wished good luck to the rising stars of their generation. (Although technically, my age wasn't far from theirs.)

"Before anything else, I'd like you to understand the total numbers we are dealing with. By current estimates, there are over five thousand refugees across the entire age spectrum."

Groans resounded across the conference room. I couldn't help but join in. Five thousand people, seriously? Way too many.

If you were going by the standards of a game world, five thousand people might not sound like a big deal, but that couldn't be further from the truth in reality.

To put things in perspective, I'll use the Roman army as an example. (Those guys sure loved systematizing everything.) A single legion could range from five thousand to six thousand people. They, of course, needed food to sustain their activities.

First of all, you needed 18,000 Roman pounds of grain, which was roughly equivalent to eight thousand kilograms. If an adult man needed two liters of

water per day, then this amounted to 12,000 liters—and that was just the bare minimum. The amount would increase depending on the season and weather. Generally, you carried more than you needed for some leeway, which meant somewhere between 15,000 to 18,000 liters. Also, this wasn't counting supplies for the horses (including the warhorses) and the cattle. When you factored them in, the amount you needed would jump by an order of magnitude.

Moreover, the number of cavalry and the duration of the operation would influence the supplies to an extent. The horses for the cavalry and the pack horses and cattle would need 40,000 pounds of food, which translated to 18,000 kilograms. All of that would be consumed in a single day.

You read that right. A single day's worth of consumables. A legion six thousand strong needed eight tons in just grain alone. Every single day, they would guzzle down the equivalent of forty drum containers of water. And since you needed roughly the same number of side dishes to go with that grain, that would be eighty drums for a single day's worth of food.

If you were to mobilize this army for, say, ten days, then you would need eighty tons of grain. This would be roughly equivalent to the weight of a JNR Class D51 steam train. In an era without mechanical vehicles, that weight would be carried in the hands of humans, or on the backs of horses and cattle. I'm repeating myself here, but this was just talking about the grain.

On top of that, you needed to feed the people who were in charge of transporting the horses and cattle. This turned the question of food into a never-ending spiral. It made you not want to think about it, but if you didn't, you wouldn't be cut out to lead a group.

Basically, to feed six thousand people for a year, you needed about three thousand tons of grain, plus an equivalent weight in side dishes. This rate of consumption was so massive that even I, with my previous world memories, found it difficult to fathom. Six thousand tons was about the weight of a ship.

Then you needed to account for all the different types of tools and equipment

they would need. Returning to our Roman legion example: medical supplies for the sick and injured, tents and blankets for camping, rain gear to ward off the elements, cooking utensils and shared foodstuffs (by which I meant alcohol) had to be considered as well. The soldiers carried their own tableware, but the transporters handled things like containers.

You also had to bring along the minimum amount of firewood for making campfires, because you'd be in trouble if you didn't have it when it was time to camp for the night. Depending on the season, you might also need to bring snow protection gear. Carpentry tools like axes, saws, and nails were necessities on the odd chance a bridge had fallen. And an army needed its own consumable arrows and medicines.

Six thousand blankets took up a considerable amount of space. If one blanket was one kilogram, then the entire load would amount to six tons. For sanitary reasons, it was also necessary to pack extras so that people didn't use bloodied blankets from injured soldiers. If you didn't bring supplies via horse-run carriages or ox carts, then you wouldn't be able to mobilize for a long-term campaign.

A battle where you didn't have to consider supplies fundamentally didn't exist, and anyone who thought otherwise was a complete fool. Horses and cattle were bigger gluttons than humans.

I'd used ancient Rome as my example for the number of consumables, but the Middle Ages were pretty similar to that. There were records from the twelfth century, when the Count of Hainaut dispatched a hundred troops on a five-week campaign. The value of currency was different in those days, which made broad comparisons difficult, but the budget was roughly equivalent to eight million yen in twenty-first century terms. Dispatching a hundred people for just five weeks required a considerable sum of money.

But in that sense, it was really baffling how Hannibal managed his food supply in the Second Punic War. How he managed to feed an army tens-of-thousands strong without supply lines was one of the biggest mysteries in military history.

I mean, seriously, how did he do it while barely even pillaging the enemy territory? I'd love to know his trick.

Although this world had magic bags that eliminated the weight of their contents, those things had their limits. On that note, the magic bags I knew about didn't have a very large capacity. In the game, you could stash multiple types of armor in one, but maybe that was pushing the bounds of reality.

Maybe there were bags that could fit a ridiculous load, but I certainly didn't know about them, and even if they did exist, they had to be considerably rare items. You couldn't blithely rely on them to supply an entire army.

You see, hardly any magic bags were actually used for carrying supplies. They were simply that rare. I wanted one for myself.

My thoughts had gone offtrack. This was a refugee problem rather than a military problem, so at least we didn't have to think about feeding horses and cattle. However, this didn't rid us of the issue of clothing and medicinal supplies, among a host of other things. I mean, where would we arrange for five thousand people to live? Building anything within the capital's walls took a while, let alone lodgings of this scale.

On that note, you also had to consider what the people put out. They were living beings, after all. They went to the toilet.

The average adult urinated between one to one-and-a-half liters per day. The calculations were annoying, but basically one liter multiplied by five thousand people meant five thousand liters, or five meters cubed. In other words, five tons. If handled poorly, people would end up wading in their own filth every day. This was no joke—it was a genuine source of illness.

Of course, not every refugee was an adult, so this was just a rough calculation, but that wouldn't halve the amount they consumed and discharged. It was more like somewhere between seventy to eighty percent. At this very moment, that massive group of people was wandering near the country's borders, giving and taking in large measures.

I understood keenly that if we didn't move fast, the problem would only expand. We had to do something about it, however reluctant we may have been. A single marquess's domain wouldn't be able to support those numbers.

It made my head hurt when I heard that there could be even more people on the way. And if I had a headache, then it was doubly so for the officials in charge of the economy. Their expressions spoke of their desire to escape reality.

"Are they all farmers?"

"No, some of them are townsfolk from Triot's capital."

So they were all jumbled together. Having refugees with significantly different backgrounds made things even more of a headache. You had to change your approach when dealing with people who could do manual labor versus those who couldn't. Even just taking into account the differences in physical strength between adult men versus women and children was a pain in itself.

This wasn't my problem to think about, right? I was just representing my father on military matters. My priority was to guard and escort—I had to focus on doing that job right.

"Are there any injured or sick people?"

"They are not entirely unscathed, it seems, but we do not know the specifics."

"How many men? How many women?"

"We do not know the precise figures, but we imagine that the women outweigh the men."

It figured. I had no idea if it even occurred to these people to collect proper data on this situation. This was a world of muscle-brains, after all.

This did make me wonder what they had in mind if it turned out that the sick people carried contagious diseases... How would they handle hygiene or contain the spread?

My thoughts were full of questions, but now was the time for the higher-ups

to speak. Frustrating, but then talking one-on-one with the crown prince would have been mentally taxing in its own way. Both options had such massive upsides and downsides.

As I contemplated these things that I had absolutely no control over, the topic of conversation shifted to the question of where we would shelter the refugees.

“For now, we will set up an encampment near the capital.”

“And after that?”

“That will be discussed at a separate conference. It will take some time before a consensus can be reached, it seems.”

“They’re greedy guts, the lot of them,” said Duke Seyfert.

His statement inspired a ripple of uneasy smiles. In this era, there was a belief that a nation’s might was equal to its population. Generally speaking, even former refugees would be welcomed with open arms as long as their numbers were manageable enough.

But too many people quickly became a burden. It would take time before the refugees would become productive members of society. The nobles wanted to take in as many people as their fiefs could support, but disagreements abounded when they were forced to stretch their limits.

Basically, every noble demanded they have only the numbers that were convenient to them, and they were currently hammering those numbers out. Refugees didn’t have anything resembling human rights in this world, although perhaps some nobles would at least be considerate enough to not separate the families.

Also, people with specialized skill sets, like merchants, scribes, and clerks, were highly sought after. People who could comprehend letters and numbers were just that important. Craftsmen would also find welcome as long as they didn’t demand exceptional treatment.

The problem was all the other people. And unfortunately, people without

specialized skills overwhelmingly outnumbered those who did in every world. Of course, farming was a specialized profession in its own right, but their know-how didn't always transfer to regions with different crops. There simply wasn't a surefire way to place them where their experience was worthwhile. So their only real recourse was becoming tenants or laborers for someone else.

“So they will be near the capital until the debates are settled...”

“Food and water will be an issue.”

“I suppose we will have to draw water from the lake at Mount Krumsze's summit.”

“There have always been plans for that area, but the terrain is just...”

The unfamiliar name made me wonder what they were talking about. It turned out that I wasn't the only person with questions. A man in his forties raised a hand.

“Excuse me, what is this plan you are referring to?” he asked.

“You were not aware, Count Vogler? To the northwest of the capital lies Krumsze, which contains a lake with a substantial amount of quality water,” the duke explained patiently. His tone basically invited other people to ask questions about things they didn't know about.

Just because someone was an aristocrat didn't mean they knew everything there was to know about the lay of the land near the capital. Plenty of regional lords stuck to their own fiefs, after all. I'd never met Count Vogler before, but I was pretty sure that his fief was next to Marquess Kneipp's.

Regardless, the story about Mount Krumsze wasn't particularly long. This small mountain to the northwest of the capital had a lake. Apparently, some people had thought of using it as a water source, but there were a lot of deep crevices in the land between the two areas serving as a hindrance. They were so bad that some people even suggested just setting up farmland near the lake directly. It seemed to be less of a “plan” and more just a topic of discussion.

In my old world, populous cities would be located next to large rivers, but this world weirdly didn't have all that many rivers—even though that would have made it easier not just to access drinking water but also to transport large amounts of it elsewhere. Maybe the reason why people didn't have trouble distributing and building things even without a river around was because this was a game world? Oh well, there was no point in thinking about it.

"We can get around the crevices by creating aqueducts, but the region as a whole dips low, making it impossible to develop."

"I see... Out of curiosity, just how low is the basin?"

"Where there are crevices, the gap between the lowest and highest points is about the size of a child," answered Count Engelbert.

Count Vogler nodded as if he had accepted the explanation, but I couldn't help but be struck by that height. I was pretty sure that it wasn't anything insurmountable.

This thought was what got me to raise my hand on impulse.

"What is it, Viscount Zehrfeld?"

"Er, um, I cannot say for certain until I have seen the area, but I believe that it may be possible to develop."

Everyone looked at me. For a moment, I thought I was going to get eaten up whole. Like a frog being glared at by a snake... Or maybe not? Anyway, this wasn't the time to get hung up on analogies.

"Um, may I have some time to prepare an explanation?" I prodded for permission.

"Granted," said Duke Seyfert with a light nod, although he did give me the searching look of a man wondering what mischief his grandson was brewing. It did kind of look that way given our respective age differences, but it was still pretty darn unnerving to be on the receiving end. "Now then, shall we move onto the next topic of discussion?"

While all that was going on, I called over some of the people standing by the wall. As I labored over drawing a diagram for the experiment tools, I asked the assistants to prepare some things for me. It didn't surprise me that they looked at me a bit strangely for it. This would have been so easy if we had plastic bottles.

A short while later, the assistants finished setting up the experiment tools and a large blackboard. Duke Seyfert graciously called the meeting to a temporary halt. Everyone needed a break anyway, so the timing was perfect.

Although I referred to them as experiment tools, they weren't anything complicated—just two wine bottles with the bottoms taken off, and a connecting tube to carry water. I would connect the rims of the bottles, with one bottle perched upside down on top of the other. Since the bottoms were gone, pouring water in from the top would flow all the way to the other bottle. I also prepared a few other wine bottles, which were filled with water.

As an aside, the tube came from the intestines of a caterpillar monster called the Stone Crawler. When soaked in vinegar for thirty days, it became flexible, durable, and resistant to rot, ultimately serving its purpose even better than a rubber hose.

Unfortunately, the materials came from a Demonic Beast strong enough to cause trouble for novice adventurers, so stock was scarce. The fact that it was used in the palace as a water hose only underscored its rarity. The adventurers' guild posted plenty of requests to obtain these intestines, but the supply never quite matched the demand. This was only to be expected when human technology couldn't produce an identical item.

The other disadvantage was that there was no way of connecting multiple tubes, so you could only make them as long as the body of a single beast. That, and, well, you know what kind of material it is. When you touch it, it squelches, and it's just... Yeah, better not think about it.

“Okay, you take this. And you take this.”

After I threaded the tube through the rims of the glasses, I instructed an adult official to hold one bottle higher than the other, so that he could pour the water in from above. I made a boy hold the lower one.

The boy’s face was tense under the scrutiny of so many eyes. It had to be scary being watched by a bunch of nobles and military commanders. I mentally apologized to him.

“I will begin the demonstration.”

This wasn’t anything to get all puffed up and self-important about. Besides, I felt sorry for the poor kid, so I decided to just get on with it. I poured water into the bottle held by the official at a higher elevation. I poured enough to fill it, taking care not to spill the water.

With a gurgling sound, the water trickled through the tube all the way to the ground. When the tube finally filled with water, it started flowing up and out of the bottle held by the boy at a lower elevation. It was a total reversal from earlier.

Quiet gasps of surprise sounded across the conference room.

“As you can see, when you fill up the waterway, the water tries to maintain an equal level. The water at lower elevation starts flowing upward. An aqueduct would also work like this, would it not?”

Using the blackboard, I drew a rough diagram. The chalk used at the palace was of an impressively high quality. I expelled the thought from my mind that it was also made from monster body parts.

I drew a simplified version of Japan’s Tsujun Bridge. I didn’t know enough about its size to draw it to scale, so the drawing came out looking like a child’s scribbles, but hopefully the point got across.

“When a waterway becomes full, the water will rise so that it will become level with where it enters and where it comes out. It is possible to bring water

up to a higher elevation using an aqueduct.”

The room filled with gasps. It was just a simple demonstration of the reverse siphon phenomenon, but there were people who didn’t know it. I mean, if the concept wasn’t known in this world, then people wouldn’t even have the opportunity or reason to talk about it.

As an aside, people knew about the siphon principle in ancient Egypt. The reverse siphon apparently found its oldest applications in Japan through the Umankashira irrigation system in the Saga prefecture. You could even use it to cross the river. It was one of the sleights of hand people used in the Edo period—basically a parlor trick—but those types of water shows are still used in modern times.

There were still some people gazing at the experiment tools with interest, but I felt bad about making people hold bottles of water indefinitely. I gave the signal to the official and the boy to put away what they were holding, then directed everyone’s eyes to the diagram.

“If you can draw water from Krumsze, then everything else should be relatively straightforward. If you make haste and create a wooden pipe to serve as a waterway, then you should be able to extract water from the lake with relative ease. It need only hold out for as long as the refugees are in custody.”

Count Engelbert spoke up with interest. “Through these aqueducts, will we be able to take the same amount of water as what remains in the lake?”

“It is hard to say whether it will be exactly the same. I expect that it shall suffice as long as the loss is only slight. It will be necessary to consult with a specialist on waterways.”

“Will sand pile up in the waterway?”

“It will, as you predict. It is imperative to cover the waterway. I ask that you direct your attention to this point...”

I drew a mark at the lowest point of the bridge in my diagram.

“I believe that laying down a wastewater port should suffice. Generally, a plank of some sort can be used as a cover. If you were to pull out the plank, the water would spill out the side, causing it to flush away the sand and dirt. After you replace the plank, the water will fill up again and flow to a higher elevation.”

“Enlightening.”

Tsujun Bridge’s drainage system was a thing they showed off to tourists, but it actually was originally used for the purposes I just described. Count Engelbert nodded in satisfaction at my answer. Then his gaze shifted from me to Duke Seyfert.

“Well, well. Lord Werner, whence did you learn this?” asked the duke.

“Er, um,” I faltered slightly, “I happened upon this realization when I was playing as a child.”

Technically, it wasn’t a lie since I had learned about the reverse siphon from my compulsory education as a child. Besides, I had been half playing around when I experimented with my cooking. *Yep, let’s go with that.*

More to the point, I sure as hell was no specialist, so I didn’t have an easy time fielding so many questions. This was more or less a suggestion that came to me out of the blue, not some deeply thought-out lecture.

“You, there.” Seemingly oblivious to my inner angst, the duke merely nodded at my reply while calling out to a civil official hovering near the wall. “Would you get in touch with His Majesty, the Minister of Works, and the Director of Waterworks? I would like some of their time in the afternoon.”

“Yes, at once.”

Um, what?

“Lord Werner, I ask that you set aside time in the afternoon. Does that suit you?”

“Yes, of course.”

That was all I could say. But, uh, what? Why? How did things wind up like this?

The meeting went on for a while after that, until the aforementioned civil official reappeared, hurried to the duke's side, and whispered something in his ear.

The duke nodded. "I have no complaints, for it was I who asked for their time in such haste. Let us attend to them forthwith. Lord Reinwardt, I entrust the rest of this meeting to you."

"Yes, my lord. You may leave the matter in my hands."

"Lord Werner, you shall accompany me. And have those two who participated in that earlier experiment come along with the tools."

"Understood, my lord."

So Count Engelbert's first name was Reinwardt, huh? Abruptly, the duke stood up, scattering my idle thoughts, so I hurriedly bowed to everyone left in the room before making my exit with the duke.

This whole issue was getting too big for me. I didn't *need* to come along, right? Ugh, I wanted to go home. When we got near the meeting room, I instinctively looked back over my shoulder and saw the civil official and the boy gazing back at me, wine bottles in hand, their faces a mirror of my own expression.

"Good day to you," the duke called out to the guard standing in front of the meeting room. "It is I, Seyfert."

"Thank you for your patience. His Majesty awaits you within."

"Good to hear."

The guard nodded reverently before opening the door. Needless to say, you weren't supposed to knock on the door yourself in this situation.

“I, Seyfert, present myself to you. I thank you graciously for your time.”

“Verily. There is much to discuss.”

Inside the meeting room sat the king, the crown prince, the Minister of Works (whose name was Rademacher), and the Director of Waterworks (whose name was Gebhart). A whole room of bigwigs. The scene was so unreal to me that ironically, I felt a weird sense of calm.

It unnerved me to see the prince smiling at me. I wasn't up to anything, I swear!

“Your Majesty, I would first ask you to look upon what Lord Werner has discovered.”

Um, what I *discovered*...? I wasn't a scholar, darn it. My game memories were one thing, but taking credit for common knowledge back in my old world made me feel kind of like a fraud.

Seemingly misinterpreting the source of hesitation, the duke took charge in directing the civil official and boy to set up the demonstration again. The boy was stiff because he was in front of the king and the crown prince. Yeah, I really had to apologize to him. Maybe I'd give him candy or something later.

When they saw the water rise up the tube, all the lofty individuals in the room looked as surprised as anyone. It really seemed like this principle was totally unknown in this world.

But wait, didn't this very palace have a fountain? How on earth did they get the water to gush out that fountain?

“So you are using that to make water at two different elevations become level?” The prince grasped the principle in an instant. This guy really didn't mess around. “To achieve that with just the water alone...”

“What degree of elevation can this be applied to?” The Director of Waterworks shot me a question.

I hesitated a little as I answered, “I have never done it before, so I cannot

determine how far it can be applied. I suspect that if the elevation is too high, the pipe may not be able to withstand the water pressure.”

“That sounds plausible.”

I was half lying. The upper limit for making water rise was apparently about seven to eight meters. In practice, this was influenced by the friction between the pipe and water, as well as the water’s mass. I honestly wasn’t too familiar with the specifics, and I’d never actually figured out the precise height through my own experimentations. It would have been weirder if I did somehow figure all that out through playing as a child.

The important thing was that I knew the reverse siphon phenomenon was used in actual waterways. I’d merely suggested it as a springboard. Maybe a specialist would study the topic in depth after the Demon Lord business was dealt with. Hopefully. I decided to leave the problem to some future person.

“I haven’t seen the land in question,” I said, “but I would hope that this would be enough to bridge the crevices and depressions in Krumsze.”

“I see.”

Hm? That was a strangely vague response. Was that, uh, it? Doubt started welling in my mind as the duke told the civil official and the boy, “You may leave.” It sure would have been nice to join them.

“Your Majesty, may I?”

“You may.”

The duke seemed to be looking for some sort of clearance, and as soon as he got it, he turned to me. “Viscount Zehrfeld, everything we discuss henceforth must be kept secret.”

“I understand.”

Just as I was wondering whether this conversation was going to be a pain in the ass, he told me what the deal was. In a certain sense, it was indeed a pain in the ass.

“In truth, this capital has suffered from water shortages these past few years.”

The startling truth. A water shortage in the capital? It had never even occurred to me.

I wasn't able to keep a straight face, but I did deserve some commendation for not letting slip a groan right in front of the king and the prince. Nobody had ever breathed a word of this to me before, so I was genuinely shocked. Even though some of that emotion did show on my face, I was honestly glad that nobody pointed it out.

As I inwardly sighed in relief, Duke Seyfert continued his explanation. “It has been difficult to increase the water supply apace with the population growth. Nevertheless, it is a stain upon our kingdom that our statesmen cannot provide water to the citizens. We have been using magic and magic items to the utmost so as not to reveal the shortage.”

“Despite that, it is a fact that the wells have become dangerously shallow. The situation is dire for the poorer residents,” the Director of Waterworks chimed in.

Then it was the prince's turn to speak up. “There is also the issue of maintaining face. We have been prioritizing the supplies for noble mansions and the business district for foreign merchants. Thus, there are many nobles who have yet to realize the problem, though your father is well aware.”

Ah, I figured that was because he was the Minister of Ceremonies. He understood the importance of keeping up the kingdom's appearances to a degree that he probably found unpleasant. It made sense to keep the water shortage under wraps from the traveling merchants, because then that information would leak to foreign countries. So, uh, I guess that meant I was the dumb one for not noticing?

“That is one of the issues involved in accepting refugees,” the prince went on. “Accepting five thousand people at the capital, even temporarily, could deprive

our own citizens of water. It is a most vexing dilemma.”

“We were hoping to push this problem onto another nobleman quickly,” His Majesty said, perhaps *too* bluntly. At least now I knew why his expression was so cheerful.

But to think that there were water shortages in the capital. I did always wonder why such a large city wasn’t near a river, but my thoughts never went beyond idle musings. The fact that it never occurred to me that a water shortage was even possible was negligent of me. I mean, the kingdom did go out of its way to hide it, but a nobleman was supposed to be in the kind of position to notice these things.

Okay, that was enough self-deprecation. This was no time to get mopey.

“The Minister of Works will investigate the effectiveness of Viscount Zehrfeld’s technique at different elevations. You won’t have time to sleep.” His Majesty casually dropped a line that would make even the most exploitative workplaces look askance.

“I fully understand and accept.”

Oh well, I supposed that knights were pretty gung ho about military work.

“The Director of Waterworks will create the blueprint for the aqueducts,” the king continued. “You may leave the core aspects as is, but incorporate Viscount Zehrfeld’s technique. You have three days.”

“Y-yes.”

Whoa, three days? was my first thought, but then it occurred to me that there were already existing blueprints for the aqueducts. The capital already had a robust water and sewer service. The irrigation techniques here weren’t at such a low level.

Depending on how long they were, aqueducts required a ridiculous number of calculations to build—especially the ones that used the natural flow of gravity. Roman aqueducts could only dip two meters over the course of ten kilometers,

so normally you wouldn't be able to set one up right away. It seemed that there'd already been quite a lot of research into the issue of drawing water from Krumsze's lake.

I kept my mouth shut since there was nothing to do but leave things to the professionals. If anything, I was grateful that they didn't turn around and ask me to do it.

I wondered if the water shortage in the capital was a deeper problem than I'd imagined. I knew that the kingdom kept track of its population for tax-related reasons, but because those files weren't public, I had no idea how much the population had increased in recent years.

"Viscount, I would like you to share your technique with the royal family," the king declared. "You will receive monetary compensation."

It was less "share" and more "submit." Or maybe "present"? There was the power balance to consider, so they probably didn't want a single nobleman monopolizing the knowledge. Not that there was much point in hoarding it when the other countries were bound to find out about it eventually.

This world didn't have patents or anything, so there was no point being precious about it. But official acknowledgment from the royal family was a different story. People wouldn't be able to blatantly rip off the idea. Plus, the monetary compensation sounded nice. They could pretty easily have taken it by force.

There were a lot of things that I needed to do. I could think of this as my budget, or perhaps as pocket money that could go toward those ends. All things considered, I would get a lot out of being obedient here.

"I would be humbled to oblige."

"My thanks. Seyfert, be prepared to change the number of troops you'll deploy."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

It only made sense that they'd dig into the refugee task force for this. You couldn't reduce the military forces assigned to the capital, what with Dreax looming large in Fort Werisa.

"Your contributions are valued as always. The two of you may leave."

"Then I shall excuse myself."

Upon hearing His Majesty's words, the two of us bowed and returned to the military conference room. As we walked down the ridiculously long hallway, the duke spoke up with a troubled expression on his face.

"My, my, it is quite a tall order to reduce the task force in this situation, though I intend to keep a stiff upper lip."

I hesitated before saying, "Would you mind if I offered a humble suggestion?"

"Oh?"

I explained my idea simply. It was a bit tough for a knight of this kingdom to swallow, but the duke actually seemed to consider it as we walked along. He put a hand to his chin in thought before nodding.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures and whatnot. Given that it would be private nobleman armies at the center of this plan rather than the kingdom's knight brigade, I have some leeway to consider your suggestion. Will you submit it to me in written form?"

"Yes, I will do so."

I'd figured that he would rather use the regular forces at his disposal to guard the construction site of the aqueduct. Thankfully, he was willing to lend an ear. But if I was going to submit a written proposal today, then I would have to pull an all-nighter, huh...

While the topic was still on my mind, I asked the duke about the fountain inside the castle as we walked along. I knew it was rude of me, but I was curious.

"That fountain shoots out water through a magic pump."

It turned out to be a brute force operation.

“There are thirty-eight magic pumps installed inside the palace to draw out water from the underground well. Every morning and night, the court mages channel magic into them. During times of peace, it is also their daily task to ensure that the pumps work as intended.”

Court mages had a surprisingly boring job... Well, I guess they couldn't train intensively all day.

Apparently, the reason there were thirty-eight pumps was not only because they needed tap water for the cooking and laundry work, but also because there were separate pipelines for watering the garden and for bathing in the inner court. Part of this was because it would be a problem if one of the pumps went haywire and the water stopped flowing, but they didn't want an overflow either.

I wondered if there were cases where the water just never stopped flowing. As it turned out, using multiple magic stones at once caused the magic distribution balance to go off-kilter. Thus, there were occasional incidents when the magic went haywire. I had no idea that things like that happened. There was a lot I didn't know about magic stones.

It was my first time hearing about it, but apparently, there was a time when the palace's inner garden got totally submerged, and the person responsible was punished. The favored mistress of the king at the time suffered the misfortune of seeing her flower bed ruined, and so the accused's head went flying—literally. Yikes. I felt like I'd just gotten a whiff of some secret, spicy palace drama. It was pretty freaky stuff.

“Maintaining the magic lamps inside the palace is also within the daily routine of a court mage.”

For some reason, the duke seemed to enjoy pulling back the curtain on the palace's inner workings. To be fair, it *was* a surprise to discover the mundane reality of these seemingly rarefied offices. Some of my reaction probably

showed on my face. I wondered how many lamps those mages checked.

“When you include both the spare lamps and the ones for nightly patrols, then it is roughly one hundred per day.”

“Whoa...”

The duke had to be a mind reader or something, because he answered the question without me asking it. Was it that obvious from my face? I had to marvel at how many magic lamps got used in this place. No wonder there were regular requests at the adventurers’ guild for magic stones dropped by monsters.

Unable to face the harsh reality, my mind started drifting. Maybe the Hanging Gardens of Babylon had its own magic pumps and mages. Oh, but then what would happen to this world if it lost its batteries (aka magic stones)?

I learned a host of uncomfortable truths on our jaunt back to the conference room, where the military strategy meeting was apparently still in progress. Mentally, I was ready to check out.



Chapter 2:

Escorting Refugees

~Guarding and Interception~

THE FIVE THOUSAND REFUGEES WERE SURROUNDED by eight hundred soldiers and two hundred knights. They were followed by another two hundred squires and the people managing the horses. This was just about half the originally anticipated numbers, but that was because the bulk of the regular army had been assigned to the aqueduct's construction site.

Even so, keeping over a thousand mouths fed per day was nothing to sneeze at. However, since we couldn't go without an armored escort to keep the refugees in order, we'd have to write that off as a necessary expense.

As if that wasn't bad enough, when it came to the refugees...

"I suppose this was only to be expected, but moving them takes quite a lot of time."

"That's just the way it is."

We were dealing with women, children, and elderly folk accustomed to the comforts of city life, now suddenly left with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Their bodies weren't accustomed to hardship, so of course their pace was slow. This was squarely at the bottom end of my expectations. The phrase "at a snail's pace" had been coined for situations like this.

Analogies and metaphors aside, this genuinely was eating up a lot of time, and there was no way around it. Even the horses looked bored. I was content with this state of affairs, but I couldn't speak for everyone.

The soldiers coaxed the refugees. "Take your time, but we must put distance between us and the border."

"There is a limit to how many sick people we can load into carriages. Everyone

who can walk must walk!”

Yet despite the soldiers’ professional conduct, not everyone was cooperative. Some of the refugees, insisting that they were aggrieved, demanded ever more assistance.

If we didn’t keep a close eye on those types, they were liable to slip away into the caravan’s wake, pilfering things as they went. For the most part, the soldiers would surround the miscreants and let the threat of force bring them back in line. Human rights? As I’ve mentioned before, that phrase didn’t even exist in this world.

Besides, the soldiers had bigger fish to fry. Nobody knew when the monsters would attack, so they had no time to spare indulging the misbehaving minority. It was inevitable that they would exploit the coercive powers of the crown. For better or worse, I was wise in the ways of this world by now.

“The duke judged rightly,” Max remarked.

“I suppose you could say it’s the sagacity of his years. Lord Frank did seem rather troubled, though,” I replied with sympathy as I recalled the face of the new marquess.

Frank Pablo Kneipp was the younger brother of the previous marquess, Oliver Heinrich Kneipp, who had fallen in the battle at Fort Werisa.

Here’s the tea: there were some nobles among the refugees. They had been transferred to Marquess Kneipp’s territory, ostensibly so they could explain the situation in Triot. And while this was in part to give their lives some semblance of normalcy, it was also to keep them from stoking discontent among the other refugees. It was a lot for a new marquess to deal with.

Incidentally, the late Marquess Kneipp’s relatives and close companions had committed some of their personal forces to the cause. About fifty of their soldiers had accompanied us from the capital, and they would remain in the fief as backup. I wouldn’t say we became brothers-in-arms or anything, but I did hope that they would be okay.

Off-topic, but I hated sitting for long on a horse. These roads weren't in bad condition, since they were usually maintained as highways, but they weren't so great that I could zone out and drop the reins. I would also like to take this opportunity to mention that riding for long periods at a time made my butt hurt.

During the late Middle Ages, knights were apparently known to develop a herniated disk from sitting too long on their horses while wearing heavy armor. There were plenty of contemporary records of knights taking baths as a sort of remedy. I remembered feeling a strange sense of wonder when I found out that medieval Europe used baths for therapeutic purposes, just like Japan did.

This world had magic healing, so the knights didn't appear to be so bothered about it, but this could be the reason why elderly knights and former knights felt such strong gratitude to the church.

"Viscount Zehrfeld, do you struggle with horses?" Lady Hermine, the lady knight riding across from Max, asked bemusedly.

"I just don't practice enough."

There was no point acting cool in this situation when the truth was apparent at a glance.

To be honest, I didn't have much interest in fighting on horseback, which was why I slacked off in the riding lessons at the academy. I didn't have much personal desire to practice either. That's because I was focused wholly on things that would help me survive the attack on the capital. Monsters could outpace a knight on horseback, and when I considered how easily I'd be run down, I couldn't muster any motivation.

Which meant that today's extended spell of riding was the perfect opportunity to brush up on my skills, though it was a little embarrassing to have my shortcomings exposed. Yeah...

"Have you a friend-in-learning?" Lady Hermine asked, seemingly to fill the silence, rather than out of genuine curiosity.

“My brother did, but I don’t,” was all I said as I awkwardly guided my horse.

It’s not that I was avoiding talking to her, just that I really didn’t have anyone I could call a friend-in-learning. I should mention that the horse required a lot of delicacy to handle, and I didn’t want to waste time on pointless chatter.

How to explain the concept of a friend-in-learning in this world...? It was basically like a childhood friend. Perhaps you could say that this was the result of mixing medieval European customs with the rules of this world.

The term “Middle Ages” referred to a long period of time. It also covered several distinct regions, which made it hard to speak of it in broad strokes. Nevertheless, during the early medieval period, children received their education from the parents of another noble house. That said, it wasn’t exactly extensive schooling in etiquette. Sometimes, it only went as far as “don’t walk around with your mouth open.” Not the most sophisticated of ages.

In the middle years of the era, the scope broadened to—how should I describe it—something like an inner-kingdom exchange student program. The middle-or lower-level nobles, such as viscounts and barons, would send their children to the more prominent houses to have them educated. Those lower nobles didn’t have the ability to thoroughly school their children on all the ins and outs, so they would hand them over to a count or higher-level house. Basically, they were saying, “I am entrusting my child to you, so please raise them and teach them all the manners befitting a noble.”

From the larger house’s perspective, there was another meaning: “I am entering your faction. My child will be at your mercy, so consider it a bid for good ties with our house.” The larger house would generally accept the proposition. By doing so, the larger house’s children could potentially find a future retainer or concubine.

The smaller houses also got a lot out of it. The boys who weren’t in line to be the next head of the house could use the connections they established with the larger houses. They could strive to become government officials or knights. For

girls, the idea was to build good relationships with the sons of noble houses. Failing that, they could win the favor of a noblewoman and become her lady-in-waiting or support the larger house by other means. There were even some cases where the patriarch of the house would become, erm, “extremely friendly” with the girl.

This was off-topic, but plenty of noble houses that got up to no good would find their partners-in-crime during that period of their lives. This was the reason why the evil aristocrats in stories would often rope in people from the same generation. It might have been a matter of limited opportunities for social mingling.

In the later years of the Middle Ages, a home tutor would teach book knowledge and etiquette. This was basically because the intellectual class had expanded enough to support a class of people who specialized in teaching. As always, the noble houses would choose whom they hired for their own political reasons.

The exchange student system for building connections still remained, though. It was common for a tutor to handle the children until they were about five or six, and then the children would be sent to study at another noble house from as young as eight years of age.

But this world I was reincarnated into had an academy system in place. There wasn't much need for domestic student exchange programs for the sake of mingling with others of the same generation. It was more common to build connections at the academy itself.

Besides, home tutors weren't regarded too highly in this muscle-brain world. To put it bluntly, anyone who had the qualities to become a home tutor would much rather work to become a palace mage.

Thus, high-achieving students looking to climb the social ladder would either choose to study magic or—if they didn't have the requisite skills—become a government official. Maybe some of them would consider becoming home

tutors because they liked children. Becoming a teacher at the royal academy was also technically an option, but to do so you'd need a direct appointment from the crown. A government office was the path of least resistance.

As a result, there was a shortage of good tutors, and the ones that did exist were snapped up by the highest-ranking houses, who offered the highest pay. Plenty of nobles wanted to extol their dignity and pretend that their son was a genius who excelled at everything after they enrolled at the academy.

Within that context, the smaller ambitious houses would approach the larger houses that had home tutors. "Would you allow my child to borrow a corner of your child's room as they study?" they would ask, sending their child into a hostage-cum-schoolmate arrangement. The result was something weirdly similar to the state of affairs back in Earth's Middle Ages, where noble houses would send and receive domestic exchange students. Perhaps that was a testament to how human nature didn't change much regardless of the world.

Anyway, the relationship between a young noble and another student under the same tutor was referred to as "friend-in-learning." The duration differed depending on when one enrolled in the academy, but it was common to study together from the ages of twelve to about fifteen.

My brother had four friends by that description, three male and one female, all from viscount or baron houses. I never studied with him due to the age gap between us, but I did remember him playing with me and giving me sweets from time to time.

"My brother's friends-in-learning had a warm relationship with my family, but not me, specifically, as an individual."

Given that I was the next head of the house, they had to be polite to me, but they probably couldn't help but feel differently about me compared to my brother, whom they had spent so much time with. As for me, I didn't want to exploit my family name to cash in on favors, so I didn't go out of my way to connect with them.

Besides, I recalled that one of the boys who studied with my brother married the girl. They'd gotten close as friends-in-learning, it seemed. I wasn't going to raise objections about that, but I thought it was only natural for people to put their own houses first.

After my brother's death, I was the only heir left to House Zehrfeld, and I didn't have a fiancée. This meant that I was on the receiving end of some weird advances, and it got quite tiresome. The fathers and daughters of noble houses would push the idea of engagement on me, even when my brother's body was still warm in its grave. No doubt they saw in me an opportune investment. Fortunately, my father banned them from visiting before I even had to speak up.

"I don't know if that's the reason why, but I didn't have any friends-in-learning even though I had a tutor."

"I-I see." Lady Hermine nodded in reply, her expression rather awkward.

I didn't need her sympathy. It wasn't like I set out to be a loner or anything. And to be perfectly honest, this suited me just fine. The fact that I was able to absorb knowledge one-on-one from my tutor had probably laid the groundwork for a reputation as an honors student. My lack of connections at the academy was entirely due to my lack of effort, but mingling had to take a backseat to preparing for the attack on the capital.

"On that subject, do you happen to have a friend-in-learning, Lady Hermine?" Max spoke up next to me, perhaps in an attempt to lighten the mood.

I was not in the mood to prolong the chitchat when my hands were full reining in this freaking horse. But oh well...

"I was raised as a lady knight, and so..."

"Is that so?" Max nodded at Lady Hermine's reply before shooting an inscrutable look in my direction.

Something in her reply struck me as a bit odd as well. Upon reflection, it was

unusual for girls of count-level nobility to become knights.

Women did have some amount of social mobility in this world. There were female adventurers, for one thing. Also, much like how there were lady knights, there were also female government officials at the palace, although they were rare. If you extended the net to regional-level officials, then there were plenty of women in those roles. Of course, much like in my previous world, highborn women could become ladies-in-waiting for prominent noble families, and there were lots of women working other roles in the palace.

On the other hand, you could say that perpetuating the bloodline and expanding its influence were the core tenets of any given noble house. From that perspective, you could easily grasp why, say, a baron or viscount-level young lady might seek to become the concubine of a friend-in-learning from an upper house. Alternatively, they could aim to move up in the world by becoming a lady-in-waiting, a knight, or a palace or government official. Of course, there were plenty of cases where a noble young lady engaged in formal matrimony, but if you were the fifth daughter in the line or something, your choices were quite limited.

But Lady Hermine was the daughter of a count. Someone in her position would have a lot of marriage options, which she would be expected to cultivate by building good relations with other houses. My personal opinions notwithstanding, I'd never heard much badmouthing about Count Fürst. Of course, it wasn't so outlandish for her to train for knighthood of her own volition, but it did still strike me as unusual.

As an aside, there was a surprisingly large array of career options for commoner-level women, including needlework, lacework, midwifery, and laundry work. Beyond that, they could take up any number of trades, such as cutting hair, carpentry, and bread baking. They were also known to take on roles as guild receptionists and administrators. Learning your father's trade, in particular, was quite common for girls here, just as it had been in Earth's Middle Ages. I'd definitely seen cases of widows continuing their husband's shop or

work studio.

But that was all just about commoner women. In that sense, Lady Hermine was a bit of an odd duck. Curious as I was to her motives, though, I didn't see any merit in poking my head into another house's family business.

I decided to change the subject. "Have you encountered any altercations on the road?"

"Thus far, nothing worse than heated arguments," she replied.

Since there were female refugees, there were about twenty lady knights accompanying us in case any problems specific to them cropped up. Apparently, Count Fürst proposed this and was obliged to send his own daughter in that capacity. It made sense for lady knights to respond to women's problems, so I figured it was the right call to have them join the mission. It certainly hadn't had any downsides so far.

For now, I focused on guiding my horse while keeping one eye on my surroundings. Though, given how quiet things were, there wasn't much to keep watch for. I sighed. Quiet was a good problem to have.

A small smile spread across Mine's face as she watched Werner struggle with his horse. So Viscount Zehrfeld wasn't without weaknesses after all. She couldn't deny that a part of her felt strangely relieved to see the younger man's behavior match his age for the first time in a while.

As a matter of fact, Werner's reputation had been climbing among Mine's peers.

When the escort squad from the capital joined up with a group of refugees at Anheim, a town near the border, they'd encountered some nobles from the erstwhile kingdom of Triot who, disgruntled at having fallen so far as to have to mingle with commoners, immediately started causing them trouble.

At Anheim, the obviously drunk young nobles had ganged up on a young lady

knight and demanded service befitting their aristocratic status. Given their station, she couldn't refuse them outright. When eventually they tried to take her by force, her squire came rushing to her defense, raising a ruckus as she did.

When Werner heard about the incident, he hurried to the scene and, without a word, flung the offending nobles to the ground.

Needless to say, his actions infuriated the nobles, but the lady knights privately thought well of Werner's conduct. When one of the nobles shouted, "How dare you lay a hand on a count of Triot!", Werner coldly replied, "So a count of Triot stoops to indecency toward a knight of our kingdom? This is no small matter. You shall comply with our laws."

"What did you say?"

"According to precedent, if a noble from another land breaks the law within our borders, then they will be expelled from our kingdom. You will be returned to Triot. Rest assured that you may take your belongings with you. I will begin preparing for your departure."

"What...?"

"D-don't be ridiculous!" The other nobles began to chime in, flustered. "If you do that..."

With a distinctly unamused expression, Werner replied, "Do you take issue with my judgment? I, who hold the honor of calling myself viscount? Enough. Even if this causes strife between our lands, so be it. If Triot has any grievances, let them bring them before our kingdom. I have no intention to run or hide."

Werner had declared his own nobility. Had reminded them that Triot no longer existed as a kingdom, nor in any capacity to express any form of grievance. By emphasizing that point, he made it clear that this incident would be one of *former* nobles assaulting a lady knight. Expelling them from the kingdom would hardly be an issue.

Werner ignored the flushed faces of the aristocrats and said to the lady

knight, “I’ll take you to the priest. We can’t have you injured.” With that, the two of them left the scene. And so the incident came to a hazy end, with Werner entrusting the soldiers to prevent the nobles from slipping away.

Mine had a stake in the matter, given that the lady knight in question was one of her subordinates. Early the next morning, she met with Werner along with the victim and the captain of the lady knights to express their gratitude for how he handled things. When Mine asked in passing about this legal precedent he’d spoken of, Werner’s reaction could only be described as smug. “There was no such precedent.”

“Fools who cling to their status from a fallen kingdom would hardly be familiar with legal matters. A bluff was perfectly sufficient,” he said with a shrug.

Seeing that, the captain of the lady knights broke out into laughter and commended him for not letting the situation escalate. But Werner responded with a simple “You’re welcome,” before steering their discussion toward more practical matters. When they heard about that, the lady knights began to gossip about how Viscount Zehrfeld was much calmer and more collected than his age suggested.

There was more to the story. When other nobles of Triot heard about the incident, they apologized to Duke Seyfert for their rudeness toward their hosts. Within the day, Seyfert received a report from Werner. Having been apprised of the situation, he accepted the apology with the stipulation that the offending nobles would be abandoned in Krusten, within Marquess Kneipp’s territory. One could say that this worked out to Werner’s advantage, because the nobles would no longer be in his hair. And so the incident was brought to a conclusion.

However, as far as Werner was concerned, it was the end of only one problem. To be more specific, he was much more concerned about the journey from Marquess Kneipp’s territory to the royal capital. He had been so fixated on the latter issue that the nobles barely registered in his thoughts. He would not deny this was part of the reason he shrugged off the praise heaped at his feet.

Although the lady knights were directly under Duke Seyfert's command, the women showed their faces to me every now and then because of my role in the mission. Though it should be noted this was a matter of managerial authority, rather than overall skill as a knight. Their unit had members stronger than me.

Just as Max opened his mouth to say something, the sound of a flute rang out, causing tension to spike the surroundings. But the group as a whole did not stop its walking pace. After a short while, a patrolling soldier came running down the path toward us.

"Report," he announced, stopping in front of me. "Two Gluttony Bats and one Tooth Worm have been sighted and dispatched. It was the Iron Hammer adventurer party that dealt with them."

"Understood. Keep up the patrol."

"Will do, my lord."

As the soldier ran back to his position, I let out a sigh of relief.

Max smiled beside me. "It seems to work well."

"That's a relief."

When you think of defense or escorting, you would generally imagine adopting a protective stance, but I had taken the opposite approach. I chose to deploy scouts in the area and have adventurers take down the monsters ahead of time.

I should say that this wasn't really an unusual strategy. To compare it with naval operations, you could liken the monsters to submarines, the scouts to surveillance aircrafts, and the adventurers and mercenaries to minesweepers and destroyers.

The regular army split off to form a protective shell around the refugees while multiple squads of adventurers and mercenaries went further afield to preemptively deal with any threats lying in wait. The scouts prowled even

farther ahead, keeping a careful watch on the land.

If the scouts spotted a monster, they would play a flute. Any adventurers or mercenaries close at hand would head to the source of the noise, defeat the monsters before they could make contact with the refugee convoy, and then return to their original position. That was the general rotation.

I would pay the adventurers and mercenaries for showing up, regardless of whether they fought or not. If they defeated any monsters, they would get paid extra, and they also got dibs on the spoils. It was strictly forbidden for anyone else to snatch the monster body parts away from the group that did the killing. The punishment would be patrolling duties for two consecutive nights, a rather harsh fate indeed, which meant that nobody acted out of line.

There were a few people who initially scoffed at the idea of adventurers doing the work when the knights were right there. But with so many people funneled into protecting the aqueduct, I was able to push my proposal through on the grounds that our troops were stretched too thin.

For the sake of consolidating the chain of command, the Zehrfeld troops took charge of the adventurers, mercenaries, and scouts. The other noble houses were decidedly reluctant to take on that mantle. Every aristocrat had their pride, after all, and those with a reputation for martial might could be particularly fussy about such things. Maybe the reason I didn't pay much heed to that was because I was a fan of adventurers in light novels and other media from my old world.

That said, I *had* successfully implemented battle tactics that had never previously existed in this world. The fact that I was trusted enough to make my own judgments meant that I didn't have to spend so much time explaining myself, which suited me just fine. I suspected that the duke himself had personally approved several of these plans. And so, though we Zehrfelds had few knights of our own, I figured that we could probably make do.

"Report from the duke," said a lady knight. "As was planned the other day, we

will rest tonight at camp number thirty-six.”

“Understood,” I said. “By the way, you don’t have to worry about the flute sound from earlier. The problem is settled.”

“Thank you, my lord. I will be sure to report that to the duke.”

“Keep up the good work,” Lady Hermine called out to the knight, who smiled in response before heading back to the base of operations.

This demonstrated why so many lady knights came my way. Basically, their day-to-day duties amounted to running errands. Sure, they were knights, but take a few dozen women and spread them across a group of five thousand and who knows what some of those people might attempt. So, for their own well-being, the lady knights worked in a close-knit group.

Meanwhile, all the noble commanders, including myself, had one or two messengers on standby whom we could dispatch to the base in case urgent problems arose. The other messengers ran back and forth between the base and troops to deliver orders and communications, just like the aforementioned lady knight had. Part of me wanted to commend them for putting on so many hard yards on their horses, although maybe the bigger takeaway was that they were way better at riding than I was.

Anyway, given that the adventurers and mercenaries were taking the lead in intercepting the enemy, it followed naturally that their commander—me, that is—would be inundated with queries and requests for status updates. Not that I could complain about dealing with the messengers. If anything, it was probably more trouble for the lady knights who actually had to do all that running around.

I turned my attention to what the messenger had said of where we’d make camp for the night. Places suitable for camping were surprisingly few and far between, so any campsites next to towns were generally well-known. They were simply referred to by number rather than individual names. As we anticipated beforehand, our stop for the night would be the campsite known as

thirty-six.

Camping as a group in this world was no walk in the park. Right off the bat, you had to consider how to secure water, how to divide the space for sleeping, and how to dispose of waste. People could get sick if you didn't clean up their (literal) crap. Even if you were only staying for a single night, you needed to prepare fences and simple moats. After all, you never knew where a monster might show up from.

With that in mind, the military engineers were divided into two broad groups. The first group stuck close to the front of the troops and developed the campsite's positions and boundaries. For example, they would set up the headquarters, choose sturdy materials to build the fences, and divvy up the cooking and toilet areas. For this reason, soldiers with surveying knowledge and engineering skills accompanied the front unit.

Incidentally, it was also their job to determine whether the main forces could cross certain roads after it rained. If they were able to get through, they would perform maintenance on the road surface, make sure the bridges were sturdy enough, and so on. It was a pretty weighty responsibility. In premodern warfare, it wasn't unheard of for soldiers to snipe enemy surveyors. After all, they didn't want people sniffing out traps or areas that were conducive to staging an ambush.

Upon arriving at the site, the second group of engineers, embedded in the main force, would follow the forward group's general layout to create simple moats and embankments, set up the command tent, and dig holes for waste excretion and disposal.

These fences and moats didn't just serve to defend against enemies from outside—they also prevented people inside from fleeing. There was always the chance that soldiers would desert, or worse, that refugees might run off and turn to crime. We had to be thorough with building these enclosures to deter such behavior.

Even if you did the bare minimum, setting up camp took at least an hour, and it wasn't rare for that to stretch to nearly three. The fences alone took an hour, but that made sense if you were considering the possibility of a fire or some other contingency. An army on the march had to arrive at the campsite and begin this work well before it got dark. By no means was moving an army as simple a matter as getting them to walk from A to B.

Part of the reason people often joked about the snail's pace of Sengoku period armies was that they didn't understand this point. The numbers could tell you how many kilometers they covered and the rate at which they moved, but that was pretty pointless without context. If you didn't know in advance where you would be camping, then an army wouldn't be able to march very far at all without being forced to stop for the day. There were examples of medieval European armies moving as little as eight kilometers in a day, depending on where they were able to locate water.

Granted, it was unusual to move *that* little, but calculating the average speed per day based on distance and overall time was nothing but armchair theorizing unless you actually walked across the terrain and environment yourself. Even the weather had a strong sway over how far you could move.

Anyway, the point was that when moving as a group, knowing the lay of the land was way more important than you might imagine, which meant competent scouts were just as crucial too. You could show up at a place only to find out that it was unsuitable for camping, which would only make things harder for the soldiers. Sleep-deprived soldiers had every right to be disgruntled.

That said, we didn't have to place that much importance on military considerations when we were moving within the kingdom's borders. Even the highways were well-known. This was only to be expected when generations of Kneipps had trod these paths time and time again.

Beyond the act of setting up camp, it was also easy to forget that moving the luggage—specifically the cattle and horses carrying them—took time. Part of the problem was that, although they were herbivores, they had to eat a *lot* of

grass to maintain the muscle strength necessary to transport heavy loads. The issue wasn't just how much they ate, but how ridiculously long it took them to graze. Even when traveling light, it could take over four hours for them to get their fill. If you were bringing along dairy cattle, then they needed seven hours a day to munch. We didn't have dairy cattle here for that very reason, but I digress.

Considering the grazing time for the horses and cattle drawing the carriages for luggage and sick people, the amount of time each day you could actually spend moving was even further limited. Within the context of a military operation, you could have the animals go without for a day or two, but in month-long campaigns, reduced grazing time would rob them of the strength to carry heavy loads. You couldn't afford to be blasé about it. Dealing with this was yet another important issue for a group commander.

In this regard, perhaps because of the wisdom of his age, Duke Seyfert's judgment was impeccable. There were a lot of things I stood to learn from him.

From inside the tent that night, I heard the sound of rustling and scraping. The soldiers were polishing their armor.

Anyone who was part of an athletics club would probably understand this, but running with a group doesn't just make you sweat, the group's combined exhalations can drive up the humidity of the nearby air. Running itself could get fairly uncomfortable, but marching with an army was even worse. One of the key differences from sports was that everyone wore metal armor.

By and large, iron was used for making armor. And because the parts were detachable, there were a lot of gaps where dust could build up from just walking around. The dust would have moisture, exacerbated by humidity. And the sweat would throw salt into the mix.

The end result was simple: rust. Armor could rust at the drop of a hat. Depending on the degree of impurities, it could even show rust within a single

day, as difficult as that may be to believe.

As a result, soldiers and squires spent the nights performing maintenance on their armor. They also serviced their weapons, but armor was the priority when the army was on the move. If rust showed up on the detachable parts, then it would have an effect on the next day's march.

You might wonder if polishing the breastplates was necessary, but if the area around the hip rusted over, it would keep rubbing against your skin, causing a pressure ulcer. You had to clean your armor and oil it to make sure none of that happened.

A nobleman like me could get a squire to do the polishing for me, but common soldiers had to do it themselves. Cavaliers had to fix up their steeds' saddles, harnesses, and horseshoes, although nobles could delegate their horse-related jobs too.

In this world of magic, there did exist enchanted armor. A spell could freeze things in a specific state, preventing rust from ever forming. But they fetched a steep price and were generally reserved for nobles. Soldiers had no choice but to quietly scrape their armor with a rag.

Nevertheless, they didn't complain, and that was because maintaining the upkeep on one's armor was quite literally a matter of life or death. Polishing one's weapons was also important to prevent them from dulling, of course, but armor had so many different components, which invariably took a lot of time to handle.

As an aside, it was chainmail that made soldiers and squires alike weep, for reasons you could probably guess. One method of servicing them involved putting them into a barrel of dry sand, and then rolling the barrel around until the sand sucked out all the moisture. On the flip side, if you didn't go to such extreme lengths, you wouldn't be able to get rid of the fine bits of moisture. There was also no guarantee that you could even get your hands on dry sand when you did want to get the moisture off.

As I reflected on my privilege as a highborn person, I walked into the tent that served as the base of operations.

“It is I, Werner Von Zehrfeld.”

“Please wait a moment.”

The proper procedure... Ah, yes, I remembered skipping past all that during the Demon Stampede... Anyway, I conveyed my arrival to the guards outside the headquarters. They went inside to confirm their next steps before making their way back to me.

“You may come in,” said a guard who held his spear more stolidly than I did.

“Keep up the good work,” I replied, before heading into the tent.

It was difficult to work out the right tone of address in this situation. It wouldn't be very aristocratic of me to bow and scrape, but the other guy was older than me, so I couldn't bring myself to snub him.

“It is I, Werner Von Zehrfeld,” I repeated.

“Come in,” came the response, this time from the man inside the tent. With permission now firmly in hand, I entered. The reason I skipped this process that other time was because it was a state of emergency. Today, there were no such pressing issues, so I observed proper etiquette.

The other leaders were all assembled. I felt a bit awkward about arriving last, even if I'd only been delayed on account of my duties. Fortunately, the others didn't seem to mind.

“Good work today, Viscount,” said Count Engelbert. “How go matters within the camp?”

“All appears calm,” I responded simply.

It had been my turn that day to inspect the camp's interior. There was no bigger hassle than monitoring a campsite with over six thousand people, counting soldiers and refugees alike, but if you passed the buck too far down the chain of command, whoever picked it up was bound to miss something and

call the wrong shots. I figured I should just be grateful that I didn't have to do it every single day. I was already delegating the job to Max when things got really busy.

"Nevertheless, I suspect that there could be *hidden* problems."

"Well, the toilet punishment takes care of that," Viscount Kauffeldt answered instead of me, causing everyone to crack wry smiles.

Of course, I had no choice but to plaster an awkward grin on my face. But oh boy...

In these situations, you could expect less than decorous behavior—specifically, the issue of prostitution. It's a perfectly respectable profession, most of the time, assuming people are selling their services voluntarily. But in times like these, with droves of people to move, it was nothing but a hindrance. Conserving our energy to move as quickly as possible in what little time we had may seem like a prosaic reason, but since we might have to flee a monster attack at any moment, it took on grave importance.

Thus, to keep things family-friendly around here, we publicly offered large monetary rewards to people who informed us of any violations by soldiers and knights. Those who broke the rules would receive a steep punishment. Meanwhile, the informants would receive enough coin to feed a family for one or two months. Because of this, the refugees watched each other like hawks for any trace of misconduct—a real testament to the power of cold cash.

Incidentally, those who did nab the reward could ask for HQ to keep hold of it for them.

A lot of people were worried that all that money might tempt someone to take it from them, and forcefully. I could understand where they were coming from.

Meanwhile, a devilish punishment had been devised for the offenders, guaranteed to rub salt into their wounded pride. Both customer and purveyor, regardless of their usual duties, would be tasked with latrine duty—and that

was a complete and utter pain in the ass. Though they were simple pit latrines made by digging holes and covering them with planks, they had to serve six thousand people. A simply nauseating number.

The cavalry horses alone numbered two hundred, and there were just about as many pack horses and cattle. You had to gather as much of their excrement as possible and drop it into the latrine. Then you would get a huge stash of ashes from the campfire and cooking fires and place that on top of the droppings. Just gathering the ashes would likely make you choke up, let alone carrying them all around the camp. It was rough going, to say the least.

Plus, you had to toss leaves, grass, and leftover fodder for the animals on top of the pile. Ash and foliage were useful for putting a lid on the filth. Then you put the soil back over and cleaned the planks that covered the holes—only then could you consider the job done.

To be perfectly blunt, not only was this work physically demanding, but the stench was so bad it would cling to your skin. It would affect your sense of smell so much that nothing you ate for an entire day would have any flavor. Doing it once was more than enough for most people.

But what was really horrid about this punishment was what came later, when you were on the move. For an entire day, you'd be a skunk whom everyone would give a wide berth. The smell as good as branded you a criminal. The trek would tax you physically—and the isolation, mentally.

Some people did get up to mischief on the first few nights, but by the fourth night the reports petered off, likely because word of the punishment had spread. It was tough work even for professional soldiers.

As a bit of a mean-spirited joke, the soldiers would even pray for a culprit to show up before they went to bed so that *they* could do the grueling work instead. If nobody came up, then the order would be determined by rotation. Actually, there had never been enough rulebreakers to cover the entire task, so the rotation came into effect every night.

Nevertheless, in the name of punishment, the rulebreakers would have to deal with the foulest areas. Thus, it made sense to hope for some miscreant to get roped into the job, if at least so you wouldn't. The soldiers were never keen on any job they could possibly avoid.

"Baron Kretschmer, how fares the rear?" asked the duke.

"At present, there appears to be no invasion from the direction of Triot. No escapees either."

Baron Kretschmer was a solidly built man who could rival Max. He really gave off the impression of a rugged warrior general. Given that Duke Seyfert had put him in command of the rear, his military achievements probably measured up to that impression.

Next, the duke called on Count Vogler, who was in charge of logistics—a very weighty role. My stomach would burst from anxiety if that landed on my head.

"Where to next, Count Vogler?"

"At camps twenty-eight and twenty-two, we should receive more food provisions and medicinal supplies. We've received word from the sentries there that no anomalies have been observed in the area. Provisions from the capital are still on their way to camps eighteen and fifteen. They should arrive in three days. The surrounding area is also stable, and our men are on standby. Fortunately, there has not been any rain, which means that the roads are clear."

"I see. Viscount Zehrfeld, tell me about the marching situation and the distribution of the enemies."

"Yes, my lord. Regarding the monster encounter rate..."

So it was my turn, huh? This was only to be expected, given that I was in charge of the adventurers, mercenaries, and scouts. The relevant information had naturally flowed my way. I'd also gone to the trouble of making lists and data sets to the extent of my abilities.

This was the routine for the daily meetings with the mission leaders. It was necessary, if soulless work. The meetings would drag on even longer when we had to brainstorm how to traverse bridges or other obstacles in the course of the next day.

Today, we had boiled water from a natural river, but we would have to pay to use the well water in a village or town. Handling those negotiations was also the leaders' jobs. Food and firewood also drained funds, of course, and those purchases needed checking beforehand.

Firewood cost a surprising amount. This was because we were consuming large bundles of it in order to cook for thousands of people and keep the night watch's fires going. Just picking up branches that naturally fell to the ground would hardly suffice. When setting up camp for the night, you would use the trees in the area to create fences. You could collect these in the morning and carry them around for a few days until they dried up enough to use as firewood instead.

Other used-up consumables like food and fodder (maybe add shoes to that list, with how quickly people wore them out) were also carefully recorded. We would submit the necessary costs to the crown once we got back to the capital, but since receipts didn't exist in this world, forgetting to report the expenses was tantamount to cutting open your own stomach.

If you didn't properly separate the consumables for the army from those for the individual noble houses, there would be disputes later. This was a hassle, but it was one of those things you had to shrug and deal with. Apparently, a good third of a Roman soldier's salary went toward shoes and other consumables. It was enough to make the person in charge of accounting start dreaming in numbers before long. In a game, the only budget you had to account for was the inn fee. Reality was downright miserable in comparison.

But moving on, the adventurers and mercenaries would come to House Zehrfeld's turf at night to report on the events of the day. As I doled out the rewards, I would hear about what kind of monsters appeared and how they

were slain. Meanwhile, my personal knights and soldiers would stand to the side and listen to the accounts in preparation for future encounters. Beyond providing useful information, these reports impressed upon the troops just what kind of danger we were facing.

I also needed to deal with the sick and injured and double-check how much of our supplies were left. Besides that, I had to commend the people who delivered good results and decide the punishment for rulebreakers. Admittedly, I did leave some of these tasks to Max as my second-in-command. I'd get burned out if I did it all myself.

My personal job of creating data for monster appearance rates and distribution would sometimes keep me up late at night. If I took my job seriously, there would be no end of tasks at my feet. It wasn't just a matter of shouting out orders and then kicking back your feet. Oh man, if you were the aide or second-in-command to an incompetent noble, your life would really suck.

Because we had to hurry up and place the refugees under our supervision, we set a brisk pace toward them. It took us only six days to reach the stronghold of Marquess Kneipp's territory. On the way back, however, we had to match the refugees' pace, which meant that it'd take us half a month to cover the same distance at the rate we were going. Considering the time needed to consolidate information from the former region of Triot, we would be away from the capital for a full month. It was making me doubt whether I would be able to keep up with classes once I was finally back at school.

I didn't think about how much the troops or the refugees were consuming. It would only make my head hurt, after all. I'd let the professionals worry about it. That was obviously the best course of action. Yep.

Although we were just about halfway back to the capital, I couldn't help but feel some relief, even if I couldn't afford to let my guard down just yet. We had

to be vigilant of a strong monster assault on our rear, coming from the direction of what was once the outskirts of Triot.

Thus far, our surveillance net of adventurers and mercenaries had dispatched most of the monsters, but there were some that still managed to slink their way over to the soldiers. The soldiers, of course, would take them out with a swift counterattack. It was their job, after all.

A couple of minor scuffles broke out among the refugees, but nothing that would result in any casualties. Anyone who looked like they had the stamina to pick a fight was put first in line for manual labor. That took the fight out of them pretty quick.

Given that we were trekking full speed every day, it was actually more unusual to find people with that sort of energy to spare. I looked up at the sky, feeling fortunate that at least the weather was decent.

Most of the problems were resolved with some mediation, adjustments, or a simple trial. I knew that in my head, but in practice, it was rather difficult to come up with satisfactory compromises right on the spot. Fortunately, I could subcontract any major problems to the adults. The top brass would decide on those things during their meetings.

Besides, intimidation worked more often than not. It may sound grim when I put it that way, but that's what it amounted to when we went around proclaiming that murder and rape would be punished by execution. To be fair, we usually made those announcements while the adventurers and mercenaries stood nearby with their monster head trophies. Sights like that were enough to spook most commoners.

Also, I had the option of curbing people's rations. If some asshole wanted to start a fight, I could have the salt in their meals reduced. Without salt and minerals, they would get tired more easily and lose their spunk. Basically, between that and walking for half a day, they wouldn't have the energy to fight. Yep, the books I read in my previous life sure came in handy here.

The sloping path was dotted with trees, though it was not dense enough to qualify as “woodland,” per se. As we continued our ascent, just before noon that day, knights on horseback came galloping toward us.

The messengers came running from Count Vogler’s territory. Upon hearing the report, all the leaders immediately assembled for a meeting. There wasn’t enough time to set up a tent, so we settled for lining up some chairs and tables. A group of knights stood around us, keeping any interlopers at bay. Within their watchful circle, the commanding nobles, myself included, sat with grim faces.

“There are hundreds of beast-type monsters?”

“Does this qualify as a Demon Stampede?”

Understandably, our first impulse was to doubt the information. Even in the wake of the Demon Lord’s return, it was hard to simply swallow the idea that a Stampede-level event had reoccurred so quickly. And to make matters worse, the horde was in the middle of cutting through the Wein Kingdom. It was deeply disconcerting.

As we traded anxious looks across the table, Duke Seyfert calmly spoke up.

“We must accept reality. Count Vogler’s wife has no reason to speak falsely.”

“You are right about that, my lord.”

It seemed that the count’s wife was in charge of handling their territory’s affairs in his absence. This was not an unusual situation, not only in this world but even in Earth’s medieval times. In fact, given that this world had female adventurers and knights, it was even more common for women to hold political or military authority.

However, their power came with a surprising amount of restrictions. I didn’t know about other countries, but in the Wein Kingdom, women could not be recognized as monarchs. Thus, kings were referred to as “His Majesty,” but his spouse was always referred to as “His Majesty’s Wife.” This was much like

Japan, which had its own era of emperors and empress consorts.

Count Vogler's wife appeared to have kept the outbreak contained within the fief's borders, but the enemy was so numerous that the count's forces had resorted to turtling up. Apparently, they were only managing to protect the civilians by the skin of their teeth. Since a large chunk of the knights were here with the count himself, nobody could blame his wife for the dilemma. Besides, we didn't have the time to start pointing fingers.

"Are the monsters attempting to cross over Count Vogler's territory?" I asked.

"Apparently so," replied Viscount Kauffeldt. "It may be happenstance that we lie in their path, but we would make a large target. There is a strong chance they would attack upon noticing us."

Humans were food as far as the monsters were concerned. With several thousand people all lined up in a row, we were a veritable feast. If they noticed us, they would *definitely* attack. Our knights and soldiers outnumbered them, but we were impeded by the overwhelming proportion of noncombatants in our group. If the monsters attacked, tragedy would follow.

"Can we not slip past?" I asked.

"That would be the ideal scenario," answered Count Vogler, "but it is looking unfeasible."

Unfortunately, the monster horde was moving in our direction—on course for a direct collision. Given that we were moving across a vast tract of land, it technically wasn't impossible to slink past them, but that was only if we were only dealing with a small group of people. With several thousand on the move, it was overwhelmingly more likely that we would get spotted. And besides...

"If that is the case," I said after an uneasy pause, "then it may perhaps be logical to assume that the enemy is deliberately targeting our group. As sobering as it may be to consider."

"Why do you think this?" Duke Seyfert asked.

It was just a hunch, but I suspected he'd reached the same conclusion as me. Regardless, he pressed me on my statement, perhaps because he enjoyed having his officers contribute to the discussion. Tokugawa Ieyasu was apparently pretty similar. He would get his subordinates to share their opinions and then choose the best plan from the range of suggestions. He probably didn't share his own stance first so as not to sway the direction of the discussion.

"It is because there has been no pursuit from Triot's direction."

Unfortunately, I should say. None of the escapees had included Triot's royal family or the nobles that directly supported them. But the Demon army's side did not necessarily know this. It made sense for them to crush everyone who managed to flee. While our forces were focused on guarding the rear, they would attack from a direction that left the refugees exposed. If their plan was to deal a fatal blow to Triot's survivors, I wouldn't question it.

"Is the Demon army so wily?" asked Baron Kretschmer.

"During the Stampede, at least, they feigned a retreat in order to draw out the kingdom's forces. It would be dangerous to assume that they do *not* have the intelligence to enact a sophisticated strategy."

I had no clue why the Demonic Beasts were so hell-bent on destroying Triot, but perhaps there was some reason for it from their perspective. But any speculation on that topic had to come later. We had to prepare for an attack under the assumption that they would attack us not from the rear but from the flanks. And that when they eventually came, fleet on their feet, they would stop at nothing to slay every last person from Triot.

When I explained as much to the baron, the duke nodded in agreement. "A convincing argument. Then it would be fruitless to attempt escape, and we lack the time to change course. Our only option is to intercept them first."

"First, we must consider how to use the lay of the land to our advantage," Count Engelbert said.

For better or worse, we were on the return path, so we knew the geography around here fairly well. However, given that the noncombatants overwhelmingly outnumbered us fighters, there weren't many areas where we could fight while covering the refugees. And it was fair to say that basically none of those areas were nearby.

There was some slightly elevated land where we could maneuver the group and fortify with embankments, but it was impossible to fend off Demonic Beasts with barricades alone. If even a single beast broke through, it would spell wide-scale slaughter.

"We could backtrack and use Helne Village," Viscount Kauffeldt said.

"Is that not our only option?" Count Engelbert said back to him.

Helne Village was yet another location that didn't appear in-game, but we had stopped by that place a day ago to replenish our water. In this monster-ridden world, any large settlements, like villages, were enclosed with walls. It wasn't anything near a fortress, but it was better than nothing.

Getting there, though, was easier said than done. I mean, we had to think about how long the line trailed when moving five thousand people around. Even if we put four people in a row, that meant 1,250 rows. If each row was a meter long, then it would be 1.25 kilometers from the front of the line to the back. To use an analogy from my old world, it was about the distance between Tokyo Station and Kanda Station if you were to use a direct train line. Managing large groups of people was an extremely finicky business.

Besides, we couldn't even achieve such regimented lines in practice. This meant that the line would actually be almost twice as long. Without transmitters or broadcasting devices, you can imagine how long it would take for a stop command to even reach a group spread out across two kilometers. Just making the group change direction was a feat in itself, and there were the additional burdens of supplies and disturbances within the group to consider.

It would be one thing if everyone were soldiers, but we were talking about a

massive group of civilians. They lacked the military training to enact a sudden shift in direction. I had no doubts this would be difficult to achieve in practice.

“Even if we were to request to use the village, I cannot imagine it capable of fitting several thousand people,” Baron Kretschmer said.

A frown crossed Duke Seyfert’s face. “We could shelter just the children and those unable to fight. The men among the refugees can participate in the assault.”

Although he said “participate,” none of those men had weapons. It was totally unreasonable to expect civilians with no proper fighting experience to speak of to face off against the Demonic Beasts with wooden spears and whatnot. The most you could hope for was having them chuck rocks from afar. If they got attacked, their line would definitely collapse into a panic.

...No, wait. The Roman general Scipio Africanus was able to incapacitate his foes when advancing his troops. I wondered if I could adapt his tactics. Our cavalry wasn’t as mobile as the monsters, but if the monsters relied on mobility, all we had to do was pin them down. The beast-type monsters weren’t too smart, and we had numbers on our side, if nothing else.

After some thought, I turned to face Duke Seyfert. “My lord, may I offer a suggestion?”

“What is it?”

The duke’s expression did not flicker even when dealing with a rookie like me. I was grateful that he was willing to hear me out, at least.

I laid out my plan for staging an attack at this location. Multiple people protested, forcing me to elaborate on the strategy: If we were going to get discovered anyway, we might as well guide the enemy to us. The skilled riders among our knights and the scouts were perfect for that kind of ploy. Then we would lay a trap for the enemy.

“You speak of traps, and yet there is nothing in this terrain that could serve

such purposes,” Baron Kretschmer pointed out.

“We will *create* the trap,” I replied, before giving a quick lowdown of the operation.

There was no reason *not* to use the five thousand people on our side. I would explain the circumstances to the refugees and get them to work for us. In return, we could offer them some reward when they got to the capital at a later date. They needed money to live on in the future, and if they could earn it with a spot of manual labor, then I could easily see some people getting on board. Plus, if they understood that the monsters would only come after them if they escaped from us, then the negotiations would probably work out fine.

“Fortunately, you can say that we have an abundance of labor and materials,” I said.

“Interesting.” In contrast to the other noblemen, who winced at the prospect of beseeching commoners for help, Duke Seyfert nodded. We were certainly pressed for time, but I was still surprised by how decisive he could be. “We will proceed with Viscount Zehrfeld’s plan. I would like to press for details, but there are things that must be done first. Viscount Kauffeldt, begin setting up camp at your own discretion. Pick any spot further along the route.”

“Yessir.”

“Count Vogler, my apologies, but I would like to use your subordinates to convey the plan to the refugees.”

“By all means.”

Viscount Kauffeldt was in charge of setting up tonight’s campsite, so he took the military engineers down the path. It was earlier than scheduled, but it was the job they would have done either way. Nevertheless, it was a huge responsibility on their shoulders, given that the camp they set today would be our battlefield tomorrow or the day after. I could only trust them to do their job, but I hoped that they picked a good spot.

Meanwhile, Count Vogler dispassionately accepted the mantle of gathering the refugees and spreading the news. Though it was a burdensome role, he bore it quite calmly.

“Viscount Zehrfeld, could you give the orders to the scouts to gather information on the enemy horde?”

“At once, my lord.”

“Count Engelbert, Baron Kretschmer, you will work with me to construct the fundamentals of the plan.”

“Yessir.”

Because I was in charge of the adventurers and mercenaries, it was up to me to give them the orders. When you included the freelancers, I was in command of the single biggest military group. Only the knight brigade’s forces outnumbered mine.

But still, Count Engelbert was the military advisor on this expedition, while Baron Kretschmer was clearly the kind of martial man to whom you could comfortably entrust the frontlines. It was very open-minded of the duke to accept a proposal from me, an utter greenhorn in comparison.

It was a strange thing to complain about, but I couldn’t help but feel mortified anyway. Still stewing in these misgivings, I hurried back to Max and the others and sent up a cloth kite to signal the scouts to assemble. Japanese-style kites were made with thin strips of tin, which made them sparkle brightly in a way that could be seen prominently from a distance. They were good for sending signals.

In an emergency situation with a big area to surveil, sounds and flags wouldn’t reach everyone in time. Smoke and kites were the only options when you wanted something to be seen from afar, though I would much rather not have ended up in a situation where I had to use them at all. All I could do was sigh.

Oh well, no point bitching about it. Time to roll up my sleeves and get to work.

After that, the army set up camp as it always did, while the refugees took on some of the night jobs in preparation for the next day. People assigned more particular work would have to start at the crack of dawn, so people busied themselves with whatever they could do in the moment. Some of the refugees had confidence in their fighting skills, which meant that we could count on them in the coming battle. They also got to work with the preparations and arrangements.

I took in the scene. The refugees were hard at work alongside the knights, answering their call for aid for what was to come. Given the grim prospects hanging over our heads, it wasn't hard to convince them to pitch in.

Some of the refugees had lost family members. They were the ones who actually took the initiative to ask if *they* could help. As grateful as I was for their enthusiasm, we didn't want anyone biting off more than they could chew. If we found them unfit to fight, then we set them to work with support and preparation instead.

That said, the thought of facing a horde of monsters had sent a tremor of fear through the camp. But once we explained, in stark detail, that escape was impossible, the refugees steeled themselves to help out. Our success in repelling the monsters to that point did give us some ground to stand on, and the refugees were able to muster some confidence in the defenses they built. To be fair, even a total neophyte to military encampments would probably look at their handiwork and perceive it as sturdy.

But no one could say with much confidence how far we could engage the enemy. Thus, our only choice was to fight in a way that made the horde stay away from the camp.

Viscount Kauffeldt's foot soldiers and cavaliers, along with any refugees with

stamina to spare, filled up a bunch of water containers. The day's meal would be pretty bland, but we really didn't know whether we'd have time to draw water tomorrow morning. We had to get that job done today so that we could get moving first thing tomorrow.

Much like on previous occasions, I split up my forces into smaller groups. If I didn't organize them like this, then things probably wouldn't come together quite right. Once I sorted people into the smallest possible units, I assigned each of them leaders and schooled them thoroughly on what to do in case of any contingencies. I grouped people who were familiar with each other from woodchopping duties in the hope that they would be able to adapt well enough to these impromptu assignments.

At the same time, I sent out a bunch of adventurers to survey the surroundings and confirm the lay of the land. After all, there was always a chance we'd need to set up other kinds of traps depending on the situation. I wanted to be double or even triple ready for anything. Besides, surveying the area required a surprising number of man-hours, so I had them move while they could.

"Master Werner, one of the scouts..."

"...has returned, hm?"

A knight and scout pair on horseback returned from their investigation and shared their findings with me and Max. News that there were enemies on the horizon raised some uneasy questions, but then, you had to expect a few surprises. For now, I had Max tell the troops what we had just learned. Then I brought the scout to the base of operations, where Duke Seyfert was situated. When I informed the guards that the scout had returned, they immediately let us in to meet the duke.

"I hear that there is a large number of Hunter Wolves, Three-Mouthed Wolves, Man-Eater Mice, Blade Deer, and Long-Legged Bears. A sheep with large fangs appears to be the leader of the horde."

“Indeed. I believe there were around three hundred of them in total.”

As I listened to the scout explain the minutiae of the situation to the duke, I summoned my recollections of the monsters and nodded along. There were more of them than I imagined. I was struck by the absence of insect-type Demonic Beasts, in stark contrast with the Demon Stampede, but decided to put that aside for the time being.

The Hunter Wolves and Three-Mouthed Wolves had fought in the Stampede. The Man-Eater Mice were large rodents that were about the size of an adult Doberman Pinscher. Freaky, but not a huge threat to seasoned knights and mercenaries. Because they banded in groups even before the Demon Lord’s revival, they were widely regarded as pests that were difficult to fully stamp out.

Blade Deer were deer with blades for horns. The blades ranged from humble forks to long and massive saws. These posed a credible threat when they swung at full force. Not that it mattered, but I was baffled by how those horns stayed sharp when the monsters never honed them at all.

Long-Legged Bears, as the name implied, had the head and body of a regular bear, but with limbs over twice the length of an Earth bear’s. You could describe them as spider-like. They looked weirdly gangly when they stood on their hind legs, but they were quite deadly when they swung their long arms about with their sharp claws.

In the game, Blade Deer and Long-Legged Bears appeared within the Kingdom of Wein, though they weren’t supposed to show up at this point. It was strange.

And the Tooth Sheep was arguably an even bigger problem. Despite being sheep, they sported fangs and ate people; they were, in a word, carnivores. That in itself was enough to weird out anyone familiar with Earth sheep. The idea that a sheep could be the leader of a pack of wolves and bears sounded like the setup to a joke. I can only ask you to shut off that part of your brain and accept this as part of the world.

Putting all that aside, though, Tooth Sheep didn't appear in the Wein Kingdom within the game. Though my memories were hazy, they were supposed to spawn in the neighboring kingdom of Fahlritz. Why were they showing up here? I wondered if it had come a long way, pulling the other monsters with it.

After all, to get to the Fahlritz Kingdom from here would require you to cross both Marquess Cortolezis's and Count Vogler's territories (if we were just talking about the major nobles' fiefs). We'd received a message from Count Vogler's territory, but I wondered how Marquess Cortolezis's fief was faring.

Not that there was much point in dwelling on that at this juncture. Regardless of such doubts, I drew upon my game knowledge and spoke. "About this sheep that appears to be the leader, I have heard that it puts you to sleep if it attacks you."

"What did you say?" demanded Duke Seyfert.

"Even if you deflect the blow, you will lose consciousness. I would advise against close-range combat."

In the game, whenever the message "The Tooth Sheep Charges!" showed up, not only did every party member take damage, there was a chance of getting hit with the sleep ailment as well. If you had really bad luck, *everyone* would start snoozing, making this beast an annoying foe indeed. Fortunately, they were weak to physical attacks and didn't have much HP, so you could wipe them out as soon as you encountered them.

But Mazel and his crew were pretty much the only people who could turn a frontal battle like that into such a simple affair. I had no such prospects. A group of knights could probably take it on, but the Tooth Sheep's charge was formidable within the context of a group battle. Hmm...

"Where did you learn such information?" Court Engelbert demanded, shaking me out of my thoughts.

"I heard as much from the adventurers under my command." I fudged the truth because there was absolutely no way I could say I knew it from a game.

Fortunately, my excuse did sound fairly plausible. It *was* plausible, right?

“Your erudition is impressive. My thanks.” What was this? It was all well and good to receive praise from the duke, but there was something strange about the way he smiled as he said it.

“I am glad to help.”

His eyes still smiling, the duke continued. “How would you apprehend this foe?”

“Hmm, let me consider it... Perhaps I would start by temporarily withdrawing?”

“Withdrawing, you say?”

I broached the idea that had come to me moments earlier, with the disclaimer that I wasn’t sure the terrain was feasible for it. For a while afterward, the duke and Count Engelbert kept a ponderous silence. I wondered what they would do. If they rejected my idea, I would have to think of another method. But just as I started worrying about my alternatives, the two of them looked at me in sync.

“Is it possible?” asked the duke.

“One cannot speak in absolutes when it comes to the battlefield,” I replied, “though I feel that it’s worth trying.”

A pause, then the duke nodded. “Then try we shall. I leave the preparations to you.”

“Yes, my lord.”

After I confirmed the lay of the land from the scout, I got the adventurers to carry out the preparations. While all that went on, I could continue organizing my troops. Somehow, I felt like I was becoming more the *de facto* authority on adventurers and mercenaries, and less a nobleman in charge of the Zehrfeld knights, but maybe that was just my imagination.

I brushed such thoughts aside. There was a lot to be done for scouting and

other preparations, and we had few people and little time to do it all with. With a crisp bow, I left the command center and returned to my troops. I'd have time for sleep when I was dead.

"He is a peculiar young fellow," Count Engelbert let slip as he watched Werner exit. The young man's actions, he mused, as well as his strategies and understanding of the world had little in common with those of other knights or aristocrats.

Seyfert chuckled at his trusted retainer's statement. "He certainly is an unusual one. The scouts informed us only just now of the enemy types. Without prior research, he could not possibly know much about the monster leading the horde."

It would, of course, make sense if he did his research after the dangerous monster appeared. But it was rare to find a paper-pushing aristocrat with an interest in the habits of adventurers and monsters.

Moreover, chivalry in this world consisted of defeating a foe in a one-on-one battle. Nobles and knights didn't typically concern themselves with squad tactics, let alone enlisting the aid of commoners. Indeed, Werner's apathy toward personal valor was almost unchivalrous.

As Seyfert chuckled, Engelbert went on: "I heard that the young man is a talented student, a close friend to the Hero, and that he never abandons the weak even if he holds himself apart from near everyone. In that sense, he possesses a strong chivalric spirit."

"No, that is somewhat different from a chivalric spirit."

"What do you mean?"

"As you say, Viscount Zehrfeld is a peculiar fellow. I suspect that this is in large part because his interests are skewed."

He had talent. But that talent was diverted to peculiar areas of interest. By

bringing his knowledge from those areas to the table, he was able to devise inventive plans. One could say that it was a rare form of genius. But as Seyfert saw it, Werner's strengths were curbed by his willful ignorance of the many things outside his interests.

"His disinterest in socializing may explain why he is not betrothed at his age," Seyfert commented.

"I cannot understand it myself, though I suppose that there are people of such persuasion."

"Womanizing nobles apply all manner of knowledge to coax ladies into their beds, only to have no interest in anything that comes after. The viscount is like that, but in the opposite direction."

The corners of Engelbert's lips curled upward. "Am I supposed to take that as an explanation?" he said after an awkward pause.

"It was merely an analogy," Seyfert said with an expression as if he was throwing up his hands.

Werner's image as a chivalrous noble, unswerving in his duty, seemed a consequence of his exemplary student life, but was in truth due more to the workaholic character he'd cultivated as a Japanese salaryman. There was no way Seyfert could know that, of course, but he was otherwise correct in his evaluation of Werner.

"We must not pigeonhole him. If we were to make him play a conventional role, he would find little use outside of handling day-to-day issues. He may be rather lopsided, even at his peak, but he's ultimately more useful that way than he would be if shackled by convention."

"Is that so, my lord?"

"We can always find others to bridge the gaps. The carpenter need not be draftsman of his own designs."

Seyfert chuckled again, knowing that Engelbert would find the young man

difficult to wrap his head around. The reason Seyfert had chosen Engelbert as his retainer was because he used his knowledge as an aristocrat to make levelheaded decisions. That very quality of his made Werner's way of thinking inscrutable to him.

But Seyfert knew that *his* role as an organizational leader was to bring out the best in people with very different outlooks. The reason why he did not curry favor with the so-called martial nobles was because they tended to favor people who thought similarly to them. The muscle-brain worldview, as Werner called it.

"Let us put the matter of the viscount aside for now," Seyfert said. "We must focus on minimizing the refugees' distress and adjusting for the shortfalls in our supplies."

"Regarding the supplies, the plan was to purchase from the surrounding fiefs what we need to retain this position."

Given that they expected to encounter the monster horde the next day, there wasn't enough time to ask the knights from the neighboring fief to supplement their forces. They'd have to make do with their existing numbers. On the other hand, while it would affect what supplies they'd need later on, it was a small relief that they didn't have to adjust their provision for the day of the battle itself.

"Let us refrain from strong-arming others into selling to us," Seyfert said. "I wonder if we can use some of the budget for restoring Marquess Kneipp's territory by purchasing from that area."

"It would require too much time and labor to transport. Better, I think, to purchase what we need from the surrounding fiefs and encourage them to replenish their supply by trading with Kneipp. Some may choose to purchase from other fiefs out of factional politics, but that is out of our hands."

They had a plan for supplies in place, but they were short on hands. Even sending out messengers to purchase the goods had to be deferred in favor of

readying for battle. How long would they have to wait before they received supplies from the capital? If the refugees starved here, then it would defeat the purpose of everything.

“For the time being, I would like you to apprise all troops of the enemy’s details,” Seyfert said to the count. “After that, you are to take command of the cavalry.”

“Understood, my lord.”

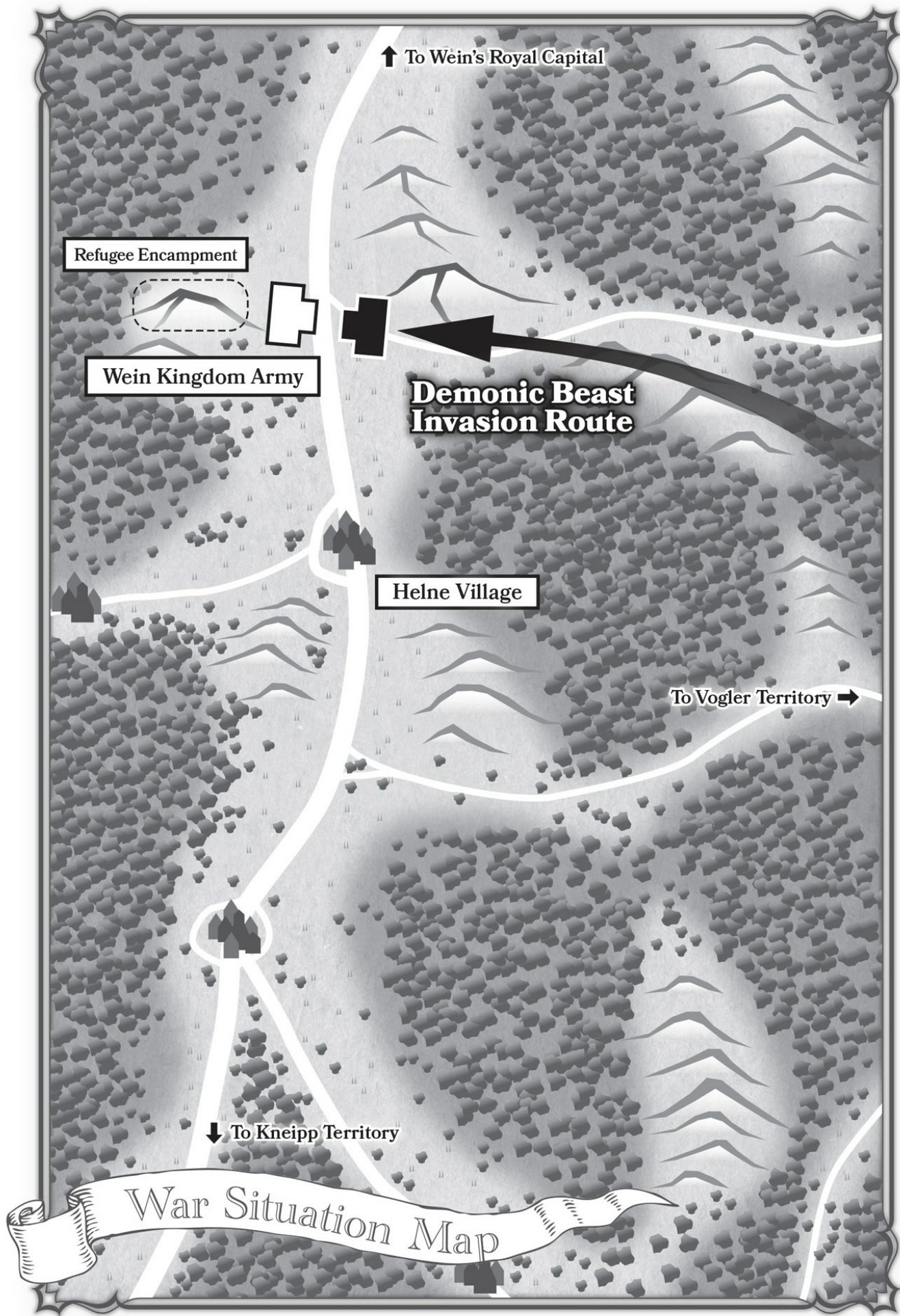
Seyfert and Engelbert hashed out the plan late into the night, detail by detail, to draw out as much strength as they could from the forces available to them.

The army would set forth in the morning before sunrise. As the soldiers ate breakfast and fine-tuned the traps, a dust cloud began to rise over the horizon. The people began murmuring quietly.

“So they’ve come.”

“Looks like our lure was effective.”

Given where the traps were placed, it was *imperative* the enemies come at us from that specific direction. That’s why we’d sent the cavalry, under Count Engelbert’s direct command, to lure them out—as soon as the enemy was on the hook, the riders would beat a quick retreat to the backlines. The horses would get fatigued if we ran them too hard for too long, after all. If they did not rest, it would be impossible to get them to work later.



As he prepared potions for the particularly tired horses, the count returned to his commander post, where his own band of knights were stationed.

While the soldiers advanced to the frontlines, House Zehrfeld's troops (including the mercenaries and adventurers) took the left flank, while Count Vogler and Viscount Kauffeldt's forces occupied the right flank. Although some people voiced their anxiety about letting the all-too-young Werner command a detachment of the knights, none ultimately challenged the decision. Not only did plenty of knights remember his feats at the Demon Stampede, none of the other commanders—including Seyfert—breathed a word of complaint about him. If anything, it was Werner himself who looked as if he was holding in a stomachache.

Right before everyone's eyes, the Demonic Beasts charged our ranks. Even the beasts regarded armored humans as somewhat more formidable than their unarmored counterparts. But the Demon Lord's revival had stoked their instincts to fight and slaughter. And behind the row of armored humans was a whole crowd of tantalizingly exposed morsels, stoking their appetites even hotter. So they did not hesitate. And the army hoped for nothing else. The result was a head-on collision between the horde and the army.

The next moment, the Zehrfeld and Vogler troops split off to the left and right.

Not slowing for even a second, the horde broke through the divided forces, rushing down the center in a beeline for the encampment. But then, right before their eyes, loomed a green wall in place of the cowering masses they'd expected.

An abatis had been erected, cut from shrubbery and spiky, unshorn tree branches. The shrubs had been as tall as two meters before they were cut, so the division rose as high as a human's torso. And because branches were stuffed into the spaces between branches, there wasn't a single gap in the hedge. From the beasts' head level, it was impossible to see what lay beyond

the barrier.

The wolf-type Demonic Beasts at the head of the pack jumped straight over the hedge. When running at full sprint, a Demonic Beast's jump could clear a human's height. Perhaps even ordinary beasts could manage that. But the monsters that did clear the hurdle let out a chorus of screams, prompting the beasts behind them to pull to an abrupt halt before the hedge. Those that had gone before them still moaned in agony behind the inscrutable barrier, skewered on stakes that pointed to the heavens.

The cheval-de-frise was a defensive obstacle originally created to stop cavalry. They came in a range of shapes and forms, tailored to stop enemies with varying levels of strength, but they were often employed as makeshift defensive measures.

On this occasion, Werner had drawn inspiration from the form of the hedgehog. A cross section of the hedge would show logs crossed in an X. Their tips had pointy edges, and there were even more long logs fastened to it in a row. This defensive structure had been employed since the Iron Age in Werner's previous world. It was simple enough to pick up and carry around from the side but practically immovable from the front. Nor could you scale it, thanks to the logs jutting out of the top.

Most significantly, unlike fences, they did not require holes to be dug up to fix them in place. This meant that you could move them from the place you built them and set them up quickly. Many of the Demonic Beasts jumped right onto the stakes pointing upward.

Moreover, the cheval-de-frise did not consist of just one row. There were three rows of them back-to-back. There were even a few lined up perpendicularly to cover the gaps. From directly above, it looked like a net of spikes. Thus, even if a Demonic Beast was fortunate enough to land in a spot between two chevaux-de-frise and avoid immediate impalement, they'd have nowhere to move. Even a Demonic Beast couldn't hurdle a cheval-de-frise without a running start.

Assembling the logs and lashing them into barriers was no challenge for commoners used to farmwork. They used vines as bindings and as rope for the packages delivered to the troops. They also made ropes out of their clothing and belts in exchange for payment to be delivered at a later date. By using assorted clothes and ropes from five thousand people, the army was able to assemble a fair number of chevaux-de-frise in short measure and use them as a trap to slow down the enemy.

“Take that!”

“Hyaaa!”

Several beefy refugees working in unison hefted a gigantic spear and skewered the Demonic Beasts from the other side of the hedge. The spear shafts were eight meters long with blades attached to them at the end, meaning that they needed multiple people to carry. The length, however, was ideal for attacking the Demonic Beasts all the way from behind a cheval-de-frise.

It was impossible to completely halt the Demonic Beasts by using the barrier, so the civilians had to pull their weight, even if they’d never wielded a weapon. Without any fear, they focused their attention solely on attacking the enemy. They also spread water across the ground in front of the obstacles and scattered leaves from young saplings over them. Even the Demonic Beasts were bound to slip on those leaves and lose their footing.

On top of that, Werner arranged the weapons in a way that even amateurs would find easy to use. The shafts had been carved from tall trees. Grooves had been carved where they were meant to be held, so the refugees’ hands wouldn’t slip, no matter their experience with weapons.

Farmers were accustomed to using long objects. Pitchforks, which were ordinarily used to lift up hay, were repurposed time and time again as weapons whenever farmers rose up in revolt. To protect themselves or their family, even civilians would pick up a weapon.

The Demonic Beasts howled their dismay, but they weren't able to escape their cage so easily. All the while, they continued taking hits from outside, and some of them were even succumbing to fatal wounds.

"Hyaaa!"

Very occasionally, a Demonic Beast would land on a skewered monster and use their pal as a springboard for another jump, but Seyfert's personal guards and the lady knights would cut them down. Though their role was to carry messages to and from the base of operations, Mine and the other lady knights took down several monsters between them, reducing their bodies to grisly messes.

"If they slip through us, the refugees' blood will be shed! A knight's duty is to protect the people!" Mine's voice rose above the din. "Make sure to finish each one off properly!"

"Yes, ma'am!" The lady knights answered as one, inspired by Mine's mettle not merely as a noble, but as a commander.

Promptly, they sank their blades into a monster that just barely managed to vault the cheval-de-frise in one piece. Wary of the beast's movements, Mine barked out her orders.

"You seem versed in group battles," the commander of the lady knights said to Mine.

"My skills were honed by Viscount Zehrfeld," replied Mine. A slightly ambivalent expression crossed her face, perhaps because she recalled being covered in dust at the group training drill on Hildea Plains. Yet that experience certainly hadn't been for naught. She no longer felt any misgivings using multiple fighters to take down a single monster, and no one on their side of the cheval-de-frise came to harm.

Mine continued surveying the battlefield, ever vigilant of monsters that could jump or slip through the cracks in the army's defense. She had to prevent casualties at all costs.

The main force was also throwing itself into the fray. The plan was not just to stop the Demonic Beasts' movements with the hedges. The army split up left and right to encircle the stymied beasts on both sides.

The horde had charged at the hedges with full momentum. The abrupt halt had thrown them into disarray. To use an expression from Werner's old world, they were "stuck in gridlock," making it difficult to change direction.

The humans plunged their weapons into the monsters' sides and swung their blades downward. The agonized squeaks of a Man-Eater Mouse spilled to the ground, blending with the screams of a fatally wounded Three-Mouthed Wolf. Their cries were soon swallowed by the surrounding tumult. The right flank commander, Count Vogler, passed command of the frontline to Viscount Kauffeldt as he confirmed the enemy's movements and sent a messenger back to the base.

Meanwhile, on the left flank, Werner also deployed a messenger to the second unit at the rear. This was because a scout had spotted a group of Blade Deer and Long-Legged Bears within the horde. The messenger soon came dashing back to report that Count Engelbert had finished the preparations. Upon hearing this, Werner called out to Max, his second-in-command, and ordered the adventurer squad to retreat as planned.

The pressure from the Zehrfeld troops on the army's left flank suddenly diminished as the adventurers backed off. At that precise moment, the monster horde began flowing to that side like water trickling downstream. Werner made his troops retreat even further, away from the abatis, luring the enemy further outward, stretching their formation thin.

Count Engelbert's troops took the opportunity to storm the beasts' stretched-out line. Like tearing into a wad of distended clay, the right flank cut off a third of the horde.

"Mercenaries, charge!"

Werner chose this moment to reverse the retreat. With his new orders, Max stood at the front, brandishing a massive sword. He launched a counterattack at the monsters at the head of the pack, putting a stop to their flow.

At the same time, the mercenaries all halted their retreat and charged at the splintered group of monsters. Their bloody blades fell in unison with those of the Engelbert troops, who had stormed in from the side. In an instant, the humans and monsters jumbled together. Monsters screamed and humans groaned, and the sounds of blades cutting flesh and fangs clashing against armor rang out across the surroundings.

Astride his steed, Count Engelbert surveyed the scene. “Oho, Viscount Zehrfeld has good intuition,” he remarked, impressed. The timing of the attack had been absolutely exquisite.

In actuality, Werner’s good intuition was a lucky gift. He was not aware of it himself, but his intuition on the battlefield was one of the traits he excelled in. Because of the fortuitous timing, the army struck the demons’ right flank on two fronts, melting them with their blades in an instant.

“Good. Leave the rest to Zehrfeld. We penetrate the enemy’s main force from the flank.”

“Yessir.”

After the enemy’s left flank fell into disarray, Count Engelbert began preparing to charge into the main part of the horde.

At almost the exact same moment, a scout came running up to Werner, apprising him of the situation. This prompted Werner to leave the frontline command to Max, with the order to eliminate the remaining enemies in the right flank. Then he gathered up some scouts and began issuing new instructions.

Count Vogler, who headed the right flank, knew that he didn’t have the qualities of a field commander. It took all his efforts to hold the reins steady and see tactics carried out without error. Thus, he left the frontline command to

Viscount Kauffeldt. Furthermore, he knew that his role was to wait for the horde's pressure to tilt in one direction and report when it happened to the base. In that role, he worked to perfection.

When Seyfert heard Count Vogler's report, he didn't hesitate—he had been waiting for the right moment to send the valorous Baron Kretschmer into the fray. The baron's cavalry began to charge from the army's right flank.

Zehrfeld and Engelbert's combined forces had divided about half of the monsters' right flank. Just as the horde had begun to thin, Baron Kretschmer's troops rushed past Count Vogler's and charged straight through the center. As their attack scattered the foe, Count Vogler threw his knights into the fray, finishing off the dispersed stragglers.

Meanwhile, Baron Kretschmer and his group closed in on the Blade Deer and Long-Legged Bears that had engaged the adventurer squad.

The deer and bear monsters were already entrapped in countless ropes weighed down by rocks. Called bolas, they were throwing weapons that consisted of multiple ropes with a weighted object on the end. They were often used in hunting to restrict a target's movements by binding their legs. Still, when thrown, the stone weights had more than enough blunt force to suffice as a weapon.

The adventurer squad repeated this tactic, taunting the enemy and stopping them in their tracks, keeping them from charging into the thick of battle.

A Blade Deer with a bola wrapped around its neck swung its head around in irritation, wounding its friends around it. A Long-Legged Bear struggled in vain to get its feet out of the ropes. Its arms were too long to extricate from its bonds, and the ropes themselves too tough to cut, so its struggle only caused the ropes to bite deeper into its skin. The monsters roared in frustration. Focused as they were on the ropes and weights, they scarcely noticed the knights and soldiers bearing down upon them.

Human hair was very elastic and sturdy. Not only was it used in slings in

Werner's previous world, but it also had applications for the nets used in ship anchors. Women's hair was even used to create nets for transporting heavy construction materials. Knowing this, Werner put in advice to purchase high-value hair from women.

Some knights had raised objections, but the proposal got through in the end. One of the reasons was because they promised long-term employment contracts rather than one-time payments to the women who provided their hair. Widows and similarly compromised women needed long-term work more than any other form of compensation. With their help, the army was able to prepare a considerable number of bolas with which to equip the adventurers.

Tangled up in that hairy situation, the Blade Deer and Long-Legged Bears weren't able to move as their bodies willed. The adventurers, who had been preserving their magic up to that point, loosed their spells upon them. And when the Kretschmer knights joined the fray, they were too weak to save themselves from the dozens of lances that split their heads.

"Hold steady!"

"Raaaah!"

"Keep calm and take down the enemy. We have them outnumbered!"

With a mighty swing of his greatsword, Baron Kretschmer joined his knights in close combat with the Long-Legged Bears. For better or worse, their chivalric ideals compelled them to seek honor in the thick of battle, and so the adventurer-mages and priests ceased their own attack and supported the knights instead.

With their support, the knights swung their weapons even more vigorously. The adventurers in charge of close combat also continued to stop the Blade Deer from moving. They threw their bolas at the deers' feet, then cut them down once they were immobilized. This way, they were able to nimbly avoid the reach of their horns.

The adventurers were particularly thorough about overwhelming the large

monsters with numbers rather than engaging in a hopeless battle. It was Werner's sincere desire to avoid casualties while on the road, but the people undeniably thought well of him for not forcing them into reckless combat.

The Tooth Sheep, leader of the horde, stood on a rise a short distance from the battlefield, its massive form plain for all to see. When an arrow suddenly pierced its flank, it let out a dim noise of surprise. This was not because of the force of the arrow, nor because it had been so much as pricked, but the Tooth Sheep made no effort to hide its surprise or rage, nonetheless.

The sheep summoned an aura of fury as it turned a baleful glare at a mounted archer. It kicked angrily at the ground before charging him.

"Good. I'll take it from here," the man on horseback—Werner—called out to a nearby thicket, which concealed the scout who had *actually* shot the Tooth Sheep. Werner was under no delusion that he could have landed a hit from horseback. The point was just to make himself a target, so he told the archer beforehand to make an escape.

Werner let fly another arrow, which sailed far off into the distance. Well before it hit the ground, Werner had flung away the bow and urged his horse to a gallop. The horse may or may not have noticed how clumsily he handled the reins, but it was certainly aware of the Tooth Sheep hot on its heels.

"I figured it would come straight after me," Werner muttered absently to himself as he desperately urged the horse on, both hands on the reins.

Reasoning that an awkward rider would doubtless hold the sheep's attention, Werner had taken on the role of decoy. But his foe was even faster than he'd imagined—he didn't even have time to wipe the cold sweat from his brow.

Kicking the horse in its side, he spurred it on further down the sloping path. His lack of riding practice prompted a rather piteous moan to escape his lips. He continued in that less-than-gallant fashion until at last he reached the base of a large tree, which was covered in a red cloth. That was the signal. Werner half

flopped to the ground as he dismounted, before turning around to face the charging Tooth Sheep.

Seeing its quarry without the means to resist or flee, the Tooth Sheep bore down upon Werner without the faintest hesitation. Werner carefully estimated the distance between himself and the sheep, and when the timing was right, called out.

“Now!”

At almost that precise moment, a spear “fell” into Werner’s hand. A scout hidden on a tree branch dropped the spear on the signal. Werner took it and propped the butt end up against the shaft of the tree. After discerning the position, he thrust the spear straight into the face of the charging Tooth Sheep. Running downhill with its eyes set on Werner as its prey, the Tooth Sheep could neither stop nor change direction. The tip went straight into the sheep’s mouth, almost like the beast had inhaled it.

The next moment, Werner felt a strong impact course through both hands. This was the accumulation of his foe’s downward momentum and its weight. Werner gritted his teeth audibly as he attempted to withstand the shock. His feet slipped, and the butt end of the spear slid down the tree shaft he was using as support.

“Guhhh...!”

Werner let out a groan that reverberated throughout his entire body. As he struggled to support the spear and withstand the impact, a dull sound rang out. Black and purple blood erupted from the Tooth Sheep’s shattered skull, spraying about the tip of the spear. As the blood poured from its mouth, a massive fang—as large as a human arm—loomed directly in front of Werner.



At that moment, the adventurers hiding in a nearby thicket sprang out in unison. They pelted the beast's stomach and back with swords and axes. With its head impaled and wounds tracing its body, the life force seeped from the Tooth Sheep, as did all its murderous intent. Its body collapsed on Werner's, and the blood from its mouth drenched Werner's head.

"Ugh, gross!" Werner spluttered.

"Are you all right?"

The adventurers pulled the felled monster off Werner, whose head and face were an indistinguishable wash of black and purple blood. As Werner slid onto his buttocks, he saw the adventurers deliver the finishing blows to the gargantuan monster out of the corner of his eye. Though its outward shape was that of a sheep, its sheer hulk undeniably eclipsed even that of a ferocious bull. The men couldn't help but blurt out the first things that came to their minds.

"This thing is *huge*."

"What a feat, taking down this beast."

"I wish victory came easier," Werner said with a sigh. *This is bad for my heart*, he muttered to himself as he scraped the blood off his face and stood up.

Then he asked the adventurers to cut off the Tooth Sheep's head and dismember its body.

"If there's a treasure chest, leave it to me to sell what's in it."

Some monsters had treasure chests inside their bodies. Adventurers sometimes discovered them when they were extracting magic stones, which were also quite a windfall. These details were consistent with what Werner had encountered while playing the game.

However, though it was *called* a chest, it came in all shapes and sizes. Some were big enough to contain bundles of medicinal herbs, while others could only fit a piece of candy. *An item drop? More like a candy drop*, Werner inwardly quipped—not that anyone would understand what he was talking about.

“That meat will go bad if we don’t drain the blood, after all.”

“Pray that there’s a treasure chest.”

Werner marveled at the mysteries of the item drop system as he gazed at the Tooth Sheep’s decapitated head. Then, as he double-checked the direction the sheep had come from, a frown twisted his face.

Though this was the best place to set a trap for the Tooth Sheep, the hill sloped downward. He would be at a steep angle when retracing his footsteps back to the main battlefield. Also, because his horse had run off somewhere when he dismounted, his only means of transport were the legs attached to his hips. Worst of all, the Tooth Sheep’s head was big enough that he had to hold it with both hands. This was a more physically demanding task than he was ready for.

How do you expect me to climb this, wise guy? As Werner complained to his past self for not considering what happened *after* the showdown, he began to haul himself up the slope, the Tooth Sheep’s massive head tucked in his arms—proof of the army’s victory.

Stationed at the base, keeping watch over the battle, it was a coincidence that Hermine noticed *it*. As she maintained her vigil, her eyes happened to flicker to the ground where she spied an almost imperceptible shadow. And even before its form was clear in her mind, she called out, “Look above! Something flies!”

The base’s garrison sprang into action at Mine’s urgent cry. The knights closest to Seyfert took up position around him, while the soldiers stationed elsewhere turned their gaze to the sky.

The next moment... The first to move were the mages on standby. Though they were few in number, they were all capable individuals, of the sort nobles might employ as personal aides. One after another, they chanted their spells, pelting the thing in the sky with consecutive fireballs. A cry of pain, higher

pitched than a human voice, reached them from above.

The soldiers loosed arrows at the enemy as it hurtled down. These archers' sole duty was to protect Seyfert. For this reason, they hadn't engaged the monsters thus far, and could now unload their full force on the suspicious figure. They had been schooled from the start about the possibility of aerial monsters. But as it fell, the thing swung a giant sickle and deflected the arrows.

When they saw this, even the hardened soldiers murmured in trepidation. "A Demon!"

"Hold your ground!" one of the knights next to Seyfert barked.

For a brief moment, Seyfert glanced upward, but he soon turned his attention back to the battlefield. This was the natural course of action for him. He had his knights to protect him, while it was his role as the supreme commander to unify the movements of the entire army. Whether his foes were Demon, warrior, or assassin, Seyfert wouldn't draw his weapon, wouldn't even flinch.

Seeing the duke's even-keeled countenance, the refugees, whether fighting at the front or watching nervously from the back, were reassured that the situation was in hand. As such, no one panicked. Under the direction of the lady knights, the armed refugees maintained their defense against the Demonic Beasts attempting to scale the hedge, while the soldiers fighting on the other side were as steady as ever.

And the knights and soldiers surrounding Seyfert were well aware of their own mission. Though they had trembled for the briefest moments at the Demon's appearance, the soldiers quickly shot more arrows. With the mages also blasting more spells and the knights readying their javelins, the Demon could not get anywhere near Seyfert.

Meanwhile, Engelbert and the other frontline commanders swiftly noticed the changes in the monster horde. The fact that the Demon guiding the horde was now participating directly in the fray meant that it had lost control of the group. The Tooth Sheep, which was supposed to unify the horde, had also disappeared

at some point, which meant that the monsters were now directionless. Seeing the enemy's confusion, Baron Kretschmer and Viscount Kauffeldt spurred their knights on to a decisive conclusion.

Thanks to the knights' and soldiers' solid defense, the Demon was forced to land some distance away from Seyfert. It swung its huge sickle, lopping off the head of one soldier and the arm of another. But that was all it managed to achieve. Whether it tried to attack or flee, the garrison was quick to retaliate, and it could do neither.

If Werner had spotted the Demon, he would have identified it as a winged humanoid with the head of a hammerhead shark. But it had a third crimson eye buried in the middle of its head, as well as an enormous mouth. In place of arms, it had wings, not those of a bird—but twisted leathery wings, like a bat or dragon, unnervingly black. If it had landed in front of the civilians, there was no doubt they would have fled in terror.

The Demon bared its shark-like teeth, snarling. The monster horde had failed, and now it would have to take the field itself. It was livid. "Begone, small fry!"

"Never! We have a proud purpose too!"

The knights encircling Seyfert were among the finest in the kingdom, men who served the highest ranks of the nobility. They feared no Demons. Noticing how the Demon's gaze fixated on Seyfert, they redoubled attacks—so that they could fulfill their sworn duty.

But the Demon had the strength to meet the challenge. Its sickles screeched violently against the knights' shields. As its steel matched theirs, screams and groans of pain split the air. Even the lady knights ended up stepping into the ring. By the time their combined might had felled the Demon, the army had lost five knights and guards, and nine were injured.

"My lord, the Demon was in possession of this."

One of the knights who had been examining the Demon's corpse came running to Seyfert to show him a crystal. It had cracked in the middle of the

battle.

“Hm.” Seyfert regarded it with a thoughtful expression as he searched his memories.

“The Hero destroyed something much like this during the Demon Stampede.”

“Would it be fair to say that the Demon was using this to control the group?”

“Mayhap.”

Even as he spoke, Seyfert turned his gaze to what was happening beyond the hedges, as if the matter with the crystal was unimportant. Because the horde could no longer muster any meaningful attacks against the army, it was no longer possible to determine whether the black crystal was actually responsible for controlling the monster horde.

Yet regardless of the truth of the matter, the knights and soldiers under his command were still fighting a gruesome battle. He kept his eyes fixed on the scene in case another situation arose that would require his active involvement. He could not afford to lose track of his army or the horde’s movements.

Under Seyfert’s coolheaded watch, the battle beyond the hedges drew to a close.

The army had the advantage of numbers from the start. The soldiers were well-trained in close combat, and the mercenaries had an abundance of experience on the battlefield. Free from the burden of protecting any noncombatants, they had more than enough strength to go toe-to-toe with the Demonic Beasts. And having used their traps to strip the enemy of their physical advantages, their prospects of victory even in one-on-one combat had drastically improved. The scales never tipped against them, and the casualties were kept to a minimum.

“This is very different from the Demon Stampede.”

“Unlike then, we came prepared.”

The kingdom had been complacent when the Stampede happened, but this

time everyone mobilized with a distinct target to protect, and a thorough understanding of their roles. No one took on more than they could handle. The result was a decisive victory. Although Seyfert certainly credited the careful positioning of soldiers and personnel for this, he also knew that he had merely adapted Werner's strategy with minor adjustments.

That youth will be a force to reckon with when he's gained experience, Seyfert thought, nodding to himself.

Next to him, a knight pointed at a hill a short distance away. "My lord, look yonder."

"Oho."

When Seyfert saw what the knight was pointing at, he nodded. At the top of the hill, panting and clutching a large sheep's head with bone-weary relief, was Werner.

Seyfert gave the signal. Then, almost in unison, his knights let out a jubilant roar. Their cheer was soon taken up by the people encamped behind the base, who had realized what that moment meant. The sounds of their triumph carried all the way to soldiers still fighting on the frontlines.

Spurred on by those cheering voices, the army made short work of the remaining Demonic Beasts, slicing up their bodies, and carving them into corpses. The battle had started at the crack of dawn, but by the time monsters breathed their last, the sun had begun to set.

In years to come, Seyfert would speak of this incident as the moment he ascertained Werner Von Zehrfeld's rare form of genius.

He put it like this: "That Demon should have gone after Lord Werner, not this old sack of bones."

Meat.

"What of it?" you might ask, intrigued by the sudden mention, but you see,

we just slaughtered a horde of several hundred monsters. It was the first fresh meat we'd come by in ages, not just for the refugees but also for the vast majority of the knights and soldiers. Everyone besides the gravely wounded got a generous serving—the soldiers and squires, and even the former citizens of Triot. Some of them quizzed the adventurers and mercenaries about the monsters as they helped cut up the meat with unpracticed hands.

During this time, the knights patrolled the vicinity, since there was always a chance the smell of blood would spur other monsters or wild animals to approach.

A bit of trivia: as long as you cooked fresh meat before the blood hardened, you didn't have to drain it for it to taste nice. It was similar to how sashimi made from freshly caught fish was really tasty. The reason meat started stinking was because the blood hardened.

Thus, though it may have been ideal to drain the monsters of their blood immediately after felling them, that would have been impossible within the context of a battle where the army was fighting for its life. The meat ended up being a bit smelly, but they were premium ingredients, nonetheless. Plus, unlike with wild animals, we didn't have to worry about parasites getting into the monsters.

Unfortunately, the skins were pretty much a write-off. One main reason for this was that taking on further luggage would only slow us down when we had the elderly and children riding in our carriages. But the actual problem was that we didn't have the time or materials to tan the hides. There were all kinds of ways to do it—from using tannins and oils, to smoking the skins, or even using animal brains in some unusual cases—but those methods required time, labor, and a whole lot of water. I was reminded that there was a method that involved using liquid lime, but I didn't remember coming across slaked lime in this world.

Besides, we didn't have many tradesmen who could tan hundreds of beasts' worth of hides, so we would just have to shrug and accept the waste. Apparently, if you didn't know what you were doing when skinning animals,

you'd end up with a lot of holes, but I'd never done it myself, so I couldn't say so from experience. Anyway, we didn't have the luxury of time for such a job, so we only brought back the high-value Blade Deer and Tooth Sheep skins while disposing of all the rest.

In the game, a monster's body would disappear as soon as you defeated it, but no such thing happened in this world. After you took what you could eat and the magic stones for the cash, you disposed of the rest of the corpse. If you didn't do that, you would end up luring wild animals, which could turn into a big problem. Even if you argued that wild beasts were nothing compared to the threat of monsters, you still wanted to ensure that the high roads were as safe as they could be.

As I watched the people dissect the monsters, I ordered them to pile the unnecessary parts off the road. It was surreal to see stacks consisting entirely of just wolf heads. After taking out all the edible bits, the corpses were added to the pile. Once they were big enough, we put some firewood there and set fire to the whole thing.

You couldn't make stock out of monster bones. Anything steeped in their bones turned bitter. Nobody knew the reason behind this, but elderly knights and veteran adventurers all agreed: "If you're boiling monster meat, take out the bones." It had to be pretty darn bitter for them to say that with totally grave faces. Monsters were mysterious creatures in many ways.

I wasn't much of a gourmand, so I didn't know the finer details, but adding stock to soft water makes it easier to bring out the flavor, while the opposite happens with hard water. In the same way, scum apparently forms easier in hard water. Perhaps that had something to do with it. Maybe it was like how, in my old world, people outside Japan would sometimes add sugar and milk to green tea because it was too astringent when made with hard water. All of that was far from my everyday concerns, though.

As another aside, some people ended up busting a monster's internal organs when getting the meat out, but strangely, this caused no issues overall.

Normally if you cut an animal's bladder or large intestine during a dissection, the excrement inside would come flooding out, spoiling the other parts to the point of being inedible. But monsters' digestion was almost entirely confined to their stomachs. It was as if monster poop didn't, well, *exist*. Given that there were even stories of monsters digesting plates of armor, they probably didn't need to be picky about what they ate.

"Nice, a treasure chest."

"Don't get your hopes up. It's probably just herbs."

Here and there, people made comments like that as they worked. In a game, you wouldn't be too surprised to see a chest pop up right after you defeated a monster. For example, it made sense for a knight-type monster to drop a sword or piece of armor. But in the real world, if you cut open a giant rat monster and a small chest popped out, you couldn't help but frown in bemusement. Incidentally, opening the chests would cause them to melt into the air, so you couldn't sell the chests themselves. Fantasy logic, I supposed.

There were some minor differences between stuff dropped by individual monsters of the same race, depending on how strong they were, but it was never anything extreme. For example, goblins and goblin magicians counted as separate monsters. A goblin couldn't evolve into a goblin magician no matter how many people or animals it killed, nor could it eventually surpass its limitations to become an ogre or anything like that. The existence of treasure chests seemed to have no bearing on the individual strengths of the monsters within their species, which made the whole concept of treasure chests all the more baffling.

As I kept watch, not just on the surroundings but also on the soldiers hard at work on their dissections, a sudden question—or rather, hypothesis—occurred to me. It was very tricky keeping my face straight. It occurred to me that if I didn't look into it here, I wouldn't have the opportunity for it later.

With that thought in mind, I hurriedly asked the military officials to

investigate something for me. I even asked around among the adventurers, particularly the mages who were struggling with the dissections. This mission was personal rather than for the sake of the kingdom, so I would have to pay people out of pocket. Fortunately, I had some cash to spare thanks to my contributions to the aqueduct, but this would be a tight squeeze for my budget.

As the soldiers and refugees feasted on meat for the first time in ages, the other leaders and I met to discuss our altered schedule. Though we had been able to source some water, we did have to adjust for acquiring provisions and the detour we'd taken.

That said, since we had already accounted for delays in case of bad weather, we didn't have to make wild changes to our plans. The bigger hassle turned out to be disassembling the abatisses and chevaux-de-frise. *Oops, my bad.*

We would spend the entirety of tomorrow on those tasks, letting the refugees take a break in the meantime. Not wanting a round two with the enemy, we drew up plans for a watch, though I felt that it might be a bit too much of a strain on the scouts. Since we weren't moving the next day, they wouldn't have to cover as much ground. We could also get the other adventurers who weren't scouts to chip in with the security.

Lady Hermine called out to me as I was on my way back to my troops. "Good work today, Viscount... That is quite an astounding smell."

"Yeah, it's what you get with so many people cooking meat."

Several hundred people were roasting and boiling monster meat, resulting in a very *astounding* smell indeed—in more ways than one.

But the reason everyone could muster such cheer right now was because we had managed to overcome the massive hurdle in front of us. At least for tonight, I supposed, we could set our worries aside. The soldiers also needed a break. Admittedly, there were still a lot of jobs they needed to do tonight regardless, like fixing up their weapons and armor.

Though it wasn't much, we passed around some alcohol to the soldiers who weren't on night watch duty. If we didn't sufficiently reward them with food and drink, they might take to pillaging—that was always the scary thing with them.

In this world, we had potions and healing magic for dealing with minor wounds, so there wasn't much point in moderate punishments when it came to soldiers or nobility (commoners without access to potions were a different story). Thus, your only options for punishment were things that diminished the offender's honor, long stints of manual labor, or a no-nonsense beheading.

"I'm thinking of keeping an eye on things," I said. "We don't want anyone starting a fire or getting carried away and picking fights."

"Yessir." Lady Hermine nodded studiously—even though "keeping an eye on things" was *our* job. Even if she was a knight, we couldn't leave night patrols to a lady. "By the way, what is the schedule for tomorrow?"

"First thing in the morning is a funeral for the fallen."

To prevent their bodies from being damaged by wild animals, we carried the deceased knights, soldiers, adventurers, and mercenaries into the encampment before the sun set. From sunup till sundown we would be carrying out their funerals, so that they would take place within the view of God. This was due to a unique cultural belief in this world.

We would start digging the graves at the crack of dawn and bury their belongings separately. Then the bodies would be interred and weighted down with rocks in the hopes of keeping them from crawling out of their graves as undead monsters.

Weirdly enough, the concept of cremation didn't exist in this world. Fire was for animals and monsters, while humans were meant to be buried; the distinction was clear. Criminals were an exception, though. Apparently, their bodies were cremated because people with deep grudges were liable to rise from their graves as undead. Regardless of whether that was true, it wasn't

hard to understand why people thought that way. In towns, it was common to burn executed criminals after displaying their dead bodies for a while.

We put three silver coins in each grave. There were two reasons for this.

First, it was their toll for when they set forth to meet God's judgment. This idea was similar to a cultural belief in Japan that the dead must pay a toll of six coins to cross the river into the afterlife. Comparable ideas existed in the West as well.

The second reason was that physical objects held a lot of value in this medieval world, so the coins were like a fee to prevent vengeful spirits from chasing after people who took their belongings home. There was also a similar belief in the West—in some regions, people even inserted a coin into the corpse's mouth.

After burying the body, the last thing to do was carve their name into a gravestone. Then you spread herbs and wine across the graves and prayed. Though it was an odd expression, it was apparently for the sake of "praying for the health of those who have passed on." There must have been some kind of origin for that custom, but I didn't know it.

This was beside the point, but in situations in my old world where people would make the sign of the cross, people here would draw an upside-down triangle. Knights and aristocrats would bring their right hand across their left shoulder, right shoulder, and stomach. Then they would make a fist and bring it to the left part of their chest. Commoners, mages, and priests would draw the upside-down triangle across their left palm, then clasp their hands together in prayer. There were all kinds of styles. The tips of the triangle represented the sun, moon, and stars. Apparently, the prayer was a way of beckoning to God, who was supposedly in heaven.

To be precise, the actual design was a triangle with the sun, moon, and star symbols inscribed at the points, and an upside-down triangle inside the first triangle. But even within the church, there were some tiny rural parishes that

didn't bother drawing the official symbol. Churches within the game only showed the upside-down triangle, after all. Unless they were at formal ceremonies, even priest garbs made do with just the simplified symbol. Perhaps people weren't so hung up on symbols because healing magic was an obvious sign of God's favor.

"You may have already heard about this from the higher-ups, but we'll be staying at this encampment tomorrow night as well," I told Lady Hermine. "We have to dispose of the abatisses and chevaux-de-frise, and the soldiers need some rest too."

"That makes sense. I understand."

"By the way, I heard that it was a lady of House Fürst who first noticed the Demon."

Oof, it was hard to talk loftily to an older woman. This would be simpler if she were just a subordinate, but technically my peerage outranked hers, resulting in this headache. I guess that Lady Hermine didn't seem to mind the way I was speaking because she had determined our respective standings based on peerage.

"It was but a coincidence, although I am glad that everything worked out in the end."

"You did an impressive job. I think that sighting the enemy is praiseworthy in itself."

After a short, stiff pause, she said, "You flatter me."

After that, we discussed the schedule for tomorrow before parting ways. There were a lot of things on my plate: checking up on the soldiers, mercenaries, and adventurers directly under my command, confirming their accomplishments, arranging and paying for healing the injured, and compiling the results of the investigation I asked for a short while back.

So much to do it made me want to weep. *Boo hoo hoo.*

“Twas almost as if he had no interest in his own accomplishments,” Mine muttered as she watched Werner go.

By all rights, he should have been bragging about taking down that enormous Tooth Sheep, but he showed an almost complete lack of interest in that topic. He seemed more inclined to talk about the night’s camp matters and the plans for the following days.

But on reflection, the mission to protect the refugees wasn’t over yet, and there was still the possibility of another monster attack. In that sense, Werner’s attitude was perhaps more fitting. As she returned to the base of operations, Mine nodded to herself, oblivious to how Werner only thought the way he did because he had been molded by Japan’s workaholic culture.

“Hello, Dame Mine.”

“It’s good to see you. You did well on the battlefield.”

Several lady knights who were even younger than Mine called out to her, so she stopped and replied. “Thank you. Likewise.”

Though she was a woman, Mine had a very firm and resolute air about her, which made her popular among her sex. Even in her student days at the royal academy, her younger female peers would often follow her around. Some of them had even admitted to having a crush on her. Though the term did not exist in this world, Werner would undoubtedly have called the group that gathered around Mine a “fan club” if he had been there to see it.

“I heard that you performed a splendid feat out there, Dame Mine.”

“I knew we could count on you.”

“No, I just happened to spot the enemy.” Mine grimaced.

To be perfectly honest, Werner was far more deserving of praise when it came to military feats. But he had a broader view on things. He was more concerned with the overall state of the war than with individual triumphs on

the battlefield, which meant that he was not inclined to boast of his own deeds.

Noticing where Mine's gaze was directed, one of the lady knights spoke up. "That is Viscount Zehrfeld over there, right?" she asked as she eyed Werner's back from a distance.

"Indeed, it is." Mine nodded.

This prompted the knight to tilt her head in thought. "How do I say this? The viscount is rather an unusual person."

"Unusual, you say?"

"He seems levelheaded. Wise beyond his years."

Mine said nothing but nodded slightly.

Another knight chose to speak up. "He is well-regarded among the refugees. They say that the 'Spear Nobleman' listens attentively to what ails them."

"I also heard that he doesn't put on airs."

This came down to a difference in values. Werner was merely interacting with the refugees who had lost their homeland in the same way he would treat them in his old world. But that was fundamentally different from how this world's aristocracy regarded commoners. Though it was nothing as extreme as sneering in distaste at the mere sight of a commoner, it was still rare for noblemen to talk to them in the way Werner did. But that was what made him so popular. Mine privately reflected on how necessary it was to consider one's attitude toward the people.

"The base has sent word to round up the errand runners."

"I see."

The only tools people had to magnify their voices normally were things like megaphones. In a world without a terribly high literacy rate, there was no guarantee that written messages or signs would get through to everyone. For the sake of conveying the schedule to several thousand people, a large number of people would stand in different places and shout out the messages. This was

a large fraction of the work demanded of errand runners.

“By the way, Master Werner,” said Max, as if he had just thought of something. “What did you investigate on the battlefield after the fighting ended?”

He asked me that question that night, as the squires polished our armor while we set about the paperwork to arrange the rewards owed to the adventurers and mercenaries.

I hesitated a moment, thinking about the subject of the investigation, but then I figured that if the documents were lost, the knowledge would be too unless I told someone. And I figured Max was trustworthy enough.

“This.”

I showed him the records of the investigation. When his eyes first fell on it, he frowned in confusion, but as he read further, his expression transformed into one of surprise.

“Master Werner, this is...!”

“It’s as you saw. A proportion of monsters with treasure chests in them had traces of digestion in their stomachs, while the monsters without treasure had empty bellies. Though there were some that carried treasure on an empty stomach, there is a possibility that it manifested immediately after they digested their food.”

This was what had occurred to me like a bolt out of the blue several hours ago. In the game, there were monsters with treasure chests and monsters without. And in this world, humans got stronger if they defeated monsters, but monsters never leveled up even if they killed an adventurer or someone.

Despite that, monsters would always eat whatever they laid eyes on, whether it was human or animal. Perhaps that was a strange way of putting it, but the point was that on Earth, even wild beasts and piranhas wouldn’t attack humans

on a full stomach. Monsters, though, would eat something larger than their own body weight and then go on to attack more prey. When I asked myself why that would be, this was the answer I came up with (if only as a hypothesis).

When a monster consumed a large amount of food, including humans, it would produce a treasure chest inside its body. In the game, the difference between a monster with treasure and a monster without came down to whether it had eaten its fill. That was my theory.

But if that was the case, it would mean that monsters had the ability to produce items as long as they had food. Just what exactly did they exist for? In the game, you could say that they existed simply as fodder for leveling up, but that might not be the case in this world.

I pondered it for a bit, but I decided to put a lid on my questions for now.

“We can’t *not* report this to Duke Seyfert. I’ll inform my father directly as well. One of them can tell His Majesty. But other than them, you mustn’t tell anyone—not even Orgen or Barkey.”

“I understand,” Max said, nodding gravely.

I wasn’t joking in the slightest. If the wrong people wound up hearing about this, they might think of feeding people to monsters and killing them to farm treasure.

There were a lot of gaps in my theory, but monsters didn’t need any encouraging to attack and eat humans. Nor were they creatures you could tame. When the Demon Lord returned to life, the monsters became even more violent.

If this information were to leak under these circumstances, then people might wind up getting their priorities totally backward by waiting until after a monster had killed others before slaying it for a rare item drop. Perhaps someone might catch on to the truth one day, but hopefully that would be after the Demon Lord was defeated, when the monster situation had calmed down somewhat. Otherwise, this would end up encouraging some utterly deplorable crimes.

I wouldn't have been able to tally up the data like this without hundreds of monsters to serve as a representative sample. But this data was not going to make anyone happy. Personally, I felt like I'd just stumbled on a very unpleasant truth.

"Jeez, my mind went to some morbid places." I couldn't help but sigh.

Still, nothing would get done by agonizing over it. For the moment, I decided to report my findings.

I still had my lingering questions about why the monsters decided to attack this group, but there wasn't any way to look into that at this stage, so my questions would have to remain unanswered. First things first, I had to focus on the documents in front of me. Don't blame me for procrastinating on my problems.

After the funeral, we gave the soldiers a break. Those who still had energy to spare disposed of the monsters' remains. That night before dinner, the leaders held a meeting.

Incidentally, the duke would have his meal after the meeting. He said he'd rather the soldiers have their fill first. The rest of us inevitably fell into a similar cycle, but I had to say: for an octogenarian in a world where the average life expectancy was in the sixties, the duke sure was full of pep.

"There seem to be no pressing issues for now."

"Indeed. We have been fortunate not to see any outbreaks of disease."

To be more precise, we used medicines and potions to alleviate anything that looked like it *might* cause an outbreak. Thus, we were able to keep the disease's spread to a minimum. It was much harder to curb a virus after it had the momentum.

Potions were generally quite expensive, but we went out of our way to feed the bitter cures to any refugees who looked ill. Though we didn't want any

diseases spreading, the expenses were also a problem—hence the solution of giving people the nasty stuff. As Confucius said, good medicine tastes bitter.

As an aside, we got people to pay for their medicine through their labor. The potions made them well enough to handle the cleaning and disposal work—it was the least we could do to justify the costs.

“On the capital’s side, the aqueduct is eighty percent complete,” Duke Seyfert remarked.

“What swift progress.”

I thought I would be the only one surprised, but it turned out everyone was taken aback. The kingdom had really got their asses together to make this happen. They were probably using magic equivalent to large-scale machinery. Did it count as manpower anymore when you used magic for construction work?

“It appears that they have been using a rather substantial amount of halleck.”

“I see. In that case, I can understand the progress, though that was a rather momentous decision.” Baron Kretschmer nodded solemnly.

I was also satisfied by the explanation, though still surprised, nonetheless.

To put it simply, halleck was this world’s version of concrete. It was similar to Roman concrete in how it hardened in water. Given that it was light, hardened quickly, and didn’t dissolve in water, it most certainly had its uses. Even better, it was sturdier than concrete, so much so that it could turn into a real problem if it were poured in the wrong place. Plus, its off-white color made it look pretty from a distance, making it prime architectural material.

Unfortunately, however, it was as rare as it was valuable. You couldn’t make Roman concrete without volcanic ash from Mount Vesuvius, though at least in this world you could get the materials for halleck from the teeth (or rather, fangs) of a Killer Rabbit. For some reason, the bones weren’t effective.

It was difficult to gather this in large quantities. Although Killer Rabbits

appeared pretty much everywhere in high frequency, the only things you needed from them were their teeth. Given that they were around as big as a medium-sized dog, you didn't get much in the way of materials from a single kill. Or maybe I should say a whole lot of killing got in the way of a few materials?

To make matters worse, in order to make the teeth usable, you had to spend a lot of time grinding them into dust. This was what made them such an expensive commodity. Not only did they take too much time to process, the rabbit meat was said to be so delectable that it wasn't uncommon for people to only bring the meat back.

As an aside, even though it was a rabbit, its skin was so tough that people mostly avoided using it. Its most common application was in shoe soles. I guess they weren't wasting the materials, at least.

"There were a healthy number of requests for the materials at the adventurers' guild, I hear."

"Of course there were."

Everyone laughed. That was said as a joke, but when we got back to the capital, we found out that the price of rabbit meat had totally plummeted. Just how many of those creatures were sacrificed at the altar...?

The next day we began moving for the capital once more.

Dinner normally consisted of soup that was slightly too salty, wheat fashioned into a naan-like bread or gruel or something like that, and a bit of meat. You either fried the dried meat or put it in your soup. There was also some cheese and the occasional dried fruit.

There wasn't much variety in the vegetables. We were proactive about buying them from towns and villages whenever we were able to. The supplies division also coordinated people's diets, and they were pretty intense about it. Our

morale would drop if we had the same thing day after day, after all.

This was an aside, but the army was strictly forbidden from gathering mushrooms without a specialist around. Apparently, there was a case in the past where an amateur got cocky and threw a bunch of poisonous mushrooms into a pot, resulting in dozens of people having to pull out of service.

Whether you called it hard bread or stiff bread, you got the picture. It wouldn't get mold, making it an ideal candidate for a preserved food, but to be perfectly blunt, you could hardly get your teeth through it, and the taste was nonexistent. It was borderline inedible. It was all well and good to focus on preserving food, but at the end of the day, food was meant to be eaten.

By the way, people in my previous world often described medieval bread as hard, but yeast was actually discovered in the early modern period. Before then, people often used wine, beer barm, and honey to leaven bread, but there were plenty of cases where it didn't work as intended. The bread wouldn't puff out, which was the main reason why it went hard. Apparently, though it wasn't the same as the *kuchikamizake* method of using human saliva as a fermentation starter, there were cases where people mixed in their own blood. If I have to be honest, that would kind of kill my appetite.

The type of wheat also played a role. Rye didn't have gluten, so it wouldn't puff out when you baked it even if there was yeast. When it came to barley, it was even more important to mix the flour, because otherwise even making the bread dough was difficult. This was the reason why regions where wheat was scarce inevitably produced hard and heavy bread that was tough to chew. The further north you went, the more common it was to find hard bread made out of things like rye. Wheat was a luxury item. In this world, breads meant to keep for a while were based on rye, although given that this was another world altogether, there might have been different types of wheat plants.

I didn't know the details, and I certainly didn't feel like going out of my way to look into how to make something that tasted bad. People cultivated wheat in every country in this world, and if you were going to research something,

obviously you'd look into stuff that keeps well while tasting good too.

My thoughts had gone off-track again. Either way, army rations were never going to be high-end cuisine, no matter how generously you described it. At the base of operations, we had a splash of alcohol here and there, but even that was far from plentiful. This was why it was not an exaggeration to say that hunting edible animals and monsters was an important role for the soldiers.

At the base, having a meal together was more of an opportunity to exchange information. This would have been its own kind of hell if the company were unpleasant, but fortunately, I encountered no problems in that department.

After the monster attack a few days prior, nothing much happened—small run-ins with monsters or petty fights didn't really count as "incidents." And so the days passed uneventfully. Fortunately, the weather remained fair, for which I was very grateful.

That day, when I finished my meal at the base and was on my way back to my own troops, a messenger called out to me from behind.

"Viscount Zehrfeld, I must apologize, but could you please return to the base?"

I wondered what was up. "I will oblige at once."

With an order from the commander, it's not like I had a choice, but it'd be pretty immature to put it that way. That didn't stop me from thinking it, though, as I followed the messenger back to the base. Outside the tent, I bumped into Count Vogler, who was also being escorted by a messenger. I suppose he had been called too.

"A pleasure to see you, Count."

"Likewise, though admittedly it has not been long since our last encounter."

The two of us exchanged sheepish glances along with our awkward greeting. We'd both been called back here while on the way back to our respective

troops, so it was natural we'd be a bit off-balance.

I was slightly relieved, though. If the count was here too, I probably hadn't been called back on account of any trouble the adventurers or mercenaries might have gotten up to.

"I wonder why we were summoned."

"Mayhap something unfolded at Triot."

"A plausible explanation."

I thought as much, at least. But the story that awaited me inside the tent was bewildering.

Every leader involved in the refugee protection mission was assembled in the tent, their expressions ambivalent. Some of them did not bother hiding their discomfort or exasperation, but we were all alike in thinking: "That guy just *had* to make trouble." I was guessing, but I was pretty darn sure I was on the money.

The reason behind this current situation was an urgent message from the capital. Mangold, the eldest son of the late Marquess Kneipp, had apparently gotten ahead of himself. Personally, I'd only had the most fleeting of encounters with him, so I didn't have a particularly strong impression of him either way, but this conversation definitely tipped the scale toward disdain.

Regardless.

"Commanding mercenaries to attack Fort Werisa... Is he a fool?" I blurted out.

"The viscount speaks my mind," Baron Kretschmer chimed in without a moment's pause.

Even though the position of marquess went to his uncle instead of him, that was half his own fault.

Not that this mattered in the slightest, but words like "fool" and "idiot" were

intelligible in this world. I remembered reading that “fool” was regarded as a bigger insult in Japan’s Kansai region, while people in Kanto hated to be called “idiot,” but both words appeared to be even more insulting in this world.

While such trivial thoughts buzzed about my head, my eyes flitted across the people in attendance. Count Engelbert, Count Vogler, and Viscount Kauffeldt said nothing, but they were nodding along with expressions of clear agreement. It looked as if we were all of one mind about this. Meanwhile, the fact that Duke Seyfert crossed his arms in silence was pretty intimidating. Amid this strained atmosphere, Count Vogler began to shake his head.

“The marquess fell even with the knights on his side,” he muttered. “To attempt to retake the fort with only his retainers and mercenaries was nothing but reckless.”

“Did the royal family not notice this?” asked Viscount Kauffeldt.

“It appears that he charged ahead without anything resembling a plan,” replied Count Engelbert. “The crown knew that he was extorting the nobles within his faction for money, but they assumed that it was related to the succession dispute.”

Oof. The people who coughed up the money were probably sweating buckets around now. There was no telling what stunt Mangold would pull next. The moment he was crazy enough to stock up on soldiers, you could smell rebellion in the air.

“Not to mention that the kingdom has been grappling with many different dilemmas as of late.”

“That is certainly true.”

Between the surveillance over Fort Werisa, dealing with the refugees, and setting up an aqueduct, they were spinning a lot of plates... The aqueduct thing kind of jumped the queue, but delegating people to guard the construction site meant that the knight brigade’s movements were restricted right now. Was that my fault? Or was this just the game course correcting itself?

But anyway, the more important thing was...

“This will not sow the seeds for an attack on the capital, will it?” I remarked.

Once again, it was Baron Kretschmer who answered me. “The possibility is certainly there.”

Count Engelbert nodded stiffly; everyone else looked just as ill at ease.

The duke chose that moment to unfold his arms and cast a sweeping gaze across the assembly. “Regardless, we lack information. Given that we are over a thousand men strong, we may be recalled to the capital at great haste, depending on how the situation unfolds. We must keep this possibility in mind.”

Everyone nodded at this, myself included. The duke went on.

“Yet that is no cause to abandon the refugees. Should the need arise, we must split our forces, leaving a fraction to continue accompanying the refugees.”

“A prudent course of action.”

“Without the soldiers, there could be casualties from monsters, and we cannot discount the possibility of people running off and turning to banditry.”

If we were to receive urgent summons from the capital, we would have to balance the need to return with as many soldiers as possible against our mission to protect the refugees. The duke had evidently been thinking long and hard about this.

At the ensuing discussion, it was decided that Count Vogler’s troops would remain with the refugees, as would the Zehrfeld forces and my hired swords. The count, of course, would be the commander. I had no objections to the plan itself, though I couldn’t help but shake a fist at the world in general. Damn it, if it wasn’t one thing, it was another.

“So there you have it, gentlemen. Care to share your opinions?”

When I returned to my troops, I gathered a bunch of mercenary and adventurer leaders, swore them to secrecy, and asked for their thoughts. Obviously, they were all surprised, but when I followed up with my question, their bafflement only grew.

“I’m questioning the mercenaries who would follow such an idiotic command. ‘Course, there are some guys who have screws loose.”

“Adventurers are cut from the same cloth. Normal adventurers wouldn’t think of participating in a nobleman’s reckless plan to attack the fort all by themselves.”

“There are nobles who have screws loose too,” I commented in spite of myself. This prompted the others to flash awkward smiles. After all, this very incident was the doing of one such foolish noble. They weren’t sure whether they were allowed to laugh or not. Normally, doing that in front of an aristocrat would have been a breach of manners, but I wasn’t very aristocratic myself.

I’d been talking casually with the mercenaries and adventurers for nearly a month now. They had become much less inclined to check themselves around me simply on account of my status, although Max was still rather deferent to me. I’d like to think he wasn’t being passive-aggressive. But anyway.

“So what do you think will happen? What kind of people do you think he brought along? That’s what I’m asking... Does anything come to mind?”

“First off, they’re probably guys who’ll do anything for money. Ain’t like there’s no ‘backstreets’ in the capital.”

“Backstreets” was this world’s way of euphemistically referring to the slums. It was self-explanatory. It was inevitable for lawless folk to emerge from a place like that. Regardless.

“It’s hard to imagine that those kinds of folks would be willing to take on monsters.”

This was the notion that nagged at me. If they were capable of fighting

monsters, then they would probably be adventurers or something. With physical strength on their side, they could easily turn a profit by dirtying their hands with backstreets crime, but adventurers at least had a higher social standing than outlaws. That was about as far as my thoughts went regarding that particular quandary. It wasn't as if everyone living in the slums was a criminal, after all.

"They won't necessarily go all the way to the fort," one of the leaders of the mercenary leaders remarked.

"Hm?" I didn't understand.

"Basically, they might plan to go along for part of the journey and then slip off one day."

"Oof, that's twisted."

It made sense to me. It was pretty common for escorts and whatnot to bail out after they got their money. Hardly anyone would be like that if the request went through the guild, but if Mangold was recruiting indiscriminately for a reckless job, then he was bound to attract unscrupulous folks.

But if he went through with the attack in that state, then he would probably be left stranded before they even reached their destination, let alone launched an offensive. But no, that wasn't necessarily set in stone.

"I see. Are there any other possibilities?"

"Is there no chance that other nobles' armies are involved?" asked one of the adventurer leaders.

After giving it a bit of thought, I shook my head. "I doubt it. Security around the capital is stretched thin already."

The forces were dispersed among tasks like building the aqueduct and dealing with the refugees. The nobles couldn't afford to waste their soldiers. Besides, they were readily familiar with what happened at Fort Werisa. Even if they had the troops to spare, they would only be adding to the body count.

“The Stampede had light casualties, but it wasn’t like they were nonexistent.”

Normally, it took years to train a soldier. This wasn’t a video game, after all. Wait, as far as my memories went, this *was* a game, but whatever. The point was that you couldn’t easily shrug your shoulders at the people who fretted over losing personnel. In my old world, whenever a colleague got fed up with the pay and transferred to a different job, some higher-up who didn’t understand the job description would send over people just to fill the numbers... I shuddered at the unwelcome memories.

Soldiers didn’t start their training by swinging weapons. They started with walking. A soldier who couldn’t even make it to the battlefield was no soldier. Fresh recruits would first train to walk thirty kilometers in five hours while armed. They would only start learning how to use the weapons after that. It went without saying that this was the baseline.

Not many people knew about it, but after that, young knights were guaranteed to learn how to hold a shield in a “knightly” way. Part of it was for show, but if you held a shield at an awkward angle or if your grip wavered, then you’d crumple in the face of an enemy attack and wind up dead for it. It was less flashy than horse riding or swinging a weapon, but it was no less important.

Details aside, the point was that it took time and money to train a soldier or knight. With that in mind, no nobleman would think of sending people on a reckless maneuver. Hopefully. Probably. God, I hoped so...

I picked the brains of the mercenary and adventurer leaders for a little while after that, but we couldn’t reach a consensus. Given that the information I had on hand was quite limited in scope, that was about as much as I could hope for at the present juncture.

“In the end, we lack information, huh?”

“This really made me feel that you nobles come in all sorts,” one of the mercenaries said.

I could only grimace in response. Though I broke the mold by drinking with

the mercenaries and adventurers around the campfire, I had to emphasize that people as brainless as Mangold were also the exception rather than the norm.

I suppose it was just the way of things for a lot of nobles to look down on adventurers and mercenaries. From a conventional point of view, adventurers and their like were definitely the types to rush headlong into danger. But that didn't mean they enjoyed being condescended to. I had to be considerate of their feelings.

"I get what we have to do. Just stick to what we've been doing," one of the guys said.

"Yeah. But we'll have to up the surveillance when the main force splits up," I pointed out.

The defensive line would get thinner, meaning fewer people to keep the refugees on good behavior as well. This would be a demotivator, although I supposed that also depended on how things shook out at the capital. I prayed that nothing bad happened. It would be nice if we could up our moving pace, but that was impossible at this point. In the worst-case scenario, I would have to consider splitting up the mercenaries and adventurers.

After dismissing the adventurers and mercenaries, I met up with Max. Losing out on guards was one thing, but when I thought about how much time we spent setting up camp, I truly felt the loss of the military engineers.

"I guess our only choice is to pay the refugees to help out."

"Indeed, it is our only recourse."

As our eyes met, I couldn't help but sigh. Hopefully, the incivilities I could no longer contain wouldn't be held against me.

"That utter fool."

"Though I understand that Marquess Kneipp belongs to a different faction from Master Ingo, I did not conceive that the son would be so foolish." Max cut

himself off there, probably because of his standing as a knight. Neither my father nor I minded, but it was almost taboo for a knight to criticize a member of the aristocracy. Max was heroic in appearance, but in this regard, he was a sensitive soul. He continued, “Should we ask for the duke’s permission to send Master Ingo a messenger?”

“That is also an option.”

After all, we didn’t have much information to go on. Asking my father could definitely help. I wondered if I should send a scout to the capital.

“In the ideal scenario, nothing happens from now till we arrive at the capital,” Max said.

“I pray that Mangold dies in a ditch somewhere before then.”

That might have been a bit much—Max was technically my senior, after all. Though I was a deputy with an equivalent rank to a viscount, I did have to consider my father’s position and our age differences. But still, there wasn’t anyone else around, so maybe I could get away with some bitching. Max just nodded and didn’t voice any objections.

“Don’t tell all our troops the details yet,” I said, “but go ahead and make sure no one’s in rough shape.”

“Understood.”

“I also want to put a mark on anyone among the refugees who looks promising.”

“I will ask not just the soldiers but also the mercenaries and adventurers for their opinions.”

“Thanks.”

I left the preparations to Max and then decided to compile everything I wanted to discuss with Count Vogler in case we got *really* unlucky. The biggest pains in our asses were guarding the supply unit and dealing with the refugees.

Even though they should’ve gotten it through their heads that monsters were

dangerous, there were people who were starting to think that the ones around here weren't so tough after all. It may have been because the adventurers and mercenaries made dealing with them look easy, but regardless, such thoughts were far too complacent. Although, perhaps they had a point in the sense that the monsters were supposed to be weak around the start of the game.

It would be a problem if people took the threat lightly and got themselves injured. People running off and turning to banditry was also a scary prospect. That reminded me...do the bandits and thieves that appear as enemies on video game fields get attacked by monsters? I had no clue. Maybe the monsters got the materials for their treasure chests from the bandits who went missing on the field. There was no point thinking about it.

Reality was serving up more pressing problems. Just as I was getting into a funk from trying to brainstorm a plan to deal with the monsters, my thoughts suddenly flitted to a different path.

“Oh yeah, the enemies at Fort Werisa were undead.”

Undead were easier to deal with than monsters, in a certain sense. They only attacked whatever moved, generally. Monsters could be more troublesome because they had a form of intelligence—or perhaps instinct was the better way of putting it. Wait?

“...Hmm? Maybe this could come in handy?” I said absently.

It wouldn't serve any purpose whatsoever in this current deadlock. But I was reluctant to let go of the idea.

My thoughts shifted to how I should consult with others while there was still time. At times like this, getting stuck in your own head could lead to holes without even noticing. To use business lingo: reporting, contacting, and consultation were important.

Fueled by a newfound sense of purpose, I drew up a rough diagram. When I was done, I left the Zehrfeld encampment and made a beeline for the command tent.

I was allowed to double-dip in the duke's schedule and set yet another meeting. Duke Seyfert was probably busy, so he understandably kept me waiting for a short while. When I entered the tent, he was scribbling furiously on some kind of document as he looked up at me.

I brought hand to chest in a military bow. Perhaps you could call it the simplified version of a bow and scrape—not that I could do the full gesture while wearing metal armor.

"Lord Werner, did something happen?" the duke asked with a light nod.

"No, I came to ask you for your permission for something and to appeal for your guidance."

As a bemused expression came over the duke's face, I explained that I wanted to send a messenger to the capital. After some slight thought, he nodded.

"Very well. I already receive regular communications, though there is no harm in broadening my perspective. May I ask to be kept in the loop?"

"By all means, my lord."

This was only to be expected. I had no intention of keeping secrets anyway. I could rest easy now that I had permission.

"Also, I have a plan for if the enemies at Fort Werisa attack the capital's vicinity."

"I see."

It was difficult to explain verbally, so I had drawn up a diagram. I could only hope I'd be forgiven for the crude drawings. I was sure it was because I only had access to black ink since we were on the march and all. I unfurled the illustration across the desk and explained what it showed. I figured that I just needed to explain everything in order, and he would probably get it.

Once I finished explaining the gist of things, the duke cast me a strange look. "I understand your explanation. It is interesting, but I wonder...did you conceive

of it?”

“Perhaps there was a precedent for it somewhere.”

To be honest, I wasn’t too knowledgeable about this world’s military history. Given that it was by and large a muscle-brain world, there wasn’t exactly an abundance of records besides whether a war was won or lost.

My plan was based simply on memories from my previous world. I’d never actually put it into practice myself, so you could say it was nothing but an armchair theory, but I figured it was worth a shot in this situation.

“Given that the monsters at Fort Werisa were Living Dead, even if a Demon were at the helm, I cannot imagine that they would be a military specialist. I expect that they would be slow to respond to situations outside their expectation.”

“You make a point. Very well. I will send a message on the matter.”

“Thank you very much. May I ask that you stamp your own name on the proposal when you send it off?”

“Why so?”

“Well, I suspect that the remarks of an impertinent youth such as myself may not be received well.”

My age was that of a student, and I was only here as my father’s representative. There would be no point to any of this if my suggestion were summarily ignored.

“I see. However, in that case, would you not lose out on the credit?”

“I would rather that than see the plan scrapped.”

“Eliminating the enemy comes first, hm? I understand. However, I cannot guarantee that it will pass even if it goes under my name.”

“I understand that well.”

As long as the plan got a fair shot, I was fine with that. If it did pass, then

perhaps the people on the field could tailor it to make it work in practice. I didn't have the responsibility or authority to come up with battle strategies.

That said, I would say I was fortunate to even have my plan put forward at all. It was a good thing I belonged to the nobility. If I'd been an adventurer or something, most nobles wouldn't even bother lending me an ear. Would they listen to me if I racked up a bunch of achievements as a mercenary?

Idle thoughts welled in my head as I left the tent. Now it was time to meet with Count Vogler about what to do when we stayed behind. Because I was of lower rank than him, I was the one who had to pay a visit to his doorstep, which meant my endless hours of footing it through the camp continued. This was bound to improve my leg strength.

Having repelled an attack, Werner and the others set forth for the capital once again after a quick break to rest and perform funeral rites. At the same time, the Demon army set forth from Fort Werisa to launch an attack, Crown Prince Hubertus began mobilizing his army, their backs to the walls of the royal capital's ramparts.

"As one would expect from an army of the dead, they move ceaselessly day and night."

"Nevertheless, they move only on foot, so there is a limit to how quickly they cover ground. They should make contact tomorrow morning."

The advisor was Count Schanderl, who commanded the anti-area-of-effect-magic experiment squad at the time Fort Werisa was attacked. Not only was he one of the prince's trusted retainers, but he was also quite possibly the person most familiar with the situation at the fort.

For better or worse, the dead moved slowly and at a predictable pace. Because of this, the prince's side could choose exactly when to make contact with the enemy. Nobody had any desire to fight an army of the dead at night—that would have been a mistake. Figuring that dawn would offer the most

visibility, the army laid its plans.

“What about the supply division?”

“Ready. They are inside the castle with fifteen days’ worth of supplies.”

“And the enemy?”

“They comprise a mix of Skeleton Warriors and Living Dead. There have been no fluctuations in their speed.”

“How amateur.”

Though the Living Dead did not tire physically, they were inferior to humans when it came to agility, and certainly nothing close to Demonic Beasts. Skeleton Warriors did possess some degree of finesse, but they couldn’t weather attacks nearly as well as the Living Dead.

If the opposing side had separated its army into separate squads and moved with a clear plan in mind, then it would have been vital to respond accordingly, but they were all just jumbled together. They didn’t even appear to move with a sense of unity. At this point, Hubertus knew that victory was assured.

“Well then, let us commence a strategy meeting. Gather everyone.”

“Yessir.”

The messenger under Count Schanderl’s command did as bidden and ran off to gather the other commanders. It did not take long for everyone to assemble.

Somewhat ironically, this meeting was the opposite from the norm. For instance, the nobles who normally called themselves martial men were relatively quiet, while those who belonged to the bureaucrat faction were eager and ready.

The reason the martial houses were quiet was not because they were afraid or intimidated, but because the son of the late Marquess Kneipp—a leader in their faction—had gone on a bender. And because of him, people believed that the enemy had set forth to attack. Given the circumstances, they had to watch what they said. On the other hand, the bureaucrat faction could not abide the

enemy laying waste to the area surrounding the capital. A simple yet pertinent reason.

Hubert was saddled with the responsibility of juggling both sides, though the nobles felt the need to suppress their egos for now. Like the Demon Stampede, this battle was a defensive one near the capital. In that sense, it might have been a good thing that the martial faction was so quiet.

“Everyone is here.”

“Well met. Now then, to prepare for the morrow’s battle, I will explain the formation.” Hubert did not bother with a preface. There was no point in pleasantries right when they were about to deploy. The experience of the previous Stampede alone was enough to bolster the prince’s resolve, though his determination to lead from the front was born of his iron-clad will to shield the royal capital from the forces of chaos.

In previous days, some people voiced objections to deploying the troops outside the capital’s walls. They also had the option of setting forth the morning before to meet the enemy’s attack at the gates. However, the leaders decided that they would need a full day to respond effectively to the enemy’s numbers.

If they thoughtlessly rushed the enemy, they might succeed only in tiring themselves out while the dead remained unflagging. If they didn’t wipe out the entire army within the day, then night would fall, and the enemy would have the advantage. The unanimous opinion was to start the battle at sunrise and finish by sunset.

Hubert began the strategy meeting under this premise, but when he began verbally outlining the formation, shock rippled throughout the group as a whole.

“This is another unorthodox strategy.”

“Regardless of whether it would work under normal circumstances, I suspect that it could prove effective here.”

“Did His Highness conceive of this formation?” asked Marquess Norpoth, who was back again at the helm of one of the flanks after his performance at the Demon Stampede. Hubert explained succinctly that the plan came from Duke Seyfert, prompting the marquess to respond, “I see. The duke is ever the resourceful man.”

“His age has supplied his mind with a nimble wit,” another noble remarked.

“Enough commentary,” interjected Hubert. “Let us establish the details.”

They went over where they and the enemy would be positioned. They also assigned the commanding roles and hammered out the signals that would guide their response. They had to act upon the meeting’s decisions before the day was out. Once all the necessary matters were settled, the prince ordered the commanders to ensure their weapons and armor were battle-ready before finally calling it a day.

The next day, the battle unfolded over Hildea Plains.

“Heh heh. So they come to us. What delightful fools they are.”

At almost the precise center of the army of the dead, the black mage Belis snorted as he watched the human army gather into a formation near the royal capital.

From his perspective, when he and the Demon commander Dreax attacked Fort Werisa, they had easily dispatched a high-ranking noble and his bodyguard knights. The only thing he could commend them for was that they noticed his area of effect magic spell outside the fort and took the opportunity to beat a hasty retreat.

Given this complacent point of view, Belis’s read on the situation was correct in a certain sense. In terms of individual fighting strength, it wasn’t unusual for a Demonic Beast to overpower an average soldier. Also, when it came to numbers, the human soldiers were at an overwhelming disadvantage. And this

didn't even touch on how the undead army was impervious to fear or fatigue. Confident in his inevitable triumph, Belis regarded the Wein Kingdom's army with a look of patronizing disdain.

"Well, whatever. Their army will soon fill Lord Dreax's ranks."

Belis gave the command for all troops to advance. The sounds accompanying the army's march were nothing like those of a normal force's—the clacking of hard bones, some ominous creaking—and a foul odor wafted through the air. The stench from thousands of Living Dead would make an ordinary person want to hurl.

"Ah, what a pleasant aroma."

Standing in the midst of it all, Belis was not merely calm—his expression was one of ecstasy. For a Demon like him, the smell was downright soothing. Not only did this cause his optimism toward the battle to swell, he even felt like he was going on an excursion.

Combined with his simplistic orders, his overconfidence and negligence to scope the battlefield thoroughly would drag him down.

Not long after the morning sun cast its first rays down to the earth, the kingdom's army, in an inverted-T formation with a central column and two wings near the back, clashed with the middle of the undead army, which had arrayed itself in an almost straight horizontal line.

The center unit of the Wein Kingdom's army advanced at an unhurried pace, not fast enough to qualify as running. When the soldiers reached the undead army, they came to a standstill and adjusted their positioning.

This vanguard unit consisted primarily of young foot soldiers. Though they lacked experience, they had plenty of stamina and vigor. Intimidated though they were by the Living Dead and Skeleton Warriors, they did not show enough fear to run away.

“Begin the offensive!”

“Push!”

Two frontline commanders, Viscounts Kranke and Mittag, had been slain in the Demon Stampede along with their retainers, which meant that this time, the formation hinged on young soldiers clad in heavy armor and bearing long spears.

The two commanders’ combat methods were polar opposites. The new Viscount Avant Simon Kranke was talented at commanding groups. Calmly, he divided the undead army into smaller groups to make them easier for his own team to dispatch as individuals.

Meanwhile, the new Viscount Wojtek Rafed Mittag had plenty of experience to his name and was regarded as a valorous warrior. He held the line with the weighty strokes of his own mace. He used the shield in his left hand to knock his opponents off balance as he barked orders at his subordinates.

The new Viscount Mittag was particularly motivated to fight out of a desire to avenge his father and brother, who perished in the Stampede. His aggression far outweighed his fear, to the extent that the precious few retainers yet serving those two young viscounts racked their brains to figure out a way to dial them back.

And the heir to House Fürst, Tyrone, stood out even more prominently. Count Fürst’s troops took the esteemed position of vanguard of the center unit. Filled with a hearty desire for battle and glory, Tyrone led the charge himself with sword flashing, every so often charging right into a throng of enemies and cutting them all down. Within the group of young fighting nobles, his movements stood out particularly keenly.

At that moment, with his mind consumed only with thoughts of military glory, Tyrone was barely conscious of his sister Hermine’s existence, let alone Werner. Tyrone did not care in the slightest about the son of a bureaucrat noble, who happened to stumble upon victory at the Stampede through sheer coincidence,

nor about his sister, a woman who demonstrated her capabilities as a knight.

“There is no need to rush. Focus first on making sure that the enemy is subdued, then make a gentle retreat. We won’t need to push them back entirely for a while yet.”

The man who noticed Tyrone’s overzealous actions and tried to rein him in was Baron Kupfernagel, who was in charge of the central unit as a whole. The baron was old enough to be described as a veteran, and he was aware of the role his unit played in the plan. Situated at the vanguard, at the junction of three noble houses, his role could be described as that of a military coordinator.

Occupying the lowly position of a baron, Kupfernagel did not command many soldiers directly, but because of the aptitude he demonstrated handling the retreat when Fort Werisa fell, as well as the training he accrued in group battles, he was one of the crown prince’s most trusted personnel.

Behind the four noble houses, Count Schanderl’s troops held a solid formation to support the frontlines. Even further behind them, the most elite members of the royal guard stood on standby. Because of them at its back, the line did not break no matter how much pressure the undead army exerted. In fact, the kingdom’s army had the momentum on its side as it pushed inexorably forward.

Under Kupfernagel’s command, the formation’s center slowly retreated while the wings held their ground, until the overall formation gradually shifted from an inverted T to a U. Tyrone, who commanded the Fürst troops at the frontline, clearly resented pulling back. But he couldn’t refuse an order, especially when the strategy came from Duke Seyfert and the crown prince himself presided over the army directly. As a result, the middle unit of the undead army gradually drifted toward the center.

Once the House Fürst troops had retreated a certain distance, they stopped in their tracks. Because both the left and right flanks of the undead army were being funneled toward the center, stopping there meant that the enemy was caught in a messy triangle formation. It was at that precise juncture when the

two flanks of the Wein Kingdom army made their move.

At the helm of the kingdom's right flank stood Marquess Norpoth. Though he belonged to the martial faction, he was one of the more levelheaded ones within the group. The crown prince trusted him on account of this and tasked him with leading a flank on the battlefield once more.

"So it is about time, hm? Give the signal to the first unit of the knight brigade."

"Yessir."

Under Marquess Norpoth's command, the knight brigade's cavalry sprang into motion. Before long, the field shuddered with the thunder of hooves and the lusty cries of war. The cavaliers formed a black cluster, driving into a group of undead and promptly breaking through their left flank.

The cavalry derived much of its destructive force from its momentum, but to achieve that it needed ample distance for the run-up to full speed. On the other hand, because a fully armored knight weighed as much as two people (or more), too much distance would tire the horse out, weakening the momentum.

On top of this, the terrain and lay of the land played a big role in the charging speed, which meant that the timing could only be determined by someone with experience. Commanding the knight brigade would have been a tall task for anyone who wasn't an expert. With his abundance of experience, Marquess Norpoth fit the bill, earning him nods of approval from the crown prince and the others at the base.

Shortly after Marquess Norpoth made his move, the kingdom's left flank charged as well, with Marquess Schramm at their head.

Marquess Olaf Helmut Schramm was a rarity at court, belonging to a neutral faction—neither a warrior nor a bureaucrat. At the same time, his daughter was engaged to the royal grandson, meaning that he would become a maternal

relative of the royal family in the near future. Although his presence here was partly explained by political considerations, the fact that he maintained an equal distance from both factions was perhaps a fortunate turn of events.

Furthermore, Marquess Schramm lacked neither pedigree, being descended from a distinguished house, nor military ability. On this occasion, he led the second unit of the knight brigade, directing his forces admirably and trampling over the undead's right flank.

This exposed the flaw of the mindless zombie army. When the two knight brigade units broke through the left and right flanks, they dashed along the side of the enemy line. In an effort to attack every living being, the undead broke away from their formation to chase the knight brigade.

With the combat lines shifting indiscriminately, the differences in reaction and movement speed between the Living Dead and Skeleton Warriors became all too evident. Their army's perimeter lost all sense of cohesion.

"Bring out the second division. Give the command for the third division to move as well."

When Marquess Schramm saw that the enemy's movements had become erratic and that the kingdom's center unit had retreated far enough, he barked out the order for the second division. Composed mainly of infantrymen, the second division made up for its lack of speed with a great deal of agility. The undead who pursued the knight brigade suddenly found themselves being hunted by the infantrymen.

The frontline commander of the second division, Viscount Davrak, had also participated in the fighting retreat at Fort Werisa. In fact, he was the very man who retrieved Marquess Kneipp's dead body. He was a martial noble and had plenty of confidence in his combat prowess.

"Advaaaaance!"

At the fore of the infantry squad, he swung his battle-axe and charged. With a single strike, he crushed the head of a Skeleton Warrior. Before the undead

chasing the knight brigade could even turn around, he plunged straight into their lines and mowed down anything unlucky enough to stray in his path.

After a short delay, the left flank's second division sent out its infantry squad under the command of Count Mühe. Much like Viscount Davrak's troops, they rammed straight into the enemy, obliterating their right flank.

"Do not falter! If we fail to defeat them here, the capital will be overrun!"

Viscount Davrak's roar echoed across the battlefield. As a follower of Marquess Kneipp, Davrak felt doubly—no, triply—obliged to fight. Yet even accounting for that, his valor was awesome to behold, to the extent that he would garner the prince's praise after the battle concluded.

Meanwhile, on the right flank, Marquess Norpoth ordered the second and third divisions to advance. Viscount Degenkolb stood at the helm of the second division's infantry unit.

Though she was a bureaucrat noble, Viscount Degenkolb had participated in the Demon Stampede. She represented her younger brother and took the minimum number of soldiers with her, which meant that she hadn't garnered little attention. It was House Zehrfeld, a fellow bureaucrat family, that took the credit for the way the situation played out.

Though she belonged to the same faction as Count Zehrfeld, she did harbor some competitive feelings. Regarding this battle as an opportunity to make up for the previous loss, she assembled her forces and threw herself into battle.

"Don't give them an inch! Stay calm and make sure each one you've beaten stays down!"

Though she was a civil official, by no means did that mean she was a coward. Her troops rammed into Living Dead and Skeleton Warriors on the frontlines. Count Harfaulk, commander of the right flank's second division, followed suit by sending his own house's soldiers into the fray. Together, they slowly gained ground in the middle of the undead army's left flank.

The undead possessed no intelligence. Thus, though they attacked the living foes in front of them, they could not maintain their positions when faced with pressure from the side. Practically surrounded on all sides, the undead troops found themselves being gradually herded into the center, restricting their ability to act as a group.

The left and right flanks of the kingdom's army took the opportunity to send out their third divisions to tighten the circle around the enemy. When they arrived at the rear of both enemy flanks, they wasted no time in joining the fray.

The soldiers directly under the control of Marquesses Norpoth and Schramm formed the backbone of the flanks' third divisions. However, because all the cavalries had been assigned to the first division, and the bulk of the nobles' private armies belonged to the second division, the third division was distinctly lacking in numbers—even if their quality couldn't be faulted.

Unlike the second divisions, which served to swarm the enemy, the third divisions were meant to attack them from behind. Because of this, the unit was constructed with maneuverability as a priority. That meant that, while the second division was heavily armored, the third division was decked out lightly. Because of that, among other reasons, their frontlines were filled with mercenaries and adventurers who were well accustomed to fighting light.

“Heh. First time fighting like this.”

“Not just that, these are some ridiculous numbers they've got.”

Oliver Goecke, leader of the mercenaries, had only just returned to the capital with House Zehrfeld's merchant corps three days ago, but Marquess Norpoth immediately hired him to participate in this current battle. Goecke was a well-known name among mercenaries, which meant that so long as he was in the capital, he was bound to receive a request to join the fight.

The man who answered was his old pal, Luguentz Laser. He was decked out with a brand-new sword and armor. His equipment stood out among everyone

else around him. Even while running past the thick of the fighting to get at the enemy's rear, his tone was rather casual.

"You keep an eye on things yourself, Mazel."

"Don't you worry about me."

Running alongside him was Mazel, who was also outfitted with gear the likes of which the capital had never seen before. Normally, there should not have been any need for a student to participate, but now that Mazel was officially registered as an adventurer, he could take a more proactive role in the crisis facing the capital.

Mazel, for his part, was more concerned about the boy running alongside him. "Feli, don't push yourself, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

Fresh from his excursion with the merchant corps, Feli was throwing himself into battle just three days after his return. He also wore some of the armor that the corps had successfully brought back to the capital. This was because he insisted on participating. Mazel and Luguentz eventually caved in and said that they would take responsibility for him.

Goecke also vouched for Feli, declaring, "This kid can fight better than those royal guards over there." But Mazel and Luguentz felt something undeniably persuasive about Feli when he said, "If it were Big Bro, he'd at least spare me some measly armor, y'know?"

"I will be sure to back him up," offered Erich with a gentle smile. He had been helping Mazel and Luguentz train as they remained on standby at the capital.

"Sorry for all the trouble, and thank you." Mazel ducked his head politely.

Erich was also wearing armor obtained by the Zehrfeld merchant corps. Their group in particular stood out very much.

"Okay, shall we get going, everyone?" said Mazel.

"Don't let your guard down," Luguentz chimed in.

The marquess's soldiers cut through the rear of the second division. They attacked the rear of the undead army's flanks at almost the exact same time as the mercenaries and adventurers who formed the third division. Without even a chance to respond, the undead fell to the blades of the battle-hardened mercenaries and adventurers.

Their momentum only intensified when the first and second units of the knight brigade joined in for another assault.

What was this? What was happening?

The Demon mage Belis couldn't wrap his head around the situation.

Belis had no experience as a commander, just as Crown Prince Hubertus had anticipated when he called him an amateur. This shouldn't have been a problem for him, however. Demons typically fought by pitting their forces head-on, a simple contest of strength. Humans, too, wherever in the world you found them, favored the straightforward approach. Belis knew that well, as did the Demon Lord.

And when it came to single combat, the Living Dead and Skeleton Warriors won out against human soldiers in terms of brute strength and endurance. As for stamina, it was no contest. The undead army also had numbers on its side, which meant that their victory should have been a foregone conclusion.

Yet despite this, the kingdom's cavalry had mowed them down on both flanks, then run down the sides to the rear. It was then that Belis lost his grip on the battle. Each time he thought he finally had a handle on things, the situation changed again.

Before he knew it, the undead army, which should have overwhelmed the foe with its sheer numbers, was the one being surrounded. When he finally realized that they were being hemmed in on all sides, Belis found himself at a loss. How was he supposed to lead these troops?

In lieu of a directive, the undead troops chased whatever living creature they found themselves closest to. Baited into waiting blades, without room to evade, they fell one after another.

“You...you cretins...!” For the first time, Belis felt that the undead around him were nuisances. He chanted a spell and directed the range of his magic at the kingdom’s army in front of him. *“Flame Storm!”*

Magic exploded out of a single point in space, accompanied by screams and groans of agony.

“The enemy mage has been spotted!”

“He’s over there!”

“Archers, let fly!”

The information about what happened at Fort Werisa had already been relayed to all the troops. Everyone was well aware of the danger posed by area-of-effect magic. At the very least, there were no soldiers who attempted to run away merely because they were on the receiving end of the AOE spell. The unavoidable casualties were a painful problem for the kingdom’s army, but the priority was to defeat the black mage here. The frontline commanders understood that well.

In the center unit, Baron Kupfernagel heard his soldiers’ screams and launched a volley of arrows to the black mage’s vicinity. One or two arrows wouldn’t inflict a fatal wound, but that was no reason for Belis to ignore a missile flying at him.

And because of the veritable curtain of arrows, the surrounding Living Dead tumbled to the ground. This caused the other undead troops to flood into their spots, collapsing their formation. Even Belis found his movements restricted.

With arrows whistling through the air, wounds dotting his body, and his own fundamental lack of command experience, Belis inevitably narrowed his focus to his own immediate surroundings.

“Out of the way!”

Although the mage’s explosive magic had slain a number of knights, it had also exposed his location. Tyrone and his adjutants made a beeline for him, cutting down undead until they were right before him. Unable to contain their glee at the prospect of taking down the Demon mage, Viscounts Kranke and Mittag—commanders of the left and right flanks—launched a fierce offensive. Their onslaught made it clear they would settle for nothing less than a most glorious victory.

Meanwhile, a group of mercenaries and adventurers stormed the rear of the undead army’s left and right flanks. There was one subsection of the group in particular that stood out prominently from all the others.

“There!”

With a single flash of his sword, Mazel sent a Living Dead’s head flying. Carried by the momentum, he instantly went for a Skeleton Warrior next. At his side, Luguentz swung his massive sword, cleaving a second Living Dead in two.

“This sword sure can cut,” he remarked, impressed.

“For sure,” answered Mazel as he felled another foe.

Now they understood why Werner told them to borrow the weapons. If anything, they were so floored that they might have begged to have them.

A short distance away, Feli was also cutting up a Skeleton Warrior’s skull into ribbons. The adults around him watched on in amazement. Only Mazel and his team were unsurprised.

“Oho, your skills are impressive,” Erich said.

“Same to you, Uncle.”

Erich could not help but grimace at Feli calling him “Uncle,” but he uttered no words of reproach. Instead, he kicked a Living Dead, sending it flying.

As a monk, Erich was more than skilled as a fighter. Though he was the only one among the four who had not borrowed a weapon from House Zehrfeld, by no means was he incapable of holding his own in battle. With punches and kicks alone, he was able to stop the Living Dead from ever moving again.

If Werner were here, he would probably declare smugly that this was only to be expected. Mazel and co. had managed to get their hands on equipment that was only supposed to be available in the mid-game. Equipping it in the starting area and the early dungeons was basically overkill. Also, because the party had diligently upped their levels in the area around the capital, they were far stronger than ordinary knights at this point. Being able to reliably take out their enemies in one hit meant that their group indisputably stood out from all the rest.

With the four of them at the fore, enemies fell in droves before them. The mercenaries led by Goecke followed at their heels, striking swiftly and adroitly, widening the rift at the back of the undead army's left flank.

Looking at the battlefield as a whole, it was plain to see that the knight brigade, having penetrated the undead army's rear, was using its momentum to expand the battle line. The enemy dropped like flies in real time. Pressed from all sides, their lines crumbled in the blink of an eye.

Though the dead held no concept of fear, a great tremor ran throughout their troops as a whole when a corner of their backline began to fall. A moment later, Mazel and the others heard the sound of an explosion a short distance away from their position. The main troops promptly began pouring a rain of arrows in one particular direction.

"The enemy commander is where the arrows are falling! Head there!"

"Yeah!"

"Don't let this chance for glory slip through your fingers!"

Responding to the cries rising up across the battlefield, the kingdom's hosts changed course. The undead in their way met swift ends, as if scattered to the

winds. Swept by the momentum, none of the soldiers showed any hint of fear toward the undead, even though some of them certainly felt that way under normal circumstances.

Regardless of whether they were soldiers of the kingdom, mercenaries, or adventurers, everyone with confidence in their skills surged to where the arrows were falling in a manner that could suitably be described as “raging billows.”

“Craven...curs...! How did it come to this?”

“That looks like the boss.”

“Sure does.”

One could say that the sturdiness of the undead troops backfired against them. With bodies pincushioned with arrows, there was no mistaking them for anything else. And so the robed figure of Belis in their midst stood out all too easily.

“Out of the way! Why, you...!”

Tyrone tried to ram his way in through a frontal charge, but there were too many undead directly in the way. Their ranks were thick, making it difficult to advance. He swung his sword in frustration and cut down his foes, but without backup from the nobleman armies on the left and right sides, the Fürst troop’s momentum began to falter ever so slightly.

As fatigue started to dull the center unit’s movements, the left and right flanks began to encircle Belis. Ahead of the pack were Mazel and Luguentz, mowing down all the undead who stood in their way. Before you could even count to ten, they were hot on Belis’s heels.

“How?! How can this be?! Ugh...!”

“This ends it!”

No matter where he turned to escape, Belis found himself boxed in by his own undead troops. Even if he were to struggle against the crowd, they

couldn't clearly comprehend what was going on. As Belis let out his final scream, Mazel closed in. The end was simple and clean—it was over with a single flash of his sword.

“The monster commander has been slain!”

“The adventurer took down the mage!”

When he heard the shouts proclaiming the death of the black mage, Prince Hubert didn't waste a second: “Don't hold back until not a single undead is left standing. Annihilate them all!”

“Yessir!” the soldiers roared as they shifted to a no-holds-barred mindset.

Later, when all the undead had been stilled, the sunset bathed the battlefield in a beautiful orange glow.

Thus, the hard-fought battle at Hildea Plains ended with the kingdom's victory. Joyous voices chanted Prince Hubertus's name across the battlefield, threatening to overpower even the sunset itself.

At around that time, the man who conceived the idea to recreate the legendary pincer movement strategy from the Battle of Cannae was...

“So they got back safely?”

“Yes.” The messenger had just returned from the Zehrfeld residence in the capital, where Werner had sent him. “The count has been admiring the weapons that the merchant corps retrieved.”

Werner put a hand to his chest in relief, knowing that the merchant corps had returned to his family home without incident. The messenger reported that though there were some injuries, none of them had died. They also confirmed that everyone had been paid for their troubles.

At the same time, Werner got all the answers he needed about the goings-on in the capital. Putting this and the report from the merchant corps to the side, he returned to the refugee relief work. As he listened to what the scouts had to tell him, he gave the orders to patrol the area in preparation for the

encroaching night.

With no way of knowing the outcome of the battle at Hildea Plains, Werner immersed himself in his work. He was only able to read the report from the merchant corps long after the sun went down.

The day after the messenger returned, Duke Seyfert gathered everyone in the command tent early in the morning to deliver a brief report over breakfast.

“I will discuss the details as we eat, but there was a pitched battle on the outskirts of the capital. It ended in the kingdom’s victory.”

You can’t just drop bombshells like that like it’s nothing, Sir Duke. Everyone involved in management—myself included—reeled in surprise.

Still, we couldn’t stay dumbstruck indefinitely. We had our regular reports to deliver. Viscount Kauffeldt began with the status of the surrounding area. After that, the other officers rattled off their reports with an eager succinctness, probably because they were keen to hear the rest of the duke’s report. Made sense, given the circumstances.

My report was about the refugees’ demands. Coming on the heels of the other reports, it was quite sobering—not just emotionally, but economically too.

Multiple refugees had been coming at me with faces that said, “You’ll do what I ask, right?” They tried to engage me in one-on-one discussions, unaware that I’d been getting over a hundred similar requests for a sit-down.

There wasn’t even any guarantee I would be able to accommodate people even if I did have the time to listen to all their life stories. There were limits to what I could do. I didn’t have the power to increase the number of carriages, darn it. It was a firsthand lesson in how people unironically thought that they deserved to be the exceptions. Maybe it was my twisted nature that made me want to prioritize the wishes of the people who stoically put up with their lot at

times like this.

Once everyone's reports had concluded, breakfast was served, and the duke dove into the details of the situation. Incidentally, breakfast was the usual: naan-like bread made from a simple process of kneading wheat and baking it. This was accompanied with salty soup and cheese, plus some fruit wine diluted with water to make it easier to drink.

The reason the soup had a salty flavor was because it had dried meat pickled in salt. Also, it took longer for vinegar-based soups to go bad compared to water-based soups, which was what made them effective to distribute and preserve. Alcohol was useful because it didn't spoil easily, but it wouldn't do for me to get drunk, so I refrained from drinking it on the field. We sometimes had dried fruits with our meals, but that wasn't the case this time. This wasn't an issue—it was only a few more days until we reached the capital, and we were hardly in the mood for such indulgences anyway.

"So does His Highness plan to use the momentum to recapture Fort Werisa?" Baron Kretschmer probed, after we'd all heard the duke's explanation.

"So it seems."

I got the impression that the baron asked because a part of him was frustrated about not being on the scene. For better or worse, he was a military man to the core.

When I heard that the prince had obliterated the enemy in a field battle and was planning to continue on to the fortress, I had to admit that I was surprised too. But I understood the reasoning behind it.

Soldiers from both factions, warriors and bureaucrats, had come together out of necessity to defend the capital. But opinions were split on the matter of Fort Werisa, and the issue had become politicized.

Having seized victory at the battle near the capital, however, the troops were more optimistic, and morale was high. With the numbers and the will to fight on our side, the enemy wasn't as daunting. It was a good opportunity to go

ahead with an attack.

Still, that was a huge decision to make... As I was mulling over the implications, I noticed the duke casting a strange look my way. I wondered what was up.

“By the way, I heard that it was young Mazel who took down the enemy commander on the field.”

I almost spat out my soup. The duke’s eyes crinkled in amusement. He’d been fishing for this reaction.

“Oh? The Hero, hm?” said Count Engelbert.

“He acquitted himself well in the previous battle too,” Viscount Kauffeldt remarked.

As their commentary washed over me, I found myself struck by a different issue.

A stark difference in the game was that this large-scale battle near the capital never happened. I had no recollection of any cutscene of the sort. Games in those days didn’t have battles like these to begin with, after all. Things mostly revolved around the Hero and what his pals were doing. In that sense, I suppose you could say that this was another difference between the game and reality.

The kingdom dispatching its army to reclaim Fort Werisa was another major point of divergence. I’d thought that the game would force events to get back in line by making Mazel and the others go to the fort alone under the pretext of scouting, but apparently not. I’d employed a number of tricks to ensure that the fort’s gates were broken, but I honestly couldn’t imagine how the situation would unfold.

The other problem that occurred to me was of the practical sort. The pitched battle apparently took place three days after the Zehrfeld merchant corps returned to the capital, but the messengers at my disposal had a one-day time lag. Perhaps that was a reflection of priorities when it came to the dispersion of

information, but there was a risk that my messengers could be affected by further time lags in the future.

As the Demon army became stronger, simply traveling the kingdom's roads would become dangerous, given that they lacked barriers, unlike the castles and towns. It might very well become difficult for even knights to move around unassisted.

Even in conflicts between humans, it was a common ploy to take out messengers and scouts to cut off the flow of information. The Demon army could achieve this with virtually no effort by simply letting monsters roam wild. Without an information network, I expected we'd struggle to get timely intel.

Triot, a country which didn't appear in the game, was wiped out by the Demons. Perhaps it was best to consider the risk of other towns and countries in a similar position getting destroyed. This meant that information was even more vital than ever.

The problem was that simple alternatives, like building stands for sending up smoke signals, wouldn't cut it. I mean, even if you were to build one of those outside a town, there was always the possibility that it could inspire a wandering monster to attack. Splitting up our limited soldiers to protect the stands was a plain stupid move. The problem was that, unlike a regular war, you never knew where the monsters were going to strike from.

In the game, you could use an item to repel wandering monsters, but that cost money. Speaking of which, they never sold out in the game. How would that actually work in this world?

I was so deep in thought that I didn't even notice the duke's eyes on me. I really needed to fix that habit of mine.

We arrived at the royal capital several days after, with the refugees in tow. Since we had arranged beforehand for an administrator at the capital to take the refugees off our hands, all we had to do was hand them off and our official

duties would be concluded. At least, in an individual capacity.

I couldn't help but sympathize with the administrator, since they had their work cut out for them. They also had to respond to a bunch of things that had popped up on the road, which had only added to their workload. But I'd submitted the paperwork to Duke Seyfert, and there were extenuating factors to consider. There wasn't much else I could do. I didn't have the right to meddle, and I certainly didn't want to stir the hornet's nest and get lumped with a bunch of extra work.

Besides, I had my hands full managing the remunerations for the scouts and adventurers I hired. I also had to list every item we used and draw diagrams showing where the monsters were appearing, among many other things. Fortunately, I could hand off some of that work to Max or Norbert, the family butler.

Incidentally, given that I was the count's representative on paper, I was able to borrow the room next to my father's study for a short while to get the paperwork done. It was inside the palace, which meant that it had all the comforts you could ask for. Normally, my father's aide would work in this room, but right now it was in my hands. Which reminded me—seeing as I was the count's deputy and all, it probably wouldn't be inaccurate to call me my father's aide.

If it were work pertaining to our local territory, it would have been fine to just do it from our manor in the capital, but given that this was a mission of national and military importance, I had to work in the palace. The crown footed the bill I submitted for hiring the adventurers and mercenaries, which meant that it was public funds. But for any of the special rewards they accrued, I had to bite the bullet and pay out of pocket. I didn't want anyone accusing me of corruption, so I was meticulous in balancing the books, even if it was a pain in the ass.

And so I dragged quill across paper, head heavy with such inner grumblings. Just then, I received word that my father was calling for me from the adjacent room. The secretary who managed my father's official business was getting

along in years, but experience was probably indispensable for an office like that of Minister of Ceremonies. There were a lot of things you had to balance.

I entered the room with a bow. This was something I had to do because of my position as a noble, and my father smiled wryly as he watched me do so. Then he gave me my orders.

“You’ll have to command the troops in my stead again tomorrow.”

“You must know I am still a student...”

I tried to object, but I knew it was pointless. This was just what came with the peerage. If nothing much happened, then I would collect a paycheck without having to lift a finger, but if something *did* come up, then they would squeeze me to the absolute limits of my abilities. That said, when I looked at my father’s face, I got the impression that it wasn’t a huge deal this time.

“I understand what you mean to say. But the circumstances are rather unique.”

“In what sense?”

“The battle to reclaim Fort Werisa was a success.”

Oooh. Nice going, Your Highness.

“I heard that it was young Mazel who defeated Dreax, the enemy commander.”

“Oooh.”

This time, I gave voice to my surprise. When I thought about it, this meant that Mazel defeated both the mid boss and the end boss of Fort Werisa. Was that a coincidence or the game offering a lending hand?

“The troops will stage a triumphant return, but His Majesty has noted that the citizens may need to be restrained to a certain extent.”

“We need to prevent a disturbance at the return ceremony, I take it? I understand.”

At this point, there were already some people in the castle town getting carried away by the festive mood, but my father didn't know about it. Neither did I, of course. Sure, it was good news and all, but some guys in the castle town were way too loose-lipped.

"Count Engelbert will be in charge, so you will fall in under his command. Prepare the troops on our own end."

"Yes, sir."

With a bow, I accepted the orders the crown had conveyed through my father. I had to pick up the pace on my paperwork so that I could prepare for the next day. If Mazel was coming back, then it went without saying that I would have to go out and greet him. I resolved to see him as soon as possible to make up for what I wouldn't be able to do under an official capacity.

At the return ceremony, I found myself jostled by a press of zealous citizens—predominantly ladies—who all wanted to get a glimpse of the victorious and dashing Mazel. That sure sucked... Well, not that it really mattered or anything. But I definitely had a rough time of it, let me tell you.

At least the drink I had after the job was nice.

Chapter 3:
Affairs in the Area
~Duty and Care~

THE DAY AFTER THE TRIUMPHANT RETURN OF THE crown prince and Mazel's party, it was right back to business. The day before had been for festivities, and now with the day barely begun, my work as a noble already threatened to consume me. Fortunately, there weren't any catastrophes to deal with.

"...I initiate thee into the fellowship of knights."

"We swear upon our lives to serve Your Majesty and this kingdom to the ends of our days, so that we may be deserving of the honor bestowed upon us."

Today was the knighting ceremony. This was held on the anniversary of the first king's enthronement—basically the date of the kingdom's founding. Though it was generally a public holiday for the commoners, all the nobility were required to attend. Though it wasn't impossible for commoners to attend if they really wanted to, it was mostly just the families who showed up. There were some exceptions this time, though.

Because the troops had made it back in time after reclaiming Fort Werisa, the ceremony was able to proceed as scheduled. Apparently, the king had been planning to delay it. I didn't know whether it was a good thing or not that it had, unexpectedly, pushed through on time.

The crown prince stood beside the king, and beside the prince stood my father. Given that this was a formal ceremony and all, it fell well within my father's purview. I was just an observer this time, since I had only just been appointed a viscount, but I would probably have to assist in this job next year.

"I thought they would do this sort of thing one person at a time."

"Ahh, that's how they do it in fairytales, huh."

Mazel, one of the exceptions in question, uttered the naive comment next to me. In a fairytale, the soon-to-be-knights knelt in front of the king as he tapped a sword on their shoulders. That was generally how it went when you imagined a knight's formal investiture.

But in reality, the knighting ceremony much resembled the graduation from an apprenticeship program. Though the exact customs depended on the country, there were dozens of people to appoint at any given knighting, so it was generally done as a group.

I mean, swords didn't weigh *nothing*. If the king individually knighted dozens of people, his arms would get numb before long. Besides, an accident could happen if the blade hit the wrong spot. This was why the king rested the sword on the shoulders of just a single representative. Everyone else would simply kneel in a line behind that person.

Anyway, if my memory served, the whole "resting a sword on people's shoulders" thing only came into vogue at the end of the Middle Ages. By then, knights were already old-fashioned, so you could say that the whole performance was just dressing people up with the dregs of authority. In that sense, this world was incredibly half-baked.

"I swear to raise my sword and my shield companions in loyalty to our king."

"So do we swear."

The representative made the declaration of loyalty, and the group intoned the vow in suit. This was followed by a round of applause. Mazel and I clapped too. All the while, Mazel kept whispering furtively to me.

"What does shield companion mean?"

"He's talking about the others who got knighted on the same day."

To use an analogy from my old world, it was like the Japanese World War II song "Douki no Sakura," which likened comrades-in-arms to fellow school graduates. If the sword represented a vertical relationship between the knight

and the royal family, then the shield companions represented the horizontal connections between fellow knights. People within the knight brigade would form fraternal bonds. In my old world, there were some countries which were very similar.

This wasn't part of the job description, but if, say, someone of their rank perished in battle, the shield companions as a whole would shoulder the daily necessities and education of the deceased's kin. If a knight's official pledge was like a one-time payment, then their shield companions represented an unofficial social security system. Well, when you looked at it that way, it was the kingdom that won out because they didn't have to bother paying any - pensio... Ahem.

This world had all kinds of designations: nobles who doubled as knights, nobles who weren't knights, and knights who weren't nobles. The term "knight" was more of a title than a signifier of status. Since students couldn't become knights, I fell into the "noble who wasn't a knight" category. Accordingly, I had no shield companions.

Mazel didn't appear to have much desire to become a knight either. As for me, I was already a nobleman, so there wasn't much point. Becoming a squire at this point would be a hassle. I would have to form horizontal connections while also juggling my status as a noble.

When you looked at it that way, commoners who found themselves suddenly ennobled for their military achievements faced a rough time. They lacked connections with their peers and struggled with courtly etiquette. They might even be on the receiving end of other nobles' jealousy and resentment. In fairytales, you could just brush that all off with "and they all lived happily ever after."

Incidentally, there were some whispers about conferring a peerage onto Mazel as a reward for his feat in defeating Dreax, but the crown prince put a stop to that. Ostensibly, this was because he was still a student, though in practice there were people like me who gained peerage while they were

enrolled. If Mazel had been born to an aristocratic family, he would have gained his own title a long time ago.

In actuality, it was because the crown prince feared that if Mazel received a title, he would be fettered by obligations such as engagement, among others. He asked me to relay that message to him in “such a manner as may mollify him,” but as it turned out, Mazel wasn’t all too fond of certain parts of the aristocracy, so he actually accepted his lack of promotion with a grin. Darn that guy—didn’t he tell me before that I was the only one who would bitch about getting a noble title?

Once the ceremony concluded, there was a standing banquet in honor of the newly appointed knights, but there wasn’t much opportunity for people who worked behind the scenes to actually meet them face-to-face. As an aide, I was even *more* of a background character. As for Mazel, he went back to his dorm after promising to meet up with me again the next day.

People who worked behind the scenes faced their own share of problems. The kitchens were always in a flurry of activity because the very notion of a food shortage at a royal banquet was unthinkable. There was also the issue of when to serve the food and alcohol. Sometimes, you had to deal with people who drank till they collapsed, and you always needed to have an answer ready if someone asked you questions.

It was like organizing any other large-scale event from the ground up, such as a wedding or a reception. This sort of thing was my father’s job as the Minister of Ceremonies, so it only made sense that everyone in my circle was being worked to the bone.

Case in point: there always needed to be food on the table, so figuring out exactly when to change the dishes was the aide’s job. Because there was a considerable distance between the kitchen and the venue, the table would remain empty for quite a while if you only brought in the next order after the

food was already depleted, resulting in a miserable time for everyone. You had to tell people to bring in the next order from the kitchen ahead of time, but this was fairly difficult to achieve. It was pretty draining having to keep tabs on the entire venue the whole time.

Also, if people finished their wine, you had to tell the waiters to refill their glasses. The correct etiquette was to refill every time until the guest told you to stop.

Young boys often fulfilled the roles of waiters at this kingdom's ceremonies, so an aide's job also involved watching them to ensure that they didn't make any blunders. This was another thing that was pretty much like on-the-job training. Before long, the boys would work as diplomats in foreign lands and whatnot. I silently bade them good luck.

It was also important to check the cork on wine bottles carefully after opening them, since preservation techniques were spotty, and corks could get damaged from time to time. Since it wasn't always possible to tell if wine was off based on the smell, people used decanters to ensure the taste.

Doing that in the corner of the venue had the added connotation of checking for poison, but on this occasion, we did it in a separate room. When taste-testing wine for over a hundred people, you could get drunk from the bouquet alone. Each time you opened a bottle, you tasted it a bit, rinsed out your mouth with some water, and then moved on to the next bottle. By the end of it, it was hard to tell whether it some kind of ascetic training or a form of torture.

For people who didn't drink alcohol, we just put olives and cherries in carbonated water and stuck a silver pin in there. This would look like a cocktail from the outside, and it usually made people very happy campers indeed.

Come to think of it, taking a swig every time you bumped into a knight commander or new recruit could be a veritable drinking game. We wanted to ensure that none of the fresh knights got drunk and made a fool of themselves, though I certainly hadn't expected the praise I got for pulling it off in the end.

The morning hours were for the ceremony, while the afternoon was dedicated to the banquet and cleanup. Actually, given that I was supposed to be the aide to the Minister of Ceremonies, this work was probably closer to my proper job description. And as if I wasn't already busy enough, two knights came to visit my room that evening.

"I am Cress Gauter Schünzel. And this is Worrack Birol Neurath."

"It warms my heart to see you again after such a long time, Lord Werner."

"Ah, Lord Cress and Lord Worrack. It certainly has been a while."

We ended up parroting each other. Both House Neurath and House Schünzel had strong ties with House Zehrfeld. We weren't cousins, but we were distant blood relations of some sort. It certainly wasn't my first time seeing these two, though we were separated by age.

"Henceforth, the two of us will serve under you, Viscount Zehrfeld."

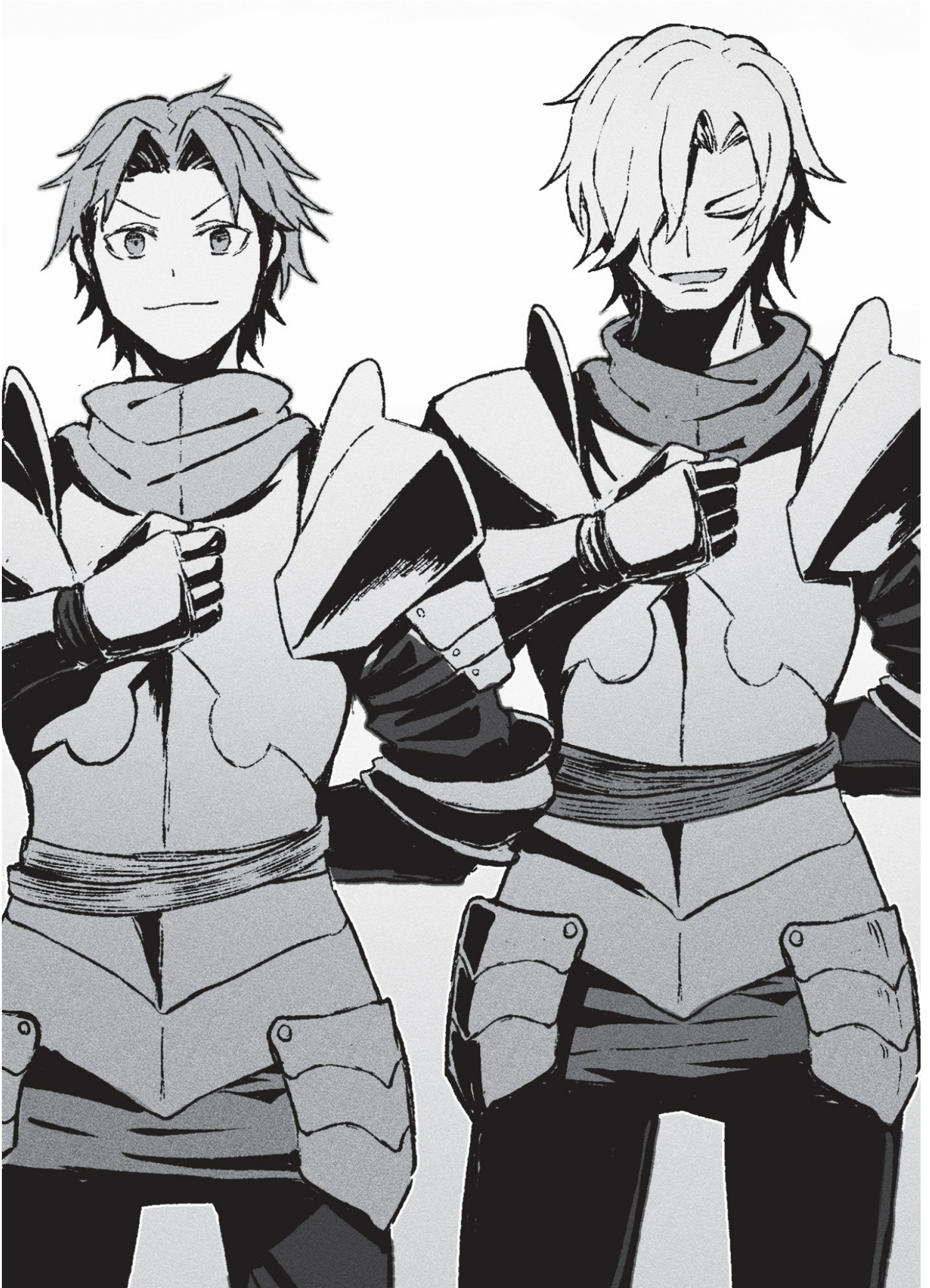
"I will do my best under your command."

"Okay, I'll be relying on you."

So they'd been assigned to the viscount, huh. Unlike Max, Orgen, and Barkey, who were subordinates of my father, Neurath and Schünzel would work directly under me. When I eventually inherited the count's title, these two might end up with Max's position.

Though I was still a student, my position as a noble meant that I would have knights as my subordinates. My official standing as a viscount meant that my position outranked theirs. The knights, in turn, would have squires beneath them. This meant that I would have to talk less politely with them to reflect our hierarchical relationship. The two knights understood that as well, so they didn't mention anything about the topic.

"I have no tasks for you at the moment, though I may call upon you before long," I said. "Specifically, the day after tomorrow."



“Understood, my lord.”

“Then we shall see you at the manor on the morn of that day.”

“No, let’s speak at the castle,” I insisted. “Come here again the day after tomorrow.”

“Very well.”

Oof, that made my stomach churn. I still had mixed feelings about ordering around knights who were my seniors by age. That said, I was getting more used to it. I was pretty sure that I would stop caring once they started showing up at my workplace. Perhaps the pressure was somewhat alleviated by the fact that, even if they were older than me, we were in the same age group. Anyway, I had to make sure that they didn’t wind up dying pointlessly on account of my orders.

That night, as I was organizing my notes at the manor, another visitor came to see me. It was Frenssen, an assistant butler who had gone along with the merchant corps. I had no idea what brought him to my door.

“The count has instructed me to wait upon you, Master Werner. I hope that I can be of use.”

His statement took me by surprise. “Huh?”

It was completely out of the blue. When I pressed him for details, I found out that my father apparently assigned him to me as my personal aide. Given that the crown prince seemed to favor me, my father anticipated that I would be acting independently on many other occasions in the future.

Though it came as a surprise, I was, frankly, grateful. The scope of what I set out to accomplish had increased considerably, after all. Part of the reason I was so busy was because I was doing things I technically didn’t have to do myself, but I felt the need to do them anyway because I was afraid of winding up dead if I didn’t. I was a coward at heart.

“Got it. I’ll be sure to call on you.”

“I strive to be of assistance.”

He was probably around the same age as my brother would have been if he were still alive. Perhaps he was really meant to be my brother’s retainer. In an alternate world, I would just be the spare. I knew that this was simply the way of the aristocracy. Whether things would have been better off that way was hard to say.

As that thought flashed through my mind, I decided to ask my newfound assistant about one of the things on my plate. “I’ll be meeting with Mazel and his companions early tomorrow morning, and I would like you to come along too.”

“That I shall do.”

If he came along too, that would shorten the amount of time I had to spend explaining things to him.

“Also, you don’t have to get on this immediately, but at some point, could you look into Marquess Kneipp’s son Mangold?”

“Lord Mangold, you say?”

“It seems that he went missing while I was away. I want to know what he was up to before that happened.”

“Understood.”

There were a lot of things I was curious about, like what sort of people he took with him, what happened to their equipment, and what Mangold himself was doing. But I didn’t have time to look into that can of worms personally. I’d leave it to someone else and get the facts from them later on.

For now, my most pressing task was sharing what I knew with Mazel and the others.

“Please excuse me, lord brother...”

That same night, Hermine scoured the mansion for her brother Tyrone. It was only when she opened the door of the game room that she realized there was a guest present. Game rooms in aristocratic mansions occasionally played host to confidential meetings among male nobles. Because of this, they were built near a separate gate, which admitted pedestrians rather than carriages. This was why she hadn't seen any signs of a visitor.

"Were you entertaining someone? I apologize for interrupting."

"It's fine. I don't mind," said Tyrone gruffly.

"It is nice to see you again after so long, Lady Hermine," said the visitor.

"Likewise, Lord Anshelm."

Mine bowed, recognizing their guest as Anshelm Zeagle Jhering, a friend of her brother's and the son of a count. Because he had often come to visit during Tyrone's student days, everyone in House Fürst knew him by sight.

"I must once again extend my deepest condolences for your lady." Mine offered those polite words, knowing that Anshelm's wife had passed away suddenly from an illness.

"I appreciate your consideration."

Though there were magic spells and potions in this world, there were some illnesses that they couldn't cure. Some claimed that in these cases the patient wasn't pious enough, or that the priest lacked sufficient power, but the precise reason was unknown. In this particular case, the illness broke out at the count's fief rather than the capital, so Mine reasoned that a talented priest might not have been around.

Whatever the case, she made sure to extend the proper courtesies to their guest. Once that was done, Mine turned back to her brother. "I apologize, lord brother, but father is calling for you."

"All right. Sorry, Anshelm, but could you wait awhile for me?"

"Sure."

“Mine, I leave it to you to entertain Anshelm while I’m gone.”

That was all Tyrone said before he rose from his seat. Faced with this sudden task, Mine’s face twisted into a grimace. For his part, Anshelm smiled, though his expression was rather close to a grimace too.

“Lord Tyrone never changes, eh?”

“I apologize for my brother’s conduct.”

“Oh, I don’t mind it so much. He just had a few quibbles to share with me.”

“Quibbles?”

Mine wondered if she had walked in on an especially awkward topic, but Anshelm seemed unruffled.

“He told me he lost out on glory at Hildea Plains and Fort Werisa.”

Ah. Mine nodded. When the Hero Mazel defeated the enemy black mage at Hildea Plains, Tyrone must have redoubled his efforts at Fort Werisa. The Fürst troops charged headlong through the fort’s broken front gates, with Tyrone at the helm.

But regardless of the state of the gate, attacking from the front meant that the enemy was able to use the fort’s internal structure to their advantage to put up a stubborn resistance. Tyrone’s side incurred losses, and by the time they finally broke through the defenses, the Hero had already infiltrated the fort by a different route, putting him far ahead of the rest of the attackers. Tyrone ended up being nothing more than a diversion for the Hero and his party.

“He may be the Hero acknowledged by the kingdom, but it galls Lord Tyrone that his own efforts only served to prop up a commoner’s achievements,” Anshelm commented.

“I think that breaking into the fort at the beginning is a worthy feat in its own right.”

“The gates were already broken, though. Nobody was going to commend him

for that.”

This triggered something in Mine’s memory. Come to think of it, the gates *were* broken. It was almost as if, even in the earliest stages of their mission, when everyone else was focused on retreat, Werner had already anticipated the possibility of later storming the fort. Belated though the realization was, Mine was stunned by Werner’s foresight.

“Did something happen?” asked Anshelm, noticing the change in Mine’s expression. When her brother Tyrone denied something, it usually meant something was eating him up inside, and he assumed the same held true for her.

“No, nothing to be terribly concerned about...” Mine explained what Werner had done to Anshelm, prompting him to nod with interest.

“Oho... I see. Though he is young, Viscount Zehrfeld appears to have talent.”

“Yes, I agree. Unfortunately, there are some who dismiss him, perhaps because he belongs to a house of civil officials.”

Mine’s words skirted her real meaning, as she couldn’t very well say that it was her own flesh-and-blood brother who was the dismissive one. Anshelm understood the implication well enough, though he deliberately avoided addressing it.

“I believe that Viscount Zehrfeld was charged with escorting the refugees,” he said.

“Yes, he displayed admirable judgment on that occasion as well.”

Anshelm asked further questions about Werner until Tyrone returned, his other business finished. Without breathing a word of that topic, Tyrone steered the conversation to other things.

After accepting a request from Tyrone, Anshelm left the Fürst estate behind him. He met with his guard outside the manor, and together they returned to the Jehring estate.

His first move was to call over a nearby subordinate.

“Welcome home, master. How was your visit?”

“Lord Tyrone was the same as ever. He cannot help but be obsessed with military glory.”

Tyrone was by no means incompetent. He possessed more than enough aptitude in single combat, in managing his subordinates, and aristocratic manners. These talents, however, were eclipsed by his vanity. Anshelm thought that Tyrone had a tendency to bite off more than he could chew, though of course he was not going to say that out loud.

Tyrone at least had enough pride as a noble not to claim that the Hero only took the credit because of his equipment, but, well...

“Between this and the issue of Marquess Kneipp’s son, House Fürst has made two blunders,” Anshelm muttered to himself, slightly sardonically.

House Fürst belonged to the same faction as Marquess Kneipp. They had apparently lent Mangold support of a monetary sort, though nothing amounting to a large figure. This had only encouraged Mangold’s indiscriminate military recruitment as well as his later recklessness. This was bound to imperil House Fürst’s standing at court in the future.

Regarding the issue with Mangold, however, House Jehring was a coconspirator in a rather different sense.

“Lady Hermine imparted a rather interesting story to me. It appears that the heir of the Minister of Ceremonies is quite the talented young man.”

“Is that so, my lord?”

“I would like you to investigate him for me.”

“Very well.”

“Useful people certainly are interesting to have around,” Anshelm muttered to himself as he uncorked a wine bottle on the table from the neighboring country of Fahlritz. Pouring the wine into the glass, Anshelm smiled lightly, yet

also terribly wolfishly.

The next morning, the sun shone brightly outside. While the ever exemplary Mazel's punctuality was nothing new, it was quite something to see his party with him too. If anything, I was the last one to show up even though this was my mansion. Blame the paperwork I had to wrestle with all night.

As an aside, we had breakfast in my room rather than the breakfast room. Wait! Don't say it. When I first heard that there were European nobles who had a room in their mansions solely for eating breakfast, I'm pretty sure I responded, "What the hell are you saying?"

But the reality was even more insane. A house could have three separate rooms just for eating. In that regard, this world was closer to the Early Modern era rather than the Middle Ages.

Like the noblemen of that world, the ones here had breakfast in their mansions with only their immediate family members. Because of this, there was a breakfast room with a smallish table for about ten people. Then there was a lunchroom, where you could sup in style as you watched the sun stream into the garden from the second floor. Finally, the dinner room served luxurious meals on a large table fit for over twenty people. This was probably the first thing Japanese people would think of when they heard "aristocratic dining."

It wasn't unheard of for visitors to have dinner in the breakfast room—it was really more of a convenient way of labeling the individual rooms. In its original etymology, the English word "dinner" referred to the most extravagant meal in a day. It did not necessarily mean an evening meal.

Oh yeah, when I mentioned this to Mazel, he seemed slightly shocked that ten people at a table was considered a small number. I'd been living that kind of lifestyle ever since I regained my memories, so I didn't have much choice but to get used to it.

The Zehrfeld estate wasn't overly extravagant by aristocratic standards, so we

only had three rooms for dining. It wasn't unusual for a duke's house to have multiple dinner rooms. You would use a different room depending on the visitor's rank and whether you were having white or red meat dishes. Movies often had scenes where a maid walked into a guest's bedchamber, saying, "Your meal is ready," and then guiding the guest to the venue, which made sense seeing as you would never know *which* room the food was in.

Besides the dining rooms, a mansion would have a drawing room for hosting guests you weren't too intimate with, or who just happened to stop by. There was a reception room further inside for people you were closer to. If you'd gone out of your way to send an invitation but the weather turned out bad on the day itself, you could take your ease in the tearoom inside the mansion.

The game room was for playing cards and board games as you sipped on wine and snacked on finger food. Aristocrat families boasting of their wealth would have exhibition rooms for displaying art pieces and so forth. Nobles could show off their tastes with musical performances in the music room. Likewise, the ballroom existed for dancing, another aristocratic hobby. Libraries were symbols of wealth in a world where paper was an expensive commodity. A number of rooms on a single floor could be taken up with the kitchen, just for the sake of preparing the meals.

There was also the hall, the study, the butler's room, a room for the family to sit together, and a cloakroom as well. Given all these varieties of rooms, a single floor could have over twenty rooms.

Some people looked at a nobleman's mansion from the outside and wondered how they could be so large, but given that these were places with three rooms dedicated simply to dine in, you soon saw why they were so massive. A noble house couldn't lump the music room and ballroom together and call it a day. As an aside, the tearoom was for women's gossip, while the game room was for men's gossip, and they were located at the east and west sides of the mansion accordingly. It was pretty funny how people took care not to let the concerns of the different sexes intrude upon each other by accident.

Furthermore, given how large a mansion was, the noble family had a floor to itself, and so did the servants. This amounted to two or three floors altogether. It was common for the female servants to have their changing, dining, and laundry rooms at basement or half-basement level, while the male servants had their own separate dining hall.

This was just talking about the count's estate in the capital. Much like their Earth equivalents, a nobleman's main estate was closer to a castle than a mansion in size. At our place, there was a long gallery for hanging up paintings—this room alone was about fifty meters from the east side to the west. And the rooms in the palace's inner court were even bigger. Without any exaggeration whatsoever, you really need to be in shape to work in the palace.

Getting back to the topic at hand, Mazel and his friends, including me, had gathered in my room. Tillura, the maid, poured us all some tea, so we helped ourselves to a sip before getting to business. Though we'd already had some breakfast, it was still very early in the morning. It was Erich's first time having the tea, but he seemed quite taken with it. Feli piled in the sugar like he always did.

"Good work on that battle, everyone," I said.

"You did good too, Werner," Mazel said.

"Your diagram and equipment sure came in handy," Luguentz chimed in.

"Big Bro, you were right when you said that the best way to get in was through the toilet." That comment came from Feli. "The undead never saw it coming."

I had Frenssen sit in with us as we exchanged some simple greetings. After that, I steered the conversation to how Mazel, Luguentz, Erich, and Feli contributed to reclaiming Fort Werisa.

Feli merely said, with a laugh, that he'd joined the battles at Hildea and Werisa on a whim. Everyone besides Erich smiled with a hint of exasperation, a sure sign that they weren't buying *that* story. That said, the game version of Feli

only joined the party after Fort Werisa. I had to admit that this was a slight discrepancy, but my priority was getting the facts straight.

“I’m glad that the equipment was useful to you,” I said. “You can keep using it for now. By the way, there’s something I want to ask you about...”

It concerned the idiot—erm, Marquess Kneipp’s son Mangold. I wondered if he showed up as one of the undead troops at Hildea Plains, but nobody appeared to have spotted him, at least. Regardless of whether he was alive or dead, I thought someone would have seen him at Fort Werisa.

“I didn’t see anyone in fancy clothes or armor, at least,” Mazel said.

“Yeah, didn’t see no one,” Luguentz grunted.

Just in case, I described his outer appearance. It wasn’t like I knew him all that well myself, but it was worth a shot. Nobody appeared to have seen anybody who matched the description, though. Well, given that Mazel and the others were fighting monsters, perhaps it was more accurate to say that nobody saw *anything*? Anyway, there was no way I could expect them to stop and look at all their opponents’ faces.

“Is it bothering you?” Mazel asked, bemused.

“Yeah, I just have this nagging feeling.”

Honestly, I wouldn’t have cared if he’d gotten himself killed on his rampage, but it did kind of strike me as weird that nobody had seen his body. But this was fine for now. If Mazel and the others didn’t know anything, then I would simply have to rely on Frenssen’s intel.

“Anyway, I’ll look into things on my own end,” I said. “Tell me what happened with you.”

“Sure thing.”

Thus, we quit the preamble and got to the chase. Just as I expected, Dreax was a Living Armor. His high defense made him an annoying foe to handle, but it looked like the equipment did the trick.

Actually, I was more concerned about the mid boss. “So there was another mage?”

“I guess so. There were three guys who looked Demon-y.”

I frowned at Luguentz’s statement. Three guys? Wait, in the mid-game dungeons, you could randomly encounter Demons as roaming bosses, so it wasn’t outlandish for multiple Demons to be there. In the game, there only happened to be one mid boss at Fort Werisa.

Recalling the details from my past life, I slipped into a pensive silence. Mazel’s eyes flickered over my face.

“One of them died on the plains,” he said, “and another one we defeated at the steps leading up to the third floor of the fort.”

So that much matched the game. But the problem was what happened next. Just as Feli was about to enter the room Dreax was in, he heard a voice saying, “When that happens, I’ll be relying on you.”

What did that mean? No such scene existed in the game. And besides, what would a Demon commander like Dreax need to entrust to someone else?

I mean, he could have been talking to a subordinate. I’d often said things like “I’m relying on you” to Max and the others. But it still felt sort of strange. Among the three Demon commanders, Dreax always did come off as the haughty and arrogant type. Why would he rely on anyone?

This was markedly different from how things played out in the game. The very fact that Feli was present in Mazel’s party at the battle against Dreax was already a deviation from the story. Maybe they heard that snippet of conversation because Feli was there? I had no idea.

Anyway, I asked them to continue the story. “But the only one in the room was Dreax, right?”

“To be precise,” said Mazel, “he only had two Skeleton Warriors and a Living Dead escorting him. There was nobody around who looked like they could hold

a conversation with him.”

The boss battle featured the same enemy lineup as the game, huh? Hmm. That meant that, whoever the interloper was, they got away—although it was hard to say whether “got away” was the right expression for someone who didn’t participate in the battle in the first place.

“Anyway, I think I get the picture for now,” I said. “Have you filed a report?”

“Yeah, I have.”

Although I doubted that I would get anywhere no matter how long I dwelt on this, it wasn’t something I could overlook either. Since the events were gradually deviating ever further from the game’s story, I sensed that we’d have to be wary of even the finer points.

“Did anything else happen?” I asked.

“Let’s see...” Mazel paused in thought. “There was one of those black gems that I saw before.”

“Spotted by yours truly,” Feli said with a smug grin.

A black gem? “Like the one we found on the Demon pulling the strings behind the Stampede?” I pressed Mazel.

“The shape was a bit different, but yeah.”

I had no recollection of seeing that in the game either. I was convinced that something unfamiliar was afoot. But what could it be? “What was it like?”

“Hmm, let’s see. It was about this big.” Mazel gestured with his hands, describing something about half the size of a fist, I estimated. Fairly large, as far as magic stones went. “And the whole thing was black. There was an eerie air to it.”

“Eerie, you say? Can I have a look at it?”

“Sorry, I turned it over to the kingdom.”

“Did you? Oh well.”

As much as I wanted to have a peek at the real thing, I figured that I wasn't in any rush. It was probably smarter to leave that matter to an important person, anyway.

Erich, who had been silent this entire conversation, spoke up right then for the first time. "By the way, may I ask what you wish to convey to us?"

"Ah, yes. Then shall I proceed?" I couldn't help but speak politely around Erich. How should I put it? He had the vibe of a real professional.

I signaled to Frenssen, who came over with a blue box. Inside was something the merchant corps had been busy purchasing from the various regions. They were items that had left an impression on me in the game, and coming by all of them was a windfall.

I pulled out one of the items from the box. To be honest, I wanted to test it out before I used it. But in the game, it worked fine from the get-go—so this was okay, probably.

"I want to tell you about this."

"What is it...?"

"I think I've seen this before. Someone purchased it from a town somewhere?" Having realized what was in the box, Feli pointed at the Skywalk Boots.

On the surface, it looked like a pair of adventurer boots with wings on them the size of keyholders. The design matched up well with my memories.

But, gosh, I hoped Feli's powers of recollection amounted to more than "a town somewhere." This whole ploy hinged on his memory.

"What is this?" Mazel asked with keen interest.

"This is a magic item. You can use it as a party."

It seemed that not too many people knew about it. Come to think of it, I couldn't recall anyone in the capital telling me about using this item in the game either. I guess this was just another way this world reflected the world in the

game.

“How do you use it?” asked Feli.

“First of all, it’s an item you use as a party. Although you can use it as an individual too, of course.”

Mazel’s party fundamentally consisted of the four guys at this meeting, plus Laura—holy woman and heroine—and the elderly mage Uwe. If Frenssen and I hopped along instead of those two, then we probably wouldn’t go overcapacity.

We would test things out by going to the town of Hafen. After telling Frenssen to keep a firm hold on the box, I passed Feli the Skywalk Boots.

“Feli, hold this and try to recall the town of Hafen. Once you’ve remembered it, say ‘To Hafen’ out loud.”

“I don’t really get it, but sure. To Hafen.”

The moment Feli uttered those words, our surroundings started to bend and shift. It looked like a warp effect from an old anime, but the fact that there was even a cheesy sound made this feel weirdly cheap. It was a distinctly unpleasant sensation—I felt the reverberations through the semicircular canals of my ears.

And then, before we knew it, we were all standing right in front of the town of Hafen. Yep, a success. Not that this mattered, but our feet would not be in a great situation right now if we followed the Japanese custom of taking off our shoes before going indoors.

After a dumbfounded pause, Luguentz started grilling me. “Oi, what’s the big idea?!”

I should’ve expected that reaction, considering we’d suddenly teleported to a faraway town, huh? “Let’s go into town first. Monsters could come at us out here.”

Mazel looked like he wanted to start chewing me out too, but he swallowed his words and mustered an “Okay. Werner, you’d better explain yourself when we’re in.”

Judging by his reaction when he saw the Skywalk Boots, he evidently didn't know about its effects. I wondered if he would even accept my explanation.

Frenssen dealt with the gatekeeper. Our cover story was that I was a noble who was traveling incognito with some guards for cheap thrills. Though he was clearly shaken, he handled the situation with aplomb. He might actually be quite the capable guy.

Incidentally, it appeared that we teleported to a fairly out-of-the-way place. Showing up in the town square or something out of nowhere would probably have caused an incident.

"Okay, talk."

"C'mon, don't give me the evil eye."

We went into a tavern and ordered some light fare. When our food and drink was on the table, Mazel and Erich promptly pinned their gazes on me. Their faces were almost as scrutinizing as Luguentz's.

"That item was a pair of Skywalk Boots. They don't sell them in the capital or the surrounding area, but I figured I could buy them in a distant town."

"Oh!" Feli let out an abrupt exclamation as he flexed his hands.

Right, the item had vanished because it was one use only. I couldn't help but marvel at how it disappeared into thin air just as it did in the game.

"You can only use each one once, and as you can see, they instantly transport you to a town you've been to before. You just experienced this for yourselves."

"Who would have thought that something like this could exist?" Frenssen remarked, his tone totally unguarded.

This gave me pause for thought. Sure, you couldn't buy this at the capital, but the fact that someone whose business was supporting the nobility didn't even know it existed did strike me as kind of peculiar. I figured that I had better make a mental note of this.

“I don’t know how they were made, but I heard they’re relics of the ancient kingdom. They’re simple and easy to use.”

“Yeah, it was pretty simple, but I’m just kind of bewildered.”

Mazel looked at me as if he wanted to ask where I heard about the item. Good thing I’d already thought of a pretext. “I stumbled upon it when I was researching the equipment used in the ancient kingdom.”

“Hmm.”

Mazel stared fixedly at the box Frenssen was carrying, where multiple Skywalk Boots were nestled together. There were also some medicine bottles, not to be confused with potions. The sight of them jogged my memory. I wondered if I should explain those as well.

As I was mulling it over, Erich lifted his gaze from the box and turned to me. “Is this power a royal secret or some such?”

“I doubt it.”

At least, I didn’t remember hearing anything of the sort. But it was strange when I thought about it. I wondered if there was a reason why this item commanded such a premium price, even though hardly anybody knew how it worked.

Maybe the sellers just hiked up the prices of excavated items as a matter of course, but that didn’t explain why the prices were uniform. Well, I probably didn’t need to overthink it because this was a game.

Maybe only certain people or certain professions knew how to use them. But that didn’t matter much to me. *Don’t think, just consume.*

“Besides, I doubt there’s a problem if you guys know about it. You gotta think about the future.”

“The future?” Mazel’s expression furled in bemusement. Unlike him, I knew for a fact that he had his work cut out for him.

“Now that you and your friends have defeated a Demon army commander, there’s a chance you’ll get pulled into political machinations in the future.”

Luguentz winced. “Sounds about right.”

He seemed to have a vague idea. Erich was also nodding.

“That said, I don’t think His Highness Prince Hubert is interested in tying you guys down in that way. At least, not at this stage.”

“What are you trying to say?” Mazel asked, as if he was trying to make sure of something.

“Worst-case scenario, if some idiot noble picks a fight with you, you can use this to skip town and not bother dealing with them,” I answered with a shrug.

“Nice and straightforward.” Feli burst out laughing, although his face turned serious a beat later. “Is it the same for me, Big Bro?”

“Yeah, people might have taken notice since you were with Mazel and the rest. Speaking of which, I have a request for you, Feli.”

“What kind?”

At this point, Feli and Frenssen were the only ones who’d set foot in more than a few towns—and Frenssen was no combat specialist. I wanted Feli to accompany Mazel and the others on their journey to make things easier for them. Besides, Feli was supposed to join anyway after the events at Fort Werisa. All I’d done was expedite things.

“You’ve seen your fair share of towns and villages. I want you to show Mazel and the others around.”

“If we use these boots, they’ll see everything in no time flat, right?”

Feli’s logic made sense, but things weren’t that simple. “You could get three standard swords in the capital for the price of one of these boots.”

“Yikes.”

Yeah, magic items were surprisingly steep. Frankly, the pile of coins I gave Feli

when we first met wouldn't be able to cover it. Speaking of which, though they weren't sold at the capital, they still cost more than the entire sum of money given to you at the start of the game. Kings in RPGs were such tightwads with money.

The other problem was that if Mazel and the others suddenly shifted their base to a faraway town, they might struggle with the powered-up enemies. The merchant corps had confirmed in their report that monster habits were changing. In all likelihood, they were going to become way nastier in very short measure. Rushing ahead at this point would only create problems. They were only able to breeze through the early game because they had raw talent, they were in the right place at the right time, and they had better equipment—not because they were tangibly stronger.

“That’s why I want you to accompany them and actually show them around the towns, Feli. It would also be great if you could loop me in on any new information or weird goings-on that you happen to catch wind of.”

“Sure.” Feli was a given, but I was relieved to see Mazel acquiesce easily. I got the vibe that he had realized on some level that I had apprehensions about their abilities. I honestly thought that he would blow his top at me for not believing in him. “In exchange, I have a request for you, Werner.”

“Sure, let’s hear it.”

I owed him, after all.

“First off, about Feli...”

“Me?” Surprise flickered across Feli’s face.

Honestly, I was taken aback myself. But what Mazel said next was very characteristic of him.

“I heard that Feli was raised in an orphanage. While he’s traveling with us, I want you to take care of the orphanage, Werner.”

“I accept.”

No need to think twice. It wasn't like it was putting me out of my way. I wondered what happened to the place in the game. The orphanage was never shown on screen, which meant that there was probably no point speculating about it. Frenssen looked like he wanted to interject, but I ignored him.

"I also want to ask you about Mr. Luguentz and Mr. Erich. Right now, they're helping me out of their own goodwill, but..."

"Yeah, I get it. I'll put them under my employ. And I'll make sure to compensate them for their contributions thus far."

There was the issue of whether I actually had the authority to do so, but I was prepared to see it through, no matter who might object. In the game, those guys helped out for free, but they were fundamentally gambling their lives on this journey. It was absurd that they *didn't* get paid. There was no question about paying them what they were worth.

Making those commitments, it occurred to me that the setup in the game really stretched one's suspension of disbelief. The goody-two-shoes Mazel was one thing, but only Laura had a plausible motive for joining him on his journey without any pay, given that she was royalty and all. Though he wasn't a party member yet, maybe old Uwe was the same?

"And also...if it's possible for you..."

Mazel seemed to have trouble spitting out the words, which piqued my curiosity. "I can take care of things for you on the academy side as well, you know that?"

"Oh, no. I mean, I was worried about that too, but it's something else."

Come to think of it, in the game, a student was inexorably pushed to embark on a journey to save the world. How did that even work? I mean, you could just chalk it up to game logic, but I wasn't so sure that would fly when game became reality.

Now that I thought about it, it was definitely strange that the teachers hadn't

said anything. It probably meant that the kingdom was pulling strings behind the scenes, right? It was hard to say whether it was because they thought highly of Mazel or because they were trying to exploit him. A person with the potential to defeat a Demon Lord was certainly a threat from the crown's perspective.

In the game, the situation was so dire that pointing fingers at Mazel would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater, but that wasn't the case here. It wasn't wild to assume that someone somewhere would keep Mazel under surveillance.

This was something to keep an eye on. Given his age, I didn't think that he would get involved in court machinations. I wondered what kind of ploy this hypothetical manipulator would try.

Just as my imagination started running wild, Mazel came out and said something completely against my expectations.

"Can I ask you to get in touch with my family?"

"Huh?"

His words dragged me back to reality, but I didn't understand what they meant. I mean, he had a family, but what did he want to do with them?

"You can write your own letters to them, you know?"

"Yeah, but, well..."

"Can't you use these boots to go to your hometown directly, Big Bro?" Feli spoke up, addressing Mazel.

I was honestly surprised—that thought hadn't even crossed my mind. From my game knowledge, I knew that you couldn't go to towns you hadn't been to, but Mazel grew up in Arlea Village. It was way, way more than just a place he'd been to.

On another note, Mazel was also "Big Bro" to Feli, huh? Wait, did he even address him like that in the game? The question briefly flitted through my mind, but I had no hope of recalling such a minor detail. Which was totally beside the

point, anyway.

“Oh, right,” I said. “Want to try?”

“Er, um, well...”

“What? Are you having a fight with your parents?” I asked.

It was honestly strange to see Mazel act so unsure. I was pretty sure that a strained relationship with his family wasn’t written into his backstory.

“That’s not it. I don’t want them to feel anxious...”

Right, he was just a regular villager until a few years ago. Of course his parents would get worried about him fighting the Demons and whatnot. So they didn’t see eye to eye about that, huh? Actually, they were probably *too* accepting in the game. That said, nobody wanted to slog through a bunch of family drama in an old-school RPG.

Not to mention that the game’s protagonist was supposed to be a self-insert. Even if the character had his own life and bonds with other people, it wouldn’t be explained to the player. There wasn’t enough memory for that in the cartridge. Omitting it was an absolute no-brainer.

“Well, okay. How about just popping in to say hi? I have some spare Skywalker Boots.”

Sure, they were expensive, but if I cheaped out here I’d be a pretty shoddy excuse for a human being.

Mazel hesitated before he said, “Okay. Let’s give it a shot.”

“Master Werner,” Frenssen cut in just as I was about to hand over the Skywalker Boots.

For a moment, I wondered if he was about to chastise me about going over budget, but what came out of his mouth was the very essence of cold rationality.

“It would cause a disturbance if you were to suddenly disappear from a

tavern,” he pointed out.

“O-oh.”

Egad, he was right. Nobody kicked up a fuss in the game, but ordinarily there would be a huge racket. How careless of me not to even consider the obvious just because I learned about the item from a game.

“I also suspect that there could be some consternation at the manor, given how we vanished without notice.”

“Ohhh...”

I’d forgotten about giving the heads-up. I mean, I doubted that people would believe me even if I did explain myself, and a part of me did kind of want to give Mazel and the others a surprise. But yeah, Frenssen was right.

“Okay. Let’s step out and return to the capital. Sorry.”

“Sounds like a plan,” answered Mazel, looking somehow relieved.

Hmm. Yeah, there was something off about his attitude. It was rare for him to act this way, and it didn’t look like it was a simple case of not wanting people to worry about him. I made a mental note to keep an eye on him.

In the end, all I accomplished that day was handing Mazel and his companions some Skywalk Boots. It left me feeling oddly ambivalent. Well, part of that may be because the boots could only take me to a town’s entrance, and our sudden reappearance through the manor’s front door caused quite a kerfuffle. Yeah, that was entirely on me.

The next day, I got off to an early start by assigning Frenssen the Mangold investigation before heading off to the palace for my business. How long had it been since I last went to school? At this point, I might as well pull out of the academy until the Demon Lord’s defeat. That aside, I had planned to talk with Schünzel and Neurath again that day.

“It is I, Werner Von Zehrfeld,” I told the guards when I arrived.

They promptly called into the room: “Lord Werner has arrived.” Once I was cleared for entry, they opened the door for me. The same old song and dance.

“I apologize for calling you here so early in the morning.”

“I am always happy to oblige, Your Highness.”

“Thank you. Make yourself comfortable.”

It was Crown Prince Hubertus who had summoned me. I had no choice but to put my other plans on the backburner. This was the tough part about serving the court. To add to the pressure, Duke Seyfert was in the room too, having been invited ahead of me.

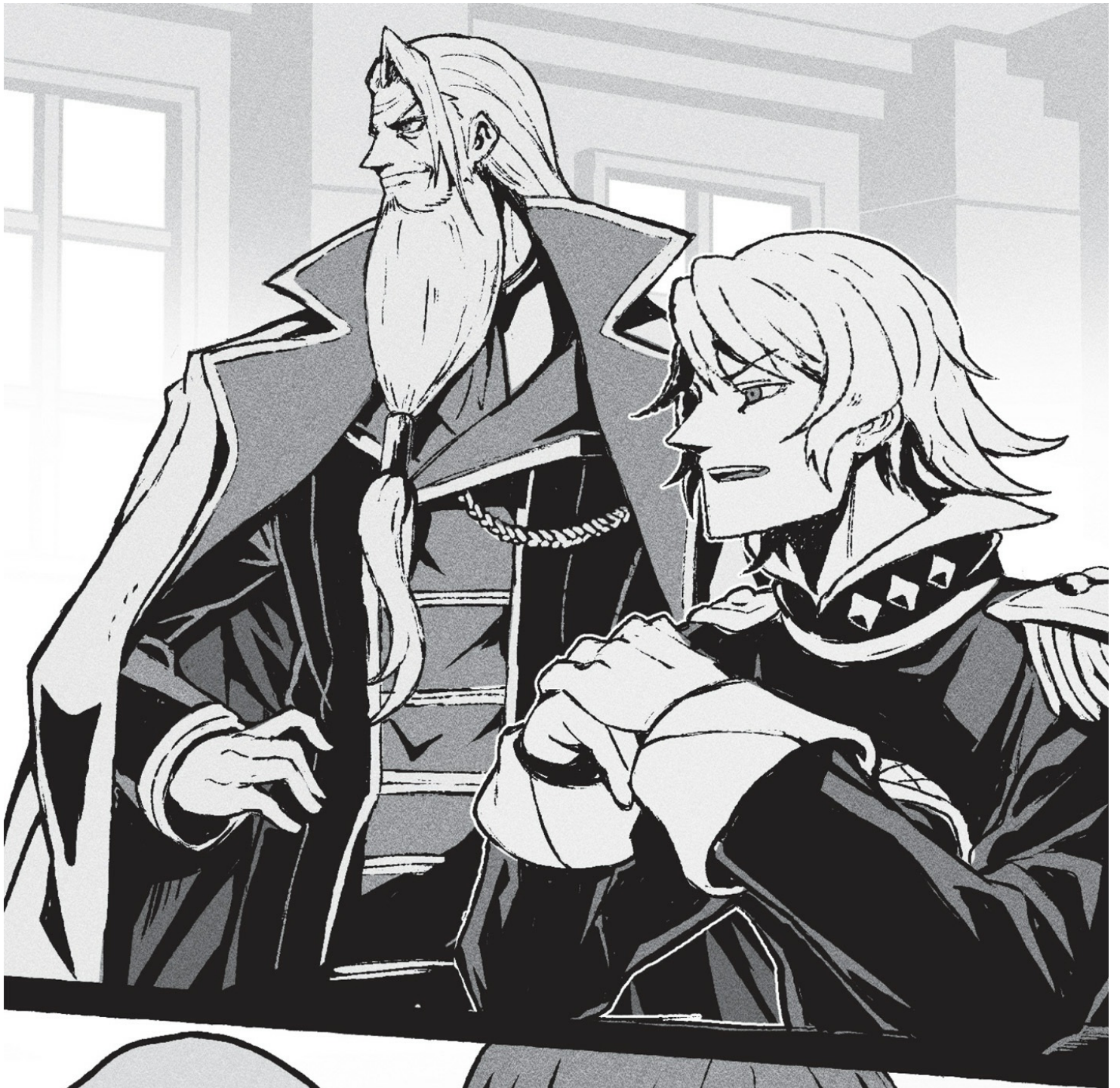
“First of all, I must thank you for all of your efforts.”

“We owe our achievements to the efforts of all involved.”

Honestly, the duke and his colleagues took care of all the most tenuous work. And if you judged by physical intensity, the scouts who surveyed the area and the adventurers who dealt with the monsters definitely had the short end of the stick. In that sense, I didn’t really do much of anything.

“I heard from the duke that it was you who proposed the formation of our troops at Hildea Plains. It was an excellent plan.”

“Though I may have conceived of the idea, I had no confidence that I could apply it myself.”



This was not modesty—it was the truth. Commanding over ten thousand soldiers was beyond me. Part of that was because of my age, but even in my old world, I'd never been responsible for more than a few dozen people at a time. Even now, I left command of the Zehrfeld knights to Max. At the Demon Stampede, I only took the reins because I'd been put on the spot. If anyone here deserved praise, it was the prince and his adjutants, for translating a hazily recalled plan from another world into an actual, effective strategy.

“You speak humbly.”

As much as I wanted to reply that I wasn't anything of the sort, I decided to plaster a smile on my face and let the comment pass. Handling this sort of thing was tricky—if I kept denying what the other party said, they would lose face.

For his part, the prince didn't seem interested in commenting further. He changed the topic.

“The weapons that your house offered up to us are of exceptionally high quality. It was quite the surprise. If they can be purchased at a reasonable price, then I would like to promptly assemble more of them.”

“I think perhaps it would be best to contact the guild.”

At this deflection, His Highness turned a curious, half-searching gaze on me.

“Are you sure? Your family would profit if the orders came through you.”

“I do not believe it is necessary for my house to profit in such a way.”

The priority, first and foremost, was to upgrade the officers and men at the capital with premium equipment. If a noble house got involved as a middleman, it would inflate the price unnecessarily. I mean, dealing with the refugees cost a lot of money, so you had to save what you could in other departments.

The prince did have a point, though, in saying that House Zehrfeld would profit from being a middleman. But this would only create an economic bubble that would burst after Mazel defeated the Demon Lord. Assuming that the game's ending didn't change, Mazel's journey would take about two or three

years at most.

Focusing our efforts on the weapons trade for short-term profit would be a poor idea in the long term. And if my house was the only one to profit, it would probably sour our relations with the merchant guild, to whom we were selling the weapons wholesale, and the Bierstedt company, which was managing the merchant corps on our behalf. Leaving things to the experts was a smarter plan in the long term. Admittedly, I had no idea what my father thought about any of this.

“As I am sure you are eager to know, the refugee issue has settled down for now. The construction of the aqueducts is proceeding smoothly, as well. It should be done in time for the dry season.”

“It relieves me to hear that.”

Another abrupt change in topic. But it was amazing to hear what they had accomplished in a mere month. The mage troops were apparently working full throttle to achieve this. You had to hand it to the technicians of the royal capital.

“However, there is another problem, and that is the question of who will succor the refugees.”

“As well as the issue of how to transport them to the fiefs,” the duke added after His Highness finished speaking. I suspected that the duke was here because this transportation plan was under military jurisdiction.

“The situation changed while you and the duke were away from the capital,” the prince went on. “Because of the proliferation of monsters in particular.”

“Many are now claiming that they would rather strengthen the defenses in their fiefs than spend their spare money on refugees,” the duke explained.

Ohhh. Well, it wasn't as if I *didn't* understand. I couldn't deny that people were dealing with an uncertain element here. Taking care of refugees was fundamentally something you had to budget for, even if the precise amount

you needed remained in flux. Money was a big issue at the moment, at least.

“Yet they cannot remain at the capital forever,” I remarked.

“At the moment, they are nothing but a burden.”

That was an awfully blunt way of putting it, though I supposed that things were bad enough that the prince did not have it in him to sugarcoat it. It would take money to help the refugees settle in, so basically it all came down to the budget, huh? Hmm...

“Guess you gotta issue war bonds,” I muttered to myself.

“Pray tell, what do you speak of?”

Oops, it looked like I accidentally blurted out what I was thinking. I couldn’t help but break out into a sweat at the duke’s question, though he at least didn’t seem to have any ill intent in asking. Judging by his expression, he was just genuinely curious about an unfamiliar combination of words.

In the short time I’d known him, I’d grasped that the duke was a shrewd guy. Even if he was aware of the concept, he might pretend not to know. Regardless.

“Er, um...”

“Do not be afraid to speak. You will receive no reprimand.”

With His Highness pressing me, I had no escape. But seriously, this world was completely different from my old one in terms of tax system, social landscape, and fundamental economic power. You couldn’t just adopt the war bonds system wholesale. Besides, people wouldn’t even understand what you meant if you said “stocks” or “bonds.” I would have to give a *really* abridged explanation.

“To put it simply, it’s like taking out a loan. Except it’s the country doing it.”

“The country takes out a loan?”

“Loan might be a crass way of putting it. The side paying the money writes out an acknowledgment of what they’re due. They give that money to the country,

and in exchange the country will only pay them the agreed-upon interest rate at regular intervals. A few years later, the country will reimburse the lenders in full.”

That was a really scattershot explanation... Actually, I wasn't familiar enough with government bonds to even explain them in detail. If anything, I had way stronger memories of the war bonds Rome issued in the Second Punic War. But wait, on the other hand, given that this country faced a similar situation to ancient Rome when it was reckoning with Hannibal, maybe their system could be adapted to this world.

Either way, simplified though it was, I managed to explain in broad strokes how government bonds worked. His Highness and the duke reacted with small groans.

“What an absurd yet novel idea. Though perhaps more novel than absurd?”

“...Perhaps more absurd.” I wasn't being ironic. In this world, at least, the idea was so unheard of that it *was* completely outlandish.

The duke spoke up. “Without a form of guarantee on the capital, a loan cannot be trusted.”

“Indeed. That is why, when issuing the bond, you may need to establish a tax as a way of guaranteeing the repayment.”

And when the deadline hit, you *had* to pay up. If you deferred the repayment even once, it would cause a breakdown in trust. At the risk of repeating the obvious, this was a society that had a lot in common with the Middle Ages. Though it was possible to flaunt one's authority in order to write off the debt, you would never be trusted again after doing that. Then the citizens would lose faith in you, and you'd struggle to hold the country together.

...But was that necessarily the case? This world *was* different from my previous one. I mean, putting aside the question of where they came from, this world had dangerous creatures in the form of “monsters” roaming all about the place. Taken to the extreme, you could argue: “Bow down to my authority and

I'll protect you from the monsters." It was possible for bad governance to go completely unpunished in this way. Perhaps you could even say that the monsters propped up this feudal-like political system.

This always struck me as a little bit weird. I was reminded of how the ancient kingdom collapsed in the time of the previous Demon Lord, but its fall did not lead to the end of the human race. Why didn't humanity die out? You could write it off as just video game logic or narrative convenience, but I wondered if maybe I was overlooking something.

My mind came close to chasing that tangent, but that wouldn't be good in this situation—not when two of the most powerful people in the country were right in front of me. I forced myself back to reality, just as the duke opened his mouth to speak.

"I imagine that the people would object."

"Indeed they would. You would have to convince them that their taxes will be repaid, and that once they are, they'll be free to enjoy their wealth as they please. But if we lose to the Demon Lord, there will be nothing left."

As the Chinese poet Du Fu put it, "The nation is ruined, but mountains and rivers remain." Inwardly, I was convinced that losing meant death, but I wondered if it was indelicate of me to say the quiet part out loud. The two leaders' faces stiffened to a surprising degree.

"I see. It is indeed as you say. After beholding the refugees of Triot, the people will have no choice but to accept the new taxes, however much they dislike them."

Wait, what?

"The war bonds you speak of are indeed absurd, but you make a compelling point when you say that our people could suffer in a similar way if nothing is done. It is an undeniable truth that, regardless of how we acquire it, funding is necessary to fight the Demon army. Now is a good opportunity to make the move, while the plight of the refugees burns strong in the people's minds."

Wait, hold up, that wasn't what I meant. It seemed we'd arrived at quite a serious misunderstanding.

"Let me change the topic."

The prince started a new line of conversation. I, of course, was the listener.

"The academy has tentatively decided to put around half its students on a leave of absence."

"Half...you say?"

"From the nobility, knighthood, and magic courses, and so forth. To be perfectly frank, we lack manpower."

Ohhh. Even a victorious battle would have its share of casualties. Though we emerged victorious at the Demon Stampede and at Hildea Plains, the losses from those back-to-back battles left holes that weren't easily filled. In a certain sense, it was only obvious that there would be a manpower shortage.

Even if they were in the knighthood course, you couldn't send a student into the thick of battle. You could, however, deploy them to maintain order on the streets, among other things. But wait, Mazel and I were both students, so maybe not?

Ordinarily, if you took the knighthood course without any skills suited to knighthood, then you would become a squire after graduation. Only after racking up another few years of experience would you finally be knighted. This meant that regular people without advantageous skills became knights in their mid-twenties. On the flip side, however, there were some people with the skills who demonstrated the abilities of a full-fledged knight even in their student years. The existence of skills was pivotal in that sense. A similar thing went for mages.

The nobility course's name was a holdover from the academy's founding. It actually specialized in areas related to national governance, like politics, administration, and diplomacy. It was a tough course to get into. It used actual

diplomatic problems as case studies, which meant that the students were selected based on how well they could keep the kingdom's secrets. It was a bit like a graduate school, but also not really. It was perhaps closer to a research facility for affairs of state.

The magic course was, as the name implied, a course where you studied magic. To be precise, it was split into the mage and priest courses. You could even study monk-type magic. Though the church could teach you the faith, it was the academy that showed you how to apply that in actual battle. When you thought about it, you couldn't exactly use a monk's offensive magic inside a temple.

In a peaceful scenario, Laura would probably have entered this course. Although it wasn't inconceivable that a royal family member like her with a lavish education graduated a long time ago.

Beyond that, there were some other courses that I didn't have much connection to. The arts course trained people to become court painters and musicians. The medical course taught healing and medicine-making. The commerce course taught business acumen. The law and engineering courses taught, well, law and engineering. There was even a steward course geared at training people into capable attendants. The academy was so broad it was almost ridiculous.

The eldest son of a hypothetical city count could enroll in the nobility course, while the younger sons would study law or engineering. You would learn completely different things depending on whether you were a successor or an aide. Commoners had their own educational programs, and every course taught standard etiquette and literacy. To give a rough idea of things, if studying at a guild was like vocational school, then the academy was like university.

These details weren't in the game, so they rather caught me off guard. I mean, the game only said Mazel was a student and left it at that. It was strangely anachronistic of this world to have such a sophisticated academy in place while the literacy rate among the populace remained low.

“With only a few exceptions, children of noble families work alongside their houses for the sake of the country,” said the prince.

That was noblesse oblige for you. I understood the concept, at least. It probably wasn’t wrong to say that Schünzel and Neurath got caught up in that same line of reasoning. But, well, I didn’t think they were pressured *that* hard into it.

The prince went on. “Accordingly...”

“Yes?”

“As the Hero, young Mazel—no, Mazel—will take a leave of absence to focus on what must be done.”

A shiver rolled down my spine. So that was the idea, huh? Before Mazel could be ensnared by some noble (including House Zehrfeld, technically), the royal family would grant him freedom of movement. At the same time, the royal family itself would charge him with the imperative to fight against the Demon Lord.

This would make it harder for other noble houses to entangle the Hero in petty intrigues. And to preempt their complaints, the prince decided to involve half the academy as well. Phew, this went well beyond “the end justifies the means.” Only royals could exert their authority in this way without a single ounce of hesitation.

“I understand. I will be sure to let him know.”

“My thanks.”

I’d been acting as the go-between, but now Mazel would formally enter the royal family’s employ. My personal support would be counted as a separate matter. Given the possibility that Mazel would be summoned directly to the palace tomorrow, I decided to give him the heads-up the next time I saw him.

“May I also ask that the kingdom issue a formal reward to Mazel’s companions?”

“Are they trustworthy?”

“Mazel certainly trusts them, and I saw no issue with them.”

“Very well. I will allocate the budget.”

I was relieved that he accepted my suggestion so readily. Mazel had been worried about this issue as well, after all. But anyway, His Highness managed to preempt the cutthroat nobles so effectively. It was hard to decide whether he was smart, or I was just slow to react.

“One more thing.” This time it was the duke who spoke up. “You have a few days to rest, but afterward, you will be assigned to guard the aqueduct’s construction site.”

Although I understood the need to protect the laborers at the site, I groaned at the thought of yet more military duties. I tried not to let the dissatisfaction show on my face, though.

“Now that you mention it, will the aqueduct itself be safe?”

“It should be. There are enough barrier stones to suffice.”

Barrier stones were stones that warded off monsters. They were used on some towns, villages, and even bridges. You could think of it as a simplified version of the barrier in the capital. Apparently, since the aqueduct was elevated from the ground, you only needed to apply the stones to the piers in order to keep them secure.

Despite being a simplified barrier, it still took about ten days for it to absorb enough magic from the soil to activate. Though it would ward off a wandering monster, it didn’t have much effect on Stampede-level hordes. The efficacy was relatively shaky.

My guess was that it merely placed a suggestion in the mind. Like how a human being wouldn’t want to go out of their way to step into a pitch-black forest, the stones would dissuade the monsters from approaching unless they had specific business there. Things like that hadn’t stopped the destruction of

the entire country of Triot. The repel items used to avoid random encounters in the game were way more effective, if you ignored how quickly they expired.

These “better-than-nothing” magic items occasionally had their uses when people were settling an area or camping for long periods at a time. Rural villages without any guards to speak of used them too. Now that I thought about it, there were a bunch of villages and towns in the game that didn’t have soldiers or battle-ready people even though the monsters in the area were fairly strong.

“Tis best to reduce the number of hands we need, at least to some extent,” the duke remarked.

“You are quite right,” I said.

Fort Werisa was a good example of the sort of troubles we’d face with personnel shortages. Though we managed to reclaim the fortress, it had naturally suffered some damage. It would be a while before it would be sturdy enough to serve as a fort again. Still, we couldn’t just abandon it since bandits or outlaws might make a hideout of it otherwise. That would be a serious issue, so people had to keep watch over it in the meantime. Not that I knew the details, since it wasn’t in House Zehrfeld’s purview.

A thought struck me then. “Is it not possible to install barrier stones at Fort Werisa’s gate?” I probed.

“It would certainly be possible should we gather enough stones, but...” The duke’s expression finished the thought: *Why?*

I gave voice to my newfound idea. “I was thinking that if we can’t hire enough hands from the capital, perhaps the Triot refugees could lend theirs to cleaning and repairing the fort.”

As we spoke, the refugees were camping outside the capital walls, but they were liable to be attacked by Demonic Beasts at any moment. But inside the fortress, there wasn’t any such danger. We could shelter the children and elderly who couldn’t fight and put them to work while we were at it.

“I wonder if the people who excel at manual labor can work near the capital, while the rest can clean the fort and do work inside.”

As a matter of fact, between the recent Demon Stampede and the battle to protect the refugees, I had come to realize something. Before the Demon Lord’s return, there hadn’t been any situations where you could get your hands on a massive pile of monster materials in one fell swoop, but this was certainly a possibility going forward. One potential use for Fort Werisa was as a temporary factory for processing monster materials, which would also help prevent a price collapse.

By separating the families across different areas, we could also keep the refugees in check, preventing them from rioting. As terrible as it was to say this, they’d be hostages. Though it would take time and labor to transport food from the capital to the refugees at the fortress, we would also be able to prevent other people from occupying it illegally. A policymaker would probably think it best to reduce the volatile elements around the capital.

“How would you propose to put those people to work around the capital?”

“What about making them build an orchard nearby?”

They shot me some funny looks when I said that. Yeah, I know, it was kind of random. But in all honesty, you could just make the refugees do whatever as long as it was work. It would take years for Mazel to defeat the Demon Lord, so the only real purpose of this was to keep them busy long enough to not cause any disturbances.

If we just sheltered them in the spirit of charity, we would be obliged to provide for the poor within the capital as well. Perhaps it wouldn’t backfire to the extent of ancient Rome’s grain dole, but it was plain as day to see that this could bleed our coffers dry. Anything we gave would have to be in exchange for services rendered, although this still begged the question of what the former farmers were supposed to do with themselves.

“Once the aqueduct is complete, I believe that we should have some surplus

of water. The trees should bear fruit, and as long as they don't wither, the buds should remain even if you don't tend to them."

We couldn't give them land to farm. You had to work at it year in and year out. Trees, on the other hand, could be cultivated for a short while even if you frankly didn't care about the harvest. You only needed to check up on them every so often, and they'd grow of their own accord. Even after the nobles took in the refugees, the trees would still be useful even if they didn't bear fruit.

If the refugees were going to live on the outskirts of the capital, then they needed a long-term plan, but in this case, we could make do with a few-years-long stopgap. But it was hard to justify my proposal without being able to explain that I knew how long the crisis would last.

"If you were to give them land to farm, then they would need overseers and tools. Fruit trees would be somewhat easier to manage. As long as you have water, then even inexperienced people should be able to make do."

In truth, it wasn't actually that simple, but a farm overseer would have much more on their plate than an overseer of an orchard. The biggest problem on our hands was the labor shortage. It wasn't like I was particularly fussed about the orchard itself.

A city that also doubled as a provider of fresh produce reminded me of Carthage—although Carthage ended up being dominated by its agricultural facilities and then destroyed for it. Putting Carthage aside, though, the point was that it was necessary to make the refugees work for their food.

"Putting aside the question of what they should produce, I don't think it would be a bad move to supervise half of them at Fort Werisa," said the prince.

"They will need guards, however," remarked the duke. "Were they to be attacked again, I expect that those refugees would turn their anger to the kingdom."

His Highness and the duke were deep in discussion. In the game, they never took back Fort Werisa. I thought that things would work out okay, but since I

couldn't exactly say that I knew this from a game, some element of uncertainty did indeed remain.

"I will consider your suggestion. I thank you for your contribution, Lord Werner."

"Thank you, sir. Now then, please excuse me."

Oof, that killed my stomach. Talking to those guys was a real strain on my nerves. If only I were a foolhardy noble, I probably wouldn't get all worked up over this. Hey, wasn't I supposed to be in the prime of youth? Why was stress churning my stomach like this?

After Werner closed the door behind him, Crown Prince Hubertus cast Seyfert a wry glance.

"What did you think?"

"Well now, if I only had a granddaughter. I might have found an excellent husband for her."

Hubert grimaced at his granduncle's words. One could say that life never went the way you wanted it to, but Seyfert was dealt a particularly harsh hand when his son, daughter-in-law, and grandchild all perished from a plague.

Ordinarily, for the sake of perpetuating the house, the prudent course of action would be to adopt a boy to become the heir, yet Seyfert politely refused to do this. He asked only for a pension to sustain his elderly wife to the end of her days, and he even proposed returning his territory to the royal family. Werner and Seyfert were perhaps similar in their indifference toward wealth.

"And what are your thoughts, Your Highness?"

"Though he is young, he is promising."

"Quite so."

As a squad commander, Werner possessed the insight to make timely

decisions on the battlefield. He was also adept at devising strategies. Hubert knew that the duke thought highly of Werner's abilities, judging by his suggestions from the Demon Stampede to the battle at Hildea Plains.

His flexible imagination was also a point in his favor, as was his willingness to put in the hard work to see his ideas through. This was evident in how he devised a countermeasure against area-of-effect magic and his decision to strike preemptively at the monsters while escorting the refugees.

Any nobleman could have obtained information about high-quality equipment, but he had distinguished himself by using his own merchant network to procure samples to present to the royal family. Even a student could have come up with the idea, but to actually execute it demonstrated a degree of aptitude that Hubert found laudable.

Furthermore, his lack of inclination to monopolize the benefits for his own house was a good sign from a policymaker's perspective. If Werner had been present to hear this, he might have strenuously insisted that this was all a misunderstanding.

"Personally, I would like to commend his attitude toward the mission," Hubert said.

From the perspective of the royal capital's aristocracy, escorting a train of refugees would be far from glamorous. It would have been all too typical for a young nobleman to slack off on a job he didn't want to do. But from what Seyfert had seen, Werner had taken the mission seriously.

On a practical level, the most important thing in missions where the objective was clearly set in stone was having the diligence to see it through. One could say that Werner had passed a secret trial. Unbeknownst to the world, this was largely because of his workaholic character as a former Japanese person.

Finally, Werner wrote a slew of reports about the monsters: when and where they appeared, and the types he observed. Now that the monster habits had changed drastically from before, Werner's detailed reports served as an

important record and reference. Ironically, there was actually *less* information about how the monsters dispersed before the Demon Lord's revival. Werner's data was already being used in strategy meetings attended by the king himself.

Werner always put in the long hours needed to transcribe his findings into convenient, digestible diagrams and charts. This was another reason why Seyfert thought so highly of the young man.

"I suppose the count must have taught him well."

"I know little of his education. Though I can't help but think it a shame that his older brother passed away."

If the eldest son of House Zehrfeld were still around, they could have placed Werner directly under their employ as a minister. The thought had occurred to both of them, but they could not exactly say this aloud. Instead, they exchanged nonchalant glances. Before long, Seyfert broke out into a smile.

"His last proposal did seem rather shallow, though."

"One cannot expect *too* much from one of his age."

"Right you are."

Werner was of student age. His idea to implement war bonds came as a surprise, but the fact that he grasped the need for a source of money to pay back the debts was impressive as far as the average student went. His plan was actually rather sloppy considering his mental age, but Hubert and Seyfert had no way of knowing that and appraised his talents accordingly.

After a short silence, Hubert spoke up.

"But that orchard idea of his. Was there some other motive behind it?"

"During the refugee escort mission, Lord Werner had experienced for himself the effectiveness of dried fruit and fruit vinegar. And we do have more mouths to feed now."

Hubert nodded along at Seyfert's explanation. In actual fact, the production of fruit vinegar occasionally had an influence on population growth. It was

nutritious when drunk and could be used as a sterilizing agent, making it useful in everyday life. In that sense, it was indeed in high demand in and around the capital.

Furthermore, although the domestic supply lines wouldn't get entirely cut off in a war against a foreign power, all bets were off against the Demon Lord and his subordinates. The kingdom anticipated that anywhere and everywhere could become a battlefield. Although the trees would not yield fruit immediately, there was always the looming possibility of food shortages in the capital in the near future.

Seeing Hubert nod, Seyfert stroked his chin with a smile.

"Mayhaps it is in poor taste to measure a man's worth in such a fashion."

"A bad habit of mine." The corner of Hubert's lips twitched up into a thin smile. From his perspective, his father was not a bad or foolish king, but even a generous soul would be hard-pressed to describe him as a talented soldier. Domestic affairs required long-term thinking, while war called for decisive action.

As much as it was a matter of playing to different strengths, Hubert had to admit his father's careful and deliberate manner was beginning to chafe. If anything, he felt more inclined to trust Seyfert in military matters. This was precisely why he'd asked Seyfert to be part of the meeting.

"You called me here because the boy is still young and lacking in experience," Seyfert remarked. "You wanted me to appraise him."

"It would be a shame if a noble of talents tried to stifle his out of jealousy. I apologize, but I must ask for your help."

"I duly accept."

Hubert and Seyfert both understood that it was an elder's duty to shepherd the young with care. Seyfert in particular felt that he had discovered a promising protege.

Naturally, Werner had no way of knowing about any of this. As for his father, Count Zehrfeld, all he could do was put on a polite smile as he screamed internally.

I breathed a sigh of relief after I left the prince's side. I felt like there was something I wanted to check up on, but I couldn't recall what it was. I might have taken on more work than I could handle.

I was well aware that I'd been reborn without any overpowered abilities, so whatever was nagging at the back of my mind would be consigned to the "let someone else handle it" pile. Oh, if only I were a hero who could do it all, but there was no point pining over what I couldn't have.

As these pointless thoughts flitted through my mind, I went back to my temporary office next to my father's. Neurath and Schünzel were already waiting for me there. Knights though they were, they obviously didn't wear their armor indoors. Instead, they wore variant colors of the knight brigade uniform.

The designs were almost identical. The base colors of the knight brigade uniform were dark blue and green, with blue as the color for the first order. Red indicated that the knight belonged to a nobleman's private army, and the family coat of arms on the armband indicated their house. Perhaps this was why every student at the academy had to study heraldry. There were also black and white uniforms, but these were slightly more formal outfits belonging to the royal guard and the inner palace sentries—basically a different uniform entirely.

Pardon the tangent, but the inner palace guards were called the Order of the White Dragon, and the order was distinctive for having a lot of lady knights. They were in charge of guarding the queen and the princesses, if any, which... made sense, I suppose. The exceptions to this mostly female group were the men in charge of their horses and the squires. But it was up to the women to guard the female royal family members.

Some knights of the order were known to become mistresses of the male royalty, so apparently there were a lot of women who honed their combat skills specifically so that they could end up in that situation. A very muscle-headed way of going about it, but business as usual for this world.

“Sorry for keeping you guys waiting,” I said to the waiting knights.

“Not at all, my lord.”

“Pray, pay us no heed.”

At least the two of them hadn’t been standing at attention the whole time they were waiting. It looked like they’d let themselves relax a bit, which only made sense in this situation. Anyway, I bade them sit in the settee for visitors before sitting down myself to face them. There was a long list of things I needed to check up on.

“Sorry again for the delay. I just want to ask you about the current state of things.”

Everyone knew that the Demon Lord was back, and Mazel was a bona fide celebrity after that parade the other day. But I didn’t know anything beyond that. We’d be in deep trouble if any inconsistencies with the canon cropped up unobserved.

Neurath and Schünzel’s individual skill levels were about average for knights their age, it seemed. I could have a little spar with them later to make certain, but from what I heard, they surpassed me at sword fighting (spears were a different matter). Given that they would double as my bodyguards on the battlefield, I was fairly satisfied with their level of ability.

To summarize the information they shared about the period I was away from the capital, some of the private armies were proactively hunting monsters around the outskirts as part of their training, while other noble houses chose to turtle up in their home territories. Many aristocrats had sent their children and grandchildren back to the estate with knights accompanying them on the journey.

It was only natural that there would be a wide range of reactions on display among the nobles. Their chief priority was protecting their houses. It was no surprise that some of them were willing to turn their backs on the capital, to put it bluntly, if it meant ensuring their own safety.

I wondered what the situation would be at this point if things had followed the game. With the destruction of the knight brigade, would they have focused on protecting their fiefs, or would the king have decreed they lend their strength to the capital?

“At the very least, nobody speaks of surrendering to the Demon army,” Schünzel declared.

Neurath picked up where the other knight left off. “The victory at Fort Werisa made a strong impression,” he concluded.

Hm, judging from how they relayed the facts, Schünzel seemed slightly more like a coolheaded advisor. Neurath was more inclined to speak based on emotion and intuition.

With the knight brigade still very much intact, the citizens didn’t appear to be too rattled. At least, on the surface. Judging by the sheer jubilation on display the other day, I suspected that they were feeling anxious on the inside, though it wasn’t manifesting in the form of public disorder just yet. That said, the average citizen was definitely feeling the heightened monster activity in the form of stock shortages.

“Light and easy-to-use weapons are becoming increasingly scarce. Perhaps this is because people have been buying them up for self-defense,” said Neurath.

“That’s not going to help them,” I pointed out with a straight face.

Those kinds of weapons were made for fledgling adventurers. Even if they did the trick before the Demon Lord’s revival, when the average monster was weaker, they were practically toys in the hands of an untrained citizen.

“Perhaps they serve as a good-luck charm.”

“That’s probably the way they’re thinking of it...”

Not that it’s a good idea for public safety if random people carried weapons around, I added mentally. But still, I understood that confronting anxiety was easier said than done. The people managing public order would want to know about this.

“Some of the vegetables they serve at the knight brigade’s food hall have also seen a sharp increase in prices.”

“I have also heard that medicine stocks are being affected.”

“I can imagine,” I said.

Like anywhere on Earth, a capital city or any other major metropolis with a large population was bound to become a hub of consumerism. As the dangers on the roads increased, the distribution of goods would stagnate accordingly.

This world had never possessed sophisticated techniques for preserving food to begin with. Ice houses and similar equivalents did exist, but you couldn’t say that they were the best fit for every scenario. To my surprise, I’d even seen magically frozen vegetables sold as popsicles. You could say that fresh vegetables were a rare sight for city dwellers. Arguably, the biggest problem facing the capital was the precarious food supply lines.

Medicine was similar in that regard. The recent Demon Stampede had used up a lot of the more effective medicines, yet the monster danger levels were only rising. Perhaps it would even become impossible to collect herbs the way it was done in the past. Of course the prices would climb when it got harder to meet the demand.

“Simply maintaining the roads will become a problem before long,” I mused.

“That does seem likely.”

They’d never been absolutely safe even before now, and the perils would only grow in the future. It would become all but necessary for merchants to hire

adventurers and mercenaries for their travels. This would split up the people who were capable of fighting flexibly—hardly an ideal situation, as far as I was concerned. You had to make sacrifices somewhere, but anyone who got the short end of the stick obviously wouldn't be happy about it. I bet the bigwigs were racking their heads over this issue as we spoke.

“Still, I suppose that there is little use in us thinking about what we cannot change,” Schünzel remarked.

“I guess so.”

He had a point—I decided to let go of that train of thought for now. On a pragmatic level, I was nothing more than the heir to a count, with a rank equivalent to that of a viscount. My words had basically zero sway over national policy, however much the crown prince seemed to inexplicably like me.

But as long as the situation (read: the script) didn't change, then I could assume that the capital would be attacked in the future. That being the case, I wanted to do whatever I could to help. To that end, it was imperative to preserve peace and order in the royal capital.

“Well, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to just offer some words of advice to the higher-ups. Let me know if you two spot anything worth reporting.”

“Yessir.”

“As you command.”

In actuality, it *could* hurt. If I put forth too many insipid suggestions, my reputation would end up in the gutter. If I was going to suggest something, then I had to at least scrape together a working budget.

But anyway.

“I just remembered that there's somewhere I wanna go. Can you two come with me?”

I doubted that things had changed much in just a month, but I wanted to see how they stood.

I took them to the research laboratory of the mage squad. It looked like a spiral tower from the outside, but the interior looked like an assemblage of complex engineering. That was a fantasy world for you.

The game map had plenty of buildings that made you wonder how they were even built, like isolated rooms that looked like they floated in the sky. Dungeons were even more convoluted. You went down the steps and then you had to wander all around the floor to find the next set of stairs. Who the hell knew what all those rooms were even for? Maybe those were built with magic too.

The mage squad never showed up in the game, and neither did their laboratory. There wasn't much point dwelling on it. But the architecture was confounding, nonetheless. The building curved so much that I wouldn't have been surprised if someone told me it was made from aluminum.

An armed soldier stood outside the gate of the mage squad. This was probably for visual effect. The mere act of holding a weapon was a deterrence. Come to think of it, I hardly ever saw mages among bodyguards and security workers. Perhaps there just weren't many of them around.

Granted, we were inside the palace, so I doubted that there would be many miscreants passing through here. In that sense, it seemed a bit pointless to have guards at all in here, although I supposed that there were all kinds of things to consider.

The guard asked me for my identity at the entrance, so I told them my name and peerage and asked for Vogt. Technically, Neurath and Schünzel should have handled introductions on my behalf, but I still wasn't used to that kind of thing, so I did it myself without thinking.

"You may enter. He will see you at the silver research room on the third floor."

"Thanks."

As a nobleman, that sort of perfunctory “thanks” passed for proper manners. With that, I went inside and headed up the stairs to where I’d been told. No amount of repetition would make it any easier for me to swallow this pompous attitude, but not exhibiting it would only signal weakness to the other nobles. It might even encourage them to harry me. Ugh, this made my stomach hurt.

Putting that aside, the mage squad’s research lab felt really novel since I’d never really swung by before. Even though it was located within the palace grounds, this place had a totally different vibe. I suppose you could say that it had a sort of academic atmosphere.

“Silver research room” referred to the fact that there were a bunch of rooms with different colored plates on their doors. The doors were more or less identical, but the plates were red, white, and so on. Once we found the silver plate, Neurath knocked on the door and opened it when a voice from inside told us to enter.

“It is nice to see you again, Lord Werner,” said Vogt.

“Likewise. It has been a while.”

It certainly had been quite some time since we delivered the report from Fort Werisa. But Vogt brushed it aside with a smile. “I understand that you’ve been busy.” Yep, a real charmer. The ladies would swoon over him.

His personal research lab was apparently somewhere else. We ended up chatting in this spacious room. Although they were called “labs,” they weren’t chock-full of vials with suspicious-looking liquids or anything. People would sit at their desks and make calculations, draw diagrams, and hold impassioned debates.

If anything, it felt more like a conference room for science students, where they all sat down to conduct an experiment.

“How is the anti-area-of-effect magic going?”

“I cannot say it’s all gone smoothly, but the findings are beginning to take

shape.”

Then he threw a bunch of jargon at me. There was some stuff about efficient ways of concentrating magic and how to render accumulated magic useless, but I had no idea what he was on about even after he took the time to explain it to me.

After all, I hadn’t enrolled in the magic course, and I was squarely in the middle of the pack as far as my school results went. Anything unrelated to the basic scientific principles I learned in my old world was frankly beyond me.

“Is there no way to preserve the magic power somewhere?” I asked.

“Perhaps you could achieve it with a large magic stone, but because they generally break after you use up the magic in them, it is hard to use them in experiments.”

“I see,” said Schünzel, who, surprisingly, seemed to be mostly keeping up with the explanations.

When I thought about it, there weren’t any single-use items in the game that launched a magic attack, although I did get the impression that some items could be used as tools to simulate something *like* magic. For example, there was the Rod of Sweltering Heat. It was undeniably useful since it didn’t consume MP, but its potency only held up until the midgame.

Anyway, this line of conversation reminded me of something. “By the way,” I said to Vogt, eager to confirm something.

“Something strike your fancy?”

“Oh, no, this has nothing to do with area-of-effect magic.”

What I remembered was something Mazel had mentioned earlier: the Demons dropped black jewels. I was pretty sure that the mage squad was on the case. I was kind of interested in this thing I had no prior recollection of. Some time had passed, so I figured that they might have figured something out.

“Oh, I see. As I recall, you are close to the Hero, yes?” Vogt remarked.

According to him, the mage squad was indeed researching the matter, but apparently someone else was in charge of that. Obviously, a single researcher wouldn't be investigating every topic under the sun.

"Would you like to try asking Pückler?"

"Yes, please. I'd like to give Mazel a progress update. Is that okay?"

"I don't mind at all," Vogt said casually.

We all filed in a line behind him as we proceeded to the lead researcher's room. But, uh, seriously, what was with this building? The dimensions seemed totally different from how they looked on the outside.

I was still lost in thought when Vogt gave a single rap on the door. "Are you in there, Pückler?"

"Gimme a sec," came a mumbling voice.

The door opened a crack, and a somewhat familiar-looking face peeked out. A man who seemed like he would look good in glasses... Oh, right, this was the guy I saw the day I made the report about Fort Werisa. We hadn't exchanged words, though.

"What's up, Vogt?" he said.

"Oh, I should introduce you to Viscount Zehrfeld."

The man's gaze shifted over to me as he bowed. His eyes were cold. He seemed to be the type to get ticked off if you interrupted them in the middle of research. To be fair, I genuinely was an outsider to the mage squad.

"He is asking whether you have learned anything about that black jewel," Vogt said.

"So that's what this is about, huh?"

He nodded at Vogt before swiveling his gaze back to me. Intellectuals like him generally unsettled me, but even among them his gaze was withering.

"I am Roger Pückler. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Viscount

Zehrfeld.”

“Likewise, Lord Roger. I am Werner Von Zehrfeld. These are my subordinates Schünzel and Neurath.”

Pückler bowed at the two knights as well. Then he turned back to me and opened his mouth. I sensed something a bit strange about his manner, but I decided to let it go. Vogt didn’t seem to think anything was particularly amiss.

“I am sorry to disappoint you after you have come all this way, but I have made little progress on my research. Also, I am currently seeing some guests.”

“I apologize. Let’s do this some other day.”

His expression and body language were unambiguously hostile, so I decided to cut things short. Schünzel and Neurath looked like they wanted to say something, but I silenced them with my gaze. Once we were some distance away, Vogt lowered his head to me.

“I apologize, Viscount Zehrfeld. He was not so disagreeable before.”

“I don’t hold it against him.”

I didn’t have a kink for cold treatment, but I wasn’t going to get mad at every little slight either. Sure, I didn’t feel great, but it was what it was.

“Frankly, his attitude seemed suspect to me,” Neurath said.

That was considerably harder to judge. Did he give me the cold shoulder because he actually was too busy to entertain us? Was he biased against the noble faction I belonged to? Did he have something against House Zehrfeld or me as an individual? Any of those explanations seemed plausible, which complicated things. I certainly wasn’t some innocent angel who’d never pissed off a single person.

Besides, there were definitely some people of low birth who felt a sense of emotional distance from the aristocrats. Whatever the reason behind Pückler’s attitude, I knew that he’d just clamp up further if I pressed him. People tended to be like that when they were dealing with folks they weren’t particularly fond

of.

But neither could I grill Vogt about any of this. I decided to just pick Schünzel and Neurath's brains later. For now, I could ask Vogt to keep me abreast of the research's progress.

After that, I learned about magic items, spells for creating equipment, and a few other topics. I couldn't really use any of this knowledge directly for my own purposes, but it was gratifying to see that Vogt was seriously throwing himself into his anti-area-of-effect magic research.

Unfortunately, our deadline was when Mazel took down the three Demon Commanders and two of the Four Fiends. I crossed my fingers that Vogt would work something out in time.

After finishing up my paperwork at the palace, I made a brief stop back at the mansion. This time, I took Frenssen with me as I headed out. While I couldn't speak for ministers like my father, I at least could head home as I pleased if my work was done. If only my brother were alive, I could have been stuck with this administrator job my whole life.

"Where is our destination?" asked Frenssen.

"Ah. I can say for sure this trip will involve the adventurers' guild and the orphanage."

"You speak of Master Feli's orphanage?"

"Yep."

Oh yeah, Frenssen and Feli would have spent quite some time with each other, back when they traveled with the merchant corps. This probably explained his soft spot for the boy.

There were a lot of things on our plate, but I ticked off the first item on the list by showing up at the adventurers' guild. Well, more accurately: I was getting this tedious to-do out of the way first, since it'd be a real pain later on

otherwise.

To be precise, I decided to quickly get this time-consuming task out of the way because otherwise my job of overseeing the workload would be a pain. And an annoying job for me now would spell more work for me down the road.

“Hey there, Mister Werner. Here to hand us the short straw again?”

“Bit rich of you to call it ‘the short straw’ considering what you’re paid for it.”

“Nah man, your jobs are definitely a pain.”

“You’re one to talk when you drank yourself silly for two days at the after-party!”

When I showed my face at the guild, my acquaintances wasted no time in calling out to me. I traded banter with them as I made my way further in. Frenssen observed this with an awkward smile on his face. I knew I wasn’t acting very aristocratic. But whatever, this was way less stressful for me.

To be honest, I was well aware that I’d put a lot of people through quite a bit of trouble when we were guarding the refugees. I tried to pay as much as I could within my discretionary power. Also, a lot of the adventurers were even younger than I was, and I got used to seeing them around. Whenever we stopped by villages on the road, I cracked open my own wallet to buy them drinks, and we even hung out when we were off duty. Thank god for the payment I got for the aqueduct plan.

Given that we were on the road together for a whole month, I had gotten to know them by face, and we even became buddies. Apparently, my reputation among the adventurer and mercenary guilds wasn’t half bad: “There are some bad eggs among the nobles, but the Zehrfeld guys get us.” I was happy about that evaluation.

Not that this mattered, but I was surprised that the phrase “bad eggs” was understandable in this pseudo-Medieval European world. Well, I guess “pseudo” was the operative word here.

“It’s nice to see you again, Viscount Zehrfeld,” said the beautiful receptionist.

“It is nice to see you too.” I couldn’t help but speak politely to her. I was a healthy male, after all. Don’t blame me. “Getting to business, I have a request... well, more like an errand.”

“An errand?”

“Yes, I need someone to head to Arlea Village.”

Mazel’s family ran an inn in his hometown. That was the case in the game, at least, but I wanted to make certain of it. My only business with it was gathering intel on recent happenings, but Mazel did ask me to keep an eye on things over there too.

I’d only told House Zehrfeld’s messenger to deliver letters and money to Mazel’s family, so they didn’t pick up on any problems happening in their area. It was my fault for not giving clear instructions, so I could hardly blame the messenger for not looking into what had been going on around the village.

“Then do you want us guys on board?” a voice called out to me from the side.

It was a member of the Iron Hammer adventurer party, who just happened to be sitting nearby. He had worked on the refugee escort mission as well. All the members were close to me in age, and they had no qualms about approaching me, so we ended up getting pretty chummy.

“That would really help me out, but are you sure?”

“Actually, we have plans to head there anyway for some other business.” He was quick with his reasons. “We’re guarding pilgrims headed to Finoy. They’ll head their separate ways after they arrive, so it wouldn’t be a huge detour for us to return via Arlea Village.”

I see. I didn’t mind the job being an afterthought as long as it got done.

“Ah, well that’s perfect, then.”

At this point, the receptionist lady took over, and we worked out a simple reward. The guy said he was fine doing it for cheap, since it was just a side job,

but I certainly didn't want to shortchange him. As annoying as it was, nobles had their reputations to protect. If people found out that I'd lowballed an adventurer, it would cast a shadow of doubt over all my house's financial dealings.

At times like these, it was customary to offer a premium rate for even a simple errand. And it was also a fact that the job involved a bit of investigation work.

"So my friend's father runs an inn in Arlea. I'd like you to deliver this letter and these gifts."

I called them "gifts," but it was just some alcohol for Mazel's father and some new clothes from the capital for his mother and younger sister. I'd picked things that were relatively light and easy to carry around. Since I'd never met any of these people, I went with some inoffensive choices for the designs. Cut me some slack—I was no fashion guru.

In rural areas, even used clothes were a sought-after commodity; they were even better than accessories. This world didn't assign special meaning to gifting normal clothes to someone, although dresses were another matter.

"One other thing I'd like you to do, if you don't mind, is take a look around the village and get a feel for what things are like there."

"Sure. Why?"

"Well, I'm not so sure myself."

I was curious when Mazel got strangely hesitant back then about getting in touch with his family. I didn't know the reason for it. Hence why I was asking someone to take a look around. The reward was within the bounds of expectation. I was undeniably relieved when the man accepted the request in good cheer. It showed the importance of maintaining good relationships with people.

"You don't have to go through the guild for such a minor request," said the

guild receptionist.

I gratefully accepted her kindness and didn't forget to tell her, "I will be sure to come back with another job in the near future." Given that the guild's main source of income came from brokerage fees, I couldn't keep clinging to her kindness. I had to do the proper thing and send some real business their way. It's not like I was defeated by a pretty lady's smile or anything—no way.

After wrapping up my business at the adventurers' guild, we headed for a dilapidated building on the outskirts of the capital. This was situated near the backstreets—basically, the slums. Apparently, the building had once been an inn.

Why would you put an inn so far away from the gates? Even if it was a proper establishment, wouldn't it seem shady? But, well, given that it was long out of business, it obviously didn't make money.

Although the church ran most of the orphanages in this world, some were managed by nobles or one of the guilds. There were even some wealthy families that ran entire facilities by themselves. No two orphanages were quite the same in this regard.

Churches ran their orphanages out of tentative charity. A lot of noble houses did it to spread their name, seeking a reputation as do-gooders. The way they chased clout wasn't much different from the elites of my previous world in their hunger for clout.

Each guild had its own reason for getting involved. The merchant or blacksmith guilds usually wanted to raise assistants. The orphanages run by the adventurers' guild were rare exceptions, set up to care for any children left behind when both mother and father went missing in the adventuring line of work.

The orphanages took care to feed the children, thankfully. Still, going by the standards of my previous life, you couldn't say that they lived on easy street.

“Who might you be, sir?”

“I am Werner Von Zehrfeld. You might have heard of me from Felix.”

“...Please come on in.”

The old lady who answered my knock seemed wary at first, but she let me inside after I introduced myself. I wondered if there was a reason for her cold attitude. The cliché would involve a cad showing up to harass one of their pretty wards.

When I asked for the story, it did turn out to be half a cliché. Apparently, there was an issue with the lease on the land and they were on the verge of eviction. On the other hand, it didn't seem as if there was any malice or criminal activity involved. If anything, I could understand where the antagonists of the story were coming from.

The old lady's name was Ernert. She didn't have any blood relation to Feli, so I guess he'd adopted her first name as his surname. This story gave me a glimpse at their relationship.

There seemed to be a lot of people around, because I could hear thumping footsteps from the floor above us. The ceiling felt like it could give way at any moment. Frenssen occasionally glanced up in trepidation.

“The owner before the previous one received some monetary aid, but alas...”

From the way she told it, this predecessor was the old lady's employer when she was young. Apparently, they owned a public bathhouse. There were a number of those in the capital, and this one was near the tradesmen's district.

Until around halfway through the Middle Ages, it was fairly common for townsfolk to use public baths. Part of this was because they obviously didn't have baths in their own homes, but public baths were a common fixture not just in towns but even in small villages. People would listen to minstrel performances there as they ate, drank, and dried their hair.

The reason why public bathhouses went on the decline in my old world was

because they turned into fronts for sex work. Not only did this go against the social mores of the time, it influenced the spread of syphilis. It wasn't hard to find contemporary artwork of men and women in a bathtub together. In that sense, I guess you could say that love hotels existed way back in the Middle Ages.

In this world, however, syphilis was perfectly curable by going to a shrine. Bathhouses were officially authorized and subject to periodic inspections to make sure they didn't get involved in sex work. I wasn't overly familiar with what happened in rural villages, but as long as they were regulated to a certain degree, public bathhouses were places where citizens could freshen up and unwind.

But anyway, this orphanage never managed to receive support when the old lady's direct predecessor ran it, either. They only just barely managed to care for the children. However, with the land's ownership recently changing hands, priorities changed. The new owners cared little for the orphanage's affairs and were keen to put their land to a different use. It was a textbook example of things getting more run-down over time. But I digress.

"A public bathhouse, huh?"

I wondered if the owner was tightening their belt because of the water shortages, although I wasn't going to say that aloud. The lack of water was supposed to be a secret, after all. I decided instead to frankly state a different, yet equally pertinent, opinion of mine.

"I doubt that repurposing the land here would do much good."

"I am inclined to agree, but..."

The old lady looked like she was at a complete loss. There was a saying about poverty dulling the wits. I mean, the reason why the owners two generations ago turned this place into an orphanage was because it was cheap back then.

I was still mulling over this when I felt someone's gaze boring a hole through the side of my face. Frenssen looked to the side, and my eyes followed where

he was looking. A demure-looking girl in rags was peering at us from the other side of a half-open door.

“Um, excuse me...”

When our eyes met, the girl timidly shuffled into the room. I’d never laid eyes on this girl before, but weirdly enough, she seemed to know me.

“Um... Thank you ever so much for the medicine.”

“Huh?”

For a moment, I was baffled by what she was saying. But give me some credit—it didn’t take too long for my cogs of memory to turn.

“Are you the girl Feli told me about?”

“Y-yes. My name is Ilse.”

So this was the sick girl Feli had mentioned, huh? She seemed slightly younger than him. In my previous world, she would be considered around elementary school age. Oh, I see, so he did it for this cute girl? Well, well.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “Feli has been helping me out a lot in exchange.”

“Um, is big bro Feli...okay...?”

“He sure is.”

Being a member of the Hero’s party gave him plot armor. That was all I had to base my confidence on, but in situations like this, I felt obligated to give a cheerful answer. I couldn’t very well scare a child on purpose.

Relief bloomed on her face at my declaration. Her head bobbed in a cute bow before she hopped out the room. She was kind of like a tiny animal—it made me want to protect her.

When I turned back to the elderly woman, she had this sort of apologetic look on her face. Sure, some nobles might flip their lid at being interrupted while they were speaking, but I wasn’t one of them, believe me.

“She’s a cute girl. Is she Feli’s little sister?”

“No, they’re not blood related... At least, I don’t think so.”

She couldn’t say for certain because both were abandoned when they were babies, apparently. They didn’t look related, as far as I could see. Perhaps they were alike in the sense that they were better-looking than average, but that was about it. At any rate, I could understand why Feli would feel indebted to me for helping her when she was sick.

But I was in a bit of a pickle. While not wholly pleased with it, my father had permitted me to use our house’s resources to support the orphanage. But he wouldn’t be so permissive regarding any funds spend on that account.



If it were just a matter of running an orphanage, we could probably make do, but if we threw money at the place all willy-nilly, it wouldn't be long before the bathhouse owner came asking for a slice of our generosity. If we wanted to fund the orphanage, we'd also have to bail the bathhouse out of its financial problems too. And that was a step too far.

...Hm? Wait a minute. Could this be a good chance to resolve that other thing I was worried about?

"In any case, I'd like to make a donation in appreciation of your efforts thus far. I will see you again soon."

"Oh? Um, okay."

The old lady seemed baffled by the sudden philanthropy, but it all was within manageable limits. I'd yet to flesh out my plan, but I was pretty confident that it was worth a shot. The problem was the budget. For the moment, I decided to head home and hammer out the details.

You had to think about medium-term plans to go with the short-term plans. The people who would suffer most directly from an attack on the capital were the city's have-nots, like these orphans. If something happened to them, I doubted I would ever be able to meet Feli's eyes again. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself either. Not only did I have to think about how to balance the facility's budget, I had to consider its future beyond that. But for now, I had to start with the short-term plans.

I dropped by Mazel's dorm on my way home, head heavy with thoughts. I filled him in on how he was now directly under the royal family's employ, his formal charge to vanquish the Demon Lord as part of the kingdom's military, and how the kingdom would sponsor Luguentz and the others.

Everything was going pretty smoothly at the moment, but that was because of the crown prince. I kind of wondered if he had some kind of grand plan in

mind. Bad managers were headaches, but managers who were *too* good at their jobs made me anxious in a whole other way.

“Got it. Thanks for coming all this way,” Mazel said.

“No worries. I’ll do whatever I can to help in a personal capacity.”

“Thanks.” Then Mazel paused. “Hey, since I’m going to be out and about, what do you reckon I should look out for?”

“Hmm...”

What an impressively vague question. I mean, I did know exactly what would happen according to the game’s script, but it wasn’t like I could blurt out that I knew the future. Besides, I was starting to notice more and more discrepancies from the original plot. I got the feeling that holding onto preconceived ideas about the future posed its own risks.

“First things first, you gotta collect information at the town or village you’re using as your base. The locals would know what’s happening in their area better than anyone.”

In the game, you would generally learn about story events and dungeons by asking people in the cities or villages nearby, but information could only spread so far in this medieval European world. In rural areas, the locals were definitely the best bet for information.

“When it comes to getting from A to B and exploring dungeons, I actually think it’s better to ask Luguentz for pointers. He’s an adventurer who’s seen his fair share of travel.”

“Yeah, I can imagine.”

On a pragmatic level, there were a lot of things that came up when traveling. You couldn’t make a judgment call until something actually happened in front of you. I wasn’t well-traveled enough to give advice about what to do and what not to do to someone living on the road. I was grateful for Luguentz’s veteran experience in that department—his advice would be indispensable.

“Also, don’t be a reckless dumbass who hoards consumable items without ever using them.”

“Consumable items?”

“Yeah, like antidotes and potions. Not using them when you need to because you don’t want to waste them is a dumb way to die.”

“You have a point.”

Poison was horrific in the game. If there was one thing I need to warn Mazel of, it was the threat of poison. Not to mention (and this was the kicker), you couldn’t restart your game when things got dire. I wondered if items that blocked insta-kills worked here.

“The only other thing I can say is you should adjust your loadout to the enemy you’re fighting.”

“What do you mean by loadout?”

“Take weapon attributes, for instance. If you’re fighting a fire-type enemy, you should use a water-type weapon. If you’re up against a magic caster enemy, you should beat them up with physical attacks. Stuff like that. You have to stay calm and suit your tactics to the situation.”

“Makes sense...”

I talked like such an expert, but it wasn’t like I even had the leeway to make choices like that in my own fights. My one skill was Spearmanship. If my opponent was strong against physical attacks, then I’d struggle and flail. If they were immune to physical attacks, then my only choice was to escape. Fortunately, there were no enemies like that around the capital.

But phew, it was uncanny how much I sounded like an NPC. As if some invisible force compelled me to spout a tutorial. Yikes.

“Anyway, if anything comes up, I’m willing to lend an ear anytime. If it’s in my power, just say the word.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” Mazel said with a smile.

According to the canon, he'd do totally fine without me. He had plot armor on his side. But plot armor or no, I wanted to make sure he had *someone* to whom he could vent and ask for advice. Needless to say, he didn't have anyone like that in the game. Did ordinary adventurers shoot the breeze or let off steam with their party members? I didn't have a clear idea of what an *ordinary* adventurer was to begin with.

Yeah, this world was pretty darn half-baked if you thought about it. I couldn't explain the weird feeling this gave me. But I wasn't going to come up with an answer no matter how much I racked my brains over it.

"I guess you should head to the city of Hafen first and use that place as your base as you test your strength around the area. Then you can set the Temple of Finoy as a temporary goal."

My memories were hazy, but I was pretty sure that was the general progression in the game. In actuality, there were dungeons and stuff on the way, so it wasn't just a straight line, but Mazel would probably hear about Triam Cave if he asked around at Hafen.

Mazel would encounter Laura as his next party member through the events at Finoy, but I knew very little about what she was up to. I'd bumped into her at the capital the other day, so I doubted that she'd be at Finoy right now. I wondered if I was reading too much into every little thing.

"Gotcha. I'll try not to get in over my head."

"Cool. Don't you go dying like a dog out there."

"I'll keep that in mind," Mazel said with a wry grin.

As he spoke, I reached out my fist and he met it with a fist of his own.

"Okay," I said. "I'm off then."

"All right. Good luck out there, Werner."

"You too."

We laughed and waved as we parted ways. Once I'd left Mazel's dorm room behind me, I reflected that this was probably the moment when he entered the game route in earnest. I doubted that he would need much help from me during the adventuring parts of his quest.

I, on the other hand, had no script for anything that would happen in the capital prior to the attack. To make matters worse, even if the story ended up playing out differently from the game, my life was at greater risk than Mazel's. This was assuming *that* event happened here.

But.

"I ain't letting a video game writer walk all over me."

"What?"

I'd accidentally mumbled my thoughts aloud. Frenssen, who had been waiting for me outside the dorm, regarded me with some bemusement.

"It's nothing."

But I was serious. Even if the story did change, I was going to steer it to a happy end, just you watch.

Crud, I hoped that wasn't Mazel's personality rubbing off on me. With so many people relying on me, I felt obliged to do literally everything I could. If I wasn't doing *something*, anxiety would creep up on me. Was this what it meant to be a do-gooder hero? Either way, it didn't change the fact that I had an insane workload.

If Mr. Random struggled vainly against fate with all his might, then he could very well leave footprints on the world as big as any lazy, OP protagonist's.

Frenssen gave me a quick update when I got back to the mansion. No developments on the Mangold issue, but that was to be expected. I mean, come on, how much were they going to learn between yesterday and today?

"Anyway," I said, "give me a hand here."

“Um...yes, sir,” he said tentatively.

“I’m writing a proposal addressed to the crown, and it needs to go through father.”

“Very well. I am at your disposal.”

If I couldn’t pay out of pocket, then I would have to involve other people in my plans. Fortunately (depending on interpretation), my number one priority was not to die, so it didn’t bother me in the least if my plan meant other people reaped the financial profits. In that regard, being born into nobility gave me a real leg up, as my trip to the orphanage had emphasized. If I diverted the profits into someone else’s pockets, getting their help was a cinch.

But it sure was a pain in the ass to write a proposal. You always needed to make a draft first because you didn’t want to make mistakes when writing with pen and ink. I wrote and erased things on a wooden board, racking my head for clear, unambiguous phrasings. I had to take care not to write something that could be interpreted as rude.

Incidentally, if you made a mistake when writing on parchment, you could normally make revisions by scraping off the offending part with a knife. So a flub now and then wasn’t necessarily a big deal. But it wouldn’t make a great impression on royalty if you submitted a document with traces of cutting. Thus, the proper thing to do was submit something without revisions. I should also add that parchment made from sheepskin or monster skin was very expensive, which further discouraged being rough with it.

Most of the time, you could reuse parchment by erasing all the words with a pumice stone and starting again from a clean slate. Given the value of paper, you wanted to repurpose unneeded documents when you could. The same thing was historically often done in my old world, where it was referred to as palimpsest.

In that world, people were known to use ink from the skins of citrus fruits to erase ink. Here, though, you used monster parts to erase ink without having to

shave it off. Unfortunately, the best thing for the job was spit from a Hyena Bat. Although you technically could use a pumice stone for drafts, you didn't want to present a palimpsest coated in monster spit to the upper ranks of nobility. The lower nobility used it for their writings, and merchants for their ledgers.

Leaving that aside, I had a lot of trouble composing all my ideas into a legible proposal document. I was bound to slip up if left to my own devices, so having an aide at hand really helped out. It really sucked not being able to stick everything onto a PowerPoint presentation like I would in my old life. As if that weren't bad enough, there was no agreed upon template for composition. This meant that some documents could be rejected off-hand because they didn't meet some arbitrary standard of etiquette.

One other gripe: quills looked cool and all, but actually using them—not so much. It was a huge pain in the ass having to constantly dip them into an ink pot.

This world actually did have something akin to ball pens. Basically, you attached a magic stone to the butt of the pen and kept creating ink with magic. The ink would run out when the magic did—quite the fantasy world item. They won out against the ball pens of my original world in terms of how long they could last.

Unfortunately, the pens were pretty unbalanced, given that there were rocks attached to their butts and all. They were hard to write with, no getting around it. It was even said that the first trial for a bureaucrat was learning how to keep their penmanship neat, even after a long day of writing with one of those things. That was well beyond my ability. They were pretty expensive too. Apparently, there were some nobles who bought them just for show. I guess they were treated like the fancy-pants fountain pens in my old world?

“Ah well, complaining isn't gonna do anything.”

I knew that the Edo period had things like fountain pens, which meant that they were theoretically possible to create with this world's level of technology.

From what I understood, capillary action was involved. If I lived to see the end of the story, then maybe I could try making a fountain pen.

That night, a slightly distant yet repetitive metallic sound ripped me out of dreamland. There weren't any clocks, but I could tell it was late at night.

I slapped on a gown and stepped out of my bedchamber. The slippers on my feet were made from the skin of a mountain goat, which was more delicate than cow leather. They weren't used in outdoor footwear, except perhaps in a few ladies' items, but I wasn't going to slacken my pace just because of that.

I didn't turn on any lights. Not because I suspected an immediate threat, mind you—I was just pretty good at seeing in the dark. When I drew near the family-sized staircase on the second floor, I bumped into my father. He was similarly dressed for bed, and he was accompanied by a maid on night watch, carrying a magic lamp.

My father called out to me first. "Is that you, Werner?"

"Yes. Should we head to the bell?"

"No, let's just send someone that way."

"All right. I'll let Norbert know."

In this medieval-ish world, bells were most frequently used in cities and towns for indicating the time. Generally, they rang three times a day, at 6 am, 12 pm, and 6 pm. Since the gates opened and closed at the morning and evening bells, your average person could get by just fine only knowing what those bells were for.

However, there were numerous other bells that served different purposes. Someone working in the markets would hear the bells at slightly different times. There were also bells that marked special occasions, like weddings, the death of a royal family member, and the outcome of a major trial.

This particular bell, dinging over and over again, was used to signal an

emergency. Naturally, you would hear it if there was an enemy attack or an insurrection, but it also sounded when there were fires. Since it wasn't ringing out throughout the entire capital, I doubted that armed violence was involved—probably a fire, then. It probably wasn't anywhere in the nobles' district, judging by how far away it sounded.

Even this world had specialized fire departments, but they were generally based in the nobles' district. The commoners had to work together, passing buckets in relays, in order to put out any fires in their area. The bell would be the signal for people to rouse their neighbors and ask for help.

Being an aristocrat, I wasn't obliged by station to send anyone out to assist, but I had my reputation and standing to consider. For appearances' sake alone, I would have to demonstrate that I was doing everything I could to help out the little guy. This was yet another facet of what you'd call *noblesse oblige*. It was kind of like how politicians in my old world would send their secretaries to attend a prominent local's funeral or wedding ceremony.

As a matter of fact, these bells were a form of peer pressure. It probably wouldn't happen in large towns comparable in size to the capital, but in rural cities and villages, families that didn't respond to the bells at their church would be judged for shirking their neighborly duty and, inevitably, be ostracized.

This was even more pronounced in medieval Europe. There were even some extreme cases of people's houses being torn down by their fellow villagers because they didn't respond to a collective call to action. Such was the power of a bell's signal—even though there wasn't much that people in the Middle Ages could do about a fire besides lining up a bunch of water buckets and praying to God that the blaze didn't spread.

Putting all that aside, though, I descended to the first floor. Since I'd been told not to go personally, I went to see Norbert, our family butler. I figured my father ought to rest when he could, considering his work as a minister and all, so I took it upon myself to issue the orders. Seeing as my father returned to his bedroom, I assumed he was content to leave this in my hands.

After a short chat with Norbert at the entrance of the first floor, I told each of our live-in servants and the sentries on night duty to see how things were at the fire's location. Then I told the other servants and maids to get some rest for now.

With that, I briefly returned to my room to get changed, letting Norbert handle the incoming status reports. A maid on night duty (different from the one who accompanied my father earlier) came over from the entrance to pass me a lamp. I thanked her and took it. Walking around the mansion was one thing, but getting changed in pitch darkness was kind of a tall order.

Some aristocrats in my old world would never deign to dress themselves alone, but this world was a bit different in that regard. Maybe it was because we had the academy, but even higher-ranked nobles were largely expected to be able to take care of themselves. This was perhaps one of the good things about a brawn-obsessed world. The idea was that if you couldn't even dress yourself, how could you be expected to handle yourself on the battlefield?

As an aside, one of the big problems in this medieval-ish world was that it lacked rubber. This meant that you constantly had to tie strings around even your underwear and shoes. Although there were some monster parts that were a bit like rubber in some respects, they didn't exist in large enough quantities to become a fixture of everyday life.

To be perfectly blunt, most of the parts which did exist went to the royals or were monopolized for women's clothing. In that regard, women wore the pants in this world—well, the rubber in them, at least. I considered searching for a rubber tree, but I didn't know what they looked like. I probably wouldn't recognize one even if I did see it.

None of these thoughts were at all relevant to the situation at hand, but they kept me amused as I made my way back to the first floor. There, I told Norbert that it was his turn to get changed. In the meantime, I went around the living room listening to what people had to say about the situation outside.

You might wonder why it was necessary to keep abreast of situations like this. Mainly, it was a contingency plan for the off-chance the fire broke out in a residence with ties to ours—like, for instance, the personal abode of one of our knights. In that scenario, our family would take responsibility for dealing with the fallout. We had much deeper obligations in cases like that.

Fortunately, one of the sentries who returned reported that the place on fire had no relation to the Zehrfelds. In one sense, that was a good thing, but since it felt awkward going back to sleep at this hour, I decided to get ready for work. Even in my old life, I was no stranger to all-nighters.

The next day—or rather, at the next morning bell—I had breakfast and greeted Neurath and Schünzel’s arrival at the estate. We walked to the palace together. Being a viscount meant that I was allowed to show up for duty in a carriage, but I preferred the walk. Everyone was a bit different in this regard, but maybe I was this way because I liked to organize my thoughts as I walked.

On the road, I passed by some people talking about a fire. At first, I assumed they were talking about last night, but apparently not. I wondered if there were multiple cases happening in tandem.

“Hey, Neurath, Schünzel. Apparently, there was another fire a couple of days ago. Do you know about it?”

“Yes. I heard it was arson,” Schünzel declared.

“Arson?” I twitched in reaction.

Much like in Japan, arson was a serious crime in this world. Given how quickly a fire could spread, taking lives as it went, it wasn’t rare for arsonists to be sentenced to hang, regardless of the actual severity of the damage. Depending on the context, you could even be executed for a failed attempt. The harsh handling was partly due to the fact that houses were often clustered together in medieval cities, making it all too easy for fires to spread devastation.

As a matter of fact, fires were extremely common in medieval Europe. Although the Middle Ages referred to a broad window of time, making it hard

to generalize, the stoves in houses often didn't have covers. Just lighting the wick of a tallow candle could create a terrible smoke. To mitigate that, there were a lot of tools to keep the candles propped up in their stands so that you could leave them on the table. This meant that fires were liable to break out if some kind of tremor caused a candle to topple, or if sparks flew off the stove. This alone meant that fire-related incidents broke out all year round.

Ironically, however, arson cases weren't nearly as plentiful. It bears repeating that arson was considered a steeper crime than outright murder. This world was much like the historical Middle Ages in the sense that a murderer could "buy their freedom" by paying their victim's relatives while arsonists would never be pardoned.

Still, to think this was an arson case...

"Knowing that it's arson does intrigue me."

"Indeed. However, your duties lie elsewhere, Master Werner," Neurath pointed out.

"Yeah, I know." I could only smile sheepishly in response.

It would be a different story if someone connected to our house was affected, but until then, the case stayed in the jurisdiction of the night watch.

There wasn't any urgent need for me to take an interest in this, but I couldn't say I *wasn't* interested. Now that Mazel had embarked on the game's story, any incidents that unfolded in his absence would not demand a Hero's intervention. At least, he shouldn't need to come back until the capital was attacked.

But even if it had nothing to do with him, it still had something to do with *me*. Or rather, you could say that my perspective on these kinds of issues was changing. Now that I'd seen kids like the royal grandson Ruven, his fiancée Rosemary, and the orphan Ilse, I couldn't stop at ensuring my own safety and that of my family. If I survived but all those other people died, I'd never be able to live with myself. And I wouldn't be able to look Mazel and his companions in the eye.

But I didn't know what form the attack would take. The game never actually showed what happened. I had to consider all kinds of scenarios.

In a conventional defensive or siege battle, supporting the citizens was absolutely indispensable. Unlike human foes, the Demon army would not hesitate to slaughter people even when they surrendered. While this meant no chance of people on our side secretly colluding with the enemy, it was conceivable that the panicked citizens could throw the castle gates open in a desperate attempt to escape.

I liked to think that the ordinary folk wouldn't be able to open the gates, but there were plenty of cases in Europe where the residents actually did betray their own side by opening the castle gates from the inside. Knowing my history, I couldn't declare with certainty that the people *couldn't* force the castle gates open through sheer pressure.

With that in mind, it was crucial that we had the people's faith and support in case we ever did fight a defensive battle at the capital. Although a commoner on their own wasn't worth much in a fight, the valiant defense during the refugee escort mission had shown me a glimpse of what they could accomplish through strength of numbers.

Maintaining order, civility, and peace of mind would be crucial in winning the people's hearts, so it was best not to leave a crime like arson unchecked. I also figured that this could be a good opportunity to test Neurath and Schünzel's mettle. I'd have to be careful not to get burned, but hey, a little playing with fire couldn't hurt too much, right?

There was a growing pile of paperwork in my office in the palace, but I decided it could wait a while. I called over some of my father's aides from the office next door to ask about what I should do. The conclusion: get a civil official to arrange things for me. After that, I asked Max to choose some veteran knights for me.

“Neurath, Schünzel, there’s something I want you to do for me.”

“Yessir.”

“At your command.”

I assigned each of them a veteran knight and civil official as aides, forming two groups of three people. Once that was done, I ordered them to gather information on the fires. In particular, I wanted them to look into where the fires broke out, who spotted them, and any persons of interest in the area.

“What do you mean by persons of interest?” asked Schünzel.

“We’re looking for someone who might resort to arson, so it could be someone with a grudge or some strong ulterior motive,” I replied.

Neurath spoke up next. “Why are you investigating this matter, Master Werner?”

“Ah, well, you know. I want to avoid any unfounded rumors implicating the refugees. I’m not in charge of the refugees, but I do have an attachment to them.”

“I see. I suppose that is possible, given the circumstances.”

Phew, I managed to come up with something. I couldn’t tell anyone yet that the capital would get attacked. It would be one thing if nobody believed me, but I definitely didn’t want anyone branding me a traitor for colluding with the Demon army. At this point, there were still ears in the walls.

Regardless, I wanted Neurath and Schünzel to gain a bit of experience with these types of investigations. The stakes were low enough that it was fine for them to back off if someone kicked up a fuss. Besides, I was sure that the experience would come in handy later, when push came to shove. I told them to pay heed to any words of caution from their knight and civil official aides, and then sent them on their merry way.

In the meantime, I busied myself with paperwork. Today’s batch included a report detailing the extra rewards allotted to the adventurers and mercenaries

on the refugee escort mission for their deeds in battle, plus the drop items they collected from the monsters. There was also a calculation of the healing fees for the injured and monetary support for the bereaved of those slain in battle.

Finally, there were some documents pertaining to the fief's administration. Oh, what was this? Klamroth—I was pretty sure he was one of our squires—was apparently getting married. I'd have to consult with my mother on getting him a celebratory gift.

There were a lot of things I didn't know about what noblewomen did with their time, but it was the duty of the matron of the house to oversee major milestones in their servants' and vassals' personal lives.

She would file the paperwork for a retainer's marriage or childbirth. In less happy circumstances, she would be the mediator in their divorces and arrange the inheritances at their funerals. She would also arbitrate disputes between villagers and oversee the valuable items belonging to the house, such as jewels and precious metals. Finally, she would often manage the exchange of gifts between noble houses, the philanthropic work within the fief, and other financial affairs.

Thus, despite their not-so-high standing on the social ladder, a competent wife was essential to managing a noble household and its territory. If the local governors in particular started doing as they pleased, a fief could get run into the ground. The servants could turn to larceny and other misdeeds if the matron herself was corrupt. Things could get even messier after the lady of the house passed away without a clear successor to her role.

My mother was very put-together in that regard, so all I had to do was send a message to her and she would take care of everything. Frankly, she was a lifesaver.

I spent the whole day on office work. My sole interruption came in the evening, when Neurath returned. He looked exhausted from the unfamiliar work, which I did feel a little bad about.

“You look like you had a long day. Tell me what you found.”

“Yessir. So about the investigation...”

What surprised me about the proceeding report was that, when you counted the fire the night before, all three incidents were arson, apparently. The first case happened before the refugees arrived at the capital. This seemed to be proof that the refugees had nothing to do with the crimes—was that a good thing or a bad thing?

I was still mulling this over when Schünzel chimed in with his report of the scenes. When I looked over the list of persons of interest, I was struck by a peculiar common thread.

“Hmm...”

“Is something the matter?” asked Neurath.

“No, nothing much at this point,” I responded half to myself.

I did have my suspicions, though. The incident was out of my purview, but I thought it was worth reevaluating. I was doing it for the sake of public order, of course, but I was also aching for a change of pace. Doing paperwork was a strain on my hands and eyes.

“Since you’ve put in the work to investigate things for me, I might as well drop by the scene to have a look. Come with me, you two.”

“Yessir.”

After explaining the situation to my father, I excused myself and left the palace. Anticipating that it would be dark, I prepared a magic lamp in advance. When I reached the scene of the previous night’s fire, I saw a crowd of rubberneckers. Not that this matters, but the fact that people understood slang like “rubberneckers” really drove home the fact that this was a game world.

My pointless thoughts were soon interrupted by the sound of arguing nearby. *Oh boy, here we go*, I couldn’t help but think. For a moment I considered putting this whole thing off for later, but the prospect of a fight breaking out

here was rather troubling. I took a peek just in case there was a serious problem, only to lay eyes on a familiar face.

We weren't *that* close, so it did cross my mind that perhaps it was better for me to stay out of it. Just from the voices, however, I could tell that one side was digging its heels in harder than the other. It looked like the situation was about to escalate in an unpleasant direction, so I sighed and steeled myself.

"Sorry. What's going on?"

Cutting through the crowd of curious onlookers, I approached the scene of the fire. The two people at loggerheads both turned my way.

"Viscount Zehrfeld..." Lady Hermine murmured, prompting a man who looked like a member of the guards to straighten up. It was at times like this that I truly felt the power of being a minister's son.

"I apologize for interrupting your conversation, Lady Hermine. Is something the matter?" I asked as I surveyed the surroundings.

Lady Hermine's face turned slightly pink. It was only when she followed my darting eyes that she noticed that there was a crowd.

"W-well, you see..."

While she stood there stammering, the burly, red-faced man in a guard's armor next to her spoke up. "I wanted to interview the people next door to the source of the recent fire," he said hesitantly.

"I can guarantee that this house is innocent," Lady Hermine interjected. *Hm.* I didn't know the relationships here, but it seemed that she was wary about the people next door getting dragged to court.

As a matter of fact, much like medieval Europe, it was hard to say that court trials in this world bore any resemblance to the modern legal system. Witch trials were an extreme case, but more often than not, medieval trials weren't a test for determining whether the accused was guilty or not, but rather a ceremony to assert that they were.

Medieval trials had some crazy ideas for how to deliver a verdict. For example, a government official could storm into the house of the defendant's family as the noon bell rang and seize things at random. Go to trial and you were as good as guilty.

This world wasn't quite as dire in that regard. At least, that's what I'd like to say, but if the fellow in charge was an ass, then the trial could be just as bad as a medieval European one. Because of this, people were wary that a negligent inquisitor could turn a hearing into a condemnation.

Though I didn't know why Lady Hermine would look out for this particular neighbor, I could understand *what* she was worried about. Hmm. This was looking like quite the conundrum. It was an undeniable fact that you were generally supposed to defer to the person in charge. "I see the situation here. Uhh..."

"I apologize for not giving my name. I am Sven Blask."

"Blask, I heard that this was arson. Has anyone died?" I asked the very officer-like guard.

"No dead, sir, but there has been looting," he replied.

Hmm. So they were pilfering things from the empty houses. I tried not to let my eyes narrow too obviously.

Neurath and Schünzel had already told me that nobody died. Thefts tended to happen where fires broke out in any world, though whether that was the explicit intent behind the string of arson was another question altogether.

"Can I have a look around the scene?"

"The on-scene investigations have wrapped up, so I don't mind."

"I-I would like to come along too," Lady Hermine insisted, and Blask accepted that as well.

Both parties seemed to have calmed down after I intervened. With Blask, Neurath, Schünzel, and Lady Hermine in tow, I entered the house where the

arson took place in the wee hours of night. The inside was filled with the smell of charred wood, and the stone walls were black with soot. There was still some water left on the floor.

While the idea of preserving a crime scene wasn't unheard of in this world, people weren't too fussed about it—hence why I was able to waltz inside without any connection to the investigation. It was hard to say whether this was a good or bad thing.

“Was the owner not around?” I asked.

“No, he perished in the Demon Stampede. His wife took their children and returned to her family.”

“Is her family close by?”

Blask nodded. “They live by the horse broker just up ahead.”

So the wife of this knight or soldier was the daughter of a horse broker. That meant that the man who died in battle was a commoner at birth. Yeah, that made sense.

By the way, people often have this impression that people in the Middle Ages got married really young, but that wasn't necessarily the case in large cities. Depending on the time period and region, men could be twenty-eight and women could be eighteen on average when they got married. It was common for people to marry again later in life because the average life expectancy was indeed quite low, but I was digressing.

I looked around the house, which had been unoccupied at the time the fire broke out. If it got vacated after the Stampede, that meant the house had been empty for nearly a month. That would have been all well and good in a regional city, but in the densely populated capital, it was unusual for a house to remain unoccupied for so long. As a matter of fact, Neurath reported that all the arsons had taken place at similarly unoccupied houses. This was what piqued my curiosity enough to go looking into it myself.

As I went further inside, my eyes fell on the windows, which were slatted shut. It was hard to tell from here whether the houses next door were occupied. In fact, you wouldn't even walk around at night in this world unless you had some specific reason for it.

Peering into the stove, something strange stood out to me. *What do we have here?* I thought.

"There's a lot of ash piled up in here," I commented.

"Indeed there is." Neurath nodded.

Although it was technically possible for it to have piled up before the occupants moved out, it was still an unusual amount. If anything, the stove looked like it was about to overflow. I could see that someone had gone out of their way to stuff the ash in there. It was evident, at least, that someone had been hiding here in the past few days.

Needless to say, because chimneys were set up away from the road, you could light a fire without anyone noticing unless you were *really* careless. This was especially true if you only used the stove at night. There were a lot of chimneys around in the capital, and not many people would stare at the sky as they walked around.

Lady Hermine was zealously examining the most burnt part of the building, where the fire was believed to have originated. I wondered if she'd happened upon some kind of clue. With my eyes, I signaled to Neurath and Schünzel to look around there in case there was anything.

As a matter of fact, an area which had a lot of flammable things would come out looking the most burned. A place that *looked* like the source of the fire at first glance might not necessarily be the source. To put it in stark terms, those spots would look like hell. If there was a big pile-up of ash, it meant that the temperature was the hottest there.

In my old world, the concept of forensics only came into being in the nineteenth century. Much like Earth, this world hadn't progressed that far in its

thinking just yet. It was impossible to search for footprints because the burnt buildings would be flooded with water, which was only to be expected after putting out a fire.

Standing in the center of the building, I swept my eyes across the interior one more time. The room with the stove had charred barrels by the wall. Even if a fire were to break out near the stove instead of deeper inside, you could throw together your bare necessities and escape from the building.

In this world, a lot of commoners' houses didn't have plumbing. This meant that they couldn't turn on the water to put out a fire straight away. Although people did use sand and ash for those purposes, even that could be tricky if the flames had spread for whatever reason. Whoever had been in this seemingly empty house must have been desperate to make their escape without anyone in the surrounding area noticing.

"Master Werner, this was inside the stove."

Schünzel approached me while I was contemplating the scene. I looked at what he was holding. "A...wooden hammer."

It was smashed up, or perhaps worn out from being used too much. Mostly, it was reduced to ash. It didn't occur to me to berate him for just casually picking it up. The concept of preserving fingerprints didn't exist here, and there weren't any tools capable of doing so anyway.

It wasn't strange in itself to see this inside the stove, given that it was common to use broken woodwork as a replacement for firewood. But considering how the original occupants would have brought the firewood with them when they left, then this was probably evidence that the culprit left behind at the scene. It wasn't covered in water, presumably because it was inside the stove, but its burnt up state didn't seem to have been caused by the fire. This had probably been left here one or two days before.

I whispered into Schünzel's ear to hold Blask's attention. He obliged and steered Blask further inside the house. I took Schünzel's place in front of the

stove, lit a magic lamp, and placed it on the floor. Then I started crawling. Neurath seemed like he was about to blow his lid seeing a nobleman scrabbling around on hands and knees, but I stopped him with a wave of my hand as I ran my eyes across the floor.

I found what I was looking for in the corner where the barrel met the wall. *So that's it, huh.* I moistened my fingertip with spit so that I could absorb some of the powder and examine it. When I lifted my head, my eyes met with an astonished Lady Hermine, but I decided to ignore her.

"So this was the spot, huh?" I muttered to myself.

Lady Hermine drew closer. "Er, um, Viscount Zehrfeld?"

She looked like she wanted to say something, but I silenced her with a quick glance.

I called Blask over. "I'm done here. Sorry for putting you out like this."

"It's not a problem. Did you figure anything out?"

"Nothing in particular. Anyway, you plan to interview the residents next door, right? I'd like to come along too."

As soon as I said that, Blask's eyes shifted slightly to the side. The movement of someone who wanted to say no. The look of a guilty conscience.

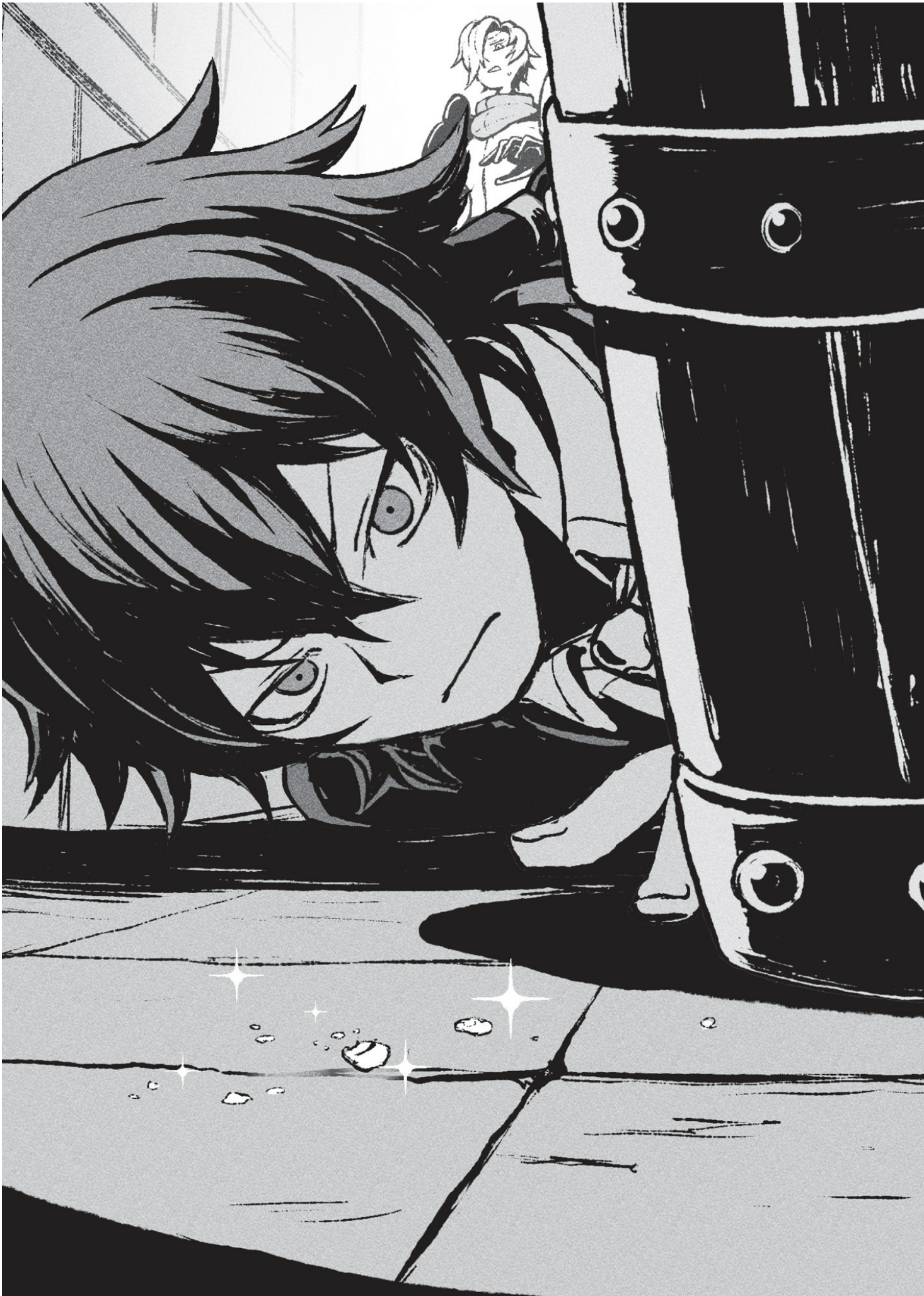
"Er, um, well..." He really wanted to ask why I was butting in when I had nothing to do with the case.

I fixed a stern stare at the space between his eyes and his forehead. "I just want to hear what they say," I said firmly, not taking no for an answer.

There wasn't enough fight in him for anything but a reluctant nod. One of the perks of being a viscount.

"Come this way, then."

"Sorry for the trouble."



Incidentally, if you stare into the area around someone's forehead and eyes, they're supposed to feel a strong sense of unease. That was what some psychology study said, at least. I saw a mentalist explain that on TV as a method of intimidating other people. Who knew that trivia would come in handy now?

Blask called over a somewhat elderly husband and wife from the commoner house next door. While he was duly occupied, I whispered quickly into Lady Hermine's ear: "If you know these people, make sure they say they haven't heard anything."

"Wh-what?"

"Just do it."

I promptly pulled away from Lady Hermine and nonchalantly introduced myself to the old couple. After that, I turned back to Blask and asked, as if the thought had only just casually occurred to me, whether he planned to record the questions and answers. And then, as a precaution, I told Neurath and Schünzel to bring in some of the onlookers from outside to serve as witnesses.

While Blask was distracted by my knights, Lady Hermine quickly whispered something to the couple. It helped that the inside of the house was dark enough that you needed a lamp to see things clearly.

Then the questioning began. When asked if they heard any unusual sounds recently, the couple gave an unambiguous no in response. After that, I asked some soft-ball questions before leaving Blask to do his job. Perhaps because he felt my eyes on his back, he didn't resort to any heavy-handed questioning.

Blask's questions finally came to an end, at least for the moment. When his gaze flickered back to me, I figured that it was probably the right time.

"Is it over?" I asked.

"Y-yes. For today."

"All right. Sorry again for butting in."

I called out to Neurath, Schünzel, and Lady Hermine, saying that it was time to

call it a day. Lady Hermine looked like she wanted to object, but I said the hour was getting late and I should escort her home. I watched her nod, and then we headed off together in a separate direction from Blask.

She kept glancing at me as we walked along. “Thanks for helping,” I said, when we were some distance away from the crime scene.

“Oh, it’s nothing. But, um. You also, er...”

“You seemed wary about that guard. Any particular reason?”

Not for the first time, I grumbled inwardly at how difficult it was to adopt such a casual tone with Lady Hermine.

She hesitated a little at my blunt question. “I heard from my senior knights that there was a guard with ‘greasy palms.’”

A guard a bit too eager for bribes, then. There was a similar expression to that in my old world. The reference to grease was a holdover from when bribes didn’t take the form of physical money, which would have been quite incriminating if found. Instead, they would accept fatty meat, which disappeared as soon as it went down the hatch. It was the western equivalent of “yellow candy” in Japan.

“That man’s appearance and countenance match what you’ve heard?” I asked.

“Yes.”

Oho. As I nodded inwardly at this confirmation, Lady Hermine spoke up. “Viscount Zehrfeld, there is something I would like to ask you.” Her expression said that she was tired of waiting.

“Okay, I’ll explain from the top. That empty house was a type of workshop. They destroyed anything that would prove whether the fire was an accident, but I am leaning toward the idea that it was an accident.” I explained my reasoning to satisfy Lady Hermine’s question, as well as for Neurath and Schünzel’s benefit.

It was better to have this sort of conversation while we were moving. It lessened the chance of others listening in.

Accidents were prone to happen if you worked by lamplight while trying to hide your presence. For example, when you were trying to cook something at night on a stove, sparks could fly onto the cloak you were using to sleep on and catch fire. In order to stop light from slipping out the window, you might try to stifle the flame with some old cloth or something leaning against the wall.

The twist was that all the fires, including the first arson, could be classified as accidents. Perhaps someone took the opportunity to destroy the evidence that they happened unintentionally, and then planted their own evidence to the contrary. I had no idea whether the idea was to frame the couple next door, but Lady Hermine was right to feel that something was off. Not wanting the work in the empty houses to be revealed, the culprit had hurriedly passed the incidents off as “arson.”

“A workshop, you say? How would you know that?”

“Even though the house was supposedly unoccupied, they determined that there was a theft at the scene. That’s one reason. If you can *determine* that, it means that they knew for certain that something was inside.”

Half of that was explanation, while the other half was me working through my deductions.

“Although there is a possibility that the original occupants confirmed what was inside for themselves,” I went on, “it’s not very likely. Everything we know about the original occupants was relayed to us secondhand.”

My thoughts whirled as I spoke. According to Neurath and Schünzel’s investigations, a guard would frequently come by the empty house. I wondered if that guard was Blask himself—it was worth looking into.

With that in mind, I brought up a separate matter. “There was also that barrel.”

“The barrel?”

“Unlike boxes, barrels are put together very securely to prevent water from leaking. They’re quite expensive to order. Your average commoner would regard them as a luxury and would have no reason to leave one lying around after vacating. Someone brought it in without asking the owners. It’s proof that they were using the house for something.”

“Ah,” someone gasped. I didn’t know which of the three made the sound.

Of course they wouldn’t know—someone who belonged to the noble or knight levels of the social strata wouldn’t regard barrels as particularly expensive. Ironically, I was able to figure this out because of my perspective as a former Japanese person. Back there, everyone used glass or plastic bottles, while barrels were regarded as high-end goods.

The next person to speak up with a question was Neurath. “So what kind of work were they doing...?”

“They were probably clipping coins.”

“Coins?!”

“They are made out of precious metal, after all.”

The gold and silver used in coins were fairly soft, as far as metals went. If you beat at something hard, you could scratch it or bend it out of shape. Even just everyday usage would cause damage over a long period of time. Such was the fate of the *bitasen* coins from Japan’s late medieval era. The term literally meant “bad quality coins.”

In medieval Europe, however, there were some cases of people intentionally damaging gold and silver coins. Removing the edges of coins to make them look like they were shaped that way from the beginning was referred to as coin clipping. Some of the old coins you might see in a museum were so damaged that they failed to even retain their original shape while others had jagged surfaces where you could tell that someone had taken bits out of them.

The amount you could scrape off a coin without depleting its value as currency was so small as to be considered miniscule. But even tiny scraps could pile up into a mountain. After clipping hundreds of coins, you could put all the bits of gold and silver into a pouch to sell.

Many coins were made with countermeasures in mind. Some had seals called clipping marks engraved on the back of them. If those seals got even slightly chipped, the coin's worth would be measured by its weight instead of face value. This was the kind of crime that wouldn't get represented in a video game.

But hmm, I guess the reason why this sort of thing didn't happen all that often in Edo Japan was because people were just *that* scared of the shogunate. I also felt like it had something to do with the characteristics of the Japanese people. Though I guess that's neither here nor there, huh?

"I have no way of knowing if they scraped the coins inside the barrel or used it as a makeshift table," I said. "Either way, the person who snuck into the house used it for sure."

If they did the clipping work with their hands inside the barrel, then any shavings that might have come flying off their tool would have fallen somewhere inside the barrel. They wouldn't lose any big chunks, at the very least. But powder-sized fragments could still have landed outside.

As an aside, all the coin denominations—gold, silver, and copper—had standard weights in this world. The standard from the ancient kingdom carried over to the present day. The Temple of Finoy had weights corresponding to each of the coin denominations, and I was pretty sure that other countries had their own stones for comparing weights.

Generally, these were used as the basis for currency in every country, so the same gold and silver coins could be used everywhere. At this point, other than counterfeit money, there weren't any other cases of criminals undermining the currency. If clipping coins reduced the value of currency, then it could very well

become an international problem.

Conversions between gold, silver, and copper coins followed the decimal system, probably because this was a simplistic video-game world. The exception to this were the mithril coins made in each country. In the kingdom of Wein, a single mithril coin was worth about a hundred gold coins. They scarcely saw any use at all. The royal family reserved them as rewards for the nobility, treating them as decorative medals more than anything else. They generally had the name and profile of the reigning monarch engraved on them. Even if you got your hands on one of those coins as a gift, I doubted that you'd be able to spend or sell it.

"Even if you're being careful as you work, the fine bits will fall out," I explained. "There was some silver dust in the corner of the wall, within the shadow of the barrel."

"Was that what you were searching for?" asked Lady Hermine.

"It's easier to find small things if you shine a light at a low angle to cast a long shadow."

Hurrah for the crime TV shows in my old world. I wouldn't normally get the opportunity to apply this level of useless knowledge. To be fair, the whole business of clipping coins wasn't normally useful either, but that was within the realm of my interests.

"But who could have done this?" demanded Lady Hermine.

"I think it was someone in the horse broker guild."

In this world, horses played the roles of both vehicles for transport, and tractors for farming. You could even say that they were like trucks, since you could use them to carry your quarry from hunting. This meant that even one horse could be pricey. Even a cheap one would usually set you back several dozens of silver coins. Although this industry did see its fair share of informal deals, it was still incredibly easy to amass a huge stack of coins relative to other industries. Jewelers also dealt with similarly expensive wares, but because their

clients were the nobility, they didn't have to resort to clipping.

"All the empty houses affected by the fires belonged to horse brokers or their relatives. It's likely that our culprit is someone related to the guild, because they would easily be able to get hold of that information."

That was another common thread in Neurath's and Schünzel's reports. This information would easily have fallen into your lap if you took the investigation seriously, but the fact that they overlooked the wooden hammer did not inspire confidence. It went beyond sloppiness and into the realm of corruption. That possibility seemed especially likely after hearing Lady Hermine's story. As a precaution, I got that couple to say that they knew nothing, so I doubted that they would be framed as the criminals—at least, not for a little while yet.

"I suspect that even if prospective renters did come along, someone could maneuver things so that the house remained empty. If one guild lays claim to a house, then someone from a different guild can have trouble renting it. It's a common story."

"But why would a horse broker resort to that?" asked Lady Hermine.

"Not every ranch is near the capital. And the monsters are changing." I gave a clipped response, not because I thought Lady Hermine was stupid or anything, but because that was all I needed to say in explanation.

Monsters liked attacking humans, but it wasn't like they *didn't* eat animals. Before, the ranchers wouldn't have needed to guard their horses against monsters when bringing them to the capital. At most, they would have hired a cheap adventurer and been done with it.

But with the monsters becoming violent in the wake of the Demon Lord's return, it was now necessary to hire an adventurer with actual skills if you wanted to guarantee the horses' safety. In other words, transportation fees were seeing a sharp climb. Thus, they felt the need to make up for the shortfall.

"There's definitely looting going on around the sites of the fires," I said, "but an organization damaging our currency is the bigger problem."

The reason why Blask declared that there were robberies was because he knew that someone snuck in after the fires to take “something” out. For example, someone who had been working inside might have evacuated from the place in alarm with just the coins in hand. Afterward, however, they might have gone back to retrieve their tools.

That in itself was a problem, but a proper guard should have discovered a thief taking advantage of the fires if he’d done a routine investigation. Probably. I guess it might be tricky in a world which didn’t have a good grasp of forensic investigations.

“But anyway, why were you so worried about that couple?” I asked Lady Hermine carelessly, before my thoughts caught up to me.

It was a foolish topic for me to bring up, I have to admit. Lady Hermine’s expression twisted for a moment in hesitation.

“The lady of that house was my milk mother,” she answered in a small voice.

Oof. I’d accidentally asked about a touchy subject. A lot of milk mothers for noblewomen were high society women or members of a retainer family. Some kind of drama must have gone down if a former milk mother for a count’s daughter was living as a commoner. If I pursued this topic any further, I’d be dredging up scandals best left buried. The fact that she answered me at all was a sign that she trusted me, but I struggled to formulate a reply. I decided to pretend that I didn’t hear what she said.

Anyway, I sympathized. Although I didn’t have any obligations to someone not connected to House Fürst, it didn’t feel great to see a guard attempt to pin a crime on a commoner. Like with fires, the correct method of dealing with this sort of crime was to put out the flames while they were still small. Time to bite the bullet, huh.

“Neurath, sorry to ask this of you when it’s so late, but could you carry a message for me? Frenssen, I want you to give Lady Hermine the conclusions from the report from earlier today.”

Lady Hermine looked like she had some questions, but I feigned obliviousness as I continued my train of thought. The house of the Minister of Ceremonies investigating a crime was a flagrant overstepping of our bounds. How would I get away with that? It was a bit pushy of me, but I would have to drag some other people into this story.

Several days later, a group of horse brokers gathered in a corner of the capital in preparation for business.

From their perspective, the choice of location was a testament to the recent sorry state of affairs. Before the Demon Lord's revival, horse brokers would have set up tents of varying sizes outside the city walls, where prospective customers could try out the horses on the spot.

But now, dangerous new monsters stalked the capital's vicinity, and even the endemic species were becoming more aggressive. This meant that, for their own safety and that of their horses, the brokers had no choice but to ply their trade in a cramped area inside the palace. Unfortunately for them, some of their customers struck hard bargains with them under the justification that they could not test out the mounts.

The brokers grew ever more disgruntled, although the guild was not a united front. This was because the brokers who targeted their services to the aristocrats saw themselves differently from the ones who sold draft horses to ordinary citizens.

Amid this tightly clustered space of people and horses, a sudden disturbance broke out nearby. The mystified brokers could only watch as a group of knights and soldiers appeared in front of them.

The surprise on their faces only deepened when an aristocratic-looking man accompanied by a magisterial official stepped forth from the center of the group.

"Birol, Joti, Heino, Sepp," he intoned. "Are these four men present here?"

“Y-yes.”

“I’m here...”

The men whose names had been called out stepped out of the crowd. The eyes of Bastian Timo Fürst glanced over them coldly.

“Good,” he declared. “You are under arrest.”

The men’s expressions stiffened.

“What?!”

“Wh-what did we do?”

“Our men are on their way to apprehend Sven Blask as we speak.”

At first, the four men attempted to protest, but the moment Bastian declared Blask’s name, their red faces instantly turned pale. Their expressions alone told an entire story. One could perhaps discern that they were unaccustomed to dodging the law.

“Why don’t you lads come quietly?”

“C-curses!”

One man tried to turn tail and run, only to be swiftly apprehended by Count Fürst’s knights. In the midst of the ruckus, a man whose name hadn’t been called out attempted to sneak out of the market unawares.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

The man jolted in alarm when Hermine blocked his exit route.

Betting on the fact that she did not have her sword drawn, the man prepared to ram himself at Hermine. Either that, or he might have tried to thrust her aside in his attempt to flee.

Hermine showed no signs of faltering. She merely shifted her body slightly to sidestep her opponent. Then she seized his arm and broke down his stance without missing a step. When she stuck her leg out, gravity pulled his body to the ground in a most graceless fashion.

As she barked out a command to a squire to arrest the man, her eyes met with Werner, who was watching the proceedings some distance away from the group. After making sure that the man was in custody, Mine approached Werner.

“Viscount Zehrfeld, it all proceeded just as you imagined,” she said to him quietly.

“The craftiest one wouldn’t make a move by himself.”

Werner had suspected that the person closest to the mastermind probably didn’t have direct contact with Blask. Thus, he recommended that she position herself outside the group to keep a careful watch for anyone who tried to sneak out.

Werner himself was flanked by Neurath and Schünzel, thinking that he would lend a hand if multiple people fled. The fact that this did not prove necessary was a testament to Hermine’s abundant strength and skill. Werner was frankly impressed.

“Are things okay on Blask’s end?”

“My brother moves in his direction. In any case, um, are you fine with how this unfolded, Viscount?”

“If anything, I’m glad that you didn’t credit me,” said Werner as he grimaced inwardly.

He felt painfully self-aware that he had barely lifted a finger himself. Because he had left all the legwork to House Fürst, it wouldn’t be altogether incorrect to describe *him* as the man pulling the strings.

“Since I was never involved in this case from the start, this should spare me some unwanted entanglements.”

The relationship between House Zehrfeld and House Fürst was cordial—nothing more or less. He was aware that House Fürst looked down on House Zehrfeld. If he “took the credit” from them, they might try to probe him for any

hidden motives and things would get messy.

From Werner's perspective, he would much rather keep quiet that someone related to the Minister of Ceremonies had been involved in a criminal investigation. Although a part of him did sympathize with Lady Hermine's complicated circumstances, he hadn't encouraged House Fürst to swoop in out of any desire to deepen the bonds between their houses. He also couldn't deny his deep-seated desire to avoid stirring up trouble between their neighboring fiefs.



“There’s something I want to do,” he said. “I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“R-right. I will take it from here.”

Werner promptly left the scene, taking Neurath and Schünzel with him. Although it was a fact that there were still some loose ends to attend to, his deeper motivation was to slip away before his presence could become a point of conversation.

Hermine watched Werner off. For a moment after that, she hesitated before turning to her father Bastian. Understandably, she did not attempt to hide things from him. On the other hand, even Hermine herself did not explain why she avoided telling her brother all the details.

The brother in question was busily working with a magisterial official to arrest Blask. Given the overwhelming difference in strength between Blask and the knights of Fürst, Tyrone encountered no difficulties in the task. He did not swing a weapon himself, though he nodded his thanks and satisfaction to the officials who’d accompanied them.

Also, in a later investigation by Bastian and his men, they discovered numerous damaged coins at the bottom of barrels for horse fodder among the possessions of the brokers. This would prompt a serious investigation into their doings.

The night after the authorities launched an extensive investigation on the horse brokers, a group of men in a certain store prepared for a hasty departure. In the dead of the night, they arranged for multiple carriages to take them from the capital to another town at the first sign of light.

One of the men packed his luggage with a distinct edge of violence. As he tossed his tools into boxes and bags, the servants buzzed around him, cramming as many bags as they could into the carriages.

“Hurry it up.”

“Yes, sir.”

Although the gates would not open until morning, his agitation spurred him to speed up the preparations as much as possible. The sudden arrest of the horse brokers had so startled him that his thoughts had fallen to shambles.

“The *investment* in that guard was a waste. How vexing,” declared a man in servant-like attire.

Though the man who faced him was dressed in expensive-looking clothes, he seemed to have more of the countenance of a poor man. “Why did those House Fürst cretins show up when they have nothing to do with this?” he snarled in irritation. “Everything was going so smoothly.”

“Blask must have slipped up in front of the count’s people. I heard that the count’s son personally arrested the man in town,” said the servant.

The other man’s scowl betrayed his extreme unease. Someone who would accept a bribe was exactly the kind of person who would help cover for a crime, but there was no getting around the fact that these types often got complacent, or else left gaps in an operation’s cover. Although he understood this on an intellectual level, it felt much too soon to have the rug pulled out from underneath him.

In order to make a profit from clipping coins, you had to keep at the work for a long time. For the crime to be exposed so soon actually meant bigger losses on their end. They couldn’t even carry out the work unless they were somewhere with a high circulation of coins. Distancing themselves from the capital had been a tough call to make.

“We haven’t enough guards.”

“Those ‘Twins of the Wasteland’ fellows refused to accompany us, saying that they would rather remain at the capital. That is why we are shorthanded.”

“Hmph, that blasted mercenary group. I realize it was short notice, but how dare they ignore our long partnership!” The man kicked the wheel of a carriage

in fury. Bravely ignoring the pain in his leg, he turned a harried gaze to his servant. "Get in touch with the guys at Eagle Nest Inn one more time..."

"Money changer Milo Solja. I'll give you credit for your quick feet, but it's time for you to come quietly."

"The night sentries...!"

The magic lamp held by the captain of the night sentries was unlike the regular variety in that its light shone unusually brightly. This made it easy to discern the affiliation of the lamp wielder.

"R-run!"

Solja's servants and porters discarded the luggage and attempted to sprint off. They didn't get far before the watch caught them. In short order, they found themselves on the ground, eating dirt.

Flanked by two men who looked like bodyguards, Solja also attempted to flee, only for several people to stand in his way. "Would have been better if you hadn't come this way," one of those people said in a slightly exasperated tone.

"Out of the way, you lout!" one of the bodyguards roared as he brandished a sword.

Unfortunately for him, a spear deflected his outstretched sword. Startled, the man saw the butt end of the spear angling straight for his chest and hurried out of the blow's path.

He had but one chance to attempt a riposte, then the spear's butt struck him near his vitals, shattering his defenses.

"D-damn it... How did you...?"

"Sorry, but I'm more scared of the monsters than you," Werner answered the bodyguard-like man flatly.

The guy was no competition for Mazel, he thought.

And with that, Werner put his weight behind a single, sharp thrust. Because

his feet had been fixed on the ground the whole time, he hadn't put his full strength into the previous strikes. The spear pierced the man's shoulder, and he howled in agony.

A split second later, another soldier came sprinting over to deliver another strike. The man crumpled to the ground. With a mildly exasperated grin, Werner rested his spear on his shoulder. The newcomer mercilessly struck at Solja and the other bodyguard before approaching Werner.

"You sure about this, Zehrfeld?" he asked.

"The house of the Minister of Ceremonies can't afford to stick its neck into this," Werner replied to his schoolmate Drechsler with a chuckle.

Drechsler, son of a viscount, was currently managing the night sentries in this area. The arrests would be business as usual for him. Werner's presence, conversely, would have been an oddity.

Werner kept a tight lid on the inconvenient truth as he chuckled at Drechsler. "I leave it to you to look into the thieves going around those fire sites."

"I'll pass your message on to my older brother," Drechsler said, prompting Werner to nod in return.

To put it uncharitably, Werner was passing off the buck to yet another acquaintance.

Even as he left House Fürst to apprehend the horse brokers, Werner took actions to address a lingering question. It was the natural thing to suspect if large amounts of damaged coins were to suddenly enter circulation. The fact that this person didn't fall under suspicion meant that they were exchanging the currency immediately after the coins got clipped.

Given the context, a money changer probably would be in possession of large numbers of damaged coins. They often bought and sold money not just for its face value but also on the basis of its weight. They were also in charge of weighing the damaged coins and exchanging them for currency of the same

face value.

By using his position as a member of a count's family, Werner put in a request with the merchant Bierstedt. He sniffed out the money changer who had a close relationship with the horse brokers, and then kept a close watch on him after House Fürst made the arrests. Fast forward to tonight—Werner had to admit that he was rather fortunate to have his friend Drechsler around as a night sentry to help him deal with the situation.

There were a few things Werner had wanted to personally confirm. By getting his schoolmate to handle the arrest, he'd secured an opportunity to assess the scene himself, without having to stick around for the questioning and investigations that would follow. He was also keen to keep his involvement discreet. He sought neither honor nor glory anyway, so he generously left credit for the horse brokers to House Fürst and for the money broker to House Drechsler.

"All right. I'm off, then."

"Sure thing. See you around."

Before Drechsler could thank Werner for letting his father and brother take the credit, Werner exited the scene. At his side were Neurath and Schünzel, whom he'd stationed nearby just in case things got out of hand. The thief who went around the scenes of the fires taking the chisels and other tools from Solja's money exchange shop would be arrested three days later.

That night, after returning to the Zehrfeld manor, Werner told his father everything that had transpired thus far. Ingo listened in silence for a while before giving a single nod.

"I understand the situation. You did well to maintain balance by bringing the case to House Fürst and House Drechsler."

"Thank you very much."

"However, you must not do this again. If people come to think that we will

help unconditionally, then the judiciary could exploit our goodwill.”

“Yes, I will keep that in mind.”

Although the whole thing really did start from a coincidence, Werner nodded earnestly. His father’s concerns were valid, though he had no reason to worry about a repeat incident. Werner had no real desire to get involved in investigation work, after all. When he was done with his father, he let out an impressive yawn as he headed to bed, relieved that the incident had finally come to a close.

Even if one tried to keep quiet about this sort of matter, it was bound to leak in some form. A short while later, the stories would spread praising Viscount Zehrfeld’s astute eye and observational skills.

A few days later, Werner would submit a groundbreaking proposal to the crown, based on the concept of fire insurance. Given that this happened shortly after the Demon Lord’s return, the “anachronistic” plan and its creator would be forgotten in the later tumult.

The concept of fire insurance would only be revisited 150 years later, when a massive fire broke out in the capital. The minister in charge of the restoration planning would marvel: “I can’t believe that someone back in those days thought of disaster insurance.” That, of course, had nothing to do with this tale.

The hunters and adventurers who could not return to their village holed themselves up in a cave in order to spend the night.

Although it was a natural cave, the nearby villagers seldom used it. Even before the Demon Lord’s return, the monsters in their area were quite fearsome compared to others. The cave was a temporary resting spot for hunters and adventurers looking to hunt the monsters for their rare materials or to gather unusual herbs.

After the Demon Lord’s return, however, the monsters began actively

encroaching upon human settlements. Moreover, some types of monsters that had never previously been sighted in the area were now appearing in large numbers. Local adventurers looking to make a quick buck started turning their sights to other regions.

The adventurers who did frequent this cave were, to put it charitably, of the ambitious sort. And when such adventurers got caught up in the thrill of their work, they sometimes forgot their unspoken obligations to their fellow adventurers.

“Ugh, this is a disgrace.”

“The guys before us didn’t bother to clean up.”

That day, when the curtain of night began spreading darkness across the forest, a group of young adventurers arrived at the cave, weariness etched plain on their faces. What they found there were the unmistakable traces of some previous occupants from several days ago. It was not a particularly welcome reception gift.

What awaited them were probably the remains of monsters their precursors defeated nearby. The heads, tails, and bones of a Rock Alligator and Twin Head Snake were scattered artlessly around the cave. After extracting the magic stones and eating the meat, they appeared to have dumped everything else that couldn’t be sold as materials.

“I heard at the base of the mountain—at Prulea Village—that there was this group of adventurers who still hadn’t returned even after three days. Think it’s those guys?”

“Oh, yeah, I remember someone mentioning that. Weren’t they a bigshot adventurer group from Valeritz?”

“Bigshot or not, I wish they’d at least clean up after themselves.”

“I’ve heard this kind of thing has been cropping up more often lately,” said a female member of the party. “Groups coming from afar and leaving their mess

behind.”

They started tidying up the place, grumbling as they did so. Unfortunately, darkness fell across the forest quicker than they anticipated, which meant that they were only able to throw everything into a pile a short distance away. The slight scent of blood still remained close at hand, but they had no choice but to resign themselves to it.

Lighting a fire to deter the approach of wild beasts would also have the effect of drawing monsters undaunted by fire straight to their location. An adventurer’s experience or intuition was all about knowing which option to choose, depending on the situation. This group chose to light a fire.

As they cooked their food, the scout of the party looked down at where the flames illuminated the ground and noticed something strange. “Huh? What is this?”

“What’s up?”

“Well... These footprints seem to be coming from inside the cave.”

If he had to make a guess, the footprints appeared to belong to a large lizard. But even a reserved estimate would put the individual size of the prints far larger than a human’s. The tracks indicated that the creature had departed from the cave and disappeared into the forest.

The party members instinctively exchanged glances. They didn’t sense anything moving, even though the fire had been blazing for a while. Just to make certain, someone threw a rock deeper into the cave, but there was no reaction. This was their confirmation that the owner of the footprints must have already left. They decided to rest in the cave for today while keeping a careful watch on things.

If they had investigated the tracks while it was still light, they would have found that the owner had been chasing multiple humans. They might also have discovered the blood that flecked the surrounding trees, or perhaps the chewed-up adventurer equipment within one of the thickets.

Alternatively, if they had been seasoned adventurers, they would have brought a light deep into the cave and found the remains of someone's armor, ruptured beyond hope of repair. Maybe they would have sensed the danger without investigating a thing, and they would have distanced themselves from this place just to be on the safe side.

But they were young, inexperienced, and they lost the battle against their exhaustion. Thinking only of the rare monster materials they could lay their hands on in the wake of the Demon Lord's return, they overlooked all signs of the looming danger. All they did was assign a watch as they took turns sleeping inside the cavern.

And late that night...

"H-h-heeel—!"

The voice cut off at the sound of a merciless crunch. Then came the chewing noises. It was not merely flesh and bones that were crushed between that pair of gnashing teeth. No, it was the eerie sound of rent armor that trailed away into the night.

"A few mere humans will not satisfy my hunger."

The lizard walked on two legs, wearing a hood and carrying a cane. It looked like a human, albeit one with a torso covered in sturdy scales. But its arms were thicker than a grown man's thighs, and its overall size was easily twice that of a human. And its head was not that of a snake, lizard, or even an alligator. If one of the adventurers caught a glimpse of it, they would have thought that it resembled a dragon above the shoulders.

Noticing that someone was approaching, the beast stirred its massive form.

"I have arrived. I must apologize for my tardiness."

"Gareth, hm?"

As the creature with the dragon head wiped his blood-smeared mouth, the Demon named Gareth approached and knelt before him.

“How is your health?” asked Gareth.

“Frankly, I am not sated, though this should suffice for now. More importantly, are the preparations complete?”

“We are ready to attack that stronghold and the town en route. We have confirmed that our target, the holy woman, is at the stronghold.”

As if responding to the Demon’s voice, the trees behind him swayed in unison. Countless inhuman eyes glinted in the moonlight. From a distance, they might have looked like a sea of stars. But any ordinary human would have frozen stiff at the sight of those eyes, and the song of death that drifted from their midst. The teeming lights evoked peril over beauty and bloodlust over radiance.

“Good. Go forth and bring Finoy to its knees.”

“Yes, my lord!”

As the massive creature with the dragon head descended the mountain, the trees swayed once more, as if the entire forest sprang to life. Footsteps beyond number marched to the drum of slaughter and destruction.

It would not be long until the biggest massacre in the history of Wein—the obliteration of an entire city.

Epilogue

SOME TIME EARLIER...

When Werner embarked on the refugee escort mission, considerable changes were unfolding across all regions of the kingdom.

Post-Demon Lord, monster habits changed throughout the entire continent. Not only did the existing monsters turn more violent, dangerous and unfamiliar breeds were starting to show up, prompting the individual towns and villages to take actions in self-defense. Arlea Village, the hometown of the Hero Mazel, was no exception.

Arlea Village was located within a forest. Apparently, the first settlers cleared the woods for its resources. These days, however, the village was better known as a pit stop for pilgrims than for its original charcoal trade.

Even in Werner's old world, forests were historically haunts for bandits, thugs, and even wolves and bears. Because of this, any villages far away from large towns or highways enclosed themselves in fences and walls. That was particularly true in this world of roaming monsters. Almost every village had enclosures, consisting of both walls and moats, albeit on a modest scale. The security was often especially tight for people seeking entry. Werner would probably put it like this: "What you see when you enter a village from the world map in a video game does *not* match how it actually looks."

That day, for the sake of protecting the village, the men busied themselves from dawn to dusk reinforcing the logs at the back of the walls.

As far as the residents were concerned, even a single monster was a source of dread and fear. Their heightened savagery posed a distinct threat, forcing them to live their lives with a cloud of uncertainty over their heads.

Needless to say, the village chief had begged their liege lord to dispatch soldiers as guards. Unfortunately, lacking enough workers to spare, he sent his

request via the church instead of sending off his young men as messengers. Between the monsters' rising numbers and violence, there were fewer pilgrims to carry messages along the kingdom's roads. Furthermore, their itineraries were very precise and deliberate. The chief had no way of even knowing how long his message would be held at Finoy.

The villagers believed the chief when he said that the guards would be dispatched immediately upon his request. All they had to do, they thought, was wait patiently until those soldiers arrived. It would have been unfair of them to demand more. The capital had its own problems to deal with, such as the Demon Stampede, and word about the Demon Lord's revival had yet to arrive at the village. Thus, even if the local nobles knew about the crazed monsters, it was not their top priority to divide their labor force for the sake of providing villages with guards. Such was the case in many regions.

"Welcome home, father."

That day, after the village men finished their work on fortifying the walls, Ari Harting came home to the inn he lived and worked at. The first person he saw was his daughter Lily. She was carrying a bunch of herbs from the back garden in her arms, a testament to her sensible and hard-working nature. She was a year younger than her brother, Mazel, and worked in and around the inn, ushering customers inside.

The old priest who had taught letters and numbers to the village children used to say, "Both siblings take after their mother. A good thing that is." He passed away from illness two years ago. Recalling the old man's words, Ari grimaced inwardly.

"Mm-hmm, I'm home."

It was not uncommon in rural settlements for people to cultivate herb gardens in their own backyards. Although the concept of nutritional value was foreign to this world, it was long-held knowledge that herbs were good for one's body. They also served as seasoning, making them an indispensable part

of small, inland villages.

There was a somewhat strained atmosphere within the village. The violent monsters had made it increasingly difficult for hunters and lumberjacks to venture into the forest, and there weren't as many pilgrims passing through the area. This spelled a loss of food and income.

"Were you okay today?" Lily asked.

"I was just strengthening the walls, so I wasn't in any danger. Don't you worry about me." He patted Lily on the head, squeezing a smile of relief out of her.

Then she said, as if she had just remembered, "By the way, someone came by for lunch, saying they were on an errand for the count. He's willing to carry a letter from us to...to Mazel."

She hesitated because she had been about to call him "Mazzy" as if they were still children. After he moved away from the village to attend the academy, however, she started referring to him more reservedly by his proper name. It was hard for Ari to figure out how he felt about this. Was this just how it was to watch his daughter grow up?

"Is that right? Is the fellow staying overnight?"

"Yeah."

Still stewing in ambivalence, Ari followed his daughter through the door.

"You two both had a big day." Mazel and Lily's mother Anna greeted them with a smile.

"Yeah, I'm glad to be back," said Ari.

"I'll put the herbs out to dry." Lily put the bundle on the drying rack. Since many herbs were used after desiccation, she picked what she needed from the garden and used them to supplement their meals.

Her idea for dinner was to make an herb stew with dried meat, plus some fruit on the side. They didn't have any other customers around, and she felt a lot of gratitude for the House Zehrfeld messenger for carrying a letter all the

way from the distant capital. She decided that instead of making him eat alone in the spacious dining hall, he could stay in his room on the second floor.

For his part, the messenger understood the hassle involved in keeping a big dining hall well lit. He actually thanked Lily politely as he took his meal up the stairs along with a candle for light.

The family had their own dining area further inside the inn. Their dinner was porridge containing assorted grains, including wheat. It was mixed with sliced cabbage, onions, turnips, and boiled beans. To grind wheat into flour, one needed a millstone. However, a family needed permission to bring one into their home, and it cost a large sum to boot. In practice, the villagers had to pay someone at the watermill to grind wheat flour for them. This meant that many commoners simply put the wheat into their porridges unground. Milling fees were an extra form of levy for fief lords on top of the usual taxes.

Given that candles weren't cheap, the family seldom used them for themselves. Putting torches around the house would fill the rooms with soot, so instead they would keep the hearth on after cooking to use as a light. Almost never did the average commoner adopt magic lamps or oil lamps for their personal use. Even the chief of Arlea Village only had the watermill and his personal abode.

At the family dinner table, the topic of discussion was naturally Mazel's letter from the capital. Ari and the others received their first surprise when they saw what came with the package: an inconceivably large sum of money for a humble villager.

What on earth is this money? Ari wondered as he ran his eyes across the letter. Then he turned his gaze to his befuddled wife and daughter. "Apparently, there was a Demon Stampede near the capital."

"What...?" His daughter's face turned pale.

"What happened to Mazel?" Anxiety tinged his wife's tone.

Demon Stampedes were the stuff of nightmares in rural areas. Although they

were rare occurrences indeed, there would be untold casualties if one were to unfold at their doorstep. An entire village could even face destruction. Thus, there was an undeniable tendency among rural settlements to overexaggerate the threat.

Ari smiled at his wife and daughter. “He’s fine, it seems. He helped an adventurer and his schoolmate at the battle and was commended for his contribution.”

“Thank goodness...”

Both mother and daughter’s faces eased in palpable relief. Ari gave them a small smile. Out of a desire not to cause worry to his family, Mazel had refrained from writing the entire truth. But since he wasn’t writing about himself, he inevitably had to choose a different topic to expound upon.

“In fact, that nobleman’s son who’s been helping us—he was very active in the battle. He even received a commendation from His Majesty and the crown prince.”

“My goodness.” Anna let out a frank gasp of surprise. “Is he the same age as Mazel?”

“He’s the one Mazel always writes about in his letters,” Lily said, sounding impressed. “Lord Werner, I think his name was.”

Ari smiled at her. “Yes, him. Mazel didn’t see it happen directly, so he says he doesn’t know the details, but the young man apparently saved a lot of people’s lives. He’s the talk of the academy.”

“I’m glad that Mazel has such a nice friend. Do you suppose that Mazel will become a knight for his friend’s house?” Anna tilted her head.

“Who knows?” said Ari. “I don’t think he’s inclined toward knighthood.”

There were some things they were oblivious to *because* they knew Mazel so well. Besides, it had not yet reached their ears that the Demon Lord had returned. The family conversation began to take a slight detour.

Although they knew that Mazel was attending the royal academy at the behest of the royal family, Ari and Anna couldn't help but see him as their son rather than as the Hero. Thus, they could only imagine Mazel climbing the social ladder by becoming a knight. Common-born knights were rare, but certainly not unheard of.

"I think Mazel would rather be an adventurer than a knight," Lily remarked.

"That way of life seems more easygoing," Ari chuckled in reply.

For a while after that, the family enthusiastically exchanged recollections about Mazel as a boy. After dinner, however, Lily took his letter into the family bedroom. Hardly any buildings in rural villages had rooms for individuals. The Harting house and inn had a kitchen, a living room space, and a single bedroom for the entire family. That was it.

Lily's father told her to go to sleep ahead of him. Figuring that her parents had something that they wanted to discuss by themselves, Lily obediently made for the bedroom. But still, she took Mazel's letter with her. That was because...well, she missed the old times.

After saying goodnight to their daughter and seeing her out the room, husband and wife turned to each other, their expressions deeply perturbed.

"I suppose the only thing we can do with this money is give it to the chief and ask him to use it for the village," Ari said.

"Did they get on your case about it again today?"

"Yeah, they said it over and over: 'If only Mazel were here.'"

Simply by being young and male, Mazel was a valuable resource to the village. This state of affairs was only exacerbated by how the kingdom called upon him. Even though they didn't know the specifics of his skill, the village residents grasped that it was probably outstanding. And with the aggressive monsters getting under their skin, many people had started throwing reproachful gazes at Mazel's parents, as if to ask: *Why did you let him leave?*

“The chief has been nagging me constantly, saying, ‘You’re his father. Mazel will come straight home if you ask him.’”

Mazel’s parents thought that their hands were tied. They couldn’t ask Mazel to come home when it was the royal family that sought his presence. At the same time, it was an unquestionable fact that there were people who thought like the chief did: Children were supposed to obey their parents, and the village was in need of their help. This way of thinking was especially pronounced among people who had been raised that way themselves.

As far as those people were concerned, the Harting family was not doing its part for the community. With everyone’s nerves frayed by the monsters, people would jump upon even a slightest cause for reproach to start trouble.

Husband and wife exchanged glances, sighing heavily.

Meanwhile, alone in the family bedroom, Lily opened the window and began reading her brother’s letter in the moonlight. Generally speaking, rural folk had good night vision. This was because they worked outside the house or on the farm while the sun was out, and after nightfall they went indoors to do needlework or sharpen their sickles and knives.

A cynical way of putting it was that the upper classes had the luxury of immediately falling asleep, while peasants had to work until late at night if they wanted to maintain their livelihoods.

“Tee hee.”

Lily could see the levity in her brother’s writing. It was like the words danced across the page. His first letters had such a stiff feeling to them, but that wasn’t so much the case nowadays. She couldn’t help but smile. A part of her felt a little jealous that he seemed to be having so much fun, but an even greater part of her was simply relieved that he was well.

The letter was almost obsessively concerned with the count’s son, the young man he referred to as his best friend. Mazel wrote about him as if he was bragging about himself. Part of that was probably because he and Lily never had

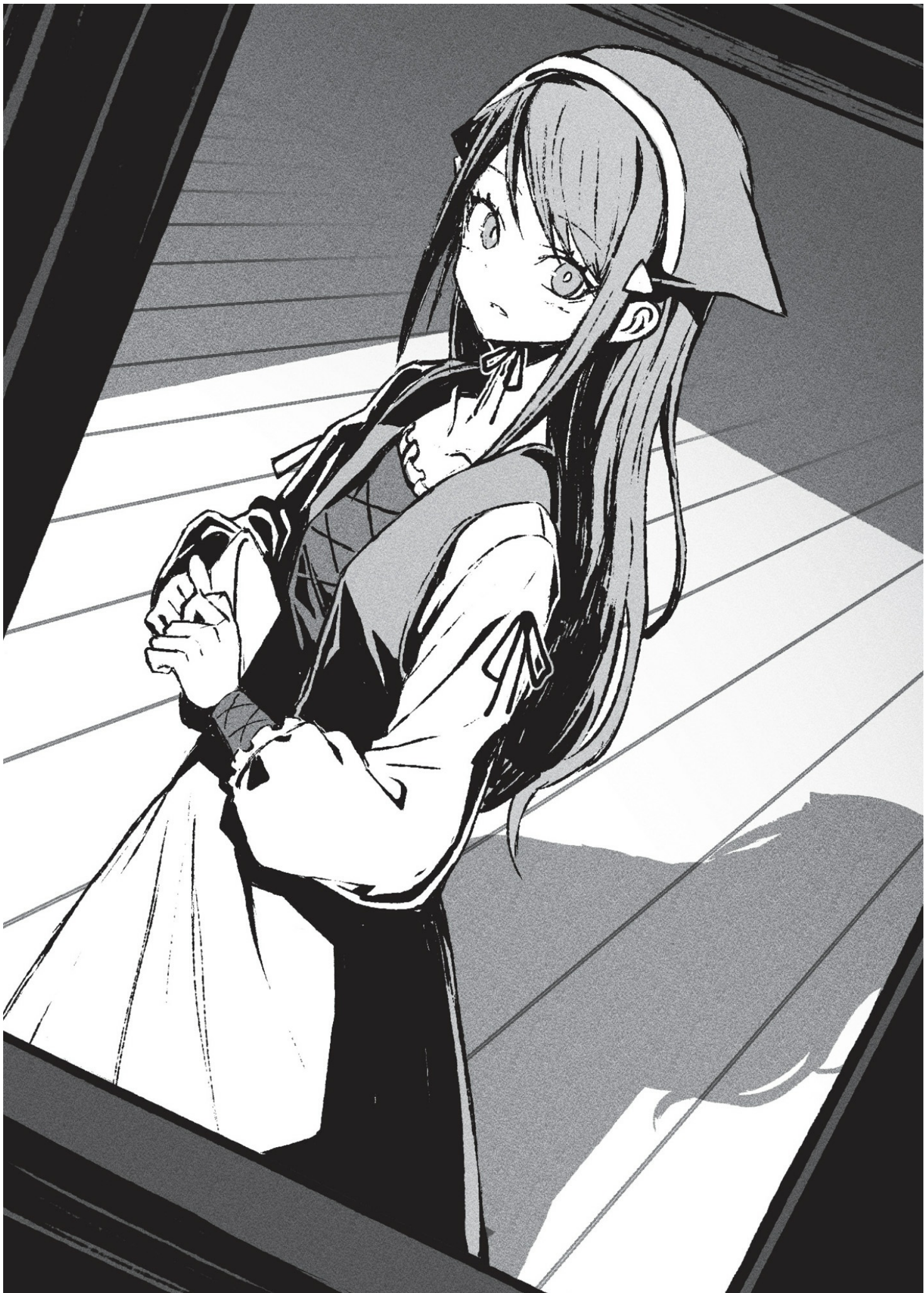
friends their age, but it also felt like he wanted to show off his friend to his family. It was Lily's first time realizing that her brother had that side to him.

"I wonder what kind of person he's like..."

From Lily's perspective, her brother could do anything. So for him to praise someone so highly... Although a part of her did want to meet this Werner Von Zehrfeld person at least once in her life, she remembered with disappointment that an important person like him had no reason to visit a country village like Arlea. As the son of a nobleman, there was a different region under his jurisdiction.

"I wonder if I can ask Mazzy when he comes home..."

Her gaze drifted out the window at the moon and heavens. *Let my brother be safe and well*, she prayed to the god above as she closed the window.



Afterword

THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO CONTINUED WITH this series after the first volume. And thank you to everyone who picked up this story because of the manga adaptation. I have read the comments and reviews to the best of my ability. I also received what one might call “fan letters.” Thank you so much for that. Finally, although I doubt that this would apply to many of you, I’d like to say “Nice to meet you” to anyone picking up the story for the first time through this book. My name is Yuki Suzuki.

When writing the web version of this novel, I never considered things like balancing word count with snappy endings. But now that I’m releasing this story in book form, I’ve written new material to serve as a good stopping point—except I wrote so many words that the page count is even longer than the first book. I’m sure I caused a lot of trouble for my editor Mr. Yoshida, but I’m satisfied with the additions. I was able to include a map, which was very necessary for the readers, and I also included some scenes where Werner gets to act like a protagonist. I really wanted to write those scenes, and I can only hope that all the readers enjoy them as much as I did.

Finally, I would like to use this space to express my deepest thanks to these wonderful people: the readers of the web novel, my new readers, my editor Mr. Yoshida, the illustrator Sanshouuo (who drew some lovely work yet again), the manga illustrator Rampei Ashio, and the manga editor Mr. Kobayashi.

Yuki SUZUKI

August 2022



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

[Sign up for our newsletter!](#)

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter

Table of Contents

- [Color Gallery](#)
- [Title Page](#)
- [Copyrights and Credits](#)
- [Table of Contents Page](#)
- [Prologue](#)
- [Chapter 1: Fall of the Neighboring Kingdom](#)
- [Chapter 2: Escorting Refugees](#)
- [Chapter 3: Affairs in the Area](#)
- [Epilogue](#)
- [Afterword](#)
- [Newsletter](#)