
Der Werwolf
02
Der Werwolf:
The Annals of Veight
— The Hero Menace —
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Character



Veight

A former human who's been reborn as a werewolf. Currently serves as the first regiment's Vice-Commander.

Airia Lutt Aindorf

The current Viceroy of Ryunheit. Despite her stunning looks, she prefers to dress in men's clothing.


Gomoviroa
Commander of the demon army's third regiment. A powerful necromancer and Veight's magic teacher.
Friedensrichter
Demon Lord of the demon army. Like Veight, he's a former human who was reincarnated as a demon.
Melaine
A bewitching vampire serving as one of the third regiment's generals. She's another one of Gomoviroa's disciples, and Veight's senior when it comes to magic.
Firnir
A young kentauros warrior serving in the third regiment. She's also Gomoviroa's disciple, and looks up to Veight.


Northern Peaks
Fortress City Schverm
City of Peaks Draulight
Mining City Krauhen
Agricultural City Bahen
Theopolis Lange
Agricultural City Welheim
Farming City Aryoug
Former Capital Vest
Fortress City Vongang
Nation of Wa
Demon Forest
Fetid Wastes
Windswept Dunes
Grenschtat Castle
Ancient City Bernheinen
Industrial City Thuvan
Labyrinth City Zaria
City of Craftsmen Veira
Trading City Ryunhelt
Trading City Shardier
Pirate City Beluza
Maritime City Lotz
Sea of Solitude

The story so far

Veight used to be a regular Japanese guy, but was reborn as a werewolf after his death. He worked his way up through the demon army's ranks, and eventually became a Vice-Commander of the army's third regiment. As someone who understands the feelings of both humans and demons, he was perfectly suited to lead the conquest of the trading city of Ryunheit. Utilizing both the knowledge he accumulated in his past life and his experiences from his current life, he skillfully governed the captured city.

By allowing the city's Viceroy, a beautiful woman named Airia, to keep her position, he was able create a city where humans and demons could live together. Naturally, there was still a lot of bad blood between humans and demons, but by mediating issues that arose with a fair and just hand, Veight was able to guide the city closer to coexistence. Thanks to his efforts, the citizens of Ryunheit began to accept him as a legitimate leader of the city.

Eventually, Airia even offered to formally enter Ryunheit into an alliance with the demon army. With Ryunheit now demon territory, Veight can finally focus on the other obstacles standing in their way of conquering Meraldia.

Chapter 2

And so, Ryunheit broke off from the Meraldia Commonwealth and joined the demon army's side. For all intents and purposes, this meant Ryunheit was now the demon capital. This meant we needed to improve the city's defenses as much as we could. It was a lot like those city simulation games I'd played in the past, except here, failure meant death.

"Where should we start?"

It was the day after Ryunheit's independence celebration, and there were still some people celebrating in the streets. Airia and I, however, had already gotten back to work. Now that Ryunheit had betrayed Meraldia, there was no doubt we'd be targeted. The longer we dallied, the harder it would be to fend them off. *It's time to put that other plan into action.*

"Let's kick out all the citizens who oppose us."

"Huh?"

Airia's eyes opened wide in surprise. Naturally, I wasn't referring to everyone here.

"There's a number of citizens who opposed Ryunheit's independence and still hate the demon army, isn't there?"

"I believe there's only a few, but yes, such people do exist."

Considering how different people were, it was hardly surprising that they didn't all share the same opinion. After that conversation, I made an announcement that all citizens were free to leave Ryunheit if they so wished. It was just a nice way of saying "If you don't like it here, you can go somewhere else."

About 100 people left immediately after the proclamation. As Ryunheit's human population was around 3,000, that meant the malcontents had been about 3% of the city. There were some others who considered it, but decided to

stay in the end. Airia sadly watched her former citizens filter out of the main gate.

“I hope they manage to find a new place to live...”

“Don’t worry, I told them they can come back any time. If things don’t work out, they can always live here.”

After the incident with Yuhit, I’d been forced to reassess my opinion of people in this world. From what I could tell, they didn’t trust anyone who’d spent time with demons, regardless of the nature of that relationship. Of course, not all humans were like that, but I had no doubt a good percentage of the people who’d left now wouldn’t be able to find homes elsewhere and would come back.

I’d ordered my subordinates to maintain their houses and fields so that they could restart their life here anytime. Furthermore, I’d bought out all of their houses for a fair price, and if they ever felt like returning, I would sell it back to them for the same amount. Since there would likely be a few who’d return penniless, I’d also told them they could pay off their house in installments as well, without interest. Thanks to all that, I’d know right away if any of them came back. And if they did, I’d be able to ask them about the current state of the surrounding regions.

Personally, though, I was hoping they’d find nice places to emigrate to. None of them had any love for the demon army, which meant they’d likely spread unsavory rumors about us; such as how we’re extremely violent and arrogant, and all that. In doing so, the citizens of other cities would begin to fear us. As we’d need to conquer all of Meraldia’s territories eventually, it would be more convenient if our enemies were terrified of us. We’d be able to use their misconceptions about us to our advantage. *We’re starting to become like the mafia...*

“You’re making that face you always do when you have something sinister planned, Sir Veight.”

“I won’t deny that I do, Lady Airia.”

Now then. I’d gotten rid of unstable elements within the city and made a few preliminary preparations for our future invasions, so it was time to tackle the

next issue. How to make Ryunheit bigger and stronger.

“If we rebuild Ryunheit’s current wall, we’ll be defenseless during the construction. I’d rather we leave the wall as-is, and build a new outer wall.”

Sitting in front of me was a mixed team of human and canine engineers. Most of the humans in the group were the craftsmen and engineers Yuhit had brought with him when he’d fled Thuvan. They were assisting me under his orders. A middle-aged man who was serving as the leader of Thuvan’s refugee engineers nodded. His name was Azul, and he was Yuhit’s son-in-law.

All of the men Yuhit had brought with him were all exceptionally skilled in their field, and were capable of crafting accurate blueprints and high-quality products with ease. To be honest, I was kind of amazed at how quickly they’d restored the Sonnenlicht temples in the city. And it wasn’t just religious buildings they’d repaired. They’d fixed or improved on almost every public facility in the city, so I knew their skills and work ethic could be trusted.

Azul ran a few calculations in his head, then nodded again. “Considering the amount of time it would take to construct a new wall, I think your plan is the most sound one. Besides, Ryunheit’s walls have historical and cultural value. It would be unwise to destroy them.”

I didn’t know that. I had no clue what kind of cultural value a wall might have, but I’d rather not destroy it if that really was the case. Before I could reply, Azul added, “We’ll need to survey the earth around the city before we can even start construction, and if you want this wall to circle the whole city it’s going to take some time to construct. Even if we get started right away, it’ll take a few years at least. Will that be alright with you?”

“A half-built wall will just give our foes cover...”

Maybe I should have told Airia to hold off on declaring independence until after we’d gotten new walls... I weighed my options, but in the end, I knew we needed a wall.

“If we delay the construction, we’ll come to regret it someday. Go ahead and move forward with the project, but start from the east side.”

“As you wish, sir.”

I guess I'll have to keep enemies at bay with espionage and negotiation for now.

With this, Ryunheit's renovations would be able to proceed smoothly, but my work wasn't done yet. I still needed to deliver my report. As usual, I had Master teleport me to Grenschtat, and as usual, Baltze came out to greet me.

"Sir Veight, I can't find our lord anywhere."

"Again?"

The Demon Lord Friedensrichter was a very busy leader. Not only was he in charge of military affairs, he also had to handle all domestic issues. Thanks to the knowledge he'd retained from his previous life, he was seen as wise by all, and many demons came to him for guidance. Sometimes he was so flooded with requests for help and advice that he wasn't able to handle them all. Even Baltze, who was a renowned warrior, had been reduced to carrying paperwork around in the castle.

"This is a serious matter, Sir Veight. There are a number of important documents my lord must see to right away."

"Ah, well, in that case..."

My mind thought back to the conversation I had with the Demon Lord last night. We'd been having tea together, and I was pretty sure he'd said, "It's been ages since I last fought at the front lines. I can feel my skills deteriorating."

"It's not like there's anyone who could match you in a fight, though."

"Still, I must maintain my edge, or I will be setting a bad example for my soldiers."

Yeah. No doubt about it, he's probably there.

"Baltze, he's probably at the parade grounds."

"Thank you so much for your help!"

As expected, I found the Demon Lord at the parade grounds, giving the newest dragonkin recruits a thorough thrashing.

“Feel free to come at me all at once!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

There were 30 odd soldiers facing off against the Demon Lord, and they all had practice staves. They all rushed him at once, but the Demon Lord easily leapt over their encirclement. He landed deftly behind the group, and three soldiers staggered to their knees. He’d struck them on the helmet and shoulder pads with his own practice staff as he’d leapt past. Each strike had been so fast even I hadn’t been able to see it. *How on earth did he do that?* After that, the Demon Lord made quick work of the remaining soldiers.

“This won’t do.”

The Demon Lord sighed as he looked at the carnage he’d left in his wake. *Considering it was you they were up against, I thought they did a pretty good job. If anything, you should be praising them.* Human soldiers would have just run away screaming; at least the dragonkin had tried.

“I can’t jump nearly as high as I used to... I truly have been neglecting my training.”

Seriously?

“My lord, you must see to these reports immediately!”

The Demon Lord took the documents from Baltze and skimmed through them.

“Hmm... Understood. Baltze, call the other commanders. We’ll be holding an emergency meeting tonight.”

“Yes, sir!”

Baltze saluted and ran off. Once that had been seen to, the Demon Lord went to each of the soldiers he’d defeated and gave them personal pointers on what they needed to do to improve. I was a complete amateur in spear fighting, so I didn’t really grasp the technical details, but it was obvious the Demon Lord was being very thorough with his advice.

“You did well, men. Train hard, so that you can maintain this level of discipline even in a real battle.”

“Yes, sir!”

The Demon Lord finished rallying the men and turned to me. I felt an ominous shiver run down my spine.

“Veight, what say you to a sparring bout? I’m certain someone of your level will give me far more of a challenge.”

“With all due respect, sir, I must decline.”

No way in hell I’m sparring with you. Not only was he far faster than me, a werewolf, he had twice the strength of a giant. No matter what I did, I wouldn’t stand a chance.

“I believe someone like Sir Baltze, who is proficient with weapons, would be a more fitting opponent for you. After all, I fight barehanded while humans use arms. If you wish to gain combat practice against the enemies you’ll be facing, he would be a better choice.”

“You make a good point.”

Sorry, Baltze. But still, what could have happened to make the Demon Lord call an emergency council?

Since I was now technically a first regiment vice-commander, I was invited to the emergency council as well. But seeing as I was still serving on the southern front, I was for all intents and purposes part of the third regiment. *Anyway, why are we having this meeting in the courtyard?* Just as I thought that, the sky grew dark.

“Oh, so everyone’s already here?” came a rumbling voice said above me.

There was only one person that voice could belong to. The commander of the second regiment. The giant, Tiverit the Thundering Mountain, had returned from the front lines.

He was the largest giant in existence, and the strongest soldier the demon army had. He was bald, with a long white beard, and a ridiculously toned body. Most giants were only a few meters tall, but Tivert was well over 15 meters. Even among giants, he was an anomaly. Typically, any humanoid body

multiplied its weight by eight if it doubled its height. Generally, because it also doubled in width and thickness.



At any rate, what that meant was that Tiverit, who was 10 times taller than an average human, weighed 1,000 times as much. Which meant his blows had that much more weight behind them, too. His head rested at around the same height as a six-story building, and he was a walking fortress unto himself. However, despite being a regiment commander, he was a very kind soul. He grinned jovially at us and sat down in an open corner of the courtyard.

“My apologies for making you wait, everyone. The humans were more tenacious in their pursuit than I anticipated.”

Upon closer inspection, I realized that his simple leather breastplate and wooden cudgel were splattered with blood. Correction: he was kind, but only to demons. Tiverit spotted me standing amidst the dragonkin, and leaned in close. *I know he’s our ally, but it’s still scary being this close to him.*

“You’re a werewolf, are you not? Why are you with the dragonkin?”

Despite his smile, I still felt intimidated. I straightened my back and replied, “I was transferred here from the third regiment.”

“Oho, I see, I see.”

He was nodding, but my guess was he had no idea what that really meant. While he might have been a ferocious warrior and a regiment commander, he also didn’t think much. He wasn’t really one for difficult concepts or strategy. The Demon Lord arrived then, and the meeting began.

Tiverit wasn’t very specific with his report, and his vague statements probably drove the dragonkin scribes recording the meeting up the wall. Since I didn’t have much to do with the northern front, I was able to sit back and listen.

In short, the second regiment had been forced to retreat from Schverm, and had been pushed back to their final city of Bahen. They’d regrouped in the fields outside of Bahen and had engaged their Meraldian pursuers. Even when the Demon Lord asked for more specific details, no one could make heads or tails of Tiverit’s explanations. All we were able to figure out was that Tiverit had single-handedly destroyed the pursuing army. Considering his size, I wasn’t surprised. You’d need siege weapons to do any significant damage to a titan like Tiverit. Besides, someone of Tiverit’s skill could easily reflect ballista shots or catapult

stones with his massive cudgel. He may not have been a genius, but he could still be surprisingly crafty.

“Basically, we showed them the mettle of the second regiment. The point is, we can do it as long as we apply ourselves.”

Tiverit finished his report, and the first regiment vice-commanders all exchanged glances. *I know what you guys wanna say. But don’t say it.* Before any of them could comment, the Demon Lord interjected, “Tiverit, how are the demons under your command faring?”

The giant scratched his head.

“Well... we all got separated during the battle. My captains are still gathering their squads. I’ll report to you again once they’ve all been found.”

It was a pretty sloppy report, but it seemed the Demon Lord was used to that. He nodded to himself and dismissed Tiverit.

“Understood. You must be tired, feel free to rest in the castle.”

“Oh no, I can’t do that. My men are waiting for me.” Tiverit slowly got to his feet, taking care not to crush any of the vice-commanders underfoot. “I’ll be returning to the battlefield. If I’m not there, the humans might try to attack us again. I only came back here to get more food for the youngsters in my army.”

The Demon Lord smiled faintly and gave Tiverit a salute.

“Very well, but make sure not to overexert yourself. May the fortunes of war be with you.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

Tiverit smiled back and walked out through the massive gate made especially for him. On the way, he grabbed six wagons packed to the brim with food; three in each hand. *He really isn’t a bad guy...* After Tiverit’s departure, we were finally able to get to the war council’s main topic. Most of the Demon Lord’s vice-commanders were both powerful warriors and skilled strategists. They all debated hotly over how to get the situation on the northern front under control. As I had nothing to do with the northern front, I stayed quiet and listened.

“Sir Veight.”

Oh, do they need me for something?

“As a veteran of the southern theatre, what is your opinion on the current state of the north?”

The one who posed that question was vice-commander Shure the Crimson Knight, the leader of the Crimson Scales unit. Despite her muscular appearance, she was actually a girl. According to Baltze, she was the most beautiful of all dragonkin, but to be honest that really had nothing to do with me.

“What do I think, huh?”

The problem was, the second regiment’s way of doing things was the polar opposite of mine. With the way the situation was, I didn’t even know where to start. There was only one thing I knew for sure.

“The tactics I used in the south won’t work there. The second regiment’s caused too much damage to the country. There’s no room left for negotiation.”

Shure’s face fell. *Oi, don’t tell me you seriously thought we could talk our way out of this?* Dragonkin were good at suppressing their feelings and acting rationally, but because of that, they were seen as emotionless by the other races. That was by no means true, but their subdued reactions often made it seem that way.

“I had hoped that we would be able to employ your style of diplomacy and reduce our casualties, but...”

“You’ve ravaged their cities and slaughtered their brethren. Convincing them you want to negotiate now will be next to impossible.”

“I see...”

Baltze’s expression darkened too. *Seriously, guys, it’s impossible. If I could fix things, I would. But if I had the charisma to talk our way out of a mess this big, then I’d have made it to president in my old life or something.*

“In that case, we have no choice but to force a decisive battle. Let’s send reinforcements from the first division. I’ll go and put an end to this,” Shure urged.

Baltze hurriedly tried to stop Shure.

“Y-You can’t, Lady Shure. If something were to happen to you...”

I’d never seen Baltze so flustered before. While I didn’t know just how strong Shure was, she was the captain of one of the Demon Lord’s best units. She was likely quite capable. *Oh... I get it now.*

Baltze just didn’t want to lose the girl he loved. *I thought he was a pretty straight-laced guy, but I guess even he has times he prioritizes personal feelings over his duty.* Once it was decided that the first regiment would be sending reinforcements, the next question was whether they should just send a small force to help the second regiment retreat, or commit the entire first regiment and push forward into Meraldian territory.

I spent the entire time watching Baltze with a grin on my face. Ryunheit was undermanned as it was, so I wouldn’t be able to send over reinforcements even if I wanted to. Eventually, it was decided that the first regiment would only send enough to reinforce Bahen, and that the second regiment would still handle the brunt of the fighting. Shure would take 500 of her Crimson Scales along with 3,000 regular infantry and act as the second regiment’s reserves.

“Remember, Lady Shure. You’re only there to provide support. Whatever you do, don’t join the vanguard.”

“I understand, Sir Baltze. I have no intention of stealing the second regiment’s glory from them.”

“No, that’s not why...”

I doubt I would ever tire of watching their exchanges. *I’m rooting for you, Baltze.*

In the end, I did my best to remain as detached from the northern front as possible. While some of the other vice-commanders seemed to think I was some master of diplomacy, I was really just an average werewolf who happened to have been a human in his past life. I’d rather not have people asking me for miracles. By the end of the council, I’d fended off Baltze’s attempts to rope me into convincing Shure not to go, and used Master’s magic to take me back to Ryunheit.

“Sheesh... Maybe I should just stay away from Grenschtat for a while.”

“Rumors of your diplomatic prowess have been spreading through the demon army’s ranks. Did you know they’re calling you the ‘Magician of Statecraft’ now?” Gomoviroa smirked.

“Please stop, you’re embarrassing me.”

I brushed off Master’s teasing and considered my next course of action. My biggest concern was the Meraldian army. While the northern front was still holding, the fact that Tiverit was fighting on the front lines personally meant that it was only a matter of time before it collapsed. Even with the assistance the first regiment had sent, they’d be forced to retreat from Bahen before long. In which case, it was likely Meraldia would focus their forces southward.

There were 17 cities that were part of the Meraldian Federation. Of those 17, we occupied 3 in the south. The remaining 14 were all our enemy. The second regiment had technically captured one city in the north, but since all of the citizens had evacuated before the attack, Meraldia still had the population of 14 cities. At a rough estimate, I would say each city possessed 500 garrisoned troops, and another 1,000 militia. Across 14 cities, that meant about 20,000 troops. The militia weren’t trained and would easily break, but I still didn’t want to go up against a number that large.

Plus, Meraldia had its own standing army of around 10,000 to 20,000 troops. Reports indicated that the army of 5,000 they’d dispatched to recapture Schverm was mostly intact. Normally, Meraldia’s regular soldiers spent half their year doing farm work, and half their year drilling. They were professionals, both trained in tactics, and in good shape thanks to all of the hard labor they did. Honestly, I’d prefer to avoid fighting them as much as possible.

There were a few other small armed bands mixed into the human forces, but for now this was what I was up against. I doubted they’d throw all 40,000 of their troops at a single city, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they dispatched an army of 10,000 or so to conquer Ryunheit. I couldn’t afford to take it easy.

“You appear to be grappling with quite the dilemma.”

“Wait, you’re still here, Master!?”

“Your office is rather comfortable.”

Master settled into one of my chairs and smiled innocently at me. While her gestures were as childish as always, she looked tired. It appeared she still hadn’t fully recovered from the battle at Thuvan.

“Would you like some tea?”

“Yes, please.”

As I put the kettle on, I consulted with Master about my predicament.

“I don’t have enough troops to defend Ryunheit.”

“Indeed, you do not. Were I at full strength, I would gladly summon more undead soldiers for you, but... even then, summoning an army of ten thousand would require me to neglect my other duties for over three months.”

That would definitely be bad. Though Gomoviroa looked like she was free, I knew she was busy assisting all of her other disciples.

“Besides, Melaine and Firnir need reinforcements as well. Their cities will likely be targeted first if the enemy attacks from the north.”

She had a point there, too. Thuvan and Bernheinen were our bulwarks against the north.

“Alright, I won’t ask for any more skeletons. But I don’t suppose you know of some place I could recruit troops from instead?”

“Some of my other disciples are trying to convince the remaining races who haven’t revolted to join our cause. But most of them have their own problems to deal with, and I would rather not force them into service.”

Which meant that I’d have to use my own connections to get reinforcements. I’d already brought every werewolf with me, and I doubt I could ask the Demon Lord for any more dragonkin. *I can probably recruit more canines but... they’re kinda weak. No, wait.*

“Oh, did you think of something?”

“Yep. I just had a great idea. I’ll go test it right now!”

“Loading complete!”

“Loading complete!”

“Angle correction complete!”

“Angle correction complete!”

“Fire!”

There was a solid *twang* and a thick arrow shot into the sky. I’d picked out a handful of canines and had them practice firing one of Thuvan’s ballistae. Bringing them back had been an ordeal; they were huge enough to fit into the back of a pickup truck. Transporting one wasn’t something just anyone could do, but luckily firing one was. The bowstring was pulled back by a large hand crank, so even a weak canine could do it.

Thuvan had assigned two-man units to each ballista, one to load the ballista and another to fire it. However, I’d decided to assign two people to loading duty. In long battles, a single person could grow tired too easily. I’d kept only a single shooter, but I’d also added another member to each squad to relay orders and keep a lookout for the others. In other words, each ballista was operated by a four-man unit similar to the ones tanks and artillery crews had back on earth. And if I could find a way to mass-produce the dragonkin’s telescopes, I’d be able to give the lookout more independence in battle. I knelt close to the canine turning the hand crank and asked, “How is it, are you enjoying yourself?”

“Yes, turning the handle is really fun!”

“Shooting arrows is really fun too!”

“So is picking them up!”

Is there anything these guys don’t *have fun doing?* They might have been enjoying themselves now, but I needed to know if they could shoot at living people when the time came.

“If the humans attack, you’ll have to kill them with these. Are you sure you’re prepared for that?”

“Yes, sir! I’m sure it’ll be fun!”

“Yeah, we’ll kill lots!”

They gave me such pure smiles that it stung my conscience. It felt like I was teaching kids to murder. Except all the canines here were adults. *I guess it’s up to me to make sure these guys have to fight as little as possible. Still, if they’re this effective, maybe I should get some more.* I tasked a few of the most senior canine soldiers to return home to the forest and recruit more soldiers. Canine villages were populous, and I imagined between them all they had at least 1,000 young men.

“Tell them that they’ll get a bonus of chicken skewers on top of their regular pay. And that there’s a lot of construction and fieldwork to go around here, so they’ll be able to dig as many holes as they like.”

“We’ll do our best, sir!”

They gave me a crisp salute and jogged off to the west. *That should be good enough, I think.* I still wasn’t sure what exactly motivated them...

Apparently, Master had told Melaine and Firnir about my soldier shortages.

“Oh, Vaito, you’re hopeless. I guess I’ll have to send you some of my men, then.”

“What are you grinning like a dunce for? Do you even have enough men to spare?”

“Some of Master’s Bone Spears are still here... though I guess I can’t control them...”

“Very well, I suppose I’ll have to lend you a few of my vampire necromancers, Fir. They’ll be able to mobilize Master’s undead for you. But in return, you’ll have to send me a few of your kentauros as well.”

“Hey, no fair!”

After that exchange, Firnir had organized a unit of 500 and sent them to me as reinforcements. The same reinforcements that were standing outside the north gate right now. *The cavalry has arrived! Though they don’t actually ride*

horses...

"I am Seishess..."

A burly kentauros youth stepped forward. He had a finely chiseled face that was made slightly less impressive by his deep frown and furrowed brows. *What's he so mad about?*

"I'm not... mad... This is what I look like when I smile..."

So he said, but as far as I could tell, he was still frowning. I had a hard time believing that was really him smiling, so I tried a little experiment.

"Can you show me what your serious face looks like?"

Seishess nodded, and continued frowning. *Yeah, I don't see any difference.*

"Okay, show me what you look like when you're angry, then."

Seishess nodded, and continued frowning. *All his expressions are the same!*

"No... they're not..."

Man, this guy's gonna be a pain to deal with... According to Firnir, though, he was a well-respected warrior among the kentauros. Supposedly, he was the second-strongest after Firnir herself.

"Do you... doubt me?"

Hey, don't you think you're omitting a little too much of the sentence there? Though the fact that he was able to guess what I was thinking just from my expression proved that he wasn't just some sulky musclehead. Not that that helped me figure out how to deal with him. Before I could respond, Seishess stripped off his shirt, and beckoned to me.

"This is... a warrior's greeting. If we fight, you'll see..."

Not this again. I guess kentauros are demons too, so I shouldn't be so surprised they want to settle everything with a contest of strength.

"Whoever pins the other down first... wins... That's the only rule..."

"Sounds like fun. I suppose I can indulge you."

If I backed down here, both the kentauros and my fellow werewolves would

lose respect for me. This was a fight I couldn't run from.

"Guys, our boss is gonna fight against the kentauros captain!"

"Get everyone over here!"

Oi, don't do that. But I was unable to stop them, and before long a large crowd of werewolves had gathered to see my wrestling match.

As Seishess and I circled each other, I noticed he had the bearing of a true warrior. One who'd seen countless battlefields. He was clearly confident in his wrestling skills, too. If I didn't do this right, the match would start to drag on. Normally that wouldn't be a problem, but I was the Demon Lord's vice-commander. It would shame my status if I was seen to be having a hard time against someone far below my rank. I needed to end this in one shot.

"Bring it on..."

"As you wish."

I transformed and instantly cast one of the spells I keep on standby. It was a strengthening spell that boosted the reaction speed of my nerves and enhanced my sensory organs. With this, I would be able to sense even the slightest movements my opponent made.

"You're mine!"

The moment I saw an opening, I circled to Seishess's rear. As kentauros were half-horse, they had a hard time executing tight maneuvers, meaning they had a lot of blind spots. Hence why they hated being attacked from behind.

"Don't underestimate me..."

Seishess shot out his hind legs in a lightning-fast back kick. His kick was far too precise, far too calculated, to be a reflexive action. However, a kick like this was exactly what I'd been hoping for. Thanks to my enhanced kinetic vision, I was able to gauge the trajectory of his kick. In fact, because it was so accurate, its path was easy to read. I ducked low and slid underneath his torso. As I passed by, I slammed my fists into both of his front legs.

"Impossible..."

Seishess tumbled to the ground, where he lay in a momentary daze. Cheers rang out from the spectating werewolves. I placed a hand on Seishess's flank and confirmed my victory.

"I have you pinned. Do you surrender?"

"Yes... It's your win, Veight..." Seishess nodded gravely and got to his feet. He'd made sure to lean into the fall, so neither his legs nor his body were injured. The kentauros spectators gave us a respectful round of applause. "You... predicted my kick?"

"I figured a warrior Firnir respected would be strong enough to have ways to compensate for his weaknesses. And since you were unarmed, I figured the only option you'd have was a kick."

"Yes..."

"However, when you do a back kick like that, you're forced to use only your front legs to balance. Which opened you up to another weakness I could exploit."

"I see..." Seishess nodded a few times. "Because you didn't underestimate me, you were able to see through my attacks. I see, no wonder you're so famous within the demon army."

"Since when were you so talkative?"

Seishess scratched his head awkwardly and responded, "Sorry. When it comes to fighting... I get a little excited..."

He trailed off and held out his hand.

"I put myself... and my men... under your care, Veight."

"Thanks. I'll be counting on you guys."

I took Seishess's outstretched hand and shook it. Just then, Kurtz came running up to the main gate.

"Sir Veight, you need to return at once! Something terrible has happened!"

"What's going on?"

Kurtz leaned in close so the onlookers wouldn't hear and whispered, "It's the

Hero. The human Hero has appeared on the northern front."

Occasionally, especially powerful demons known as 'Champions' appeared among the usual demon population. With their superior abilities, they tended to protect their race and lead them to prosperity. Those who were exceptional even among Champions became known as Demon Lords. They led and protected not just their own race, but all demon races. While people like Firnir and Dogg were nowhere near the Demon Lord's level of strength, they were still powerful enough to be considered Champions of their respective races. Of course, I was just a regular werewolf who happened to be a reincarnated human.

Since demons had Champions, it stood to reason that humans did too. Any human Champion who possessed strength rivaling that of a Demon Lord was known as a 'Hero.' We occasionally praised our own comrades by saying they were heroes, or that they achieved heroic feats, but the actual title of Hero was something that had to be officially granted by the state. No matter how powerful a warrior you were, you couldn't just go calling yourself a Hero.

"I see, so the Hero's finally appeared..." Airia muttered uneasily. Since she was on our side now, the Hero was her enemy. Kurtz, who was sitting next to her, asked, "I've wondered this for a while, but why is that we call an opponent equal in prestige and power to the Demon Lord a Hero, and not a Human Lord?"

"Oh, I can answer that for you."

Airia seemed at a loss for words, so I jumped in instead.

"Demons revere strength, but humans don't. While the strongest among us becomes a ruler, with humans you need to have the blood of a king to become king. Unless you're born royalty, the only way to become a ruler is to create your own country or take over another person's by force. Which is why Heroes don't become 'Lords.'"

"Hmm, how strange."

Kurtz tilted his head quizzically as he wrote everything down in his notepad.

“But without strength, how can you survive a crisis? Wouldn’t a weak king be easy to remove?”

“If you kill the current king, their children will just take over.”

“What value is there in passing rulership to your offspring?”

I was born in a democracy, so I wouldn’t know. However, Airia lifted her face and said, “Royalty and nobility are taught from birth what is necessary to be a good ruler. That’s why their children take over. No one would follow an incompetent ruler who only swaggers around. Even if they did, a nation ruled by one would soon crumble.”

I forgot we had the ruler of a city sitting right here.

“More importantly though, there is value in having the Hero not be our leader.”

“What value would that be?”

“The Hero can throw himself into dangerous situations without fear for his own safety. For even if he dies, the king will still be there to lead the people.”

“I see... Thank you for such a logical explanation.”

It was kind of amusing watching the exchange between Airia and Kurtz. *Wait, now’s not the time to be thinking about stuff like that.* The human version of the Demon Lord had just shown up. Regular demons like us wouldn’t stand a chance against the Hero. There were a few stories of “Tragic Heroes” who were unlucky enough to somehow be killed by weaker demons, but in reality that almost never happened.

According to the reports Kurtz had brought, the Hero was somewhere on the northern front. Most of the second regiment was still split up, and the isolated units were fighting small-scale guerilla wars in enemy territory. In other words, they’d gotten lost and were resorting to banditry. The point was, however, that the Hero was now going around eliminating each of these isolated squads one by one.

Because of how disorganized the battlefield had become, communication was delayed and it had taken a long time before the Hero’s existence had even

become known. It didn't help that the Hero had killed every last demon he'd found. Thanks to that, no one had any idea what the Hero's abilities were, or what he looked like—or if he was even a he. I hadn't wanted to get involved in the mess in the north, but now I really wanted to keep as much distance as I could. Unfortunately, though, this wasn't something I could ignore. After all, the Hero's ultimate goal was killing the Demon Lord. *As if I'll let that happen.*

"I don't suppose there's any way to collect information on this Hero, is there?"

Airia looked down and thought to herself for a few seconds. She then looked back up at me and said, "Even Heroes are human. I doubt he's just wandering around in the wilderness. He must be using one of the cities as his base of operations, even if only temporarily."

So just like in RPGs, where you use different towns as rest stops while going on your journey to beat the Demon Lord.

"Why don't we try sending spies to the northern cities? I'm certain the viceroy of whatever city he's staying in would be eager to advertise that fact. After all, neither bandits nor demons would want to go up against the Hero."

That made sense. Heroes were meant to be allies of justice and all.

"I'd like to send some of my werewolves over, but the right magic could easily blow their cover. I'm worried they'd be in too much danger on a scouting mission. Besides, I want to preserve as much of my fighting strength as possible."

"In that case, leave everything to me," Airia grinned. "Ryunheit is a trading city. And there's plenty of traders who do business in the north. I'll ask some of the merchants if they're willing to help."

"Are you sure?"

I didn't doubt the skills of Ryunheit's citizens, but I felt a little guilty about using them as my spies. However, Airia's smile only grew wider.

"I'm sure. In return, though, they'll probably want permission to have exclusive rights to buy and sell goods from the north."

“I see, so this is a business opportunity for them.”

Since we would be the ones funding their trip, it would be a perfect chance to make a killing. Honestly, I was impressed by their devotion to commerce.

“Alright, let’s go with your plan then. I’ll pay for their expenses and grant them license to trade with the north. In fact, why don’t you tell them to buy some canine silverwork to sell over there? I’ll give it to them for a discount.”

“I’m sure they’ll be happy to hear that.”

Our conversation had gotten a little off-track, which Kurtz quietly noted.

“Sir Veight, I see you’ve been influenced by the commercial spirit of this city.”

“...I guess I have.”

What can I say? The economics of this world are just so interesting. Though distribution was still a problem with the current level of technology, a guy could still dream. Once the fighting ended, maybe I could start up a business together with the Demon Lord. Though I suppose we were stuck dealing in the business of bloodshed for a while longer.

After that, I returned my focus to improving and fortifying Ryunheit. I had the canines spend a few days creating a large quantity of sandbags, which I used to protect the construction site of the wall. It wasn’t much, but it’d at least provide some protection against surprise attacks. If the sandbags could buy even a few seconds, it would be enough time for us werewolves to go the canines’ aid. Plus, I had a secret trump card. If enemies occupied the fortified construction site, I would blow the whole thing up with gunpowder. I imagine it’d be effective in an enclosed space like that. The problem was, Kurtz wasn’t letting me touch the gunpowder anymore.

“My apologies, Sir Veight, but I cannot allow you near the Dragon’s Breath.”

Why’s he so strict? Though I hadn’t told anyone, I was used to handling gunpowder. Back in Japan, I’d spent a good deal of my childhood messing around with fireworks. Burning weeds with firecrackers, making makeshift aerials with bottle rockets and empty cans—the list goes on. I was hoping to eventually train a musket squad too. Also, I’d eventually have the canine

crossbow squads use explosive arrows instead of normal ones.

There was a mountain of work to do, but the most important issue was still finding a way to deal with the Hero. To be honest, I had no idea how I was going to beat someone as strong as the Demon Lord. The difference in strength between us was immense. Even if every single werewolf charged him at once, we'd definitely still lose. Worse, we had no idea what kind of person the Hero was, or what his modus operandi was.

Predicting an army's movements was simple enough, but the same didn't hold true for an individual. It was well within the realm of possibility for the Hero to show up at our doorstep tomorrow. This was technically the demon capital now. That alone was reason enough for him to attack. If he did show up, my plan was to hit him with 1,000 undead soldiers, but even they'd have a hard time defeating him. Were all else to fail, I'd have no choice but to fight him together with all the werewolves. When we'd left our village, we'd all accepted that we might die during the fighting. But if I could help it, I'd really rather not face him.

"Sir Veight, we have returned!"

A few days later, the old canines I'd sent out recruiting returned.

"Good to see you're alive and well. How did the recruiting go?"

"We managed to get five..."

Just 5? Or maybe he's about to say 50?

"Five hundred, sir!"

"That's way too much!"

I doubt I could afford to house that many. Ryunheit itself only had a population of 3,000. And I'd just taken in another 500 kentauros the other day.

"But they're already here."

"You brought them all with you?"

"They said even if they get rejected from the demon army, they'd be happy living in Ryunheit."

They sure were eager. And rather bold. After a hurried meeting with my canine officers, I decided to accept 100 of the 500 canines into the army. I split them evenly between the crossbow and construction units, bringing the total number of canines in the engineering unit to 200, and the number of canines on the crossbow team to 100. I had the canine officers pick out the people best for each job, so I'm sure I recruited the cream of the crop. Canines were exceptionally good at appraising their own kind.

The remaining 400 canines I hired as temp workers to help with the wall construction. Once that was done, I'd be able to expand the city to accommodate them as permanent residents. At any rate, I was glad we were able to recruit more manpower. Though it also meant Ryunheit's population suddenly jumped to 4,000, leaving Airia scrambling to take care of the logistics.

"While I'm more than glad we're getting new demon residents, could you please not flood the city with them?"

"I'll make sure they pay taxes at least, so let it slide just this once, please."

I listened to the sounds of construction going on outside for a few minutes before one of the traders, Mao, got to the main topic of today's meeting. The information I'd been waiting weeks for.

"The Hero's party is staying in Schverm," he reported. Mao seemed to be a jovial, sociable fellow.

"Party? It's not just one person?"

"Err, there's only one Hero. His name's Ranhart. But he has three comrades he fights together with. All three of them are quite skilled in their own right, too."

Great. Humans got exponentially more powerful when they combined their strength. But that aside, Schverm was supposed to be one of the cities the demon army had demolished during their invasion. Even if Meraldia had retaken the city, was it really in good enough condition to use as a base?

"When I went there, it looked like the citizens had returned, and everyone was working toward rebuilding the city. Because the Hero and his party took care of the remaining demon squads, it's safe enough for people to live there

again.”

Damn bastard, he’s acting like the second regiment is on its last legs. Well, I guess it is. Mao noticed my angry glare and smiled.

“My apologies, that was a rude way of phrasing it. Regardless, the citizens have finished patching up the walls, and in a few days Schverm’s army of five thousand will be returning to the city.”

Not good. Schverm was right next to Bahen, the city the second regiment was currently barricading themselves in. If they returned safely, it was only a matter of time before the second regiment was wiped out.

“What is the rest of the Meraldian army doing currently?”

“You didn’t ask me to check up on them, so...” Mao trailed off apologetically. “However, I did hear a few things about their movements. Most of their forces are working in tandem with Schverm’s regular army. Combined, there are five thousand regular troops and ten thousand militia.”

“Thanks for the information.”

“A good number of the militia will start going back to their home cities now that the immediate threat is past. If Meraldia wants to launch another large-scale offensive, they’ll have to call them back.”

Looks like I’m going to need to send a permanent informant to Schverm.

“I asked a few of the other merchants from my caravan to stay behind in Schverm. I can have one of my men meet up with them outside the city whenever, and get an update on the situation.”

“Just how good at this are you guys?”

Mao grinned.

“We simply believe that sincere cooperation will be met with due reward.”

“Assuming it really is sincere, then I promise you it will.”

Humans were as varied in personality as demons were. And Mao, in particular, was someone I needed to be wary of. Still, I was grateful he’d brought me all this information. Since I was tired of polite niceties, I decided to

be frank.

“So what kind of reward are you looking for? I doubt it’s money.”

Mao’s smile grew wider.

“An astute observation. We would like to hire a few of your kentauros for my caravan.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re a valuable asset for us merchants. They’re fit, make for good guards, and their presence will help us negotiate more favorably with demons. I don’t mind even if they aren’t soldiers.”

It certainly was true that kentauros had both the intelligence of humans and the mobility of horses. Even if they weren’t a trained soldier, a kentauros could easily handle wild wolves or other dangerous creatures. On top of that, having one in a merchant’s party would make passage through demon territory much safer. If Mao only wanted a few, and they didn’t have to be warriors, I could probably scrounge some up. However, this trade seemed a little too good to be true.

“Is that really all you want?”

“But of course. Whether it be merchants or an army, both seek to employ people of talent, no?”

I had my reservations about granting such a cunning man so many privileges. There just had to be a catch somewhere. *Oh, I see now.*

“The real reason you want to hire kentauros is so you can spread your name around the demon army and be our primary supplier, isn’t it?”

Mao stared, and gave me a very stiff smile.

“Oh my, it seems you’ve seen through me...”

“You’re quite the scoundrel.”

“That I am.”

He’s got balls.

“Sorry, but no. If that’s your objective, then I’m afraid we can cooperate no

longer. Showing favoritism like that would just lead to corruption.”

Mao’s face fell. I really couldn’t let my guard down around merchants. But after thinking about it a bit longer, I decided to compromise.

“If you want a reward that large, then come back after you’ve done more for the army.”

“After I’ve... done more?”

“Indeed.”

You better get ready to be worked to the bone, though.



Mao sighed and bowed his head.

“Very well, I shall continue working as your private spy for free for some time longer, Lord Veight. Hopefully, that can earn your favor.”

There was no way a guy like this didn’t have other negotiating cards up his sleeve. I was certain he’d bring something else out. I silently nodded for him to continue, and as expected, he pulled out another one of his cards.

“Incidentally, I have been making preparations to discreetly import the vast quantities of stone you will need to build your new wall. Were Ryunheit to simply order the stone up-front, our enemies would easily catch on to our plans.”

“What exactly do you mean by preparations?”

Mao unfurled a map of Meraldia and pointed to one of the cities.

“I will pretend to be a merchant from the north, touring the south to buy up quality stone for Schverm’s rebuilding efforts.”

“Wait up, do merchants from the north come down here often enough for a story like that to be convincing?”

Mao nodded with a grin.

“The north does need a lot of stone right now. It wouldn’t be the least bit suspicious if northern merchants had to go further than usual to find some.”

This guy was willing to use his fellow humans’ plight as a pretext.

“You really are a scoundrel.”

“That I am.”

Mao’s grin grew wider. I’d seen plenty of people like this back in Japan, but few demons had such calculating personalities. If you let them reel you, you were finished. But still, they were definitely useful. So long as he was valuable to the demon army, I’d keep him around.

“Very well. In that case, we have a deal. But don’t get carried away, or you’ll find yourself out of a job.”

“I will keep your warning close to my heart.”

Mao bowed deeply and left the room.

Once he'd left, I softly called out, "Monza."

"I'm here, boss."

My best spy, Monza, walked soundlessly into the room.

"Have your squad keep an eye on him."

Monza's lips curled upward and she asked, "If he betrays us, can I kill him?"

"You can beat him to an inch of his life, but bring him back here alive."

"Mm, fine."

Now then, how's this going to play out?

The Hero's appearance had caused a stir not just in Ryunheit, but in the whole demon army. Every time a Demon Lord had appeared in the past, a Hero had risen up to challenge them. Because of how demon society worked, Heroes were a demon army's greatest nemesis. Since they only obeyed strength, if the Hero defeated the Demon Lord, who was the strongest of that generation, the remaining demons lost their cohesion.

You would think it'd be fine if the second-strongest demon just took up the role of Demon Lord, but the problem usually was that even that second-strongest demon had become demoralized after the death of their lord. In other words, without a Demon Lord, any large demon army instantly fell apart. Past Heroes had known this, which was why they'd cut through the army's ranks and went straight for the Demon Lord. It was a reckless attack, but one that was fatal for our side if it succeeded.

Naturally, preparing a body double or grooming a successor would circumvent this problem, but the issue was that demons would never accept such methods. It was irrational, but that was just how they were. For our side, the Demon Lord was irreplaceable. Even if there was someone just as strong as the Demon Lord, they wouldn't be able to take over the position until they'd proven their

strength to every other race.

“That’s quite the pained expression you’re making...”

“Whoa!?”

Surprised at the sudden whisper in my ear, I whirled around.

“Heya, Movi’s here.”

Master waved a hand at me from behind my shoulder.

“Master, I really think you should give up on trying to make that nickname stick.”

“Blame my parents. They were the ones who christened me with such a ridiculous name as Gomoviroa.”

She really doesn’t like her name, huh? I prided myself on having a good grasp of my master’s personality, and when she made jokes like this, it was usually because there was something weighing down on her mind. These bad jokes were her way of trying to raise her spirits.

“Are you worried about the Hero too, Master?”

“More or less...”

From her tone, I could tell Master had been worrying about him quite a bit. The Demon Lord Friedensrichter, the giant Tiverit, and the Great Sage Gomoviroa had been comrades ever since they’d first founded the demon army. Tiverit was still fighting in the north, and the Hero would eventually attempt to assassinate the Demon Lord. Both of them were in danger.

I observed Master’s childish face, and thought back to the deal I’d made with Mao. We knew the Hero was in Schverm. Mao had men posted in the city, so it might be possible to take Master there too to get a better grasp of the situation. She might even discover some intel that would cheer her up.

“Master, if you’re alright with it, why don’t we take a trip to the northern front?”

“Why the north?”

I relayed all the information Mao had given me. Master mulled my words over for a few minutes, then muttered, “I see... So you’ve posted human spies. Are you certain it’s not a trap?”

“Not for sure.”

But if we ran into enemies, I was confident we’d be able to run away. Master weighed nothing in my arms, and a werewolf could outrun a horse and take more hits than a heavy infantryman. *I’m sure we could make it work out.*

“But I don’t believe the merchants of this city would have any reason to betray me. There’s no profit in it.”

“What if Meraldia promised them a monetary reward for turning you in? Or if they have a religious incentive to betray you?”

“I guess that is possible...”

Though I doubted the Meraldian army had put a bounty on my head. I was just a measly vice-commander, after all. Besides, Monza’s investigation had already shown that Mao was a Mondstrahl follower, and not a very devout one at that, so he had no religious prejudice against demons. There was always the possibility that he held a personal grudge against demons, but that held true for everyone. It was inefficient to concern myself with that possibility.

“Boy, do you not realize that you are currently the most important person in the demon army?”

“I really don’t think I am...”

It was true governing Ryunheit was a heavy responsibility, but even if I died, Airia and Kurtz would be able to carry on without me.

“Oh, for goodness... Never mind. So long as I’m with you, I suppose we should at least be able to escape, if it comes down to it.” Master heaved a long sigh and jumped off her chair. “Schverm is occupied by the enemy now, so I’ll open a teleportation gate in Bahen. It will take some time, though.”

While Master worked on opening the gate, I powered through all the paperwork I needed to finish for the day. Since I was in a hurry, I left some of the smaller tasks for Airia. With our respective preparations thus complete,

Master sent the two of us to the agricultural city of Bahen.

“Whew...”

The first thing caught my eye upon arriving was the extent to which the city had been razed. There were two main factors to the city looking like a wreck. First was, of course, the physical destruction. The second regiment had thoroughly destroyed the infrastructure of Bahen during their invasion, rendering it uninhabitable. The agricultural city’s prized canals had been smashed to bits, and the water fountains were filled with stagnant, fetid water. Many of the lion-head-shaped spigots had been smashed as well.

The second reason was the state of the second regiment itself. The squads still in fighting condition were camped outside the city, but the streets were filled with rows of wounded giants and ogres. I spotted a small, human-sized hobgoblin lying on the floor with a blanket covering his torso. He was missing one of his arms. Next to him, a five-meter tall giant leaned against the ruined wall of a house, breathing softly. It looked like his eyes had been gouged out by spears, judging by the horrific scars on his face.

“They barely made it out alive... It must have been a fierce battle.”

Master tried to act calm, but I could tell she was pretty shaken up. There were hundreds of soldiers lining the main street alone. Among them, quite a few were already dead. Houses that were still standing had been converted into field hospitals, and I could hear screams coming from some of them. Chances were, a good number of demons had been hurt so bad they needed arms or legs amputated. Master turned back to me and said, “There’s nothing more pitiful than surviving a battle only to die of injury afterwards. I will stay here and tend to the soldiers.”

“That’s all well and good, but what about the Hero?”

“I leave that in your capable hands. If something unexpected happens, return here.”

Master didn’t even wait for my reply before running off and casting healing magic on the nearest soldier. She was more worried about them than she let on. “Pull yourself together. It’s not the end for you yet.”

Knowing Master's personality, there was no changing her mind now.

"Alright, Master. I'll go by myself, then. I'll try and return as soon as I can."

"Mmmm, be careful. I'll head over myself later."

Master was already on her third patient. The two hobgoblins she'd healed were blinking in surprise and patting down their healed injuries.

That's just how she is, I guess... Master couldn't stand to let any of her allies die.

"You be careful too, Master. I know you're worried about these guys, but don't use so much mana or you'll end up collapsing again."

"Fear not, Tiverit's guarding this city. I plan to announce my presence to him later."

I transformed and slipped out of Bahen's main gate. I dashed past the city's bountiful wheat fields and headed towards Schverm. As Bahen's main purpose was to provision Schverm, the two cities were situated close to each other. With a werewolf's speed, I'd arrive by nightfall.

As predicted, I reached Schverm's walls shortly after sunset. Bahen had been ravaged pretty badly by the second regiment, and Schverm was in no better condition. The walls the city prided itself on had been smashed in, and would be no obstacle in the event of a siege. *I see, it's because the city's hard to defend now that the Meraldian army can't commit to an all-out attack.*

According to Mao, his people had already infiltrated the city. He'd shown me how to contact them, so it'd probably be best if I heard the city's current situation from them first. However, I still didn't trust Mao. If the city was in this poor shape, it might be wiser to return to my human form and scout it out myself.

Yeah, I think that's what I'll do after all. I'd contact Mao's agents only after I'd done some reconnaissance of my own. That way, even if I'd been betrayed, I'd still be able to leave with some concrete information. And if Mao's men tried to feed me false intel, I'd be able to tell right away. I returned to my human form, and changed into the local costume I'd prepared. I clambered over one of the

destroyed sections of the wall and slipped into the city.

Unlike Bahen, Schverm was in the middle of being restored. While the walls were still in disrepair, most of the buildings had either been rebuilt, or been replaced by tents to house soldiers temporarily. Places had also been cleared out to hold large stockpiles of building materials. From the looks of it, they were preparing to rebuild Schverm in earnest. Were I the Meraldian commander, I'd be prioritizing recapturing Bahen over rebuilding Schverm. That way I could leave my main force in Bahen as a buffer, and focus on Schverm's rebuilding without any fear of enemy attack.

However, a significant portion of the federation's army was militia. The citizens of Schverm probably cared a lot more about fixing up their own home than recapturing someone else's. This was all just speculation of course, but it seemed to me like Meraldia's army was being forced to make strategically unoptimal decisions because of outside pressure. Obviously, the demon army had its own internal politics to deal with too.

What I did find surprising, though, was just how many soldiers Meraldia had stationed in Schverm. There were so few civilians that I stood out in my plain clothes. Furthermore, the loose garments favored by people in the south were nothing like the tight-fitting outfits people here preferred. I'd tried to pick something as inconspicuous as possible, but thanks to the design of my clothes, I stood out like a sore thumb. *Maybe I should pull back for now.* I decided not to go to the city square and left through the same gap in the wall I'd arrived. *Well, that scouting mission was a failure.* After collecting my thoughts, I considered contacting Mao's agents.

A second later, I transformed and leapt backwards. At the same time, I heard something whoosh through the air. I kicked off a nearby piece of rubble and leapt further away. Something sharp passed by and ripped through my sleeve.

"A werewolf, huh?"

Three armed soldiers stood behind me. They were supported by a single mage, standing a short distance away. *They're skilled. Even my superior hearing and sense of smell couldn't tell they were here.* The only way that was possible was if they'd used magic to conceal themselves. I put some more distance

between myself and the soldiers and observed them from afar.

The three in front had an unbelievable amount of mana. Far more than most humans. And while the mage didn't have as much mana as the others, they were far more skilled at manipulating it. If I let my guard down, I'd be killed.

"Wait, are *you* the Hero?"

One of the soldiers stepped forward and said, "I am the Hero Ranhart. Thanks to this city's divine protection, we knew what you were the moment you entered its walls."

So they've already set up alarm barriers around the city. Even though these spells tended to be crude and easy to spot, I hadn't noticed it at all. They must have camouflaged it very well. The man who'd called himself Ranhart brandished his sword.

"Die, you abomination."

"Whaddaya mean, abomination..." I muttered under my breath.

The Hero and his two comrades spread out and surrounded me on three sides. *Not good.* I cast all the strengthening spells I had ready. My movements became lighter, and I was able to better perceive my surroundings. I also boosted my natural healing in case I got injured, and hardened my fur with mana.

"HAAAAH!"

The Hero and his friends simultaneously, targeting my head, shoulder, and legs. Their coordination was impeccable, and I was only able to dodge by a paper-thin margin. I doubted I'd be able to stand a chance against the Hero alone, so I knew there was no way I'd be able to fight him and his party. I wanted to flee, but I'd be cut down the moment I tried. Their team tactics were keeping me pinned down here.

Even with my magic boosting every one of my abilities, defending was taking everything I had. To make matters worse, I could tell the mage at the rear was chanting a spell. I had no clue what that spell was, but if I was put at even slightly more of a disadvantage, I'd die for sure. Even if I had to take a few hits, I needed to stop that mage.

I stopped dodging for just a second, and cast Soul Shaker. The effects were immediate. The surrounding mana was converted into the variety demons used, and began gathering around me. Thanks to that, the mage's spell sputtered out before it was completed.

Now I just needed to survive the Hero's onslaught. Due to all the high-speed healing spells I'd cast, so long as I didn't die, I'd be able to make it out of this somehow.



However, the attacks I was expecting never came. I surveyed my surroundings, and noticed the Hero and his comrades had stopped in their tracks, their expressions twisted in fear. As unbelievable as it seemed, my Soul Shaker's fear effect worked on even the Hero.

Isn't the Hero supposed to be as strong as the Demon Lord!? Despite my shock, my body still reflexively launched an attack while they were disabled. A dark gale surrounded my claws as I swung my arm down. My claws raked through all three men, breaking the neck of one, ripping off half the face of another, and crushing the windpipe of the third. They slumped to the ground, dead. *You've gotta be kidding me!? That's the most anticlimactic Hero fight ever! There's no way a single werewolf just took down the Hero's party!*

"Impossible..." I muttered.

Just then, I realized something was off. The flow of mana was all wrong. The Demon Lord's mana welled up from inside him, but these guys' mana was coming from their weapons and armor. Plus, even though the people using that equipment had died, the equipment itself was still releasing as much mana as before.

"So that's what it was."

I walked over to one of the dead men and picked up his sword. I could feel a large quantity of mana being emitted from it. It had likely been crafted by a powerful sorcerer in ancient times.

"So these guys are just fake Heroes you powered up with weapons, huh?"

I turned to the trembling mage and grinned. Since I was in wolf form it probably looked like a snarl, just like all my other expressions.

"Eek..." From under the mage's mysterious hood, I heard the scream of a young woman. A gust of wind blew her hood off, and I got a glimpse of her face. She had long hair and otherwise plain features, but overall I guess she would still be considered a beauty. However, right now, a yellow stain was spreading across the lower part of her pure white robes. She'd wet herself in terror. I took a single step forward, and she fell backwards, weeping.

"P-Please... don't kill me..."

There was nothing more pitiful than a mage bereft of their magic. Especially a human mage. After watching me kill three of her comrades in an instant, the woman knew she had no hope of defeating me.

“Please, I-I’ll do anything...”

I guess that means she’s surrendered. While it was never a good idea to let one’s guard down around a mage, thanks to my earlier Soul Shaker, she wouldn’t be able to cast any spells for some time. Besides, at this distance, I’d be able to kill her if she tried anything. After confirming I was in no danger, I gave the woman her options.

“If you refuse an honorable death in battle, you’ll live the rest of your life in disgrace. Are you fine with that?”

“I am! Really! I’ll do anything, so please just don’t kill me!”

There was even snot coming out of her nose now. I didn’t have the heart to kill someone who was begging for their life like that. Besides, she would be more useful to me alive. First things first, though. I needed to interrogate her.

“Who do you work for?”

The armor and weapons the three men had been using were all valuable equipment. Not only was it difficult to create magicked armor or weapons, it was extremely expensive. And if someone used them in combat, it was a given that they would get damaged. Magic items like these weren’t the kinds of things regular people could get their hands on.

“Someone went through all the trouble of giving you these powerful weapons so that guy could pretend to be a Hero. Who was it?”

Quivering, the mage answered, “Th-The Senate...”

“I see.”

It all made sense now. The Meraldian Senate would certainly have the resources to buy up this much magic equipment. And they had a good reason for propping up someone as the Hero.

“So this was all propaganda.”

“Propa... ganda?”

“A way to raise the Meraldian Federation’s morale.”

I rephrased it in a way she might understand, and the mage nodded furiously. *Dang, I shouldn’t have come here at all, then... If Commander Tiverit or someone had blown away these guys in one hit, the second regiment’s morale would have gone up.*

“Finished with your interrogation?”

I heard a voice behind me, and spun around.

“You came faster than I expected, Master.”

My master floated leisurely in the dark night sky.

“Healing so many people took its toll on my mana, but... Oh, how kind of you to prepare nourishment for me.”

Master touched one of the nearby fallen swords. Like a dry cloth sucking up moisture, she absorbed the mana stored within it. The faint light surrounding it vanished.

“Master, what are you doing!?”

“Replenishing my mana. You sure are a thoughtful disciple, finding all this for me.”

“Master, I’m pretty sure you just sucked the mana out of the famed dragon killer sword, Lionheit.”

According to legend, it was extremely effective against dragons and dragonkin—even against normal enemies. It was meant to have enough power to split a shield in two.

“Isn’t that perfect, then? It would be to our benefit to remove such dangerous things from enemy hands. Oh, this shield has a wonderful stockpile as well.”

“That shield bears the crest of the old kingdom, you realize that, right? ...From the looks of it, it’s probably at least a hundred and fifty years old.”

“That’s hardly old at all.”

Once she finished with the shield, Master moved on to a suit of armor. *If I remember my history right... that’s a true antique set of armor worn by a*

previous Hero.

“Master, stop! It’s a waste to drain them all like this! Surely you can leave some of these relics intact!”

“Alright, alright, I will craft some demon relics just for you. Surely now you have no complaints about me using these to restore my mana? There are still people back in Bahen who need my healing.”

“Liar, we both know you won’t make anything.”

If the amount of total mana I possessed was measured at one Veight, then the amount Master had siphoned out of the swords and armor would be equal to roughly 27 Veights. The warriors of the second regiment would have loved to have these weapons in their possession. Master finished draining all of the fake Heroes’ equipment, then stretched leisurely. I’d been keeping track the whole time, and by my count, she’d just sucked up 127 Veights of mana. Her total mana capacity was insane.

“Now now, no need to sulk. Regardless, who’s that apprentice mage over there?”

“One of the Hero’s companions, apparently.”

Master nodded in understanding. “So they used these worthless toys to play pretend Hero, did they? If you try to fill shoes too big for you, you’ll find yourself in an early grave, girl.”

Uhh, Master, I already killed her comrades, so that warning’s a bit pointless now. Master then turned away from the pale mage and started drawing glyphs in the air.

“As thanks for such a sumptuous feast, I suppose I can at least deliver these corpses to their comrades. Arise, O fallen. I grant thee artificial life.”

Master waved her fingers, and the three dead soldiers staggered to their feet. She’d turned them into zombies. She gently patted the still-bleeding zombies, and murmured, “Walk back to your comrades. They’ll grant you a proper burial.”

She then saw them off with a jovial smile and a wave. *You know, this is why*

everyone thinks necromancers are psychopaths... The woman watched with a horrified expression as her former comrades shambled back into the city, leaving a trail of blood in their wake. Master then turned back to the girl, the same jovial smile still on her face, “Oh, are you unable to walk? In that case, fallen warriors, take your surviving comrade with you.”

The zombies turned back to the mage and stared at her with glassy eyes.

“Eeek...”

They shambled back over, bent down, and carried the mage between the three of them.

“Eeeeek! N-NOOOOOOOO!”

“You’re surprisingly lively for one who cannot walk. No matter, my precious undead shall see you home safe and sound.”

Master waved her hands once more, and the zombies carried the mage through the gap in the walls.

“You do some really crazy things sometimes, Master.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No... never mind. I’ll go see what the inside of the city’s like.”

I had almost forgotten centuries had passed since Master had lost her humanity. Sighing, I headed back into Schverm. I didn’t have to worry as much this time, since I knew Master would be able to save me if anything happened. As expected, the city was in an uproar now.

“Sir Hero!? Are you alright!? Those wounds look serious!”

“H-He’s dead! He’s been turned into a zombie!”

“Sir Ranhart’s a zombie!”

“His comrades the Astral Fencer and the Divine Cavalier too!”

Those are some impressive-sounding titles. I know it was in self-defense, but now I feel kind of bad for killing these guys.

“Wait, the Holy Priestess still lives!”

So she's the "Holy Priestess," huh? You guys should probably let her rest for a bit. Once the zombies reached the central square, they collapsed to the ground with a wet plop. Having carried out Gomoviroa's orders, they returned to the corpses they originally were.

A large crowd of soldiers gathered around the dead Hero, but they kept their distance. Considering what had just happened, I didn't blame them. The hope of the north, the Hero and his comrades, had just returned to the city as zombies. Most of the rank and file soldiers were too stunned to do anything. It was then that a noble-looking officer ran up to the scene. I'd never seen a Meraldian Senate secretary before, but judging by his clothes, he was one. The middle-aged man walked up to the mage and shouted, "What in heaven's name happened here!? Explain yourself, Holy Priestess Mildine!"

Still lying on the ground, the mage screamed, "A-A werewolf! A werewolf killed all of them! And then he turned them into zombies..."

"A werewolf, you say!? Impossible, our Hero wouldn't be done in by such a lowly creature!"

I guess a normal werewolf would have died pretty fast against the three of them. In fact, if I hadn't used Soul Shaker I'd probably have died, too. The girl called Mildine shook her head vehemently and replied, "He howled once, and my magic was sealed! We didn't stand a chance against him!"

The soldiers watching the exchange started whispering to each other.

"Was our Hero really so weak that he couldn't take down a single werewolf even with his comrades at his side?"

"That's not it. Haven't you heard about how the Demon Lord has this crazy strong werewolf general at his side?"

"There's no way that guy would come here, though."

Except I'm right here. Shaken, the secretary tried to quell the unrest among the men.

"Don't jump to conclusions, men! The Holy Priestess has simply lost her composure! Come, what you need now is rest!"

He grabbed Mildine's hand and tried to pull her to her feet, but was stopped by one of the soldiers. Judging by the simple breastplate he wore over his civilian clothes, he was likely one of the militia.

"Wait a second, was Sir Ranhart really a Hero!?"

"Yeah, there's no way a Hero would die this easily!"

"Did you guys trick us!?"

The Meraldian Federation's regular army was made up of former swordsmen and mercenaries, along with nomads with no other place to go. They were trained professionals, and they had nothing to lose, so they'd fight against any enemy without complaint. But that wasn't the case for the militia, nor for the city's garrisoned troops. Garrisoned soldiers were only concerned with defending the city under their jurisdiction, and the militia fought because they had no choice. Their morale could plummet at the drop of a hat.

More soldiers gathered at the square, curious to see what the commotion was. Before long, they were rioting. They pinned down the Senate secretary and started beating him mercilessly. In seconds, his face was a bloody mess. Someone then hauled him up and threw him into the crowd, where he vanished. No one seemed to care at all about the dead soldiers. Once they'd finished venting their frustrations on the secretary, they crowded around the mage.

"Aren't you supposed to be a master of all twenty-six schools of magic!? Can't you do something about that werewolf!?"

Now that's impressive. Not even Master can use all 26 types of magic. Mildine shook her head and shrunk away from the soldiers bearing down on her.

"N-No... I can't..."

"Why the hell not!?"

"I'm j-just a court magician... Th-The only magic I can use is illusion magic..."

"Illusion magic!?"

Terrified as she was, Mildine ended up saying more than was necessary.

"Eek! M-My only job was to make ceremonies look more impressive and

cover up scandals and the like!”

Silence followed her confession.

“So you’re just a crook!”

“Holy Priestess, my ass! Those Senate bastards!”

“I lost good friends thanks to these bastards’ scheming!”

“Let’s kill her!”

“Yeah, off with her head!”

Oi, oi, are these guys serious? Were they really going to kill an unarmed, helpless woman? *Besides, the only reason you guys were able to take back two of your cities was because these ‘fake’ Heroes boosted your morale.* Just then, I felt someone tug on my sleeve.

“Lord Veight.”

The only people in here who’d recognize me on sight would be Mao’s agents. I turned around and saw two young traders looking at me in surprise.

“What are you doing here, Lord Veight?”

“I just came here to scout out the area, but it looks like I ended up killing the Hero.”

“Are you serious!?”

I mean, really, it’s your boss’ fault for being so shady. I could have just come to you from the start if he was trustworthy.

“Regardless, please come with us. We have a change of clothes ready.”

They led me to a nearby tent, and gave me a northern-style overcoat.

“Please try not to stand out too much. It’ll put our position in jeopardy.”

“Sorry.”

Like I said, originally this is all your employer’s fault.

In the time it took me to change, the soldiers had convinced the crowd to lynch Mildine.

“STOOOOOOOOOOOP!”

Someone grabbed her by the hair and pulled her to her feet.

“This isn’t my fault! I just did what the Senate told me to! Why do I have to die for that!?”

Tears streamed down her face as she clung desperately to the flagstones. She didn’t have any of the dignity befitting a Holy Priestess.

“Come on, aren’t you supposed to be a Holy Priestess!? The least you could do is act like one!”

“I’m not! I’m just a government official!”

Mildine shook her head, trying everything she could to avoid being pulled into the crowd. Considering the tough fights they’d been forced into thanks to the fake Hero’s urging, I could understand why they were so angry. But this girl really was just a tool of the Senate. I wasn’t too knowledgeable on the Senate’s inner workings, but I doubted a mere desk clerk had the power to disobey them. Eventually, the soldiers succeeded in dragging Mildine to the raised platform in the square.

“Damn Senate! Always lording over us! How come they get to sit back and watch while us peasants die!?”

“We won’t forgive you for this!”

“No, no! NOOOOOOOOO! Stop! I don’t want to die! Please forgive me!”

“Give it up, bitch!”

“STOOOP! No, no, no! I don’t want to diiiiie!”

Surprisingly, no one raised even a single voice of complaint. No one found it strange that they were forcing a single girl to bear the weight of the Senate’s sins. And from the looks of it, the people weren’t too fond of the Senate to begin with. But regardless of the circumstances behind it, it was true that Mildine had tricked a large number of people into fighting against the demon army. On top of that, she was my enemy. That being said, I couldn’t just turn a blind eye to her plight. I turned to Mao’s traders and whispered, “I’m gonna transform, so get away from me.”

“Lord Veight, what are you planning on doing!?”

“Saving her, I guess?”

“That’s far too reckless! Aside from us, everyone here is your enemy!”

I knew that better than anyone. But unless it was in battle, I didn’t want to let anyone die. Before I could second-guess myself, I transformed and leapt onto the dais. I grabbed the soldier closest to me, and threw him into the crowd below. The soldiers were so shocked by my sudden appearance that they couldn’t react.

“A werewolf!?”

“H-He’s here!”

“We’re under attack!”

But soon enough, they all fell into a panic. Meanwhile, I kicked off the rest of the soldiers on the platform. One of them struggled, so I crushed his helmet before throwing him off too. I made sure to hold back enough to only crush his helmet and not his head. I finished cleaning up the dozen or so soldiers left, and occupied the dais. Compared to the fake Hero, these regular soldiers went down easily. They were all far too weak. *Since I’m already here, I may as well give them a little demonstration.*

“My name is Veight, Vice-Commander of the demon army! As you can see, I turned your pathetic Hero into mincemeat! Even your strongest warriors are no match for us demons!”

The soldiers stopped what they were doing and focused their attention on me.

“Did he say Veight!?”

“The demon general who obliterated Ryunheit!?”

Uhh, the city’s still standing, guys... At my declaration, even the hardened soldiers of Meraldia’s regular army froze up.

“I heard he slaughtered four hundred men by himself...”

“Four hundred? I heard it was four *thousand*. Supposedly he murdered every

last man, woman, and child in Thuvan."

"Rumor has it that he smashed through Thuvan's massive walls with a single swipe of his claws..."

Is it just me, or are the rumors even more embellished than before? If even half of these were true, I'd be as strong as the Demon Lord. I'd been planning on making an example out of anyone who came to challenge me, but since everyone was cowering, I had no idea how to proceed. *There goes my chance to go on a rampage.* I stared blankly at the crowd, like a comedian who'd forgotten his lines. *Oh yeah, the Holy Priestess girl or whatever's still here. Didn't she say she was proficient in illusion magic? Guess I'll put her to work.*

"Oi. If you don't want to die, cast something big to draw their attention. We'll run while they're distracted."

"Why are you helping me?"

She likely hadn't expected me of all people to come to her aid. To be honest, neither had I.

"I promised to spare your life. If I let you die here, I'd be breaking that oath."

I came up with some half-assed excuse to explain away my actions.

"Anyway, unless you wanna die, hurry it up."

"O-Okay!"

Mildine nodded multiple times, and started casting as fast as she could. Her practiced movements belied her panic. A few seconds later, our surroundings went dark. *The heck is this?*

"Bwahahahaha!"

Wait, that's my voice. It sounded like it had been run through a filter, but that was definitely my voice echoing from above. I looked up and a saw a giant werewolf towering over me. For an illusion, it was pretty realistic. This girl really was a skilled illusionist.

"You mortals stand no chance against me! Come, I'll slaughter you all! Be it four thousand or forty thousand, it makes no difference to me!"

How exaggerated is that one battle going to get? Still, Mildine's illusion worked; the soldiers lost their will to fight. First, their Hero had come back as a zombie, then they'd learned their Hero had been a fake all along, then a werewolf had jumped into their midst, and now that werewolf had grown to the size of a giant. It was only natural they'd be panicking. And it appeared my illusion wasn't done yet.

"Us werewolves are everywhere! There's plenty even among your own ranks! You better be careful, or you'll find yourself eaten one night!"

Oh yeah, thanks to the clothes those guys gave me, I looked like a Meraldian militia right before I transformed, didn't I? At my illusion's words, the soldiers all started looking suspiciously at one another. Their attention had shifted from the dais to this new fictitious threat. Mildine sure knew how to rile up an audience. For an impromptu act, it was quite well done. Maybe she really did have the makings of a Holy Priestess. Hidden by the illusion, I transformed back into a human. I then picked up Mildine, slung her over my shoulder, and dashed into a nearby alley.

"Umm, where are you headed?" One of Mao's agents asked. They'd followed after me the moment I'd made my escape.

"I'm heading back to Ryunheit. I'll take her with me."

"I-I see..."

"Be careful, you two. Don't do anything reckless."

The two of them exchanged glances and said, "With all due respect, you're the last person we want to hear that from, sir..."

Am I really that bad? I snuck out of Schverm during the chaos, and safely returned to Ryunheit with Mildine in tow.

After the Schverm incident, there was a shift in the northern front. Officers and foot soldiers alike grew suspicious of the Senate, and many of the militia deserted and returned home. The Senate did their best to deny allegations that they'd purposely propped up a fake Hero, and in the end, they managed to

partially convince the citizenry. Thanks to that, rumors started to spread that I was as strong as the Demon Lord. *Apparently people are calling me the Sub-Demon Lord now or something.* Personally, I wished they'd stop exaggerating my strength like that. I really wasn't all that powerful, so it just felt awkward.

At any rate, the only soldiers left in Schverm now were Meraldia's regular army, a few city's worth of garrisons, and Bahen and Schverm's militia. Moreover, all soldiers were now subject to periodic checks to make sure no demons had snuck into their ranks. That added logistical problem meant Meraldia's army couldn't move as quickly as before.

On the other hand, thanks to all the mana Master had drained from those magic items, she'd been able to heal the second regiment's wounded in no time. Everyone who'd survived was now in fighting shape and had returned to the front lines. Master was skilled enough that even those who had lost a limb or an eye had been restored fully. For someone who'd mastered the secrets of death, healing was hardly a challenge. Though it did consume vast quantities of mana. The demons of the second regiment had taken to calling Master a saint because of all she'd done for them. Master herself seemed pleased with the title, and she'd taken to visiting the northern front on occasion.

"Master, weapons like these have both strategic and historical value, so could you please not destroy them from now on?"

"Weapons designed for humans are unsuitable for demon hands. The size of their handles and so on are misaligned. Besides, to the magicians of the era, these were mere tools used to stockpile spare mana. I simply used them as originally intended."

"Yes, but in this era they're rare. I bet the soldiers' morale would have risen if we'd handed these weapons out to them. You could have left at least one shield intact."

In retrospect, I had to admit Master had made the right decision back in Schverm, but she could have left a few magic items untouched. Weapons of that caliber were coveted by soldiers the world over. Back in my old life, I'd gotten pretty obsessed with collecting them in MMOs and the like. Sadly I was a werewolf now, so even though such legendary weapons existed, I couldn't use

them.

“Is that so? I suppose in that case I could craft something when I have mana to spare and pass it on to the second regiment. Surely a masterpiece created by the Great Sage Gomoviroa herself will have a similar effect. So could you please put this matter to rest?”

“If you’re really going to do it, then...”

“What do you think of a necklace that allows its wearer to reanimate after death and continue fighting?”

“I think they’d prefer something that keeps them alive.”

Master considered my suggestion for a few seconds, then said, “Then what about a sword that temporarily reanimates foes it kills, and turns them into allies?”

“Can we do something other than zombies?”

Honestly, I found the concept intriguing, but it’d just sow chaos among regular demon soldiers, so it was probably a bad idea. And more importantly, it’d be devastating if the enemy managed to steal a weapon like that.

“Very well, what about a sword that transforms defeated foes into evil spirits that haunt the wielder’s enemies?”

“So instead of zombies, we’re going with evil spirits now? Why does everything you suggest have to involve necromancy? Just how much do you like dead things, anyway?”

Master scratched her head awkwardly.

“If I were to enchant something with necromancy, those are about the only effects I could imbue items with. I’m much less experienced in the other fields of magic, and it would be difficult to create something enchanted with other properties. And I doubt demons would be happy with a helmet or breastplate that utilizes the souls of their departed comrades to protect them...

“Actually, I think that’d go over pretty well.”

Afterwards, Master made a few of the aforementioned helmets and brought them over to the men of the second regiment, which in turn skyrocketed her

popularity even higher. Honestly, Master could stand to do things like these more often, but because she was bad at socializing, she never did. Most mages, myself included, weren't very social to begin with. But necromancers were especially reclusive. Probably because they just saw things on a completely different level than us mortals.

Though Master didn't look like it, she was just as much of a problem child as Tiverit, just in a different way. Practically all strong demons were peculiar in some way or another, for whatever reason. That was why they needed grounded, reliable vice-commanders like me or Melaine.

With their morale restored and powerful new magical artifacts at their disposal, the second regiment was once again able to fight the Meraldian army to a stalemate. Their forces were still significantly depleted compared to when they'd started the campaign, but retaking Schverm was a possibility now. For the present at least, the northern front was stable. The only problem was, Mao wasn't happy with how I'd handled the situation.

"Why didn't you contact my subordinates to start with? It would have saved you so much trouble."

"I'm sorry, but it's your fault for looking so suspicious."

"I won't deny that I can occasionally be duplicitous, but why would I betray you when there's no profit in it for me? I'm hurt that you think so little of me."

So he doesn't care that I think he's suspicious, he cares that I'm implying he'd make an unprofitable deal?

"In my opinion, those who cannot take into account the costs and benefits of their actions are even worse than greedy cowards. When you fail to take the most profitable action at every juncture is when you fail as a merchant."

"I-I see. Sorry I misjudged you."

Why am I the one stuck apologizing? To make matters worse, my subordinates started grumbling about my decisions too.

"Hey, did you hear? Our commander ran off to the north."

“Even though he’s supposed to be overseeing the southern front, he was playing around in the north...”

“Wait, I thought he went there to kill the fake Hero?”

“What are you talking about?”

The least you could do is not say this stuff right outside my office. I can hear you, you know. You’re just making it hard for me to concentrate on work.

“Oh yeah, what’s with that girl the commander captured?”

“Apparently she was one of the fake Hero’s comrades.”

“Our boss sure does some crazy stuff.”

Go somewhere else already! I honestly wanted to tell them off, but nothing they’d said was technically wrong, so I couldn’t.

“Our commander’s crazy strong, even for a werewolf. He gets himself out of all kinds of messed-up situations on his strength alone, which is why he’s so reckless.”

“I guess it’s up to us to have his back then. We can’t have him dying on us.”

“Yeah, no way we can let him die. The future of the demon race’s riding on his shoulders.”

Is it just me, or are they treating me like a problem child who needs to be looked after? Well, whatever. Right now I need to figure out how to deal with the “Holy Priestess” Mildine.

“My name’s... not actually Mildine...” The Holy Priestess that I’d brought to my room mumbled. “It’s Lacy. And I’m just a court magician, not a Holy Priestess...”

So Mildine was just an alias?

“My family was poor, so the only way I could afford to study magic was by earning a Senate-sponsored scholarship. But in return for waiving my schooling fees, I had to work for them for a few years. That’s the only reason I’m here...”

Alright, alright, I get it, so stop crying. From the looks of it, she’d had her fair share of troubles too.

“I get that you had no choice in the matter, but surely even the Senate realized how much political backlash there would be if word got out that the Hero was a fake?”

“Th-They did...” Lacy nodded, and continued, “That was why the plan was to dispose of Ranhart after he’d fulfilled his purpose and claim that he’d died in battle.”

“The Senate does stuff like that?”

“If the Hero became so popular that his clout eclipsed that of the government’s, they’d no longer be able to control him, so that was what they decided.”

Damn, the Meraldian Senate’s scary.

“Oh, we weren’t planning on actually killing him, if that’s what you’re thinking. The idea was to remove him from the public eye after saying he challenged the Demon Lord and lost. Then we’d use his supposed death to raise morale.”

I see. So they were going to fake his death and turn him into a martyr for the cause. As I digested that piece of information, Lacy looked timidly up at me and asked, “Umm...”

“Yes?”

“Were they strong?”

She was referring to the three men I’d killed. Had I known they were actually fakes, I probably wouldn’t have even killed them. They would have been more valuable to me alive. That being said, it wasn’t a fight where I could afford to hold back. While they may have been bolstered with magic artifacts, they’d been pretty strong in their own right. On top of that, they’d been quite proficient with the artifacts in their possession. Your average foot soldier would never have gotten close to hitting me, magic sword or no. They may have been my enemies, but they had also been valiant men. So there was no need for me to lie for Lacy’s sake.

“If I’d made even a single misstep, I’d have died during that fight. Naturally their magic artifacts made them stronger, but even without them, those three

were skilled fighters. In fact, I wish I could have recruited them to my side."

"I see... I'm glad to hear that." Lacy breathed a sigh of relief. "From the start, those three had been prepared for death. But they'd told me that if they were going to die, they at least wanted to die as heroes."

Stop, now you're just making me feel guilty.

"By the way, does this mean the Hero's real name wasn't Ranhart either? I forget which of the three was him."

"That's right. And all three of them pretended to play the part of Ranhart at different times. That way, even if one of them died unexpectedly, we'd be able to continue the ruse that the Hero was still alive."

They had really thought this entire ruse through. It showed just how much the Senate had been scrambling for a way to raise morale. Lacy looked down again and muttered quietly, "The three of them were good, kind men. I only knew them a short time, but I'm glad we had the opportunity to fight alongside each other."

They might have been good people, but that didn't change the fact that they'd been my enemies. And the fun adventures Lacy had had alongside them mostly consisted of killing my comrades. Naturally, I didn't say that, but my thoughts must have shown on my face. Lacy went pale and bowed her head over and over.

"M-My apologies. I know they were your enemies."

"It's fine. They may have been my foes, but they were also your precious comrades. I may just be a lowly demon in the demon army, but I'm sure to you I'm the evillest of the lot."

At that, Lacy tilted her head in confusion.

"Are you really that unimportant?"

"That I am. There's plenty of other vice-commanders in the demon army."

Still looking confused, Lacy fished through her pockets and pulled out a tiny scrap of paper.

"Take a look at this. It's a wanted poster the Senate's posted throughout

Meraldia.”

“Hm?”

[Wanted: Werewolf King Veight]

Reward: 70,000 silver coins

Points of note:

-Conquered Ryunheit and is one of the demon army’s strongest generals-

-Is also responsible for the annihilation of Thuvan-

-Is an accomplished mage, skilled in necromancy, strengthening magic, and destruction magic-

-Appears as an unassuming black-haired young man in his human form-

-Is known to be invincible to arrows-

-Has claws powerful enough to shatter castle walls-

-His howl is deadly; those who hear it are killed instantly-

-Anyone he bites is turned into a werewolf-

-No one has fought him and survived to tell the tale-

“What kind of nonsense is this...”

There were so many things wrong with this poster that I didn’t even know where to start. Besides, didn’t ‘No one has fought him and survived to tell the tale’ and ‘Anyone he bites is turned into a werewolf’ contradict each other? What, did they think I ran around biting people without fighting them? As I glared at the wanted poster, Lacy stood up in a panic and hurriedly explained, “Umm, th-that poster is why I thought you were one of the Demon Lord’s main generals. I wasn’t trying to offend you...”

“Oh, I’m not mad at you specifically or anything. Though I would very much like to meet the person who made this wanted poster.”

Considering how many other rumors and half-truths they'd stuck into this poster, I figured I could maybe convince them to add 'Is exceptionally handsome' to the list of points to note. Lacy went white as a sheet. It appeared she'd taken my words the wrong way.

"S-S-Sorry... I was told as a child that I was too insensitive to other people's feelings. Please don't eat me..."

She certainly didn't seem like she was good at reading the mood. I could more or less guess why the Senate had pushed the job of babysitting the fake Heroes onto her. *Still, to think I have a 70,000 coin bounty on my head...* One silver coin was enough to feed and house a man for a day. Even if someone splurged and used two coins a day, that would still be enough money to let them live comfortably for 100 years. *Maybe I should fake my death and have one of my men collect the reward for me.* I continued reading through the list of wanted criminals, and noticed our esteemed Demon Ambassador Airia had a bounty on her head too.

[Wanted: Traitor and former Viceroy Airia Lutt Aindorf]

Reward: 100,000 silver coins

Points of note:

-A beautiful woman who often dresses in men's clothes-

-Former Viscount; now stripped of her rank-

-A recognized master of the Sashimael Style of Fencing; her title of swordsmaster has been revoked-

-An accredited Maykhara tea ceremony maestro; her title of maestro has been revoked-

-A graduate of Meraldia's military academy; her credentials have been revoked-

-Former licensed Meraldian merchant; her license has been revoked-

She was quite the multi-talented noble, though all of her qualifications and rights had now been revoked. If you crossed off all rights she'd been stripped of, all that was left was 'A beautiful woman who dresses in men's clothes.' Meraldia sure hated her guts. Her bounty was even higher than mine. She probably already knew about the bounty, but I reminded myself to tell her later just in case. First, though, I needed to figure out what to do with Lacy.

"Do you want to return to the Senate?"

"I do, but even if I went back, I'd probably just be executed for my failure..."

She had a point there. *Guess I have no choice but to look after her.*

"Would you like to live here in Ryunheit, then? Considering how talented you are, I wouldn't mind hiring you myself."

"Th-That seems best... Just don't be too hard on me, please."

The former fake Holy Priestess politely bowed her head to me.

Around the time the fierce fighting on the northern front began to turn into a slow battle of attrition, those who had left Ryunheit started trickling back to the city. It appeared they'd been unable to find any other place to take them in, and so were returning here.

"Can you believe it, Sir Veight!?"

I met the travel-worn citizens on the first floor, which had turned into a makeshift audience hall.

"Those heartless monsters treated me like part of the demon army just because I'd come from Ryunheit! Look at my carriage!"

He pointed out the window, and I spotted two arrows sticking out of the canvas of the carriage outside.

"They shot arrows at us and demanded we get lost!"

"That... certainly sounds terrible."

The merchants who'd left had probably been able to find their way into other cities using their connections or bribing their way in, but regular citizens didn't

have that option. Still, I didn't think the remaining cities would go so far as to fire warning shots at them.

"Please crush those bastards for us!"

"Just whose side are you on?"

At any rate, it appeared Ryunheit's refugees weren't welcome anywhere. Of the hundred or so who'd left, the vast majority returned. The remainder were likely still searching for a place to take them in, or had met an unfortunate end during their travels. My guess was very few of them had managed to emigrate successfully.

As I'd hoped though, the citizens who returned brought with them valuable information. Most of it had been filtered through their own biases, but it was information nonetheless. When I told the citizens I'd return their homes and fields to them, they broke down in tears and started thanking me profusely.

"Thank you. Thank you so much... If you'd turned me away here, I'd have been doomed to wander the wastes until I died... I'll never forget your generosity."

"You can all rest easy. Ryunheit will never abandon one of its own."

One of the returnees grabbed my hand and started shaking it over and over.

"Thank you so much, Sir Veight! We'll help you however we can in teaching those ungrateful wretches what it means to oppose Ryunheit!"

Seriously, it's because you guys are like this that no one wanted to take you in.

After that particular incident, Lacy took up her post in the demon army not as a Holy Priestess, but as a regular old illusionist. I'd seen what she was capable of, so I knew she'd be a valuable asset. On top of that, because she required our protection to survive, there was little chance she would betray us.

A few days later, the Demon Lord officially awarded her a title and rank. That made her the second human to officially join the demon army. Unlike Airia, however, she was just a regular foot soldier. Still, I was glad the number of humans in our ranks was growing.

“Oho, so you think so as well?”

“Yes, I wouldn’t like it either.”

As I was going through today’s stack of paperwork, I heard Lacy and Master talking to each other in the next room over. From the sound of it, they were getting along well. Master was normally shy around new people, but she had no problem talking with other mages. Curious about what kinds of things an illusionist and a necromancer might be discussing, I poked my head through the open door.

“In that case, would you rather have a hearty meal together with your colleagues, or eat a sandwich alone in the corner of the library?”

What kind of question is that? Obviously, you’d want the hearty meal, right? Food was all about quantity. The more the better.

“You would have to be a fool not to choose the sandwich option, no?”

“I knew you’d get me!”

“There is nothing more soothing than enjoying a sandwich in a dim corner, surrounded by one’s research...”

I don’t get these two at all. I stared at the two of them, dumbfounded. Just then, Master noticed I was standing there, and turned around. “Oh, Veight. This girl you’ve brought me is quite promising. I see much potential in her.”

“What exactly are you referring to when you say potential?”

Please don’t refine her potential as a loner. Lacy grinned, and took Master’s hand.

“Mister Veight, Lady Gomoviroa’s so nice! I didn’t think we’d get along this well!”

Now that I think about it... these two are both the same brand of antisocial, huh...



Master nodded in agreement and said, “I am thinking of formally adopting Lacy as one of my disciples. I happen to know a few illusion spells that have been lost to human scholars, so I believe it is not a bad proposal for you either, Lacy. What do you say?”

“I’d love to be your disciple, Lady Gomoviroa!”

“Good, good. In that case, you may now call me Movi!”

“Of course, Master Movi!”

“Mmm, that has a nice ring to it.”

This is starting to give me a headache. I’m just going to go back to work.

I was both happy and a little apprehensive at having another fellow disciple joining our ranks, but the one thing I was unequivocally grateful for was the information Lacy provided me.

“Do you know about Shardier, the city that lies east of Ryunheit?”

“Of course. It’s pretty far from us, but it’s like our eastern sister.”

Like Ryunheit, Shardier was a trading hub. Both cities relied on mineral resources for their profits. The raw ore dug up in the Bortze region in the north was sent south to be refined and processed in Thuvan, then shipped even further south to Ryunheit, where it was loaded up on caravans and sent to the various cities dotting the southern half of the continent. Shardier happened to be the perfect midway point between Ryunheit and the cities further to the east, outside of the Meraldia Federation. The entire route was similar to the silk road back on earth, with Shardier functioning as one of the relay cities.

There also happened to be bad blood between Shardier and the north. Due to some incidents that had occurred during the Meraldian Unification War, Shardier resented its northern neighbors.

“Rumors have been going around that Shardier’s planning on doing the same thing as Ryunheit and declare independence from Meraldia.”

“Oi, oi, if Shardier declares independence right now, they’ll be crushed.”

“Perhaps, but these rumors have made the Senate worried. They fear if they leave the situation alone, all of southern Meraldia will capitulate to the demon army. Part of the reason they came up with the fake Hero ploy was because of that fear.”

Regardless of how much Shardier hated the north though, their only hope for survival right now was to maintain the status quo. Joining the demon army would take a great deal of resolve on their part. Unless they were willing to trust us unconditionally, they were better off remaining with Meraldia.

However, Lacy’s information did match up with what some of the citizens who’d sought refuge in Shardier had told me. They’d been denied entry of course, which was why they’d returned, but apparently Shardier’s viceroy had been acting strangely as of late. And when Meraldia requested that Shardier house its regular army, Shardier refused.

Both Bernheinen, which lay to Ryunheit’s northwest, and Thuvan, which was to the northeast, were under the demon army’s control. West of Ryunheit was demon territory. That meant that any attempt to recapture Ryunheit would have to come from either the east or the south. Of the two directions, east was a far better choice, strategically. Attacking from the south would require making too large of a detour. Despite that, Shardier had refused to let Meraldia station its troops there.

In order to corroborate this information, I had my werewolves and some merchants make further inquiries. The reports they returned with were worrying. Apparently, the request to station troops wasn’t the only demand of Meraldia’s that Shardier had refused. They’d been butting heads with the Senate for a while now. Furthermore, the reason they’d given for refusing Meraldia was that their city wasn’t sufficiently prepared to house such a large number of troops. For an excuse, it was pretty weak. They didn’t seem interested in masking their disdain for the Senate in the slightest.

In truth, most of the southern cities, including Ryunheit, didn’t much like the north. During the Meraldian unification war, the cities had been split between north and south, so it was understandable. The problem was, it wasn’t just common citizens who were worried about these rumors, but the Senate itself. If the government was taking the threat of Shardier declaring independence

seriously, then these rumors weren't just rumors anymore; they were weapons of informational warfare. There might be some way to utilize them to our advantage, though.

I called Airia over to my office to get her opinion on the situation.

"Ah... Well, there certainly are a lot of complications between the south and the north. There's a reason why the prestigious Aindorf family was only granted the rank of Viscount." Airia observed Lacy and Master's loner talk with some amusement as she spoke. "Even though it was the riches Ryunheit has gained through trade that filled Meraldia's coffers, both my father and I were only granted the title of Viscount."

"So that's why you were so willing to leave Meraldia."

"Viscounts are little more than glorified custodians. They don't possess the right to make large-scale policy changes in a city. Even if the citizens requested expansions to the city or improvements to public infrastructure, I was unable to approve them without the consent of the Senate. And the Senate would never approve any of our requests unless we gifted them with 'donations' of gold."

"How awful."

Now that Ryunheit was under demon control it needed no such permission from the Senate, and the city was in the middle of a large redevelopment project.

"Shardier is likely suffering under similar restrictions. My father and Shardier's previous viceroy often used to get together and complain about the Senate. Our families happen to have a bit of history with each other."

I'm amazed you guys have held on to your grudges for this many generations... But if these rumors were credible, perhaps it was possible to open a dialogue with Shardier.

"Do you think Shardier's current viceroy is someone we can negotiate with?"

"I'm not sure. While I know the current Lord Aram is a capable leader, I'm not privy to the details of Shardier's current situation. I'm not sure how he'd receive us."

So Aram's not the kind of simple-minded fool who'd join hands with the demon army simply because he hates the north. Good, that means he's worth negotiating with.

"He sounds like an interesting guy. I think I'll go meet with him."

"Personally?"

Airia seemed shocked, but I was determined to see this guy for myself.

"If he's a friend of yours, Lady Airia, then I'm sure he'll at least agree to speak with me. If he doesn't... well, I'll think of something then."

It was a bad habit of werewolves not to consider the possibility of failure. But in all honesty, it seemed unlikely that the viceroy of Shardier would try to assassinate me.

"Anyway, I'm off to find people to bring with me. Take care of things here for me, Lady Airia."

"Do you want me to report you to the Demon Lord?"

"Now, now, don't be so stiff. Overlook things just this once. I'm doing this for Ryunheit's sake, you know. Now then, I'll be heading out. You should stop drinking tea and return to work as well."

I somewhat forcefully pushed Airia out of my office and went off to search for suitable attendants.

* * * *

—Lacy's Letter—

Mother, Sister, are you doing well? It's Lacy, your foolish little sister. Until recently, I'd been serving as the Hero Ranhart's Holy Priestess under the name Mildine. But I've since quit that job. Now I'm living in Ryunheit. Oh, and Ranhart never existed. He was a fake Hero the Senate cooked up.

It's been a few days since I quit being a fake Holy Priestess and started living in Ryunheit. I was surprised by how different the weather was at first, but you know me, I can get used to anything. And while the weather's not the greatest, the food definitely is. Also, Ryunheit's completely different from what I

expected it to be.

When I'd taken up the role of Holy Priestess, the Senate had told me: "Ryunheit has turned into hell under the demons' rule. Executions and torture are the norm, and corpses litter the streets. The entire city lives under a haze of rot and plague. The sewers run red with blood, and clean water is nowhere to be found."

To be frank, I was terrified of fighting demons after hearing that. But I also thought I needed to step up and rouse Meraldia's forces so that we could free the cities suffering under the demons' tyranny. Unfortunately, none of our plans went as planned.

I don't think I'll ever forget that night. But I don't want to ever think about it again. The three knights I'd been traveling with were all killed in an instant. I still feel bad that I'm the only one who survived.

Afterwards, the werewolf Veight saved me from the Schverm army's lynching, and took me to Ryunheit. The people here don't know that I'd been pretending to be a fake Holy Priestess, and even if they did, I doubt they'd mind much. Even the bishop of this city's Sonnenlicht order is a surprisingly nice man. He came to visit me shortly after I arrived in the city. When I confessed my sins to him, he just nodded and smiled. Then he told me, "I'm the same. My sins are too numerous to count. I will never be able to erase them, but at least I can atone for what I've done. At least, that was what a certain someone said to me." I always thought Sonnenlicht priests were more stuffy, pompous types, but this one wasn't at all.

Another thing that's different about the city is that there were demons walking around everywhere. There's a lot of... I think they're called canines(?) opening shops in the city. They're all really cute. Every time I see one I can't help but cuddle them. There were some werewolves and lizard-looking people too. I was scared of them at first, but they're all really polite and nice. Oh, there's also these demons who are half-horse. All of the guys are super handsome and muscular.

Oh, one more thing before I forget. I'm going to write down the names of the three knights I fought with here. I'm not sure if the names they gave me were

their real names, but if you can, try and find their families and let them know what happened. The master swordsman was called Ewinem. He always used to say there were plenty of other swordsmen better than him out there and that he didn't deserve the title of master swordsman. The lord knight was Karnitz. His favorite thing to say was, "It's nice that we're popular and all, but it's tough acting all heroic and moral all the time." And the one who usually played the part of the Hero Ranhart was Shierk. He always hoped that once the demons had been driven out of Meraldia that he'd be able to tell the people the truth.

Even though Mister Veight killed them all instantly, he still praised their bravery and said they were valiant soldiers. I hope those words help them rest in peace. They really were all wonderful, reliable, kind people.

I know it's cowardly, but I'm thinking of living under the demon army's protection from now on. Really, I'm so sorry I'm such a spineless wimp. But Mister Veight saved me, his enemy. I still don't know why he did that. Not only that, but he didn't kill anyone else in Schverm, even though he easily could have. He created this huge diversion to help me escape, but he still did his best not to kill any of the other soldiers. When I asked him why, he looked really surprised. Then he turned around and said, "Oh... Well, you know. Those small fries weren't even worth my time."

I'm not a demon or a soldier, so maybe I just don't get how warriors think, but I get the feeling that wasn't really the reason why. Either way, I'm glad he didn't kill anyone else. I hate watching people die.

Also even though he's a demon, Mister Veight feels more like a kind older brother than some kind of scary monster.

Oh yes, I also became the disciple of the Great Sage Gomoviroa. I call her Master Movi now. I feel like I heard the name Gomoviroa during my days in the magic academy, but I can't remember where now. Was it in magic history class? I never liked magic history. Regardless, I'm glad I get to spend time studying again. Unlike people, magic works exactly how you expect it to, so it never gets tiring to spend time with. When I told Master Movi that, she said she agreed 100%.

You know, even after Mister Veight saved me, I felt like it was all the Senate's

fault for making me do all this fake Hero stuff. But now that I've gotten some time to think about it, I've realized I need to take responsibility for my own actions. I can't lay all the blame on the Senate. Although... I can definitely lay some of it on them. After all, they're the ones who treated me like a disposable pawn. Still, I've come to terms with the fact that I was partially responsible too. I'm thinking that in order to make up for deceiving all those people, I should do something to help the world. I'm not sure what a lowly court magician like me can do, but surely there's something out there for me. I hope. Maybe I can help bring about world peace?

Now then, I'm not sure who I can ask to deliver this letter to you two... or if it'll even reach you, but I promise I'll come see you two again, Mother, Sister.

Stay well.

P.S. I'm pretty sure the Senate's fired me, which means my scholarship's been revoked. But I promise I'll work hard here in the demon army and pay all my fees back, so don't worry about that. No matter what it takes, I'll pay those fees back. Just you watch!

* * * *

"Do you think you could have one of your caravans deliver this letter for me?"

I handed Mao a sealed envelope. Recently, he'd been spending more and more time in my office. He looked at the pink embroidered border and tilted his head.

"Where to?"

"North to Krauhen. The recipient's name is on the envelope."

"That's quite a lengthy trip... but I just so happen to have business in that area, so I suppose I could." Mao looked dubiously at me as he took the letter and asked, "Do you happen to know someone in Krauhen?"

"Nah, it's that fake Holy Priestess' hometown. I already looked through the contents and it's nothing I need to censor, so there's no issue with sending it off to her family."

Mao gave me a strange look, but then nodded and put the letter in his pocket.

“I shall do my best to deliver it, then. Do you require some kind of proof that the letter was successfully delivered?”

“If you can get it, a reply or something should be fine.”

“Understood.”

What business could Mao possibly have in Krauhen, though? It was situated far up in the rural northeast.

“What are you going to Krauhen for?”

“To procure more of *this*.”

Mao pulled out a chunk of whitish rock. I wasn’t able to tell what it was on sight alone, but my enhanced werewolf’s sense of smell made it obvious. That was a lump of crystal salt, halite.

“If it’s salt you need, couldn’t you gather some from the sea to the south? Why go all the way to Krauhen to buy it?”

Mao shrugged his shoulders and replied, “Rock salt and sea salt have different flavors. I’ll take the salt harvested from the saltpans here up north, and come home with their rock salt. Since I’ll be carrying only salt for both legs of the journey, I can save a lot of time and effort on the logistics front.”

“I guess they do taste different, but...”

The halite lump in Mao’s hands smelled faintly of sulfur. Even in my human form, my enhanced sense of smell picked up on those details.

“This salt is best used as seasoning for meat. Once you grill the meat, the unpleasant smell of sulfur vanishes, and the salt’s taste is vastly improved. High-class restaurants and nobles buy up rock salt at high prices.”

Really?

“By the way, do you happen to have any connections in Shardier?”

“I’m afraid not. My primary trade routes run north-south... Refined sea salt doesn’t fetch good prices in Shardier. I’ve occasionally visited it to sell rock salt, but that’s the extent of my dealings with the city.”

What a useless guy.

“However, Lord Aram, the viceroy, is known for being a gourmand. I have fulfilled personal orders of salt for him once or twice. If you desire an audience with him, I believe I could arrange one.”

“You’re one hell of a merchant, you know that?”

That was more than enough for me. That being said, I didn’t want to spend any more time than necessary talking with this scoundrel.

“In that case, set one up as soon as possible.”

“Understood. What exactly should I tell Lord Aram?”

I smirked. “Just tell him I’m coming to pay him a visit.”

“As you wish.”

After pushing all of my duties onto Airia, I started making preparations for my trip to Shardier. Since we needed to cross the eastern desert to reach Shardier, it’d turn into a somewhat lengthy trip. Honestly, I would rather just go alone, but if I told the other werewolves that, they’d all yell at me not to be reckless. *Hmm, guess I’ll take Hamaam’s squad with me.* Hamaam and his men used to live together with the desert nomads, so they were used to the harsh temperatures.

“I’ll be counting on you, Hamaam.”

“Yes, sir.”

I requisitioned a carriage for the trip, since I would be going in an official capacity as the demon army’s ambassador. Hence why a simple cart or riding in on horseback wouldn’t do. The covered wagon wasn’t especially ostentatious, but it was sturdy and would serve for my purposes. Considering how expensive carriages were in this world, having a personal one was like owning a private jet. Even if it did smell like horse dung and rattled all the time, it was the best this world had to offer. While carriages were a great way to display one’s status, they were also prime targets for bandits.

“Sir, there’s a dust cloud up ahead.”

Hamaam knocked on my door, and I stuck my head out the window.

“Looks like there’s about ten of them...”

“They’re doing their best to move stealthily, so I suspect there’s more than that. Thirteen, maybe fourteen.”

Hamaam was the desert expert, so if that was what he thought, then I trusted him. Hamaam and two of his squadmates readied themselves for a fight. He gripped the hilt of his scimitar and asked, “Should we transform?”

If we transformed, a dozen or so cavalry wouldn’t be a problem, but there were too many of them to beat in our human forms. This was a dilemma. *Maybe I should have brought more guards with me after all.* I squinted and tried to get a better look at exactly what we were up against.

“Those are bandits, alright.”

“Technically, they’re warriors belonging to this region’s ruling nomad tribe.”

So, bandits. Asking for a toll in order to be granted safe passage through their lands was no different than highway robbery.

“What a pain.”

Killing them would be easy, but we were on a diplomatic mission. I wanted to avoid any unnecessary trouble. Noticing my dilemma, Hamaam said, “Could you leave this to me? I can get us out of this without fighting.”

Hamaam wasn’t originally from our village. He moved there right around the time I’d become a full-fledged mage and was thinking of joining the army. Before that, he’d been living in this desert. He definitely knew more about this area than I did, so I had no problem letting him handle the situation.

“Alright, I’ll follow your lead.”

“Thank you. In that case, sir, make sure you play along.”

Play along with what? Before I had a chance to ask, the mounted soldiers surrounded our carriage. Hamaam’s guess had been right on the mark. There were exactly 13 of them. They were all dressed in loose nomad’s clothes, and had bows and scimitars slung across their backs. A middle-aged man who appeared to be their leader scraped some sand out of his beard and shouted, “This land belongs to the Srujaaf! Those who wish to pass must offer a tribute

of two sheep!”

Are you kidding me? We don’t even have any sheep. Without waiting for a reply, the man continued, “If you have no sheep, then you must pay five silver coins per member of your caravan!”

So that’s what you’re actually after. Since there were five of us, we’d have to pay 25 silver coins. That was roughly equivalent to 250,000 yen. To be honest, it was a price I could easily afford, however it seemed Hamaam would save us from having to spend even that. He stepped forward and said, “Long time no see, brothers.”

The nomads turned to Hamaam in surprise.

“Is that you, Hamaam!?”

“You’re still alive!?”

Just what kind of past did Hamaam have? He nodded and said, “Yeah, I managed to escape somehow. Now I serve this man. I can’t reveal what exactly our business is, but suffice to say, he’s someone of noble status.”

I am? Hamaam turned back to me and stared. *Oh, this is what he meant by play along. Alright, I can do this.* I straightened my posture a little and nodded solemnly.

“People of Srujaaf, it is an honor to meet you. I am an official diplomat of Ryunheit. Hamaam here has served me well as a bodyguard.”

Our carriage had Ryunheit’s crest emblazoned on it, so that story should be believable enough. The nomads exchanged glances, then dismounted from their horses. They then brought their hands to their breasts and bowed respectfully.

“You have our eternal gratitude for saving our comrade from the jaws of death and taking him into your fold.”

Looks like these guys are more reasonable than I thought. It seemed they thought I was the one who’d saved Hamaam from whatever predicament he’d gotten himself into. Though in truth, Hamaam was the one saving me right now. I nodded again and said, “I am currently heading to Shardier on official business.

As I am in a hurry, I unfortunately cannot stay, but if it is silver coins you need, I shall gladly provide them."

The nomads hurriedly shook their heads.

"We would never dream of asking our friend's savior to pay a toll!"

"Such a dishonorable act would surely earn the wrath of the moon that sleeps up high!"

It appeared the nomads were Mondstrahl adherents. One of them unfastened a leather pouch at their belt and held it out to me. Judging from the smell, it contained alcohol.

"I beg of you, please look after our treasured brother."

I accepted the pouch with a smile and said, "I promise you that I will do everything I can to keep him safe. May the light of the moon ever guide your path."

The nomads bowed again, then remounted.

"We will let our brethren know to let your caravan pass unmolested! You need not fear being accosted on your return journey!"

I nodded a third time.

"You have my thanks."

As they turned to leave, their leader looked over his shoulder and asked, "Would you be so kind as to tell me your name, o' Diplomat?"

I had wanted to complete this journey in secret, but if we'd already been spotted I guess it didn't matter too much. Hamaam gave me a stern look, but I felt like this man's respect deserved respect in kind.

"I am known as Veight. I pray we meet again."

When they heard my name, the nomads froze.

"Veight!? You mean... *that* Veight!?"

"The honorable werewolf-general Veight!?"

"The same commander who topped Ryunheit in a day!?"

“And slaughtered an army of four thousand heretics...”

Seriously, guys, it was just 400. Stop adding zeroes to it. Either way, this was bad. They were all looking at me with a mixture of fear and awe. I turned to the carriage driver and said, “Let’s get out of here.”

“Ah, yes, sir.”

We hurried away from the nomads. Once we were a short distance away, Hamaam leaned in close and whispered, “Don’t you think it was unwise to name yourself here, sir?”

“Yeah...”

I’d lost all interest in asking Hamaam about his past, and leaned back into my seat with an exhausted sigh.

The rest of our trip was uneventful, and we reached Shardier without issue. The trading city of Shardier had been built on the edge of a lake. Actually, since it still lay in part of the desert, technically it would be an oasis. Its culture was completely different from Ryunheit’s. Shardier had a more Arabian feel to it. Its viceroy, Aram, was known to be a gourmand and often ordered spices and sauces from faraway lands. Thanks to that, many foreign restaurants and stalls had opened up, and the streets were filled with the scents of a hundred different spices.

“This place is making me hungry,” I muttered. Everyone nodded in agreement. Though both Shardier and Ryunheit flourished on trade, Shardier was more focused on catering to caravans and travelers. There were far more bars and stalls here than in Ryunheit. It was a werewolf’s paradise.

In contrast, Ryunheit’s trade focused on bulk orders of goods and established local stores. Apparently Shardier even had an entertainment district. I was a little curious about what it was like. This world had no internet or television, so I was wondering what kinds of things people did for fun. Though since this was technically enemy territory, I doubt I’d have any opportunities to visit.

When I announced myself at the front gate, the soldiers stiffened. There may have been only five of us, and we may not have been carrying any weapons, but

we were still the demon army's ambassadors. However, the viceroy himself then appeared on the walls and assuaged the soldiers' unrest. He didn't have the look of a warrior, but he was clearly a capable leader. In that respect, he was a lot like Airia. Unlike Airia though, he looked more like a nerd than a dignified lord.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Shardier's Viceroy, Viscount Aram Sukh Shazaf. I have been looking forward to this meeting."

"I'm Veight, Vice-Commander of the Demon Lord's first regiment. I apologize for requesting this meeting on such short notice."

Now then, it was time to see just what kind of man Aram was.

I was led to the viceroy's manor and ushered into a wide, luxurious room. From the looks of it, this was the viceroy's audience chamber.

"Your attendants may wait in this room here."

"Actually, we're..."

Hamaam shook his head, but I held out a hand to stop him.

"No need to worry about me. You guys should rest here."

He raised an eyebrow, but he knew better than to question my authority in front of the viceroy.

"As you wish."

Hamaam reluctantly allowed himself to be escorted out, leaving just me and Aram in the room. The viceroy smiled, and offered me a cup of something similar to jasmine tea.

"I'm honestly quite shocked. I never expected you, one of the demon army's preeminent generals, would come greet me in person, Sir Veight."

"I'm just a vice-commander."

I sipped my tea without hesitation. Being the coward that I was, I'd already used magic to make sure it hadn't been poisoned. With that knowledge in mind, it was better to drink boldly in order to show Aram petty tricks would be useless

against me. And though I had no idea what leaves he'd used, the tea was delicious. At any rate, it appeared a lot of unsavory rumors had started to spread about what kind of person I was. So in order to appear open and friendly, I decided to start with some small talk.

"This tea is quite fragrant. Did you import it from somewhere?"

"I did indeed."

Not only was the tea good, but also the tea set he'd served it in was obviously valuable. *This must be his way of showing off his city's economic power.* Aram was craftier than he appeared. Still, the tea really was delicious. I'd never had anything like it back in Japan. *Maybe I should ask him where he got it from.*

"If possible, I'd like to try drinking this tea chilled too."

"In that case, we could prepare some for you later."

"I imagine it would taste great with ice in it."

"Ice?"

Aram's expression stiffened.

"Ice... I-I see..."

Crap, I shouldn't have said that. Refrigeration didn't exist in this world. The north had icehouses to store ice year-round, but the south was so warm it never even got snow. In fact, it was possible Aram had never seen ice in his life; he'd likely only read about it. Because Master had often made ice even in the summer, I'd been so used to it that I'd forgotten normal people didn't see it often. Most days, after our lessons had finished, she would create a massive pillar of ice and cut it up to put in our juice or tea. *Those were good times... Wait, now's not the time to be reminiscing.*

"Drinking tea with ice in it while lazing around on Shardier's oasis certainly does sound like an enjoyable way to spend the afternoon..."

Aram smoothed over his discomfort with a smile. Or at least tried to; his smile was pretty stiff. It appeared I'd ended up hurting his pride. *Sorry.* Honestly though, this guy was turning out to be a pain. I wasn't trying to imply Shardier's culture was backwards or anything. I'd come here to make friends, not enemies.

He'd been nothing but polite to me thus far, so I figured I may as well compliment him on something to improve his mood. *Oh yeah, I can talk about his tea set.*

"That aside, this exquisite tea set really enhances the flavor. Both the thickness and the curvature of the glass give off a soothing feeling."

"Huh?"

Aram paled again. *What'd I do this time?*

"I-I see, so our glass appears... thick and curved to you..."

Oh yeah, I totally forgot. Back when I'd shattered Airia's manor's windows, they'd been the same thick, warped glass. Even the replacement glass we'd brought to repair the windows had been the same. The thick, blurry glass was convenient for me since I'd prefer not to be overheard or spied on during meetings, but thinking on it now, it wasn't like the glass was made that way on purpose.

"I-I know it's not up to standards, but... I'm glad you appreciate it..."

I could hear his voice sink as he said those last few words. *I just keep messing up.* Honestly though, I really did like the design. Back in Japan, a tea set like this would have easily been worth a couple thousand, or even ten thousand yen. At this point, I was running out of things I could compliment Aram on, so I decided to forego all the pleasantries and start putting on the pressure.

"Incidentally, I see there are other people in the room behind ours."

At a glance, there was no door at the back wall of this hall. But my heightened sense of hearing and smell clued me in on the fact that there was a hidden room behind Aram. It was less an escape route and more a small space to hide soldiers in. Aram had hidden guards waiting in ambush. Sweat started pouring down Aram's forehead, and he smiled awkwardly.

"Th-Those are just, uhh... m-maids. They're cleaning the inner rooms... my apologies for not informing you."

I didn't really care if he was hiding soldiers nearby. In fact, it was a natural course of action considering he was meeting with the enemy. However, if those

soldiers actually attacked me, there'd be needless sacrifices, so I thought it best to warn him of the idea. Pretending that those soldiers were maids was only going to make things more difficult for him.

"Maids, you say? They seem to have a distinctive masculine musk to them though. And I've never heard of maids wearing armor."

My ears were able to pick up on the faint rasp of metal against metal with ease. I could tell they'd padded their armor to dampen the sound, but that was useless against my senses. Aram grimaced then once again gave me that awkward smile.

"Well... you know... it's just... Ahahaha..."

Seeing as my roundabout hints weren't getting anywhere, I decided to just tell it to him straight.

"No matter how much armor you clad your maids in, a mere six of them won't be much of a match for me. Besides, the distance between you and them is too great for them to be any use."

"Wha—!?"

The strength of their scent and the faint sound of footsteps made it easy to tell how many there were. Furthermore, they were a good two meters away from Aram's position. Even if Aram dashed toward the wall the moment his soldiers burst out, I'd still be able to grab him and snap his neck before they reached him. Naturally, I had no intention of doing so, but the point was I could. For all intents and purposes, Aram was facing me alone. So it was in his best interests not to try anything. Holding back enough to not kill anyone was difficult.

Still, am I really that bad at communicating with people? I guess I have no right to judge Master or Lacy... There was no point in trying to be cordial anymore. I was better off just getting the negotiations over with.

"At any rate, let's move on to the reason I came to see you today, Lord Aram."

"And what is that?"

Sweat clung to Aram's clothes, and his expression was as stiff as a board. He

was obviously under a lot of stress. But then, he was facing off against an unpredictable werewolf whose deeds had been exaggerated beyond belief. If our roles were reversed, I would have wet myself. I pitied the poor guy, so I decided to keep my explanation brief.

“Would you consider breaking your alliance with the Meraldian Federation and forming a new one with the demon army?”

“Wha—!?” Aram stood up with a yell. “You want me to betray Meraldia!?”

“Now now, calm down. That’s not what I’m asking.”

I needed to word this carefully. Negotiations were only possible if both sides saw benefit in them. It was imperative to show off what he stood to gain by joining our side. Intimidation was one way to express that. I could just threaten him by saying we’d raid his caravans if he didn’t, but that was a last resort. Picking my words carefully, I explained in a low voice, “Is there any meaning in swearing your loyalty to a doomed nation?”

“Doomed?”

All empires, no matter how powerful, collapsed eventually. If there was one thing I learned in history class, it was that. The rest I mostly slept through. Regardless, the point was that if Shardier wanted to survive as a city-state, it needed to adapt to the times. To use a more contemporary phrase, Meraldia was old and busted while the demon army was the new hotness.

Aram scrutinized my expression with a pale face.

“So you plan on destroying Meraldia after all?”

“Depending on how we move, the federation may fall, yes.”

If the demon army gained control of all Meraldia, its structure would certainly change. Fortunately, however, Meraldia wasn’t a monarchy. If the Senate was willing to accept the Demon Lord’s sovereignty, assimilating them into the fold wouldn’t be too difficult. Judging by Aram’s expression though, he seemed to have misunderstood something.

“Please do not misunderstand. We have no interest in drowning the country in a sea of blood. The three cities under our control, including Ryunheit, are all

operating normally with their human population intact.”

“Y-You mean to say... that if we ally ourselves with you... you’ll spare us?”

“But of course. Assuming you ally with us, that is.”

Not that I was planning on destroying the city even if he didn’t. But telling him that wouldn’t exactly be a good negotiation tactic. Aram bit his lip and looked down at the floor. Since his misunderstandings seemed to be growing, I figured it was time to switch to persuasion rather than threats.

“We know that the southern cities, including Shardier, have no love for northern Meraldia. It is for that reason that we’ve chosen to raid the north while peacefully occupying the south.”

That was a total lie. The reason the second and third regiments had different policies regarding conquered cities was because the second regiment had gone on a rampage during the opening battles of this war. Demons were a bunch of rural country hicks living in forests and mountains far from civilization. There was no way we could have known about the federation’s internal strife beforehand, but it didn’t matter if I was speaking the truth or not. All that mattered was that Aram believed me.

“Bernheinen, Thuvan, and Ryunheit are already in the demon army’s possession. Furthermore, the viceroys of Bernheinen and Ryunheit have willingly defected to our cause.”

Bernheinen’s viceroy had been turned into a vampire so they hadn’t had any choice in the matter, though. Of course, Aram had no way of knowing that.

“Of the eight cities that comprise the south, five still remain. The demon army is willing to reward those who join our side sooner rather than later.”

Better to convince him that there’s more in it for him to join willingly than to be conquered.

“Shardier especially is of interest to us. Though it’s far from our current holdings, it is Ryunheit’s sister city, and another center of trade. The sooner we can become allies, the better.”

Aram’s expression softened, and the color returned to his face. He was no

longer terrified, and was instead calculating the costs and benefits of my proposal. I could tell this was as far as I should push for now. Shardier was a longstanding member of the Meraldian Federation. Betrayal carried a huge risk.

If Shardier declared independence and Meraldia decided to retake the city by force, I wouldn't be able to reinforce it. As much as I would like to, I had no troops to spare. Honestly, if Aram was thinking only of his city, the most advantageous choice would be to refuse, even if it meant his death. However, if he refused my offer here, I wouldn't be able to enter any further negotiations, which would be a problem. So I rose to my feet and gave Aram a slight bow.

"Of course, you have no need to answer me right away. I know very well that trust is something that takes time to build. I will return for your reply at a later date."

Aram breathed an audible sigh of relief.

"I understand. Please give me some time to consider your proposal."

"Gladly. I am in no rush. Now then, I'll be taking my leave."

Before leaving Shardier, I took a quick tour of the city. Trade was booming, likely thanks to the lake to its north. I saw merchants dressed in all manner of clothing lounging around the bars and inns. While the city seemed lively, and the average standard of living surprisingly high, I didn't see too many guards or garrisoned soldiers. However, I did see plenty of people wearing soldiers' uniforms. *Who exactly are those guys?* On the way back, I had to suffer Hamaam's squad's complaints.

"Commander, why can't we just kill that viceroy?"

"Yeah, the five of us could have taken him down easily."

"I thought we'd finally get to go on a rampage."

Is killing all these guys ever think about? I sighed, and Hamaam mumbled, "Have some more faith in the vice-commander. He's already proven that he's a master strategist, even if his methods are unfathomable."

Hamaam's men exchanged glances, then nodded to each other.

“True that.”

“We trust you, boss.”

I was truly blessed to have such good subordinates. But I wasn’t a master strategist or anything, just a werewolf who’d happened to be human in another life.

It was only after returning to Ryunheit that I learned why Aram had refused to house Meraldia’s troops. According to the rumors Mao’s merchants brought me, he was raising his own private army. The Meraldian Senate had dispatched a scant 120 men to serve as Shardier’s garrison. That was less than even Ryunheit. Chances were this was Meraldia’s way of slighting Shardier for its actions during the unification war, but it was still far too few men.

The nomads that roamed the surrounding desert were not part of Meraldia. Meaning that Shardier often had to deal with nomadic raids and assaults on their trading caravans. They often tried to extort a fee from travelers as well. While they weren’t violent so long as they got their fee, none of the city folk trusted the nomads. For that reason, Shardier needed a sizable army.

120 men were barely enough to patrol the city. And a trading city like Shardier needed more soldiers than usual to man the gates and inspect arriving goods. Technically Meraldia had promised they would send the regular army over if Shardier ever faced a true emergency, but if that army couldn’t make it in time it was useless.

The moment Aram had assumed office, he’d started using his vast treasury to recruit mercenaries and adventurers to his cause. Those men I’d seen in Shardier had been part of his private army. No one knew the exact scope of Aram’s forces, but rumor had it that he had around 200 men. Furthermore, from what I could tell, they were as well-trained as Meraldia’s garrison troops, and just as well-disciplined too.

Raising a private army like this was in violation of Meraldia’s laws, however. Aram hadn’t wanted Meraldia’s troops in his city because he was worried about getting caught. *No wonder he seemed so timid when I first met him.* For a coward, he sure made some bold moves. He seemed like the type to get tripped

up by his own schemes. However, his weakness was something the demon army was in perfect position to exploit. If we could convince him of our strength, he'd be sure to join us.

I'll pay him another visit soon.

When I was next able to get some time away from work, I went back to visit Shardier. Though this was meant to be a much more peaceful visit than the last, it appeared I wasn't welcome. Rumors of my exaggerated atrocities had spread throughout the city. It made conversing with anyone difficult. Because no matter what I said, it was misinterpreted in a sinister way. With a heavy heart, I made my way to Aram's manor.

"My apologies for the repeated unannounced visits."

I snuck a glance at Aram, who appeared as pale as before.

"My apologies, but I'm afraid we have yet to come to a decision..."

"Fear not, I didn't come here to press you for an answer. I just came here to gift you with some silverware I thought you would appreciate. I hear you're quite the gourmand."

Aram frowned as he accepted the ornate set of forks and spoons I handed him. *I take that back, he doesn't look as pale as before, he looks worse.* If he was this stressed, I doubted he could even taste the food he was eating these days. *I guess I should start by coming here often enough that he gets used to me.* If relations between Meraldia and Shardier were worsening, then Aram would eventually be forced to join our side. At least, that was what I thought, but Aram was acting strangely. He looked like a cornered rat.

"I... I have no intention of exposing my people to danger..."

I tilted my head as Aram suddenly blurted that out, "Did something happen, Lord Aram?"

"You act as if I have a choice, but I can tell this is all a trap..."

"A trap?"

"Th-That's right. If one of the demon army's leaders keeps visiting Shardier,

eventually rumors will start to spread. Meraldia will begin to think that Shardier is already friends with the demon army."

I see now. You could take it that way. Though I think you're overthinking it a little.

"Calm yourself, Lord Aram. I have come in secret and in an unofficial capacity every time. I doubt anyone in Meraldia's Senate will notice."

"That's not good enough! I-I cannot allow my relationship with Meraldia to grow any worse! I'm sorry, but I will be negotiating with the demon army no longer!"

I'd thought he was just a spineless nerd, but he had a surprising amount of backbone. Even if he did sound a little hysterical.

"Shardier is a member of the Meraldian Federation, and we won't betray them so easily! Th-Threaten me all you like, but if you think you can rule humans through force alone you're making a huge mistake!"

I'd tried to be as peaceful with my negotiations as possible, but it seemed that hadn't worked. Regardless of my intentions, I'd pressured Aram more than expected. Now that it had come to this, threatening him was my only option. I'd scare him a little, then force him to accede to my demands. I slowly transformed into my werewolf form. The blood drained from Aram's face as he watched me.

"Lord Aram, does this mean you refuse my invitation to join our alliance?"

"Th-That's right!" Aram raised a trembling fist. "I, Aram Sukh Shazaf, have made my decisions as the viceroy of Shardier! You don't scare me, you k-killer of f-four thousand!"

Seriously, it was only 400. And I only killed 3 of those 400 personally.

"You have, have you?"

I took a step forward, and Aram jumped.

"I-I-If you're going to kill me for it, then so be it! But I won't let you lay a hand on my people!"

It might be rude of me to say this, but Aram's skill with the blade was a little

better than an amateur's. Judging by how he held his stance, he was even weaker than Airia. The fact that he denied me despite knowing he stood no chance spoke volumes about his resolve. Like Airia, he was willing to put his life on the line to save his citizens. Still, I was surprised. For a supposed schemer, this nerd sure was hot-blooded. Then again, a true schemer would never have done something as obvious as gather his own private army. This guy really wasn't suited to plotting. Though I doubted I needed to, I decided to test his resolve.

"You mean to say that you would be willing to die if it was for the sake of your citizens?"

"Th-That's right!" He was trembling in fear, but the light in his eyes hadn't dimmed in the slightest. "You demons might be strong. But strength alone isn't enough to rule over humans! Don't think Shardier will be yours if you kill me!"

He was right. With demons, their leader was always the strongest among them. If that leader died, then the next-strongest warrior took over. And almost always, they were inevitably worse at leadership. However, humans didn't work like that. You could kill as many human leaders as you liked, but more would always appear. And generally they tended to have actual leadership skills. This was one of the biggest differences between humans and demons. And the primary reason why demons could never beat humans.

All that aside, I was honestly surprised by the passion in Aram's voice. I hadn't expected him to be such a straightforward guy. *Alright, that's enough intimidation.* It wouldn't work anyway, and it was looking like being honest with him was a better strategy. If he didn't care about the benefits of joining the demon army, maybe he'd listen to reason instead.

"Don't worry. Neither me nor the Demon Lord wish for bloodshed."

I wanted to say the entire demon army didn't, but the second regiment existed, so I couldn't.

"Even when I conquered Ryunheit, the city's only casualties were seven soldiers. We didn't harm a single one of the civilians. And while I won't deny that we annihilated an army of four hundred Thuvan soldiers, that was because they tried to invade Ryunheit."

Aram's face relaxed somewhat.

"D-Do you speak truly?"

"I do. If we were really as barbaric as the rumors make us out to be, Lady Airia would never have joined hands with us. Surely you know that as well?"

That seemed to have to give Aram something to think about, and he fell silent. I followed up a little irritably, "We don't want to rule over humans, nor do we want to slaughter them all. In fact, you guys are the ones who tried to annihilate us demons. That's the only reason we took up arms."

"I-I suppose I can't deny that..."

"The Demon Lord wishes for demons to coexist with humans. Unlike Meraldia, we hold no grudge against the people of Shardier. I guarantee you an alliance between us would work to our mutual benefit."

Aram bit his lip, his expression difficult to read.

"B-But if I accept an alliance with the demon army, it will put my people in danger... I have a responsibility to protect them."

If they joined hands with the demons, Shardier's entire world would be turned upside-down. There was no way the Meraldian Senate, who desired to maintain the status quo, would accept such an alliance. That being said, we had no intention of rolling over and letting ourselves be destroyed either. It was imperative that demons carved out a place for themselves in this world. And we'd use force to do it, if we had to.

"And I have a responsibility to protect my own people. Humans have been encroaching on demon territory for centuries, driving us into a corner. We can no longer afford to keep retreating. If you agree to ally yourselves with us, I swear the demon army will protect Shardier. Together, we can change the world."

Aram bit his lip so hard he drew blood, his brow furrowed so deeply it left deep grooves in his forehead.

"I understand well the need for change. A boat floating downstream can only fight the current for so long. But similarly, if it tries to race down the current too

fast, it will find itself capsizing. Those were my father's words. It was he who taught me when to fight the current and when to aid it."

I see, so it's his dad who taught him how to act like a schemer. I knew all too well how tiring it could be to keep up an act like that.

"If we ride the flow that is coexistence with demons, then the ship known as Meraldia will no doubt capsize. And when that happens, who's to say Shardier's tiny raft won't capsize with it?"

I shook my head.

"I can guarantee you that will not happen. Come see Ryunheit for yourself, if you need proof that humans and demons can live together. So long as we take things one step at a time, coexistence is possible."

Aram fell silent, contemplating his options.

"Could you... give me some time to consider this? I'm not simply stalling this time... I really do need to think your proposal over. Furthermore, I need to see what the rest of my city thinks."

His words lacked the rotting stench of a lie, and his expression was deadly serious. I decided to put my faith in him.

"Very well. Take as much as you need. So long as you don't try anything strange, the demon army won't interfere with Shardier's decision."

As I was the one who decided the southern front's military policy, that was a promise I had the authority to make. And I could tell in Aram's case, it was better to give him space to think. He stared intently at me for a few minutes.

"What... are you?"

"Just one of the demon army's many vice-commanders." I turned my back to Aram. "We'll meet again, Lord Aram."

On my return trip to Ryunheit, I reflected on the course negotiations had gone. Recently, I'd started acting more like how the rumors described me. I wasn't being careful with my words, and I was relying far too heavily on threats to get my way. I was growing conceited because of the power I held. Worse, I saw betrayal and plots behind every utterance, making me paranoid. I needed

to remember that sometimes straightforward honesty was actually the best policy. Though in this case, it only worked because Aram himself was an honest man. It was too early to celebrate, but at the very least it seemed there was still room for negotiation.

* * * *

—Aram's Royal Records—

Whenever I find myself faced with a difficult decision, I look back on the Shazaf family tree. My father, grandfather, and great-grandfather's names and deeds are all recorded within. Reading my way up the tree reminds me of their teachings and philosophies. The Shazaf family has protected Shardier since the time it was just a small oasis town, and led it to prosperity.

During the Meraldian Unification War, my great-grandfather fought bravely against the forces of the north. But in the end, he was defeated. And since his defeat, Shardier has suffered. My grandfather, who became viceroy after him, worked tirelessly to deflect the pressures of the Senate. His unbelievable skill in diplomacy and statecraft were the only reason Shardier still prospers today. After him, my father succeeded the position, armed with the teachings of my grandfather.

Like my father, and his father before him, I must act wisely if Shardier is to survive. Until now, I've used everything my predecessors taught me to survive in the harsh world of Meraldian politics. I even forced myself to grow fatter in order to appear more imposing during negotiations. All for the sake of protecting the people under my care.

But at some point, I realized the viceroy I'd become wasn't really me. I had forced on an ill-fitting mask in an attempt to ape my betters. In time, I began to forget who I really was, and what my own strengths were. Before I knew it, I had become a pale imitation of my grandfather. Could such a brittle persona truly protect Shardier and its people?

Right as those worries began to plague my mind, the werewolf Veight arrived for his audience. I attempted to use the same heavy-handed negotiation tactics my grandfather had mastered. I flaunted our economic, cultural, and military

might to emphasize the superiority of our position. But none of it had any effect on the werewolf. I was unable to prove myself superior to him in any way. Not in economic prosperity, not in cultural influence, and naturally not in military might.

I had been well and truly defeated. This was the limit to what I could achieve by copying others. The realization sent me spiraling into panic. On the other hand, the werewolf seemed unfazed. Throughout our discussion, his tone remained casual, as though he were commenting on the weather. He calmly explained to me the benefits Shardier would receive for joining in his alliance, then threatened me in the same breath. But despite his clearly superior might, he held out the hand of friendship. I knew not whether that hand was sincere, but I lacked the courage to turn him down outright.

In the end, my mask availed me naught. The techniques of my grandfather were only useful in the hands of someone as crafty, as charismatic, and as experienced as him. Simply mimicking them was meaningless. My disastrous audience with Veight had taught me that very well. The person currently leading Shardier is neither my father nor my grandfather. It's me. And I can't be anyone but myself. I need to believe in myself and hope that my own abilities prove sufficient.

I rolled up the Shazaf family tree one last time and put it back in its wardrobe. I suspect I will not need to examine it again. I lack the wits to survive in this world on schemes alone. So from here on out, I'll fight using my own methods.

* * * *

A few days later, Shardier's viceroy asked to visit Ryunheit. *So he's finally ready to give me a reply.* While I was glad he was willing to talk once more, I'd made a slight miscalculation. Considering his initial reluctance, I hadn't expected him to ask for a visit so soon. He had more guts than I gave him credit for. Unfortunately, that was a bit of a problem for me. We weren't in any state to receive visitors. The eastern section of the wall hadn't even finished construction.

"Is there no way to hurry up construction?"

"Afraid not, sir. Unless you can do something about it with magic."

I went to Azul to see if there was any way to speed things up, but it seemed there wasn't. If building walls was something that could be done with magic, I would have done it myself ages ago. *Wait, that's not exactly true...*

After another few days, Viceroy Aram arrived at Ryunheit with an honor guard of 100 troops. It was a bit large for an honor guard, but seeing as he was visiting enemy territory, I wasn't too surprised. Besides, I knew from our previous meetings that he wasn't the kind of man to launch a surprise attack.

"Whoa... So these are Ryunheit's gates..."

Aram's amazed reaction was exactly what I was hoping for. The gates he looked up at were tall and imposing, fitting portals to the entryway of the demon capital. I'd created them using Thuvan's gates as a reference, then reinforced them some more. From either side of the gates, massive walls stretched out to surround the city. They were both tall and thick enough to withstand most siege engines. But that wasn't all they had going for them.

"Are my eyes playing tricks on me, or are these walls slightly slanted?"

In response to Aram's curiosity, I puffed my chest out proudly and said, "You have a discerning eye, Lord Aram. These are what are known as deceiver's walls."

I'd built the walls with a slight slope to them. At a glance, that made them appear easy to scale, but in truth the slope grew steeper the higher up the walls you went, until finally you found yourself trapped, unable to climb up or back down. I'd stolen the idea from ancient Japanese castle design. Most sieges consisted of the attackers trying to climb up the defenders' walls with ladders. But of course, climbing a ladder while arrows were raining down on you was a demoralizing and life-threatening task. If possible, most people would rather not do it. Foot soldiers who saw a sloped wall like this would be tempted to forego the ladder entirely and attempt climbing it on foot. And therein lay the trap.

Furthermore, a sloped wall like this was harder to latch on to with ladders. And even if someone did manage to set a ladder against a curved wall like this, their back and heads would be completely exposed as they climbed. Because of

the angle, they wouldn't be able to defend themselves with shields. Meaning they were open to all manner of attacks. Naturally, there were holes at the top to pour boiling oil from as well. Any potential attacker would find a boiling surprise waiting for them if they reached the summit.

"Where did you find the time to build such massive walls?"

The truth was, I hadn't. Aside from the gates, everything else was a magical illusion of what the final walls would look like.

"Now that Ryunheit has been freed from Meraldia's bondage, it no longer has to answer to the Senate before undertaking projects like these. So we decided to rebuild our crumbling walls."

After giving that arrogant speech, I turned to Lacy and worriedly whispered, "Are you sure we can touch these?"

"Y-Yes. I've endowed the illusion with a texture. Though if someone tries to barrel through it, the illusion will break."

Lacy had always been a skilled illusionist, but she'd grown leaps and bounds since apprenticing herself to Gomoviroa. She was almost skilled enough to be a Holy Priestess in truth.

Still, I couldn't let myself forget this was an illusion. One mishap and the ruse would be discovered. I tried to usher Aram and his entourage through the gates, hoping my impatience didn't show.

"Now come, why don't I show you the city proper. I guarantee you'll be amazed."

Please, let's just go in and see the city. Stop staring at the walls like that, you're making me nervous. Past the gates lay a wide, empty plain.

"We're planning on constructing a new residential district here. The old town is already filled with people, so we're going to need more houses for all the demons and humans that might migrate here in the future."

I was trying to keep the city core unchanged out of consideration for those living there. And I knew from past experiences in my old life just how fierce clashes between established citizens and new migrants could get. We crossed

the empty plain and entered the city proper. The moment they laid eyes on Ryunheit's main street, Aram's soldiers exclaimed in wonder.

"Wow..."

"So this is the demon capital..."

The eastern sector had been on the decline after I'd blockaded the gate, so I'd asked the canines to set up a workshop here. It was a large workshop, used by canines both to craft commercial goods and to indulge in their hobbies. Plenty of canines came to use it, and the sector had seen a lot of growth. Restaurants and parks catering to canine tastes had started popping up here and there as well. Near the entrance of the workshop, I spotted a human merchant and a canine craftsman chatting idly with each other. Judging by the pair's happy expressions, business was booming.

As we continued walking down the street, we saw a group of dragonkin milling about the butcher shop. They were calculating out exactly how many chickens they would need for today's dinner. My guess was they were Kurtz's subordinates. They'd probably come to the workshop to place some orders. *And over here we have... Wait, is that Fahn?*

"Fahn, what are you doing here?"

Fahn looked up from the group of canines surrounding her and waved to me.

"My squad's off-duty today. I'm just having tea with these guys. Wanna join us, Veight?"

"Does it look like I can join you!? I told you an important visitor was coming today, didn't I!?"

"Oh yeaaaah."

Why does her brain shut down every time she starts fawning over canines? I could feel Aram and the others staring at me, so I coughed loudly and said, "Sorry, my subordinates are a little lacking in discipline."

Aram's gaze shot back and forth between me and Fahn. Finally, he fixed his gaze on me and asked hesitantly, "Are all of your men this... casual with you?"

"I'd prefer it if you pretend you never saw that," I growled in reply, and Aram

nodded hurriedly. Without breaking stride, I went on to explain what was in the eastern sector. “The eastern sector is where the canine’s workshop is, and you can buy the silverwork they craft here. I know rumors say their touch causes silver to rot, but they’re actually quite skilled silversmiths.”

“Unbelievable... Does that mean the silverware you gifted me with a few weeks past was made by them as well?”

“It was indeed.”

“I see. What a splendid industry you’ve built up here. It’s heartening to know canines can craft fine silverware with both artistic and cultural value.”

Glad to hear you like it. Canines were like distant cousins to the werewolves, so I wanted to clear up the unsavory rumors that had been spread about them.

“My apologies for assuming the worst when you, a werewolf, gifted me that silverware. I see now you had no ill intentions.”

“I apologize as well for causing any misunderstandings.”

So that was why he looked so scared when I gave him that gift! He had probably assumed I was trying to send him some kind of implied threat by giving him silver, which was supposed to be a werewolf’s weakness. *I need to be more careful about that in the future.*

After a tour of the eastern district, I led Aram to the center of the city. Airia was waiting for us in front of her manor, bedecked in ceremonial garb.

“It has been a while since our last meeting, Lord Aram. I had intended to greet you at the city’s gates, but as you can see...”

She pointed to her two secretaries, each of whom were carrying a stack of papers. Behind her stood an honor guard of 20 soldiers and 20 werewolves. She’d clearly been busy with paperwork up until the last minute. *That’s probably my fault, isn’t it? Since I kept running off to go to Shardier.*

Of course, there was another reason she hadn’t come out to the main gate. There was a possibility that Aram might try to have her assassinated. She was one of the most important people in the demon army, as well as one of the

weakest. Unlike me, she wouldn't be able to just shrug off an ambush.

However, Aram smiled in relief when he saw Airia. He strode up to her and said, "It's good to see you well. I grew worried when I heard tales of how you'd become a demon ambassador."

"As you can see, I am alive and well. Though I am indeed serving as the demon army's ambassador to human nations."

To be honest, her title sounded so fancy it felt a little embarrassing to hear her say it. She probably felt the same way.

"I would be more than happy to explain to you the events that led to Ryunheit's declaration of independence. Come, let us go inside."

At Airia's invitation, Aram stepped into the viceroy's manor. I filed in afterwards as a matter of protocol, but honestly, I knew Airia could handle this.

Aram nodded to himself as Airia finished her tale.

"I understand now... That explains why this city appears so prosperous." He took a sip of his tea and continued, "Were I Ryunheit's viceroy, I would have made the same choice as you. Though perhaps not as swiftly as you, Lady Airia."

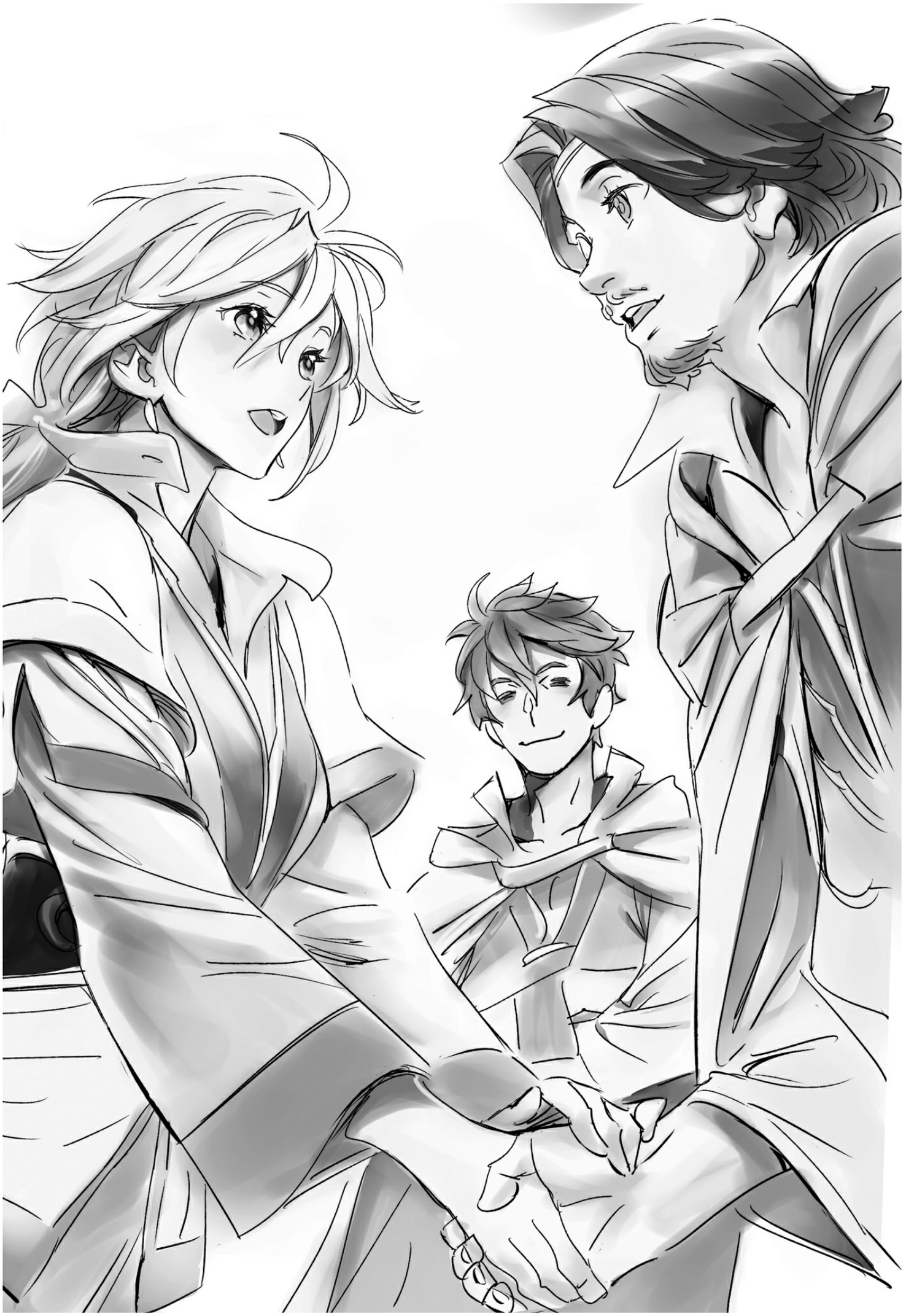
Says the guy who came here after only a few days. I shot Aram a look, and he smiled ruefully.

"That being said, Shardier has few troops and no sturdy walls to hide behind. Unless the demon army can provide troops to defend my city, I am unable to betray Meraldia."

He had a point there. Unfortunately, I didn't have any troops to spare. While I might be able to send a few over in an emergency, I definitely didn't have enough to station a battalion there permanently. As I was agonizing over how to respond, Aram added, "That being said, I would not be opposed to forming a covert alliance with Ryunheit. Once circumstances allow it, we could make the alliance public. Naturally, our alliance would be not just with Ryunheit, but with the demon army as well."

"That's certainly an appealing proposal."

A secret alliance wasn’t the best-case scenario, but it was more than I was expecting to get. Airia and Shardier signed a few unofficial documents sealing the alliance, then shook hands. With that, Shardier became our ally. Four of Meraldia’s cities were now on the demon army’s side.



After forming a covert alliance with Shardier, I returned to the Demon Lord's castle to make my report.

"I see you've been busy, Veight."

"Just handling a few small tasks here and there, sir."

The Demon Lord chuckled, "Defeating a fake Hero, crushing the Meraldian army's morale, bringing an enemy mage onto our side, and forming an alliance with Shardier aren't things I would brush away as just 'small tasks.'"

"Well, you know..."

Compared to what the Demon Lord was trying to achieve, my accomplishments really were just a few small tasks. It was better that I took care of these trivial problems so that the Demon Lord could focus on his grand vision. He shook his head and threw a sheaf of papers down on the desk between us.

"If you consider all this nothing more than a few small tasks, then the demon army's entire mission may as well be one, too. If your accomplishments grow any bigger than this, the demons would be better served with you as their lord than me."

"N-Now hold on a second. If you were to abdicate, sir, I would much rather retire as well and live out my days in the countryside."

"I must say, I have never met someone as lacking in ambition as you," the Demon Lord said with a smile. I smiled back. I enjoyed being vice-commander.

"Regardless, I am pleased with how you handled the situation with the fake Hero. What is the self-proclaimed Holy Priestess doing now?"

"I've hired her as my personal aide. She's a well-mannered girl, and she doesn't seem to harbor any grand ambitions herself."

Well, that and she's a master of illusion magic. Honestly, she's good enough that she could use it in combat, even. Though she was a timid girl, her heart was in the right place. The Demon Lord nodded.

"Your skill in converting enemies to our cause never ceases to amaze me. In that, you surpass even me."

“You flatter me, sir.”

Really, I just suck at finishing people off. And then they end up following me around. I wanted to protest, but since the Demon Lord had gone out of his way to praise me, I decided not to.

“Furthermore, your handling of Shardier’s viceroy was truly splendid.”

“To be honest, I kept messing the negotiations up...”

First I’d misjudged Aram’s personality, then I’d threatened him when I didn’t mean to, and in the end, I’d just come clean with him.

“I wouldn’t consider myself skilled at persuasion by any means. I just happened to be human in my past life. It took me forever just to realize Aram was only pretending to be a crafty politician.”

“Hmm, I see.” The Demon Lord nodded again. “But you know, Veight, most demons would not even consider the possibility that someone might be putting on an act. No other vassal of mine would have been able to pick up on that.”

He had a point. Demons saw no purpose in creating personas. All that mattered was strength. Even among demons of equal rank, the stronger one held more authority. If the other guy was stronger than you, you listened to what he asked. If he was weaker, then you could do as you pleased, and maybe protect them if you liked them. That was the extent of demon relationships.

The Demon Lord added, “Human society is complex. Too complex for demons—who believe in survival of the fittest—to understand. It is for that reason that I need the strength of people like you. Though I know such over-reliance must cause you a headache.”

I matched the Demon Lord’s rueful smile and said, “I’m sure my troubles are nothing compared to yours, sir. Anything you need me to do, just ask.”

Crap, I promised to help without thinking again. The Demon Lord nodded and responded, “Once Viceroy Aram publicly declares himself our ally, Meraldia will move in to reclaim Shardier. Whether or not the demon army can protect Shardier from Meraldia will be pivotal to the future of this war.”

“Yes, sir!”

I'd been worried about the same thing myself. The humans of this world sure loved fighting amongst themselves. Then again, that might have been true back on Earth as well, I just happened to live in a peaceful country. Hence why I wasn't as familiar with cases of infighting.

"Fufu..." The Demon Lord chuckled, and I tilted my head in confusion.

"Is something the matter?"

"Oh, don't mind me. It's just... Mmm, I see."

What's so funny?

"Veight."

"Yes, sir?"

"Now that we have conquered more territory, we need more troops to protect it. Take five hundred of my Azure Knights, and distribute them as you see fit."

The Azure Knights were led by Vice-Commander Baltze, and were the Demon Lord's most elite troops.

"I-I couldn't, sir. You need them here to protect you, don't you!?"

But the Demon Lord just shook his head.

"Their duty is not to safeguard me, but to safeguard demonkind's future. And that future doesn't exist here, it exists in Ryunheit." He rose to his feet and placed a hand on my shoulder. "I have already discussed this with Baltze. He told me it would be reassuring to fight by your side."

"But then you'll have no one to protect you..."

The only group with fighting power equal to the Azure Knights was the Crimson Scales, and those had been dispatched to the north. While most of the first regiment's regular soldiers would still remain in Grenschtat, they alone were insufficient.

"Fear not, Veight. I am more than capable of protecting myself. Were I not, I never would have risen to the position of Demon Lord," he said while giving me a reassuring smile. "Thanks to my overly-capable right-hand man, I have found

myself with little to do. You must allow me to at least do this much for you. What point is there in me being Demon Lord otherwise? You may... think of it as an overprotective father's doting, if you wish."

He scratched his cheek awkwardly as he said that. I never knew he thought so highly of me.

"In that case, I'll gladly take the men."

I bowed deeply, grateful for the Demon Lord's generosity.

"My men are eager to fight alongside the famed Hero-Killer Veight," Baltze said, a playful smile on his lips.

"The Hero I killed was a fake. It's hardly something to be proud of."

"Fake or not, he had become the bane of the second regiment. It most certainly is something to be proud of."

Baltze was riding a two-legged monster known as a wyvern. Though wyverns weren't as sturdy as horses, they were much more maneuverable. Their greatest advantage over horses was their nature, though. Namely that they were carnivores. Their ferocity when it came to fighting made them horses' natural enemies. You could think of them as the strategic counter to cavalry. However, dragonkin were the only riders wyverns permitted.

Meaning while Baltze and his men got to ride out of the castle, I was the only one walking. I couldn't even ride a horse, since the wyverns would kill it. *Even though I'm supposed to be a vice-commander, I'm the only one on foot...*

"You've been making a queer expression ever since we left the castle. Is something wrong?"

"N-Not exactly. While I'm happy to have the famed Azure Knights under my command, I also feel as though a heavy responsibility now rests on my shoulders."

Baltze grinned, "Believe me, I feel the same way. I sincerely hope I don't end up dragging you down, Sir Veight."

Wow, what a reliable guy. But while I was glad for this addition, it meant yet

another different faction added to my already multicultural unit. Organizing everyone was going to be a pain. As we returned to Ryunheit, the canines were in the middle of creating another set of stables for Baltze's wyverns.

"Ah, Lord Veight."

"Welcome home, sir."

"Whoa, he's brought dragons with him!"

They're not dragons, they're wyverns. You're making their stables right now, so what's there to get surprised about?

"Sir, can we try riding these?"

"I wouldn't if I were you. Only dragonkin can tame those guys."

"Aww... What a shame."

Stop playing around and get back to work, guys.

* * * *

—The Baltze Brothers' Afternoon—

After transferring to Ryunheit, I've been able to spend more time with my brother Kurtz. He's the smartest of us azure dragonkin, and I'm proud of what he's achieved.

"Brother, do you think you could allow the Azure Knights to use your newly developed Dragon's Jewels as well?"

"Unfortunately we're having a difficult time mass-producing the metallic powder we need to give the Jewels their color, so they're not as versatile as before. If you don't mind them being colorless, I can dispatch one of my officers to your unit."

"That would still be a huge help."

But even when we ate lunch together, all we ended up talking about is work. I remember once having lunch with Lady Shure, and she'd asked me if I ever thought about anything else. At the time, that stung quite a bit, and I became depressed for three days straight. Unfortunately, I really didn't know what else

to talk about most of the time. For that reason, I was quite glad that both my brother and Sir Veight were more than willing to discuss work at any time.

While Kurtz may not be a general, he was still one of the Demon Lord's most trusted vassals. He truly was the smartest dragonkin the demon army had, and was probably its most valuable asset. Both His Highness the Demon Lord and Lady Shure were from the Crimson Scales clan. Despite that, the Demon Lord hadn't played favorites, and gave both me and my brother important posts in the first regiment. What surprised me even more though, was that he also brought Veight, who wasn't even a dragonkin, into the first regiment. *If I'm being completely honest with myself, I do feel like the other races aren't as intelligent or as rational as dragonkin.* I know I myself can be a little rash at times, so perhaps I shouldn't judge, but almost all of the demons' past Champions have been dragonkin. It was that history that has likely made us feel superior to the other demon races.

"Brother."

"What is it, Baltze? Oh, and wipe your mouth. There's food stuck to it again."

Since we were children, Kurtz always scolded me about my table manners. I hurriedly wipe my mouth before continuing.

"Brother, who would you say are the demon army's greatest Champions?"

Kurtz's eyes narrowed in surprise.

"That's rare. For you to bring up something other than work."

"To be honest, the thought came to me as I was thinking about work."

Kurtz nodded in response, then fell silent as he pondered my question.

"First and foremost would be our honorable Demon Lord. Lord Tiverit and Lady Gomoviroa are also quite powerful. So to answer your question, those three are likely our greatest Champions."

That made sense. His Highness was of course our lord, and both Lord Tiverit and Lady Gomoviroa were indispensable to our army. Kurtz folded his arms.

"The vampire necromancer Lady Melaine and the kentauros warrior Firnir also come to mind. Both of them have been able to successfully rule their

assigned cities, which is no mean feat. However...”

I filled in the rest of my brother’s sentence, “Neither of them are as impressive as Sir Veight?”

“As you say, Baltze.” Kurtz put down his fork and held my gaze. “When it comes purely to mastery of magic, Lady Melaine is more skilled than Sir Veight. And when it comes to earning the respect and loyalty of one’s men, Lady Firnir has the kind of natural talent commanders envy. However, Sir Veight possesses something more, something no one else does.”

“The ability to understand and negotiate with humans, right?”

Kurtz smiled knowingly at me.

“Correct... Baltze. You originally asked who I thought were the demons’ greatest champions because you wanted to confirm that, didn’t you?”

“Something like that.” I coughed in an attempt to hide my embarrassment. “You were there at the battle of Thuvan, so you must have seen Sir Veight’s fighting style up close. How was it?”

“Horrible,” Kurtz sighed, and looked down with a frown. It’d been seven years since I last saw him look this forlorn. “You read the report, didn’t you? He doesn’t understand how much trouble his reckless actions cause us poor technical officers. However...”

“However?”

“Though it pains me to admit it, his solution was the only viable option in that situation. That doesn’t change the fact that he’s the bane of technical officers everywhere, though.”

“Hahaha.”

Kurtz gave me a teasing smile and asked, “Do you want to be a Champion like him, Baltze?”

“I do, but I know I’m nowhere near his level yet.”

“In that case, watch what he does, and learn. You won’t become like him relying on martial might alone.”

Kurtz sure knew how to hit me where it hurt. And once he got started, he was merciless.

“And if you wish to win Lady Shure’s heart, you’re going to need to start finding hobbies outside of work.”

“I’ll try my best.” Lady Shure’s striking figure popped into my mind as I said that. “Brother, how can you be so calm when talking about Lady Shure? Doesn’t the mere thought of her lustrous scales, glowing pupils, and tapered fangs set your heart ablaze?”

“Well, I’m more of a scholar than anything, so...”

“Though she appears so stern and aloof on the battlefield, there’s also a gentle side to her. Truly, she is the most beautiful dragonkin in existence. One look at her graceful tale is enough to give me the courage to fight ten thousand men.”

“Alright, calm down, Baltze. You’re beginning to sound like a madman.” Kurtz sighed and added, “You should learn from Sir Veight’s example. I have never once seen him lose himself to lust.”

“You have a point...”

That was one more thing I was going to need to work on.

* * * *

Shortly after returning to Ryunheit, I realized I needed a way to feed my new dragonkin knights. As I was pondering that question in my office, Airia came running in.

“It’s terrible, Sir Veight! The Meraldian Federation has dispatched an army to Shardier! They’re marching from the north!”

“What!? Who brought you that report!?”

“A runner from one of Ryunheit’s merchant groups! According to him, they’re composed entirely of regular army veterans. A combination of cavalry and infantry that numbers nearly two thousand!”

“How many siege weapons did they have with them?”

“None of the merchants spotted any.”

If they’re not bringing siege weapons, I can’t imagine they’re planning a full-scale assault. This seemed more like a political power play. However, I still had a bad feeling about this. I rose to my feet and declared, “Gather the werewolves, kentauros, and Azure Knights. Lord Aram’s life may be in danger.”

“In accordance with our alliance, we’ll be riding to Shardier’s aid!” I addressed the army of werewolves, dragonkin, and kentauros splayed out before me. “However, remember that Shardier is still officially part of the Meraldian Federation. In order not to worsen international relations, I’ll need your units to carry out some abnormal orders. Be ready to do things that might not make sense to you.”

“Yes, sir!”

Baltze snapped a crisp salute while Seishess nodded solemnly.

“Understood, commander...”

Since demons were an unruly bunch I’d been worried they would act on their own, but it appeared that had been a needless fear.

“Werewolf squad, transform! We march, men!”

I had all my werewolves transform so they could keep pace with the kentauros and the wyvern-mounted dragonkin. Naturally, I took the lead.

“Hey Veight, you’re the commander so you should be in the back!”

That’s the last thing I ever thought I’d hear from one of the Garney brothers. Fahn loped up to me and nodded in agreement.

“He’s right. That reminds me, which squad is on Veight duty this week?”

“That’d be us.”

Jerrick and his squad raised their hands. *What the heck is ‘Veight duty?’*

“Hey, wait a second. What’s this Veight duty you’re talking about? I’ve never heard of this.”

“We’ve assigned you guards so you don’t charge into the enemy formation

again and get yourself killed. And you're not allowed to get rid of them."

Excuse me? I'm the commander here, you don't get to decide these things without my permission.

"Your job is to sit in the rear and command the rest of us, *commander*."

"The rest of us are expendable, but if you die we're going to be stuck hiding in remote frontiers farming potatoes for the rest of our lives."

"Besides, how could we ever show our faces to the Demon Lord if we let you die? Think about what we have to put up with for once."

Am I really that unreliable? Jerrick ran over and patted me on the shoulder.

"Don't worry, boss. We'll keep you safe."

"Though all four of us combined are probably still weaker than you."

"But hey, we can at least be your meat shields."

Jerrick grinned playfully. If I tried anything reckless during this campaign, these four would do something even more reckless to protect me. In other words, I'd be putting them in danger. *I see now. So this is why the Demon Lord never goes out onto the front lines.* Our enemy this time numbered 2,000, and was a mix of infantry and cavalry. I'd only brought 1,000, but they were all effectively cavalry. Still, a head-on fight would see us defeated. However, I had no intention of fighting head-on in the first place. There was more to war than slamming your troops against the enemy's.

"Vodd, take your squad and start scouting the area north of us. If you spot enemies, do not engage."

"You got it, boss. This looks like it's gonna be a fun one."

The former mercenary smiled, his white fur bristling. His squad of four detached themselves from the main unit and vanished north in a cloud of dust. In a world without GPS or smartphones, keeping track of enemy positions was difficult. However, accurate intel was one of the greatest advantages in war. Since there were infantry in the Meraldian army, the whole force should have slowed down to match their pace. However, if Meraldia had sent their cavalry on ahead, then I'd need to adjust my own plans.

Fortunately for us, our entire army was comprised of cavalry or people who could move at cavalry speeds. There was no need for me to split my forces. However, in the time it had taken the rider to deliver news of Meraldia's advance to Ryunheit, their forces had likely covered a lot of ground. In this day and age, getting information in real time was impossible. I could only pray that we weren't too late.

"Sir Veight, pardon my presumption, but will this plan truly work?" Baltze asked with a worried expression. "If Viceroy Aram betrays us, we'll be caught in a pincer attack."

That was definitely a possibility. However, I'd considered that scenario as well.

"If that happens, we'll have to use our superior speed to retreat. Regardless, our job will remain the same."

"You have a point there."

Personally though, I didn't think Aram would betray us. If that speech he'd given me the last time I'd gone to Shardier had all been an act, then he was a far better actor than I gave him credit for. But if he'd been that skilled a swindler, then he would have patched things up with Meraldia ages ago. So I was pretty confident he wouldn't turn on us. Though I'd taken precautions just in case still.

"I can see the city!" One of the kentauros in the front yelled. Other voices called out in agreement.

Shardier's walls swam into view, a veil of heat and dust making it difficult to discern any details. However, I didn't see Meraldia's army anywhere. It appeared we'd made it in time. I set up a command center on a hill some distance from the city and started giving out orders.

"Werewolves, return to human form and remain on standby! Hamaam, take your squad and see what's happening in the city!"

The werewolves shrunk back to human-size and squatted down in the sand. Hamaam had been to Shardier a few times already, and he was acquainted with

Aram. He was the best person to send to establish contact. And I wanted to let Aram know the situation so he wouldn't be surprised about a demon army showing up at his gates.

"Kentauros, circle around to the eastern gate! Azure Knights, you take the western gate!"

Though it was a trading city, Shardier only had two gates. There was no need for a northern gate since the lake bordered its entire northern side. As for why there was no southern gate, it was because Meraldia hadn't given Shardier enough garrisoned troops to man three gates effectively. That meant potential attackers only needed to surround the city on two sides to cut it off.

"Seishess, unless they attack us, do not engage Shardier's troops."

The taciturn warrior nodded, "I understand. A true warrior knows not only when to fight, but when not to fight. I will keep my men in line. You can count on that."

"As always, you get a lot more talkative when it comes to fighting."

"Ah... I suppose..."

Seishess blushed a little. He then went back to his troops and led them off to the east.

"I suppose it's time I sortied as well."

Baltze turned his wyvern around and led his knights to the west. *Time to see what the famous Azure Knights can do.* I remained here with the rest of my werewolves in order to keep an eye on the overall situation.

Shardier's western gates closed as Baltze's men lined up outside it. Though they were in formation to attack, they didn't move at all. Nor did any arrows fly from the castle walls. So far things were going well. All that was left was to wait for Meraldia's army to arrive. After a short time, Hamaam returned.

"As you predicted, Aram is unaware of the situation. He was quite surprised to see me."

I knew it. Hamaam added, "When I asked him what Meraldia's troops might have come for, he guessed that they'd come to station themselves in the city by

force.”

I see, so they’re just going to ignore the viceroy’s authority. But if they just show up unannounced, would a city of this scale even have the food or lodging facilities ready to house 2,000 troops? Well, no point in worrying about that now... As I put the thought out of my mind, one of Vodd’s squad members returned with an odd report.

“We spotted Meraldia’s forces. They have three hundred cavalry and five hundred infantry. Their forces are marching southward in a column, with the cavalry in the lead. Old Vodd said that going by their armor, they’re heavy cavalry and light infantry.”

“Those numbers don’t add up.”

My men exchanged uneasy glances. There were two possible explanations. First, that the remaining 1,200 troops were somewhere else. Either they were waiting in ambush somewhere, or for some reason they were marching slower than the rest. The other possibility was that Mao’s merchant had simply misjudged the numbers. Seeing as he was a merchant and not a soldier, there was no guarantee he accurately knew how to estimate an army’s size just by looking at it.

The worst-case scenario would be if those 1,200 soldiers had changed direction and headed toward Ryunheit. If that was the case, I couldn’t afford to waste any time. Lacy was a skilled enough mage to control the bone spears I’d left behind in Ryunheit, but she was an amateur when it came to military strategy.

Should I turn back right now? No, wait, let’s think about this calmly. We outnumber the enemy right now. And they’re marching in file. If we strike first, we could turn this into a quick, decisive battle.

The only thing that could turn the tides here would be Aram betraying us. If he did, we’d be trapped between 800 Meraldian troops and 300 of Shardier’s soldiers. That would tip the scales enough to make the outcome uncertain. But in that case, I could just order a retreat. I’d purposely organized this force to be fast enough to outrun human cavalry.

Most importantly, though, I couldn’t afford to let the Meraldian army arrest

Aram here. If I didn't protect him, our alliance would be shattered. This was a battle I needed to fight. If things started looking dicey, I could always unleash my werewolves. After making my decision, I turned to my werewolves and ordered, "I want you to disguise yourselves as refugees and sneak into Shardier. The kentauros and Azure Knights will remain on standby until I have further orders. Meanwhile, I'll take Jerrick's squad and rendezvous with Vodd."

"Yes, sir!" My men said simultaneously.

I raised my voice, trying not to buckle under the pressure that accompanied being responsible for 1,000 lives, "Move out!"

Guarded by Jerrick's squad, I moved to another hill, this one a short distance from the main road. The 300 cavalry leading Meraldia's forces were definitely armored enough to be heavy cavalry. Even their horses were covered in mail. On the other hand, the 500 infantry were lightly equipped. They all had sets of expensive chainmail, but they were armed with only bows, short spears, and swords.

"There's something strange about all this."

Jerrick cocked his head and said, "You're right, boss. It's like they're all shouting, 'Look at how much money we've got.'"

"You think so too, huh?"

800 was still enough men to take Shardier, but there was no need to bring extremely expensive heavy cavalry to a city siege. The fact that all of the infantry were wearing brand new suits of chainmail was odd as well. Chainmail was good for stopping slashes and thrusts, but not as helpful against arrows. Old Vodd the veteran sauntered over and muttered, "Looks more to me like they came to threaten Shardier than capture it. You get plenty of those types, who try to use military force as a negotiating chip."

"I see now. But aren't they putting a little too much money into... Oi, boss, look at that!"

Jerrick grabbed my shoulder and wheeled me around. I looked where he was pointing and saw a carriage surrounded by infantry. Going by how thick it was, and the fact that it was plated in steel, it was probably a prisoner carriage.

“So they came here ready to arrest Aram, huh?”

I wasn’t sure if they were actually planning on arresting him or not, but now all this unnecessary display of power made sense. I prepared one of the dragon’s jewels to send a signal flare.

“Once they reach the lakeside, we’re going to hit them all at once.”

“You got it, boss.”

Meraldia’s column of troops reached the northern edge of the lake, and turned onto the road that detoured around it to the west. Had they taken the eastern lakeside route, they would have had their right sides exposed to Shardier’s archers. By going from the west, only their left sides, which is where their shields hung, were visible from Shardier’s walls. The fact that they were being cautious meant they expected an attack. After skirting half of the lakeside, the Meraldian army’s advance faltered. They’d spotted the Azure Knights.

“Fire the signal!”

“On it!”

Jerrick launched the signal flare, informing our allies to charge.

The Azure Knights, which had until now been facing the western gate, did a perfect about-face. Like a single living organism, they reformed their ranks and readied their weapons. It was amazing how well-trained they were.

The Meraldian forces were no slouches either. They quickly reorganized into battle formation like the professionals they were. However, their formation was stymied by the fact that there was a lake to their left. They couldn’t spread out as well as they’d like to. Left without any other choice, they deployed their right wing further than usual. The cavalry uncouched their lances, readying themselves for a charge.

However, Baltze’s Azure Knights had no intention of letting them complete their preparations. Using the superior agility of their wyverns, they cut into Meraldia’s formation before it was completed. While wyverns lacked the explosive charging power of a horse, they were much better at close-quarters

combat. Especially since the particular odor they gave off sent horses into a panic. Not even armor could protect horses from that.

“Wow...”

“They’re amazing...”

I couldn’t agree more. The battle was completely one-sided. The lances the cavalry had taken out for their charge were completely useless in a melee. They dropped their lances and tried to draw their swords, but the horses’ panic was making it difficult.

Furthermore, Baltze was maneuvering his forces to drive the cavalry into the lake. The horses were tall enough that the soldiers could fight even in the water, but if any of them fell, they were sure to drown. The last thing the cavalry wanted was to be forced to fight in the lake. However their horses were panicking, and the unit’s chain of command had long since crumbled.

Without any orders, a few of the soldiers drove their horses into the water in the hopes of putting some distance between them and Baltze’s knights. Others, however, stood and fought. Yet others tried to break through the dragonkin and flee toward Shardier. And some turned back north and fled outright. Those who fought suffered a tragic fate.

“My name is Baltze, of the Azure Knights! Face me and die, you cowards!”

With a spirited war cry, Baltze drew his scimitars. He was a master of dual wielding, and his twin blades flashed in the afternoon sun as he cut down soldiers one after another. Though his swings appeared light, there was immense weight behind each of them. His scimitars bit deep into the thick plate armor of the mounted soldiers, and more often than not hit, with enough force to knock them off their horse. In seconds, Baltze was surrounded by a knot of riderless horses. He’d already gained control of the battle. It was hard to believe the ferocious warrior was the same quiet guy who rarely raised his voice.

However, the Meraldian army wasn’t routed yet. The infantry drew their short spears and attempted to surround Baltze and his men. If they managed to complete their encirclement, it would be Baltze and his men who would be pushed into the water next. Fortunately, Baltze’s greatest strength as a commander was knowing when to retreat.

“Pull back!”

The Azure Knights wheeled their wyverns around in a tight circle and retreated toward Shardier. Had they waited even a moment longer, they would have been completely surrounded. But even in retreat, Baltze made sure to do some damage. He and his men rode down the cavalry that had tried to flee in the direction of the city, annihilating them. The remaining soldiers watched on in horror as their comrades were ripped apart. Unable to watch their allies suffer any longer, the remaining soldiers reformed and charged Baltze’s rear. The action moved from the lakeside to Shardier’s western gates. *We need to follow them without getting spotted or I’ll lose track of the situation.*

“Let’s go.”

“Right behind you.”

From what I could tell, there were only 100 heavy cavalry left. The rest had either been injured, killed, or had retreated. 66% losses were pretty catastrophic. On the other hand, Meraldia’s infantry were still intact. It seemed they’d been intended as the army’s main force from the start. Furthermore, spears were anathema to cavalry. But as Meraldia’s forces bore down on Baltze, they were interrupted by the drumming of hooves.

“Proud warriors of the kentauros race, fight bravely so as to not dishonor your ancestors!”

“UWOOOOH!”

The 500 kentauros I’d dispatched to the east had swung around from the south. They loosed a wave of arrows as they charged Meraldia’s infantry. The moment they showed up, Baltze turned his forces around and counterattacked. Unlike horses, kentauros didn’t fear wyverns and could fight alongside them. A combined force of 1,000 cavalry pincered Meraldia’s infantry.

Seeing the overwhelming difference in numbers, the soldiers panicked. There was no way they could take twice their number of cavalry. Maybe if they’d had the longspears and larger shields of their heavy infantry counterparts they could have gotten into a box formation, but as they were, they’d be torn apart. To make matters worse, there were arrows raining down on them. But even if they wanted to retreat, they had no hope of outrunning cavalry. Resigned, the

soldiers steeled themselves for a fight to the death.

But just then, Shardier's west gate opened. Trumpets blared, and a fully armed regiment of infantry marched out. Their standard bearer was holding aloft the flag of Shardier's garrison. They carried large round shields and longspears and walked in a tight formation, reminiscent of the spartan phalanx. Though they numbered only 300, they still posed quite a threat to cavalry. Especially since they were coming from the demon army's rear.

"Save our allies, men!"

My exceptional werewolf hearing picked up Aram's words. He sounded a little nervous to me. His garrison was meant to be only 120, so the fact that he'd brought all 300 troops meant he was showing his hand to Meraldia. *Are you sure that's a good idea?*

I watched as Aram deployed his forces opposite Baltze's, flanking him between his own men and Meraldia's. Now it was the demon army that was at a disadvantage.

"Alright, this is probably good timing."

I ordered Jerrick to launch the next signal flare. Our flares were far faster and far more reliable than runners. Honestly, now that I'd gotten used to them, I didn't think I could live without them.

The moment they saw the signal flare, both Baltze and Seishess ordered their men to retreat. The enemy was now comprised mostly of infantry, and their few remaining cavalry were too heavily armored to be fast. I doubted they'd give chase. The demon army retreated toward Ryunheit, kicking up dust as it went. *Perfect, everything's going according to plan.* The rest was in Aram's hands.

As I waited for my werewolves to return, I observed the city gates using Kurtz's telescope. Soldiers that had been separated trickled back to Meraldia's main force in twos and threes. Many had lost their horses and came back on foot. Their standard bearer had been pushed into the lake, and the squad's flag

was a sopping, tattered mess. This group of heavy cavalry were meant to be Meraldia's elite, but right now they just looked pathetic. The infantry were mostly intact, but they still slumped to the ground, exhausted. Moments ago they'd been prepared to fight for the death, and the aftershock of that hadn't faded yet. As Aram approached the soldiers, a single horseman rode out to meet him. He was likely their commander. From this distance, I couldn't make out what was being said, but the cavalry commander bowed his head over and over to Aram. Aram said something in response, and the commander grasped Aram's hands in gratitude.

"Looks like everything went well."

My returning squad of werewolves pumped their fists into the air.

"Easiest victory ever!"

"Not like we did anything, though!"

"Man, I really wanted to go on a rampage!"

Though they sounded happy, I could tell they were dissatisfied.

"Don't blame me, alright!? You would have had your chance if Aram had actually betrayed us!"

Personally, I trusted Aram completely. But as a commander responsible for the lives of thousands, I couldn't just trust my gut. The reason I'd sent my werewolves into Shardier was to set the city on fire in the event Aram betrayed us. He wouldn't be able to assist Meraldia if he was busy putting out fires. I was confident that he would have prioritized saving his people over helping soldiers from the north. Thankfully, it had turned out to be a needless precaution. The best battles were ones that ended without me having to reveal my trump card.

After a brief conversation with my men, we returned to observing the events at the gate. It appeared Aram was getting along quite well with the commander of Meraldia's forces. I'd planned on rescuing him with my werewolf squad if things went south, but it appeared I wouldn't have to.

"Alright, let's go back home. Diplomacy is all we'll need to handle the rest. As thanks for a job well done, I'll treat you all to some meat back in Ryunheit."

“Now we’re talking!”

“Meat!”

“But we still didn’t get to do anything!”

They’re never going to let that go, are they? In truth, I purposely created an opportunity for Aram to betray us. If he’d wanted to turn on us, there were plenty of options during that fight. But he hadn’t, and he’d played along with my plan. It was still possible he was just waiting for the right moment, but considering his personality, I believed that to be unlikely. He acted like a strategist, but deep down he was a hot-blooded, straightforward guy.

A few days later, after confirming Meraldia’s army had retreated, I went to visit Shardier.

“Thank you so much for your assistance, Sir Veight,” Aram greeted me and my escort with a smile. “It appeared that army had been sent to arrest me and bring me before the Senate for an inquest. But because that commander vouched for me, they’ve decided to let the matter rest.”

I knew it. There’s no way he’d arrest the guy who saved his life. Furthermore, the fact that he’d ridden out against us had ostensibly proved to Meraldia that he had no intention of betraying them.

“But you know, I didn’t think you’d bring out your private troops as well. I thought you’d want to keep those hidden and sortie with just the garrison.”

“There weren’t enough of them to have any meaningful impact on the battle. It would look strange if the demon army retreated because of a mere hundred and twenty men.” Aram guided me to the audience chamber as he talked. “And thanks to my contributions, it appears the commander is willing to stay quiet about my army. He understands that I need more men to protect my city.”

“That’s good to hear.”

I didn’t know what kind of conversation Aram had had with Meraldia’s commander, but it appeared he’d done a good job of convincing him. Considering how hot-blooded the commander had seemed, it wasn’t much of a surprise that the two had gotten along. Apparently, Aram had done such a good

job of negotiating that he'd even convinced Meraldia's commander to petition the Senate to increase Shardier's garrison. As I expected, he was much more suited to straightforward negotiations than clever scheming. Once we were inside the audience hall, Aram straightened his back and turned to me.

"You have my deepest gratitude for rescuing Shardier from its crisis. Especially since this whole mess only happened because of my ineptitude when it comes to negotiating."

"Well, you do have a pretty straightforward personality..."

I knew Aram had tried his best to be a politician, but he really wasn't suited for it. He was just too honest. Fortunately, he had the kind of charisma that made it possible to move people with his honesty. I straightened my posture as well and said, "I wanted to show you that the demon army has plenty of troops, fulfills its promises, and more than anything, does its best to avoid needless bloodshed."

Their heavy cavalry had posed quite a threat so I'd been forced to rout them, but even then I'd kept the total death toll under 100. Baltze's men had ended up disarming and unhorsing more people than they'd actually killed. Aram nodded solemnly in response.

"Of course. From here on out I will be providing my full support to the demon army, and attempt to convince the other southern cities to do the same."

I wonder if things will really go that smoothly?

"Us southerners are descendants of pioneers who crossed over to this continent by sea. To this day, that pioneering spirit lives on within us. I'm certain we'll be able to make this new, uncharted venture with the demon race a success."

Aram puffed out his chest proudly. He really was a passionate guy.

After finishing up my meeting with Aram, we returned to Ryunheit. The city was now protected by Bernheinen and Thuvan to the north, and Shardier to the east. I had yet to set up any buffers to the south, but I doubted the remaining southern cities could mount any large-scale offensives. It looked like I'd finally

be able to focus on domestic affairs for a bit.

That night, I was awoken by one of my guards, “Commander, the leader of the Mondstrahl Church is requesting a meeting...”

He walked into my bedroom and shook me awake.

“At this time of night?”

I’d really rather do this in the morning.

“She claims that she’s received a divination that concerns the demon army’s survival,” my guard replied.

“Hm?”

The leader of Ryunheit’s Mondstrahl Church was Mitty, a renowned astrologer. I hadn’t talked much with her since the religious council I’d called soon after occupying Ryunheit. I had no idea what kind of divination she’d seen, but considering her reputation, I decided it was best to meet her immediately.

I rubbed the drowsiness out of my eyes as she entered my office.

“My apologies for visiting so late, but the stars foretold the arrival of a human Hero. I felt it prudent to inform you as soon as possible.”

Oh, so that’s all it was.

“Thank you for going to the trouble of bringing me this information, but I already defeated the Hero. It turns out he was actually a fake, though...”

“I am not referring to Ranhart. I mean a true Hero.” Mitty leaned forward, her expression grim. “Moments ago, one of the northern stars of fate flashed with a blinding radiance. I highly recommend dispatching scouts to the north immediately.”

This was all rather sudden, but I knew Mitty’s skills were held in high regard. She was the most famous astrologer in the south. In this world, astrologers were proper seers who used magic to peer into the future. The more skilled an astrologer was, the more accurate their predictions. As a fellow mage, I knew how foolish it was to ignore an expert’s prediction.

“If you believe the situation is that dire, Lady Mitty, then it likely is. Very well,

I'll send someone to investigate immediately."

If I recall correctly, Master was staying in Bernheinen tonight. It would be fastest if I sent one of the kentauros over to ask her to see what was going on at the northern front. Still, that would take some time. But in a world without cell phones or internet, all communications took time. That aside, it was surprising that a respected priestess was helping us demons out.

"Pardon my brusqueness, Lady Mitty, but why tell me this? Isn't the Hero your ally?"

Mitty smiled and shook her head.

"I owe you a debt for your assistance during the religious council, Sir Veight. Moreover..."

"Moreover?"

Her smile transformed into a roughish grin.

"My disciples much prefer Ryunheit as it is now. We would rather support the werewolves of the south, than the Hero of the north."

It made me happy to hear that.

"Thank you, Lady Mitty. I'll definitely repay this debt one day."

I bowed to Mitty and sent a runner to Bernheinen.

Though I stayed up the rest of the night, the kentauros I'd sent didn't return. It wasn't until the next afternoon that he finally came back.

"That took a lot more time than I expected. Did something happen?"

Face haggard, the kentauros messenger wheezed, "It's horrible... Commander Tiverit has..."

"What happened to him?"

"He... died in battle."

No way. That guy's taller than a castle and a veteran of countless battles.

"Are you absolutely certain?"

“Lady Gomoviroa said so herself, so I believe the information is accurate...”

Did Master watch him die?

“Wait, is the commander of the third regiment safe!?”

“Y-Yes, sir. She returned to Bernheinen this morning. She was utterly exhausted, and Vice-Commander Melaine is looking after her now.”

The situation in the north seemed even worse than I’d anticipated.

According to Master’s report, the Meraldian army had attacked the agricultural city of Bahen where the second regiment was stationed. In response, Tiverit had taken to the field personally. However, he was attacked by a lone militia soldier, and after a fierce duel, slain. The slaughter that followed had been horrific.

Without their leader, the remaining demons had fallen into panic. Only another demon could understand how terrifying it was to have your leader, the strongest out of all of you, defeated in combat. That was just how much faith most demons placed in their commanders. It was for that reason that the Demon Lord never took to the field personally, and why all my subordinates got mad at me when I did. With the second regiment demoralized and disorganized, the Meraldian soldiers had easily been able to cut right through them. Witnessing the death of their almighty commander had robbed the remaining demons of the will to fight.

The Meraldian army had started killing men left and right, and had only stopped when Master had run in and cast a mist over the entire battlefield. It was the same spell she used to keep Grenschtat Castle hidden. She’d then ordered a full-scale retreat, which was the only thing that had saved the entire second regiment from being annihilated. As they’d fled, Master had spotted a single soldier who was unaffected by her disorienting mist. Or rather, the mist parted around him. No one but a Hero had the strength to repel Master’s magic.

“Has anyone informed the Demon Lord of these events?”

“The second regiment is retreating toward Grenschtat. However, Lady Gomoviroa sent a messenger from Bernheinen as well, just in case.”

“Understood. Thank you for bringing me your report. Take some time to rest.”

I called all of Ryunheit’s important personnel to my office. Namely Airia and all of my squad captains. The situation was graver than ever. The second regiment’s commander had perished, while the third regiment’s commander had expended so much mana she was out of commission. Right now, the highest-ranking officers in the field were the vice-commanders.

“Sir Veight, we need to return to Grenschtat immediately.” Baltze’s voice was even, but I could tell he was tense. “At the very least, please grant permission for my Azure Knights to return to His Highness’ side. We must be there to protect him.”

Unfortunately, that was something I couldn’t allow. If we were up against a Hero, no mere squad of elites could handle him. Even if Baltze challenged him with all 500 of his men, the Hero would hardly break a sweat cutting them all down. He was on the same level as the Demon Lord, meaning he was practically a demigod. The fact that he’d been able to slay Tiverit was proof that normal demons like us stood no chance. After all, Tiverit’s strength rivaled that of all the Azure Knights combined.

“Sir Baltze, I’m afraid I cannot allow that. All units under my command are to focus on defending Ryunheit, nothing more.”

“But...”

“We cannot afford to lose any more of our troops to the Hero. Furthermore, the hopes of all demonkind ride on the survival of this city. The Demon Lord would never forgive us if we left it undermanned.” I purposely made myself sound cold, and Baltze fell silent. “Lady Airia, I hereby appoint you temporary commander of the troops stationed here. I have faith a human of your talents, unbound by demon preconceptions, will be able to lead them with a cool head. Lacy, you’ll be in charge of controlling the Bone Spears.”

“U-Understood. But then what will you be doing, Sir Veight?”

I knew the people gathered wouldn’t like what I had to say, but I didn’t feel

like lying. I took a deep breath and gathered my resolve. “I’ll be going to guard the Demon Lord myself in place of you guys. Since I’m a mage, I can support him even if I’m not directly taking part in the fighting.”

Silence followed my declaration. Kurtz, Baltze, Seishess, and Fahn just watched me, unwilling to say anything. *Am I being unfair after all?* Finally, Kurtz opened his mouth.

“It... pains me to admit it, but I believe that is the best decision. The rest of us would be of no use to the Demon Lord in a fight.”

Kurtz looked down bitterly, and his brother Baltze stepped forward to support him.

“It hurts to say it, but my brother’s correct. Among us, only Sir Veight can use healing magic. There is no one I’d trust more by the Demon Lord’s side.”

“He’s also an unbelievably strong warrior... With our regiment commanders incapacitated or dead, he’s our strongest fighter after the Demon Lord.”

The others nodded in agreement. Apparently they thought I was the strongest in the demon army after the Demon Lord and the regiment commanders. Personally, I thought they were overestimating my magical strength, but now wasn’t really the time to argue that point. *Sorry, Fahn.* I gave her a silent look of apology.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of the other werewolves and the canines while you’re gone. So you better not die, Veight.”

“Yeah, I’ll make it back one way or another.”

Once I’d given everyone their orders, I started preparing for my journey. No new information came in the few hours it took, and I was ready to depart by mid-afternoon. It was a 2-3 day trip to Grenschtat on foot, but if I transformed and ran nonstop, I could make it by tomorrow morning. I could cut the distance down a little by passing through territory horses would have to detour around too.

Before I left, I pulled out an old leather-bound book from my desk drawer. It was the magic tome I’d used in my early training days. I opened it to the page I was looking for, and made sure I still had a certain spell memorized correctly.

Though ideally, I wouldn't have to use it.

The deterring mist still hung over Grenschtat when I arrived. I carefully picked my way through the fog as I approached the castle. Fortunately, it appeared the castle was still safe. When the palace guards spotted me, they instantly opened the gates. As I walked into the courtyard, I saw just how badly the second regiment had been decimated. Most of the giants and ogres lying in the grass didn't look too hurt. At a glance, it appeared as though casualties had been light, but that wasn't the case. The truth was, any who'd been injured during the retreat hadn't been able to make it back alive at all. The men's despondent expressions and diminished numbers proved that. Since I was already here, I decided to see how the survivors were holding up. Of the races that made up the second regiment, I found hobgoblins the easiest to talk to. They had small frames, and were physically weak, but possessed a good amount of intelligence and could use magic. They weren't too different from how they were depicted in fantasy games.

"I heard Commander Tiverit fell in battle. Can you tell me what happened?"

The group of hobgoblins I'd approached exchanged glances, then said, "Boss is... dead... A single human killed him. Then a bunch of humans came and killed all of our friends."

"What was the guy who killed the commander like?"

"He looked normal. He had a sword and a shield, and normal clothes."

That really doesn't help. At the very least, it appeared he didn't stand out like Ranhart had.

"Is this all that's left of the second regiment?"

The hobgoblins shook their heads.

"We don't know. After the great saint made the fog to hide us, we all got separated. The only reason I survived was because of the helmet the great saint gave me."

Upon closer inspection, I realized the hobgoblin was wearing one of the helmets Master had made. I'd heard they'd been dubbed "Thousand Soul

Helmets” by the warriors of the second regiment.

“Zuuk, Gyobel, Gubuuf... They all spoke to me through the helmet. They told me where to run, and I was able to find a red dragonkin warrior who protected me.”

He was likely referring to one of the Crimson Scales. As I expected, they’d aided the second regiment in their retreat. I cast my gaze around the courtyard. Most of the survivors had huddled together in groups of their own race, and at least one person from each group was wearing a Thousand Souls Helmet. It appeared those helmets were what had allowed the soldiers of the second to run in the right direction through the mist. However, if the men gathered in the courtyard were the second’s only survivors, then the regiment was done for. Even the hobgoblins, the most prolific race in the second regiment, had been reduced to a few hundred men. At the start of the war, there’d been somewhere around 2,000-3,000 of them. The giants and ogres, both races who considered retreat one of the most dishonorable acts in war, had been decimated even more thoroughly. There were less than 10 giants left, not even enough to form a single battalion. And surprisingly, I didn’t see a single ogre anywhere.

“Hey, where are the ogres? You know, the one led by Dogg, the self-proclaimed genius.”

The hobgoblins shook their heads sadly.

“Dogg’s gone.”

“What?”

“He said ‘Protecting you weaklings is the job of strong guys like me!’ and fought against the humans. After the mist came, I couldn’t see him anymore. Then it got quiet.”

They knew what that silence had meant. The hobgoblins looked down at the ground, tears spilling from a few of their eyes. *I never knew that oaf had that side to him...* I felt like it wouldn’t be right to question them any further.

“I see, thanks for telling me all that. You can rest safely here, the first regiment will protect you guys.”

“Thank you, Lord Veight.”

Considering how devastated they were, these guys would likely never fight again. As far as strategizing went, it was safe to assume the second regiment had been lost entirely.

I entered the castle proper, and a red-scaled dragonkin woman ran up to me. Shure, the only female vice-commander of the first regiment.

“Sir Veight, thank goodness you came.”

“I’m glad to see you well, Lady Shure.”

Thank god, I can bring Baltze the good news. He’d been worried sick about Shure. As we walked to the Demon Lord’s chambers, I asked her to fill me in on the details. Apparently, after Tiverit had fallen, the Meraldian army had breached Bahen’s walls. While Bahen’s walls had been repaired after the demon invasion, the members of the second regiment had done a shoddy job. Their lack of knowledge in siege warfare had meant the repaired wall were been full of holes. But even if that wasn’t the case, they wouldn’t have been able to withstand a siege against the Hero. After the city had fallen, the soldiers of the second regiment fled, using Master’s helmets to guide them. Unfortunately, the vast majority had run into enemy divisions, or the Hero, and were subsequently annihilated.

“While the fog had covered Bahen and the area around it, the Meraldian army sent out a pursuit unit to chase down anyone who escaped. I had my unit strike them down and escort the survivors of the second back to Grenschtat.”

“You did well. Without you, Lady Shure, the second regiment might have been slaughtered to the last.”

However, Shure grit her teeth and shook her head.

“No... I was forced to retreat along with the remnants of the second. The Hero’s presence boosted Meraldia’s morale, making it impossible for us to fight them off. If Meraldia pushes all the way here, we will be hard pressed to repel them. And it will have been due to my failure.”

I understood her worries, but the Meraldian army should have no way to

locate this castle. It was situated deep in the forest, and since it had been centuries since humans last occupied it, there were no roads leading to it. On top of that, Master's fog obscured it. Not only did it obstruct vision, but it also ate away at human bodies. It hadn't been as effective at Bahen because of the scale, but anyone human who spent half a day in here would collapse. The real problem was the Hero. A bonafide Hero would be able to withstand even Master's magic.

"Don't worry. You have my guarantee as a mage that no normal human can survive long in the mist around the castle. Our biggest threat right now is the Hero."

Shure lapsed into thought for a few seconds, then nodded.

"Understood. I'll split my men up into squads and have them patrol the forest. And I'll make sure they know to avoid engaging under any circumstances."

Shure had grown more cautious after seeing the second regiment's destruction firsthand. Relieved, I bowed my head.

"Very well. In that case, I shall assist you."

I parted ways with Shure and headed to meet the Demon Lord. As always, he appeared to be deep in thought when I entered his study.

"Veight, you didn't have to come back."

"How could I leave you on your own when you're facing such a serious crisis?"

"You needn't have worried about me. Your time would have been better spent focusing on Ryunheit's domestic affairs. Still, I'm glad you came."

The Demon Lord smiled ruefully and gestured to the chair across from him. I'd been worried he might be feeling depressed after losing Tiverit, one of the founding members of the Demon Army, but it appeared he was still holding up.

"So even Tiverit has passed now... You know, long ago he was a bandit who ravaged the dragonkin's lands." The Demon Lord looked down at the table as he reminisced. "When I went to put a stop to him, he took one look at me and surrendered without fighting. Though many thought him a fool, he was a very

perceptive man.”

Uh oh. I guess he’s not holding up as well as I thought.

“Of those who were there when I first created the demon army, only Gomoviroa remains. I need to live on for the sake of my fallen comrades.”

“That’s absolutely right. Both for the sake of those you’ve lost, and for the sake of those who remain, please continue to lead the demon army.” After encouraging the Demon Lord I added, “Even the Hero will have a difficult time locating Grenschtat Castle. You need to use that time to prepare for his arrival.”

The Demon Lord looked up at me and muttered, “How very like you... to not suggest I hide behind my troops.”

“We wouldn’t be able to stop him no matter how many of us there were.”

Those who achieved the status of Demon Lord were like gods come down to earth. No normal human stood a chance against him. But Heroes were aberrations, beings far more powerful than a normal human. If they were still in their growth period, or let their guard down, maybe a normal demon might stand a chance against them. But in a head-on fight, they would lose every time. Naturally, I had no intention of fighting the Hero myself. Maybe I’d be able to buy some time against him, but I knew for a fact that I’d die. If all my death would achieve was buying time, then it was better for everyone if we bought that same time through different means. If anything, I suspected my role would be to heal the Demon Lord once the fight was over. Regardless of who won the fight, they wouldn’t come out unscathed.

Two days passed as I continued my preparations within Grenschtat. I was worried about how Ryunheit was doing, but right now I was the only person in the castle capable of using healing magic. If Master recovered before the Hero came, I was planning on switching out with her; but if the Hero came first, then it was all up to me. As I waited, Shure brought me more unnerving reports.

“Over these past two days, I’ve lost three of my patrol squads to an unknown foe,” her expression was grim. The cross marks on the map denoting where the patrol squads had been defeated were growing steadily closer to the castle.

“I can’t imagine anyone but the Hero capable of doing this.”

Shure nodded in agreement.

“I ordered my men to retreat at the first sight of hostiles, so they must not have had time to even flee before the Hero killed them.”

The poor patrol squads were living a horror movie right now. Since the Hero was alone, he could use the fog to his advantage and ambush units before they even knew what was happening.

“I had used your squad formation as a reference and had my men split up into squads of four. They’d also been split between vanguard and rearguard duty, so no matter where the Hero struck from, someone from each squad should have been able to make it back to report to me. And yet...”

That meant that the Hero was strong enough to kill four mounted dragonkin fast enough that none of them even had the time to flee. *How terrifying.* It was hard to tell if the Demon Lord or the Hero was the more dangerous monster here.

“Sir Veight, you saw those corpses as well, did you not?”

I did. I had hoped to save any who might still be breathing, but they’d all been efficiently and mercilessly killed.

“From the looks of it, each dragonkin had been cut in half along with their wyvern in a single stroke. No normal one-handed sword could do that.”

“What do you believe did it then?”

A larger weapon like an axe or a claymore might have been capable of such force, but then the cuts wouldn’t have been as clean. The scouts had been sliced by a razor-sharp edge. While I wasn’t completely confident in my conjecture, I said, “This is my guess as a mage, but I believe the Hero used his own mana to cut your patrols down.”

“I see... So he really is something we cannot hope to handle.”

Shure made a bitter face. I decided to cut our losses before they got out of hand.

“Judging by the location the final patrol was killed, the Hero has already come

quite close to Grenschtat. Maintaining patrols is too dangerous."

"I agree. In order to avoid depleting our forces any further, I shall confine them to patrolling the castle grounds only."

Shure lowered her voice and added, "His Highness the Demon Lord ordered the second regiment to disband. He's given them leave to return home for now."

"That's a good thing, isn't it? Going by the dead patrols, we know which direction the Hero's coming from, so those leaving won't run into him."

The second regiment was all but demolished. After losing their commander, the survivors had neither the confidence nor the courage to keep fighting. Moreover, the long campaign had exhausted them physically and mentally. However, disbanding the second would mean only dragonkin would be left to defend the castle. Shure's Crimson Scales were comprised of 500 cavalry and 3,000 infantry. She also possessed an elite bodyguard of 20 men, each of whom was a skilled officer in their own right. However, they wouldn't be of any help here.

After consulting with the Demon Lord, I had three of her sub-captains take the Crimson Scale infantry to aid in the retreat of the second's remnants. If the Hero was as powerful as I feared, whether we had 3,000 regular troops or 30,000, it would make no difference.

While the infantry obediently left, the cavalry refused to retreat.

"At the very least, have them remain outside the castle."

"I'm afraid I cannot allow that. We must be by His Highness' side no matter what."

Shure's sharp tone brooked no argument. *Oh boy...* I didn't want to be rude, but honestly even Shure's best elites would probably offer as much resistance as a gust of wind to the Hero. Even if I told them that though, they definitely wouldn't listen. Before I could argue any further, the Demon Lord appeared, fully armored. He'd brought his Black Scale elites with him.

"I see you're causing Veight no end of trouble, Shure."

His tone was gentle, like a father speaking to his daughter. Shure instantly straightened her back and said in a nervous voice, “N-Not at all, my lord! I was simply trying to fulfill my duty as your vice-commander!”

“Your unwavering loyalty brings me great joy, Shure. But in this, you should listen to Veight.”

The Demon Lord stooped low and met Shure’s eyes.

“According to Gomoviroa and Veight, this Hero is as powerful as I am. That means the only one capable of fighting him is me. I know better than anyone just how strong you and your men are. But even they cannot best me, isn’t that right?”

He wasn’t boasting. Even the entire demon army’s might combined probably couldn’t beat him. If his goal had been to simply destroy humanity, he could have done so years ago. He just wasn’t interested in annihilation.

Shure hung her head, sufficiently admonished. In a pained voice she said, “It’s as you say, my lord... I...”

“Say no more. I am proud of both your loyalty and your bravery. It is for that very reason that I do not wish to lose you in this trifling skirmish.”

He really just went and called a duel with the Hero a trifling skirmish, huh? Of course, I knew the Demon Lord didn’t really believe that. However, this was the best way to reassure Shure. Finally, Shure conceded.

“My apologies, my lord. I shall do as Sir Veight suggests.”

“Fear not, I have Veight and my imperial guards to protect me. Between us, we possess the might of ten thousand men. Your duty is to ensure the remnants of the second regiment escape safely. There will once again come a time where their strength is needed.”

“Yes, sir!”

Sheesh. Finally she agrees to leave. A huge smile spread across her face as the Demon Lord continued to praise her. *So this is the charisma of the Demon Lord.*

“Sir Veight.” Vice-Commander Shure turned to me with a serious expression and said, “I understand my powerlessness would only get in your way. So please

support the Demon Lord in my place. And please stay safe yourself."

Honestly, I had no idea how things were going to end up. If we were even a little unlucky, all of us could end up dead. So all I could say in response was, "I'll do my best."

The castle courtyard fell quiet, and dark shadows covered the forest as night approached. Soon enough, a single figure appeared from beyond the mists. He was lightly armed and lightly armored.

"All of you, fall back. Unless I give the order, do *not* interfere!"

I commanded the Demon Lord's remaining bodyguards from atop an observation tower on the castle walls. I then had the castle gates opened. Walls and gates were meaningless against a monster who could cut down Tiverit; they'd just be destroyed, and I didn't feel like wasting resources. Though it still irked me to let him through without a fight. The Hero strode through Grenschtat's gates without even the slightest hint of fear. As he drew near, I was able to get a measure of just how strong he was. He didn't appear to be a mage, but he possessed an unbelievable amount of mana. It spilled out in an endless torrent, much like the Demon Lord's own. *I'm certain of it now. That guy's the real deal.* The waves of power he emitted caused the mist to part around him, leaving his path clear. His mere presence was overwhelming.

"Lord Veight..."

The palace guards standing around me gave me a worried look. These weren't the Demon Lord's elites, but just normal soldiers. However, they'd been in enough fights to know just how dangerous the Hero was. I turned to them and said in a stern voice, "That guy is without a doubt, a real Hero. Even if we all attacked him at once, we'd be struck down instantly. Do not, under any circumstances, engage."

"Y-Yes, sir."

After entering the courtyard the Hero went straight for the main entrance. He was wearing civilian clothes in the northern style, and outfitted with only the simple equipment given out to conscripted militia. I spotted Bahen's crest on his leather breastplate, but I couldn't tell if he was originally from Bahen, or had simply picked up that piece of armor in the city. At his waist hung a lightweight

longsword. Aside from that, he had nothing, not even a soldier's backpack. *He doesn't look like he has any projectiles, maybe we can slow him down a little with arrows.* But before I could give the order, another group struck.

"Revenge for our commander!"

"Protect his Highness the Demon Lord!"

Dozens of figures leapt from the shadows, targeting the Hero from every direction. From the looks of it, they looked to be from the remnants of the second regiment. I had expected all of them to run away. Mixed in among them were a few newbie dragonkin soldiers.

"No, stop!"

However, my warning fell on deaf ears. They continued their charge, and the Hero drew his sword. He swung it horizontally in front of him, but my attention was more focused on his hands than his sword. Mana flowed from his hands into his sword, creating a second invisible blade from its hilt. The mana-blade had unbelievable reach.

"Get down, all of you!"

The only ones who listened to my command were the dragonkin. The Hero's invisible blade scraped the scales on their back as it passed over them. Those who hadn't dropped to the ground were cut in half. In a single stroke, the Hero had taken down an entire squad of soldiers. Deep grooves had been cut into the castle's wall where the Hero's blade had passed through.

"Run into the castle, now!"

The surviving dragonkin scrambled for the gates, but the Hero wasn't about to let them escape. He leapt lightly off the ground, sailing a good 10 meters into the air. By the time he'd landed in front of them, the dragonkin were all dead. Blood spurted from their chests and they collapsed to the ground. None of them had managed to run away.

After the slaughter was over, the Hero looked down at his sword. The cheap weapon hadn't been able to withstand the ferocity of its mana, and the blade had shattered. He kicked a nearby dragonkin corpse, rolling it onto its side. He then bent down and retrieved the soldier's sword. Dragonkin swords were

weighted differently than blades meant for humans, but it seemed anything with a sharp edge would do for the Hero. All he needed was a core to wrap mana around.

The Hero looked up and glared at me. The dragonkin surrounding me flinched and backed up a few steps. Of course, I was just as terrified, but I had my pride as a vice-commander. Determined not to be overwhelmed, I glared back. However, I knew if I tried to get close I'd be cut down. After a brief staring contest, the Hero turned his back to me and headed toward the castle entrance. As I'd feared, he was far beyond our capacity to handle.

"I'm heading back to the castle. You lot check to see if there are any survivors in the courtyard. After you're done, take anyone who's still alive and run."

Chances were everyone was dead, but I needed to give these guys something to do or they might try something reckless as well. Once I'd given my orders, I ran down the corridor connecting to the castle, and headed for the audience chamber. Before I could reach it though, I spotted a figure running toward me from the opposite direction. *It's the Hero!* Somehow, he had managed to beat me to the audience chamber. Despite never having been in this castle before, he'd known where to go, like some kind of hunting dog. I swallowed my fear and glared at the Hero. If I was going to die anyway, I'd at least die with pride. However, the Hero came to a halt when he spotted me. He didn't seem to be getting ready to attack.

"The Demon Lord's in there?" he asked in a voice colder than ice. Though he was human, he didn't seem to have any humanity in him. His voice was filled with anger, hatred, and bloodlust. Those were the only human emotions I sensed from him. His inhuman tone left me momentarily taken aback, but it seemed the Hero wouldn't move until he heard my answer. *Not like I can hide it from him, so I may as well be honest.*

"That's right. Face him if you dare, human."

Terrified as I was, I still refused to call him "Hero." As far as I was concerned, the only true heroes were people like the Demon Lord. I pushed the double doors open and stood aside to let the Hero pass. As he walked past, I sensed a wave of bloodlust roll off him. All of the mana surrounding him was molded into

an attack, ready to be loosed at any moment. I instantly leapt back and readied myself for a fight. But the Hero did nothing. Was he trying to test me? *Damn It, stop scaring me like that. Don't think I'll just take your threats lying down!*

"Do you wish to face me, human?"

The Hero ignored my threat, and silently continued into the chamber. Had I let my guard down for even a moment, I likely would have been cut down.

The Demon Lord's imperial guards flanked the throne, each of them fully armored. Sitting in the throne was the Demon Lord, dressed for battle. The pressure he was emitting rivaled the Hero's. The Hero ignored the Demon Lord's guards and walked straight up to him. It looked like he was tired of dealing with small fry like us. He shot the Demon Lord a gaze filled with pure hate and growled, "Arshes."

Apparently that was the Hero's name. He hadn't announced himself as the Hero. The Demon Lord nodded and replied in a calm voice, "Friedensrichter."

Like the Hero, he gave his name and not his title. He pointed at the Demon Lord with his sword and spat, "I've come here to take revenge for Meltia."

That was a name I hadn't heard of. It wasn't the name of any of Meraldia's villages, so I guessed it was a person's name. Probably a woman's. The Demon Lord eyed the Hero silently for a few seconds, then rose to his feet. Neither of them said anything else. Likely because they had nothing more to say.

The Demon Lord grabbed the short spear leaning against the throne. A smaller weapon like that would be easier to maneuver. There was one thing that differentiated it from a normal short spear though. Its butt had been flattened like a sheet. On top of that, the cylindrical shaft leading to it had been hollowed out. It reminded me of the old muskets I'd seen in history books. The Demon Lord lowered his spear and said, "Whatever your grievances are, this is my only reply."

At that, the Hero charged the Demon Lord. The struggle between the Hero and the Demon Lord was truly a battle of the ages. The Demon Lord's spear shot out toward the Hero faster than my eyes could follow. Swirling tendrils of mana wrapped around it, enhancing the power and reach of his attack. The

Hero took the Demon Lord's attacks head-on. His sword moved like a hurricane, blocking each and every one of the Demon Lord's thrusts. The Demon Lord unleashed a flurry of blows in the span of a second, and the Hero parried them all. Every time their mana-infused weapons clashed, the nearby pillars shattered. As I watched, awestruck, I noticed something about the Hero's movements. He was purposely trying to draw the Demon Lord's imperial guards into the fight. The Demon Lord reduced the scope of his attacks, ensuring that he didn't accidentally hit his own men. The moment I realized this, I hurriedly shouted, "Imperial guards, get back! Don't be fooled by their weapon's appearances. They've both lengthened their reach with mana!"

The Demon Lord's men reacted instantly, and retreated toward the walls. *These guys really are elites.* However, they weren't mages, meaning they could only see the physical weapons the two were wielding. Meanwhile, I could clearly see the flow of mana surrounding both of them.

On the surface, it seemed like the two were just trading fierce blows. In truth, though, they were chipping away at each other's mana reserves, trying to exhaust their opponent. Even a glancing blow from the Demon Lord's spear shaved away large quantities of the Hero's mana. Likewise, even a scratch from the Hero's sword drained staggering amounts of the Demon Lord's mana. The smallest of cuts could become a decisive blow in this battle between titans.

Honestly, I wanted to help, but I knew if I got close I'd be ripped to shreds. Nor would the Demon Lord appreciate my attempts to aid him. I couldn't even cast support magic, since the Demon Lord's strength was so far above my own it wouldn't have any effect. My meager mana was nowhere near enough to raise his abilities.



All I could do was keep an eye on my surroundings and watch the battle unfold. I was as helpless as the Demon Lord's guards. The most I could hope to do was put my life on the line to get close and maybe cast healing magic on the Demon Lord.

As far as I could tell, the two were evenly matched. The Hero blocked the Demon Lord's thrusts, and the Demon Lord blocked his swings in turn. The pair swung back and forth between offense and defense. However, as the Demon Lord pulled back from his latest thrust, his lips twitched. For the briefest of instants, his movements dulled. I knew exactly what must have happened.

The Demon Lord had told me before about the one curse of being reincarnated. Both me and the Demon Lord had gone from being human to being demons. Naturally, demons had a very different physique from humans. As I'd never really been much of a fighter in my past life, the only martial techniques I knew were the ones I'd learned as a werewolf. So for me, the difference in body type wasn't much of a problem. The spear techniques the Demon Lord used, however, were ones he'd learned in his previous life. They were completely different from those used by other dragonkin. But those techniques were meant to be used by a human. Humans and dragonkin had arms of different lengths, and their joints were connected in different places.

Forcing yourself to use human techniques in a dragonkin body would inevitably put undue strain on your body. In truth, the Demon Lord was most skilled with a sword, but the sword techniques he used would destroy his wrists in a prolonged fight. After testing different fighting styles, he'd eventually settled on the spear. Of course, even his spear technique was miles above everyone else's. And even that slight lapse in his movements had been so small as to be barely perceptible. But in a fight between two monsters of this caliber, that slight lapse proved fatal.

"DIE!"

The Hero instantly went on the offensive. The Demon Lord attempted to evade the Hero's stroke, but he was a second too late. The Hero's sword bit deep into the Demon Lord's shoulder, and passed diagonally down through his

body. I watched as mana drained from him at a prodigious rate. *This can't be happening. There's no way the Demon Lord could lose.* But the blood spurting from his chest proved that he could.

"Well... fought..." The Demon Lord rasped as he fell to his knees. He wasn't in any condition to fight anymore. Though he may have won, the Hero didn't come out unscathed. Right as he'd been cut down, the Demon Lord had stabbed the Hero through the stomach. Unfortunately, it wasn't a deep enough wound to fell the Hero. Despite his wounds, he raised his bloodstained sword and ran toward the prone Demon Lord.

I leapt forward to stop him, but it was already too late. The Hero slashed downward, ending the Demon Lord's life once and for all. His massive frame collapsed onto the polished black floor, never to rise again.

The Hero tossed aside his broken sword and wiped the blood on his face with his shirt. He didn't seem to feel anything at defeating his fated foe. He turned toward us, already having lost interest in the Demon Lord.

"Don't think any of you will be leaving here alive. You're next."

It appeared the Hero had no intention of letting any of us escape. His goal was the wholesale slaughter of demonkind. The Demon Lord's imperial guards lowered their spears, but I held out a hand to stop them. They'd just get themselves killed.

"Get back. I'll take care of this bastard."

The Hero turned to me, confused. I didn't like the look in his eyes.

"You look just like a human. Are you really a demon?" he growled.

Instead of replying, I transformed and howled with all my might, casting the strongest Soul Shaker I could. The chandeliers hanging from the ceiling shattered, and the torches lighting the room went out. The audience chamber grew a few shades darker, the light of the moon the only remaining source of illumination. I looked down at the Hero and spat, "You're the one who's not getting out of here alive."

To be honest, I had no confidence I could back those words up. But I didn't regret uttering them. Regardless of what the consequences might be for the demon army, I refused to let this bastard leave here alive. The Hero looked at me like I was an idiot, then threw away his broken sword.

"Do you really believe you stand a chance just because I'm injured?"

He covered his wounds with his hand, and a second later his injuries disappeared. The Demon Lord's guards staggered backward in shock. The Hero then took a knife from his belt and held it in an underhanded grip.

"What's the matter? I thought you wanted to kill me?"

That bastard's really looking down on us. While it was true that his wounds had healed, he was nowhere near peak condition. The Demon Lord's final attack had drained a gargantuan amount of the Hero's mana, and he'd used up even more to heal himself.

He wasn't the superhuman monster he'd been before the battle. The near infinite amount of mana that had been swirling around him when he'd first entered the chamber had been reduced to a measurable amount. In fact, I doubted he even had enough to heal another injury of that caliber.

Weakened as he was, he was no longer invincible. Even I had a chance to beat him. However, I needed to be prepared to die to do it.

I activated all of the body-strengthening spells I knew, raising my abilities to their utmost. Thanks to Soul Shaker's secondary effect of gathering mana around me, my strengthening spells were even more effective than usual. On top of that, I also cast my final trump card.

"O sleeping madness, sear unto my body your boundless strength!"

This was one of the few forbidden spells, Fanatic Burn. For a short time, it gave the caster strength that overcame their physical limitations. Whether my bones broke or my muscles tore, I'd be able to continue fighting at full strength. If I wasn't careful, the aftereffects of the spell would kill me. Granted, I'd die anyway unless I won this fight, so there was no reason to hold back.

When he saw me using magic, the Hero leapt toward me and thrust his knife

forward. Even with my vision heightened, I could only barely follow his speed. I dodged more on instinct than anything, then launched a kick toward his stomach. While it landed where I wanted, I could tell it didn't have much effect. All it managed to do was punch a hole in his leather armor.

"Curse you!"

The Hero countered with a horizontal swing, which I narrowly avoided. I possessed neither the enormous amounts of mana or the powerful physique of the Demon Lord. If one of those swings so much as scratched me, it'd be the end. I aimed a punch toward his face while he was off-balance from the last swing. It was another clean hit, but once again my attack had almost no effect. *This guy's insane! That punch was strong enough to kill a bear!*

If I continued fighting in close quarters like this, it was only a matter of time before I was caught off-guard. I leapt back and put some distance between us. *Calm down. You're a werewolf. Werewolves are merciless hunters, not proud soldiers.* This wasn't some noble duel. No, it was just an enraged werewolf's hunt for revenge. A cowardly attempt to strike down a wounded foe. After returning to my senses, I hid behind one of the chamber's pillars.

"Where do you think you're going, you coward!?"

The Hero swung his knife at the pillar multiple times. He sliced through it like it was wax, cutting it into to a dozen smaller pieces. Just as I'd expected him to.

Now was the time to strike. If I hesitated even a little, it'd be all over. I kicked at the broken shards of the pillar in quick succession, then dropped to all fours and raced across the floor. Between the black floor, black walls, black pillars, black ceiling, and black rubble, my black-furred form became hard to spot. For the briefest of instants, likely not even a second, the Hero lost track of my position. But that split-second of camouflage was more than enough. Without any regard for my own safety, I jumped at the Hero and bit down as hard as I could onto his shin.

"Gaaah!"

I heard his bone's snap, and the taste of his blood filled my mouth. Werewolves' greatest weapons weren't their fists or their claws, but their fangs. Everything else was just there to make it easier to bite your enemies to

death. I had no idea how to fight as a human, but I'd learned from an early age how to fight as a werewolf. And while my other attacks had been ineffective, it appeared my fangs could pierce the Hero's defenses. Meaning I still had a chance. Injured or not though, Arshes was still the Hero.

"URAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Screaming, he swung his knife down at me. The series of fierce struggles had taken their toll on him, and he had very little mana left. Pain and exhaustion dulled his movements, granting me just enough time to roll away. After dodging his attack I yanked my jaws backward, dragging him to the floor. At this point, our chances of victory were finally even. We charged each other, betting our lives on every attack. It was a race to see whether my fangs would reach his throat, or the Hero's knife would pierce my heart.

In terms of pure strength, the Hero outclassed me even with his reduced mana. However, he wasn't trying to pin me down. My guess was he was wary of the Demon Lord's imperial guards. He hadn't killed them earlier because he'd used them as hostages to keep the Demon Lord's movements in check. But now it was their existence that was keeping him in check. Even with all these advantages piled on, though, I was just barely keeping up. Only my fangs had any hope of hurting the Hero. On the other hand, even a punch or a kick from him was deadly. If I let my guard down for even an instant I'd be killed.

But so what!? Like hell I'm going to lose here! You're no goddamn Hero. You're just a murderer! I feinted for the Hero's throat, and when he raised up his arm to block I bit down on his right wrist instead. I used every ounce of my strength to tear through his joints and shatter bone. With this, his right hand was out of commission. However, even as I bit through his wrist, he threw a punch with his free left hand. It packed as much force as a giant's fist. For a moment, I nearly blacked out. By the time I returned to my senses, the Hero was straddling. He looked beside himself with rage.

"YOU BASTARD!" he screamed.

Not good. He had his left arm pulled all the way back. If he hit me with a punch like that, I'd die for sure. However, I was pinned to the ground. Though he looked slender, he weighed more than a boulder. The nearby imperial

guards readied their spears, but they wouldn't make it in time.

Is this as far as I go? Well, if I'm going to die, I may as well die fighting. Before the Hero could attack, I counterattacked with magic. I had no affinity with attack magic, so I couldn't use any offensive spells. The only spells I could use that affected other people were body strengthening and healing ones. And so, that was what I used. My hastily assembled healing spell went off moments before the Hero launched his punch. It was one of the most basic healing spells I knew.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

However, it caused the Hero more pain than anything else so far. He held his wrist and shin, groaning in pain. And for a moment, he showed an opening. The healing spell I'd used was one that heightened a person's natural healing and slowly knitted together their wounds. It was the same spell Master had used to heal Dogg once before. It required almost no mana to cast, but because it forced the cells of the person it was cast on to regenerate at abnormal speeds, it caused a great deal of pain. It was a spell with little practical value and was a practice spell used by new mages to train. I doubted anyone else had ever used it in combat. Because of how messy the wounds caused by my fangs had been, their healing was even more painful than usual. A normal person would likely have passed out from the agony. But the Hero being the Hero, he managed to withstand the pain with his consciousness intact. Still, it was enough to make him recoil. I mentally thanked Master for her thorough tutelage and shoved the Hero off me. I then pinned him down to the floor, straddling him like he'd done to me seconds ago. This was likely my only shot at victory. If I didn't kill him here, I wouldn't get a second chance. I bit into his neck without hesitation. My fangs tore through his windpipe, and I ripped half his neck off in a single savage bite. Crimson blood spurted from the wound, dying my field of vision red. The Hero didn't even scream.

Gagging, I stumbled to my feet. Every breath I took stank of the Hero's blood. I wiped my face and looked down at the Hero, who was drowning in a pool of his own blood. Unbelievable as it seemed, he was attempting to stand back up. However he'd lost too much blood, and as I watched his struggles grew weaker.

The paltry healing magic I'd cast on him was of no use for a wound this fatal. He sucked in a few rasping breaths as his lifeblood spilled onto the obsidian floor. His eyes shot open in terror, and he looked up at me. He moved his lips, forming silent words as blood dribbled from his mouth. He lifted a trembling hand and pointed at me. I had no idea what he was trying to say. But as he pointed to me, I remembered I hadn't yet told him my name.



“I am Veight. Just your average Vice-Commander.”

I had no idea whether he heard my words or not. But a second later his hand fell limp, and the light vanished from his eyes. And thus, the Hero Arshes met his end.

Silence followed the Hero’s death. None of the Demon Lord’s guards made a move. I stumbled over to a nearby pillar and slumped against it. Too exhausted to maintain my wolf form, my body transformed into that of a human’s. This was the first time I’d ever been this tired. The aftereffects of using Fanatic Burn were kicking in now. As my vision grew blurry, I staggered to where the Demon Lord had fallen. My legs felt leaden, like I was dragging a boulder with each step. His body was prone, and I could tell from the lack of mana around him that his life was already extinguished. No magic could save him now. I hadn’t even gotten the chance to tell him goodbye. Though, maybe I’d get my chance to see him sooner than I thought. The consequences of using a forbidden spell grew more severe, and my entire body felt like it was being ripped apart. I grit my teeth against the pain and said to the Demon Lord in Japanese, “I’ve avenged you... Maou-sama...”

Demons of this generation would no longer have to live in fear of the Hero. *So rest in peace. You’ve earned that much, at least.*

Everything went black. Since becoming a werewolf I’d been able to see in the dark, so this was the first time in this life I was enveloped in darkness. *If I die like this, will I be able to see you again?* That was the last thought that crossed my mind before even my consciousness was enveloped in darkness.

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—Melaine’s Nursing Diary—

I turn over to the bed, where Veight’s sleeping like the dead. He is still alive, right? Vampires can tell the living from the dead easily enough, but I can’t help but be uneasy. I lean close and make sure he’s still breathing. Okay good, he’s still alive. Just knowing that is a huge relief.

But still, it's been three days now. How long is he planning on sleeping for? He's been prone to oversleeping ever since he was a kid, but this is really too much.

I've been keeping a close eye on his vitals using both my knowledge as a necromancer and my innate talents as a vampire. At first, he really was hovering on the brink of death, but after three days of constant care, his condition stabilized. They don't call me Master Gomoviroa's greatest disciple for nothing. I won't let you die that easily, Veight.

The Demon Lord needs you to finish what he started. If I compare the demon army to a family, then the Demon Lord was everyone's father. Master is like everyone's grandmo—err, I mean, mother. Yep, definitely mother.

She might end up reading this, so it's better not to write anything that'll make her mad.

Anyway, that makes Veight everyone's big brother. The responsible older brother of the demon army. Everyone relies on him. And not just because he's a good general and a good diplomat. They need you and your weird ways of thinking, Veight. You show pity to the weak, and even though you're a werewolf you don't like spilling blood. But when things get dangerous, you're always the one risking your own life. But everything you do helps lead demonkind toward a better future. Whenever something unexpected pops up, people expect you to deal with it, Veight. Because they know you can handle it.

Whoops, this was supposed to be a nursing diary, but it ended up becoming my personal diary. Well, whatever. Master always says that writers insert their subjective bias into everything they write. I just wish you'd wake up already, Veight. Because, well... I'm relying on you as much as everyone else. Please, protect Master and all the other demons, Veight.

* * * *

Apparently, I slept for quite a few days.

"Ah, you're finally up."

The first thing I saw upon opening my eyes was Melaine. She pressed her forehead against mine, then nodded to herself.

“Looks like both your mana and your spirit are doing just fine. And you don’t seem to be suffering any side-effects either.”

“Where am I?”

In retrospect, that was an unnecessary question. I could tell this was the room allotted to me in Grenschtat.

“So I survived...”

I heaved a sigh of relief. If I’d really died here, I had no doubt the Demon Lord would have given me a scolding in the afterlife. Melaine gave me a stern frown and said, “Is being reckless with your life a trait all werewolves share, or is that just how your personality is, Veight?”

She reached over and pinched my cheeks. *Oww, that hurts, Melaine.*

“So, what happened after the fight?”

I escaped from Melaine’s clutches and asked the thing I was most curious about. She patted my shoulder and said in a gentle voice, “It’s okay. You don’t have to worry. Master took care of everything.”

After I’d lost consciousness, the surviving imperial guards had treated my wounds. Once they’d done all they could for me, they’d called the other dragonkin back and cleaned up both the Demon Lord and the Hero’s body. Around the same time, Master regained consciousness. Supposedly she’d sensed the deaths of the Hero and the Demon Lord, and the death of such huge bundles of mana had been what had jolted her awake. Even though she could barely move, she’d forced herself to teleport back to Grenschtat.

From there, she’d taken charge. The first thing she’d done was spend an entire night trying to revive the Demon Lord. Unfortunately, not even her powers were enough to bring back someone who’d completely crossed the threshold into death. Exhausted, she’d tearfully announced the passing of the Demon Lord. His body had then been entombed in the mausoleum underneath the castle.

While demons did bury their dead, traditionally they didn't hold elaborate funeral services. Most races lived in the harsh wilderness, and if they didn't dispose of their dead quickly the remains were likely to be eaten. However, it appeared the Demon Lord at least was going to get a proper funeral.

As for the Hero, Master carried his remains back to the Meraldian army awaiting his return. She'd wanted to give the humans a chance to mourn their own dead, but when the army camped outside the mists had seen her carrying the Hero's corpse, they'd fled in terror. When they'd seen the bite marks marring the Hero's neck they'd assumed that the Hero had failed to slay the Demon Lord, and had been slaughtered by a werewolf on his way to the castle. Mistakenly believing that the Demon Lord was still alive, the army had abandoned Arshes' corpse, fearing they would be next. Master had felt bad about just leaving the Hero's body there, so she'd brought it back to the castle to be buried. However, she hoped she'd eventually be able to return it to his hometown.

Afterwards, scouts confirmed that the Meraldian army had retreated back to Bahen. Most of the militia had deserted, while the standing army was too terrified to leave the safety of Bahen's walls. Apparently, there were some highly exaggerated rumors circulating around the Meraldian army regarding my deeds. From the sound of it, my wanted poster was about to get a lot of new entries to it.

In the end, neither army gained anything from this battle. Both sides lost their greatest warriors without anyone gaining a tactical advantage.

At present, the Meraldian army wasn't making any big moves. But right now, the biggest problem was if the Demon Army could survive. With the Demon Lord gone, the only people capable of leading the army were the regiment commanders. However, Tiverit had also died, meaning the only person capable of taking charge was my master, Gomoviroa. During the time I'd been unconscious, Master had reassured the men, maintained morale, and kept the army together. Had it not been for her valiant efforts, the army may well have collapsed in the aftermath of the Demon Lord's death.

In terms of both ability and experience, Master was the most suited to

succeed the position of Demon Lord. She seemed reluctant to take the position though, so I figured I needed to persuade her. After all, Master was the one who convinced the Demon Lord to start this army in the first place. Before that, he'd just led a small band of dragonkin warriors. It was thanks to her efforts that Tiverit had joined, and the demon army had grown to the size it was now. Even I'd only joined the demon army because of Master. It might be cruel of me to say this, but she had a duty to see what she started through. Of course, I had every intention of supporting her as her vice-commander.

While I was worried about the future of the demon army, right now my biggest priority was visiting the Demon Lord's tomb. I wanted to properly say my farewells to him. I slid out of bed and got to my feet. Though I was still a little sore, it looked like I'd healed enough to move around.

"I'm going to visit the Demon Lord's tomb."

"I'll come with you."

"I want to go alone, if that's okay."

Melaine gave me a troubled look, but after a few seconds, she smiled sadly.

"Alright... Just don't push yourself too hard, okay?"

I leaned against Melaine's shoulder, and she patted my head like she used to when I was a kid. *How many years has it been since she last did that?* It appeared Melaine had been worried sick about me the whole time I was unconscious.

As I stepped out into the hall, I found the first regiment's vice-commanders all lined up outside my door. Even Baltze and Kurtz were there, along with the Demon Lord's personal guard. Everyone raised their arms in a silent salute. I understood what they were feeling, even if neither of us could express it in words. I returned their salute and headed off to the mausoleum.

Grenschtat's mausoleum was an edifice of stone enshrined in the castle's rear courtyard. Presumably, it had been built for the castle's original inhabitants, but for some unknown reason, they'd never used it. Perhaps some human foes had

eliminated them before they'd gotten the chance to. Regardless of its original purpose, now the mausoleum was the Demon Lord's final resting place. I burned a stick of incense in front of the imposing stone building and offered a silent prayer. This world didn't have the same incense sticks that existed in Japan, so I'd borrowed the closest equivalent I could find from Melaine. I clapped my hands together and whispered, "It's not fair, Demon Lord. You can't just leave me like this."

He was the first other reincarnated person I'd met after coming to this world. Not only that, but he'd also been from Japan. I'd felt a strong connection with him, even if I hadn't known too much about his past life. Even if he didn't talk about his past, we'd still had no end of things to talk about.

"Demon Lord, do you ever crave rice? The bread of this world isn't bad, but I wish I could eat rice again."

"I do indeed. A square acre of rice can feed far more people than a square acre of wheat. I hope there's an opportunity to introduce rice cultivation to the demon army at some point."

"Err, I just wanted rice because it tastes good..."

"Since you are a werewolf, your body can digest vegetables and grains. However, I am dragonkin. Unfortunately, our bodies cannot handle plants well."

"It must be tough to live like that..."

We'd had tons of pointless conversations like that. In the end, I'd never learned what kind of person the Demon Lord had been in his past life, but judging by his personality he'd likely been a workaholic. After all, he'd literally worked himself to death in this one. Thinking back on it now, he really had been an awkward guy. He hadn't even told me what his old name had been in Japan. My nostalgia trip was suddenly interrupted by a voice from behind me.

"So this is where you were, Veight."

It was Master's voice. I turned around and saw her smiling at me like she always did. However, her face was pale, and she was so exhausted that she

needed to lean on her staff just to stand.

“Are you alright, Master?”

“No need to worry about little old me. I hear you avenged Tiverit and the Demon Lord for me. Thank you, Veight.”

“I just struck the Hero down while he was still wounded, it’s nothing to be proud of.”

The Hero Arshes, huh? He’d mentioned someone called Meltia—at least I assumed she was a person. Likely he’d been fighting to get revenge for her. Had she been a family member? Perhaps his lover? Or maybe his master or his disciple. Maybe he too had been reincarnated into this world. There was no way of knowing now.

Master took an envelope out of her pocket and handed it to me.

“We found this in the Demon Lord’s will. It’s addressed to you.”

“He wrote me a letter?”

“He wrote me one as well. Once you’ve read it, come to my room.”

Master then turned to the mausoleum and quietly bowed her head.

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—Demon Lord Freidenrichter’s Will—

Veight. If you are reading this letter, it means I have been defeated by the Hero. And that you have defeated the Hero in my stead. Even knowing of your exemplary diplomatic skills, I doubt you would be able to negotiate peace with him. However, it should be impossible for you to have defeated a foe that felled even me. I am fully aware how queer it is to be penning you a letter when in all likelihood you have died with me. Yet at the same time, I have a feeling you are capable of achieving what even I cannot. Hence why I am leaving this letter for you.

First, let us get a few practical things out of the way. I have recorded all the knowledge I possess from my previous life in Japanese. There are four tomes bound in red felt in the right-hand drawer of my personal desk, everything I

know is written in them. I will leave it to your discretion which passages you believe should be translated and diffused throughout my technical officers, and which are too dangerous to reveal.

As to the matter of my successor, if there are no objections, I wish for Gomoviroa to become the next Demon Lord. She has both the necessary experience and ability to lead. In truth, I had considered making you my official successor, but I know you do not desire the position. Though I can understand why you would refuse becoming Demon Lord.

You understand better than most the weight of responsibility that comes with being a ruler. A single careless remark can sow the seeds of fear and mistrust among both your followers and your rivals. One who sits on the throne must choose their words wisely. Furthermore, there will always be those who wish to manipulate a ruler for their own benefit. Hence why the new Demon Lord must be one who will not be easily swayed.

I know not whether I was as prudent and wise a ruler as I aspired to be. But I do know there are times when a ruler is forced to make a cruel choice; when you perhaps have to slaughter an entire army, or execute those who surrendered. Such atrocities were commonplace back in the Sengoku Era. Some commanders may have ordered them out of malice, but I believe many were forced to make such unpalatable choices.

However, I know you do not have it in you to be so cold-hearted. It is for that reason as well that I will not name you my successor. The kindness you show toward your enemies is one of your weaknesses, but it is also your strength. Your desire for peace is a rarity not only among demons, but even among the humans of this world. However, I believe it is those values of yours that are the key to revolutionizing society. I wish for you to remain as an unburdened vice-commander, so you are free to do as you please.

Now then, there is something I must apologize to you for, Veight. I previously said that it was better not to talk about our pasts. And that I would not pry too deeply into your own past life. However, in truth, I was able to guess what kind of person you were without having to ask. I am certain you came from a Japan decades, or perhaps even a century further into the future than my own. Judging by your personality, you had grown up in a Japan filled with

technological marvels, enjoying an era of prosperity.

Many people, myself included, have learned much from your progressive way of thinking. For that, you have my deepest thanks. Though I suspect you yourself are not aware of the influence you've had.

Furthermore, I believe the Japan you lived in was a much more peaceful one than mine. Only a time of peace could have cultivated a soul as merciful as yours. If that is true, then the future I spent my life fighting for has finally blessed Japan. My apologies for being so suspicious of you at first. I have an unhealthy habit of assuming the worst of everything.

However, it is thanks to that habit that I was able to live such a fulfilling life in this world. Well, I suppose I am still alive right now, so perhaps I shouldn't be so fatalistic. I have no intention of losing to the Hero. For I am Friedensrichter, Lord of Demons and Advocate of Peace.

Right now, I have no regrets. Both in this world and the last, I was able to fight my way through any obstacle that came my way. The demon army's territory is gradually expanding. I have dozens of talented individuals who can carry on the future of the demon army. And I need not worry about who my successor will be. At this point, whether I survive this battle or not is a trivial matter. I get so few opportunities to cut loose, so I may as well enjoy this fight.

Though I suppose since I went through all the effort of penning this letter, perhaps I should give it to you even if I survive the battle with the Hero. I would very much like to see what reaction you'll have to these revelations.

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After reading the letter, I looked back up at the Demon Lord's tomb. *For all your confidence, you still lost in the end. It's not fair you get to go out happy while the rest of us have to live with your death.*

Maybe he got reincarnated already. In fact, maybe he was reincarnated somewhere in this world. If that was true, I'd do whatever it took to find him. But of course, there was no way of knowing what had become of the Demon Lord's soul.

I pocketed the letter and wiped the tears from my eyes. Then I sucked in a

deep breath, and bowed before the Demon Lord's tomb. *If you spent your whole life as the Demon Lord, then I'll spend mine as your loyal vice-commander.* With this, I lost any chance of ever changing jobs or getting promoted. But I was fine with that. *Leave the rest to me, Demon Lord. I may be just a vice-commander, but I'll do everything I can to make your dream come true.*

I returned to the castle and headed straight for Master's room.

"Master, please become the next Demon Lord."

"Don't ask the impossible." Gomoviroa flailed around on her bed, like a child throwing a tantrum. "I lack the qualifications to be a ruler. I am a researcher first and foremost, and a human to boot. There is absolutely, completely, utterly, no way that I can take the job."

"Please stop whining, Master. You're supposed to be an adult. If we don't do something soon, the demon army will collapse. We've already gotten other humans wrapped up in our troubles, so we can't just abandon them now."

Master hugged her pillow and puffed out her cheeks.

"In that case, why don't you become the next Demon Lord instead?"

"Me!?"

"Not only are you the Champion who defeated the Hero, you're the esteemed governor of Ryunheit. No one would object to you taking the post."

"Yeah, well, you're the one who first started the demon army, and its oldest surviving member. Plus, you're the world's strongest mage."

Despite my arguments, Master refused to budge.

"I was unconscious when the Demon Lord needed me most. If I take the throne now, it will look like an attempt to usurp him."

"That's not true. If anything, I was the one unconscious when the whole army needed me most," I retorted.

Master shook her head and said, "I'm-not-doing-it!"

“Stop acting like a child!”

“I despise being a public figure. If I become Demon Lord, I will have no choice but to meet with other people, humans included. I may be able to handle audiences with other demons, but I cannot stand humans. It is simply impossible for me to be Demon Lord!”

I forgot Master was shy. I had known Gomoviroa for quite a long time, so I could tell she was only acting spoiled because I was here. She had lost all of the comrades she’d started this venture with, and now everyone else in the demon army was begging her to become the next Demon Lord. While Master was a talented teacher, an exemplary researcher, and the strongest mage alive—she was by no means a politician. Negotiations and military strategy weren’t her forte. Though she was complaining, I could tell she was still trying to work up the resolve to accept the position. At the very least, that’s how it seemed to me. So I decided to indulge her tantrum for a little bit.

“In that case, I have an idea Master.”

“You do?”

I pulled a life-sized doll meant for magic training out of Master’s closet.

“Let’s make this the Demon Lord.”

“What?”

I explained my plan to Gomoviroa, and she nodded thoughtfully, “I see. So whenever I have to meet with humans, we’ll control this puppet instead and make it seem like it’s the Demon Lord.”

“Exactly. We can make it look as imposing we want with props and make-up, and we won’t have to worry about you getting assassinated this way. All you’ll have to do, Master, is control the puppet to make it look imposing and read off a script.”

I’d seen these kinds of set-ups dozens of times in manga. Where the Demon Lord sitting on the throne was actually just a fake, and the real Demon Lord was the beautiful attendant standing next to him. It was clichéd, but it worked. After considering it for a few moments, Master said, “I see. Humans terrify me, but if I won’t have to associate with them directly, then...”

“It’s perfect, right?”

Master hesitated, but after another moment of consideration, she nodded. While she’d been whining to me, it appeared she’d made up her mind.

“I suppose I cannot allow the demon army the Demon Lord staked his life to build to wither away due to my own selfishness. I will become the next Demon Lord.”

“Now that’s the Master I know and love.”

Master walked over to me and wrapped her tiny fingers around my hand.

“However, I will not be able to do it alone. I will need your help, and the help of all my other disciples. Will you lend me your strength?”

“Of course, Master. Together, we’ll fulfill the Demon Lord’s dying wish.”

“Yes, we shall.”

She looked up at me and grinned.

Shortly afterward, we announced that Gomoviroa was the new Demon Lord. Everyone in the demon army accepted the news surprisingly easily. It appeared the previous Demon Lord had done a good job in mentally preparing everyone for his successor. Because he’d always talked about someone succeeding him, the other demons had started to instinctively accept that someone else would fill the position if he ever died. And Gomoviroa was one of the founding members of the demon army. Furthermore, while she could only unleash her full power for a short while, she was invincible until her mana dried up.

The third regiment’s vice-commanders were all disciples of Gomoviroa, so they were more than happy to see their respected master become Demon Lord. The survivors of the second regiment were only alive thanks to her efforts, so they too had no objections to her ascending to the position. After all, most of them called her a saint. Even the members of the first regiment had no objection to Gomoviroa being the next Demon Lord. That had been the previous Demon Lord’s wish, and none of them had any intention of going against that. Furthermore, most of the first regiment’s troops were veterans who had known Gomoviroa for a long time.

Thanks to all of that, Master easily won the approval of the demon army.

From now on, Gomoviroa would guide the demon races. Her official appointment ceremony was scheduled to happen during the old Demon Lord's funeral. However, now that Master was the Demon Lord, the seat of third regiment commander had become empty.

"Who's going to be the new commander?"

"You would be the best choice."

"But I'm the first regiment's vice-commander. Meaning I'm already your personal aide."

If I had to manage the third regiment as well, I wouldn't be able to handle all of my responsibilities. The two of us thought about it for a few seconds, then looked up at the same time.

"What if we made Melaine the new commander?"

"Perfect."

All of Master's other disciples would be willing to obey Melaine. And so Melaine was promoted to commander, while I became Master's adjutant. All things considered, this was the best position for me to be in from a negotiator's standpoint. Melaine wasn't happy about the promotion, but since this was an imperial command from the Demon Lord herself, she couldn't refuse.

"Hey, Veight, how come *you*, the guy who killed the freaking Hero, is still just a vice-commander!? You should be the commander!"

"It'd feel weird being your commander. You're the one who has seniority when it comes to being disciples."

Seeing she wouldn't get any help from me, Melaine turned to Firnir.

"You know, that's not cute at all, Veight! Alright, fine. You be the commander then Firnir!"

"There's no way I could be a commander! I don't have nearly enough experience with magic, or with commanding!"

Just give it up, Queen of Vampires. This is your burden now. While we were still feeling the pangs of loss, we all resolved to carry on the Demon Lord's will. One day, we would create a nation where humans and demons could live together in peace.

Some time before the coronation ceremony, Master came to me to ask for my help with something. *I wonder what she wants?*

* * * *

—Gomoviroa's Memoir, Page 168—

What exactly is a Demon Lord? Demon Lords of the past were called thus because they possessed strength far beyond any regular Demon. Among them, some pursued only strength, while others wished to loot and plunder. Yet others desired the destruction of humankind, while one wished to make peace with them. Seeing how varied their lives were, it is clear that those who attain power do not all share the same goal.

Human Heroes are just as unfathomable. However, it is a known fact that whenever Demon Lords of the past attempted to intrude on human lands, a Hero inevitably appeared. It is still unknown whether every generation of humans contains a single individual with the potential to be a Hero lying dormant within them, or if a Hero is born every time a Demon Lord is.

This generation's Hero was as mysterious as all the rest. For someone who'd earned the respect of all Meraldia, his equipment and clothing had been strikingly plain. Not only was he improperly equipped, but he'd also rushed straight for the Demon Lord. I heard his goal had not been to protect other humans, but to get revenge.

I wonder if Heroes and Demon Lords are fated to clash with each other. In a way, they appear to me like steam and ice. Across history, regardless of whether the Demon Lord or the Hero won their particular generation's fight, the victor almost always followed after the vanquished a short time later. Similar to how when steam and ice mix, all that remains is water. The entire process of birthing Demon Lords and Heroes seems to be the world's way of maintaining balance.

Another way of looking at it might be the relationship between a hole and a mound of dirt. If one were to dig a hole, they would invariably create a mound of dirt next to them. In this analogy, the Demon Lord would be the mound, and the Hero the hole. By throwing the dirt back into the hole, one can level the ground once more, returning it to a state of equality.

Regardless of the reasoning, however, the fact remains that the Hero dealt us a serious blow. He killed both Friedensrichter and old Tiverit. Leaving me the only one capable of succeeding the Demon Lord's position. No, that's not strictly true. There is one other, but I would never want him becoming Demon Lord.

Having seen his growth from a young age, there is one thing I understand about him. For a leader of men, he is far too soft. To put it in a more positive light, he values peace too highly. The duties of Demon Lord would be too painful for one such as him. As his master, I could never push such a burden on him. However, I am still uncertain about my own qualifications. While my contributions to the army are few, I certainly am an old veteran. There is no problem regarding my seniority. And fortunately, it appears the members of the demon army accept my appointment as well. However, I fear I lack the strength to be a true Demon Lord.

Biologically, I am just a mere girl. Not even a fully human one at that. I am only alive thanks to the power of magic. This frail body of mine will not be able to withstand the rigors of being the Demon Lord. Meaning I will soon have no choice but to cross necromancy's final threshold.

Friedensrichter forbade me from attempting to do so because of the dangers such an experiment posed. Though he was no mage, he understood humans well. And he knew most humans would not be able to withstand the suffering that accompanies crossing the final threshold.

I have always wondered, why was it that a demon had such a deep understanding of humans? Because he was the Demon Lord? Demon Lords were powerful, but they were not omniscient. That much is clear just from studying the deeds of past Demon Lords. No, there must have been some other reason he was so keen. Naturally, I posed the question to him multiple times, but he always deflected my queries, saying he would tell me one day. My dear

friend, I'm afraid that's one promise you broke.

My disciple, Veight, is much like Friedensrichter in that regard. Like Friedensrichter, he has a deep understanding of humans, despite being a demon. On top of that, he holds a similar set of values. He always considers the long-term, and he is always working toward lasting peace. It appears that while many people find Veight strange, none have noticed his similarity with the Demon Lord. However, I cannot help but be curious. As a researcher constantly in pursuit of truth, I wish to know the secret behind these two. I have come up with several theories that attempt to explain their unnatural understanding of the human heart.

First, that they both possessed abilities that allowed them to read the minds of humans. Veight's unique werewolf traits allow him to sense the emotions of others based on the smell of their sweat. It's possible that feeling the emotions of humans for as long as he has allowed him to understand them better than most. However, Friedensrichter possessed no such ability. Furthermore, Veight is the only werewolf who has such a unique perspective. No other werewolf appears to have changed after experiencing the emotions of humans. My second theory is that Veight was a human in his previous life. The concept of reincarnation is well-known to those who study necromancy. While no case of reincarnation has been observed, the tenets of necromancy prove that it is theoretically possible. However, the likelihood that someone reincarnated with their previous memories intact is exceedingly slim on both a theoretical and practical level. That being said, reincarnation itself is not yet fully understood, so some unknown factors may have increased that likelihood. The only problem regarding this theory is that Veight's mindset is quite different from a normal human's as well.

Lastly, it is possible that he was reincarnated from a world different to our own. Though honestly, I cannot believe I even wrote such a thing down. It is unbecoming for someone with the title of Great Sage to be making such wild, speculative guesses.

Perhaps the death of my good friend still has me rattled. I really must keep it together. Before I let myself be swept away by sentimentality, I need to remake myself into someone stronger. This is not the time to be wavering.

Friedensrichter, I know you would not want this, but I will cross necromancy's final threshold. As I am now, a stray arrow could easily end my life. Unless I grow stronger, I fear the demon army will be left without a Demon Lord once more. And that must not be allowed to happen.

My dear friend, perhaps you will laugh at my folly. No, please, laugh at my folly. For if you're laughing, that would mean you've returned to us. Why must I be the only one left behind?

No, I need to hold it together. I wonder if my age is making me this sentimental? Either way, I cannot afford to hesitate. Dangerous though it may be, I must cross the final threshold. Naturally, the prospect makes me uneasy. More specifically, the thought that I may come out a different person terrifies me. For that reason, I will enlist the aid of the one I trust most. Simply imagining his face gives me the confidence that things will all turn out well. Though I suppose I am a failure of a master to be relying on my disciple like this.

* * * *

It was decided that Master's coronation ceremony would be held in Grenschtat in a few days. Demons didn't really hold ceremonies like this normally, but everyone felt that they needed to do something to officially denote Master's new position. Besides, the ceremony would also serve as the old Demon Lord's funeral. Once it was over, Master had declared she would be moving the demon army's base of operations to Ryunheit. This was likely the last official event that would be held in Grenschtat. Master came to me for help the night before her coronation ceremony.

"The Demon Lord is not simply the strongest demon there is. Whoever serves as Demon Lord must possess superhuman powers placing them on a level close to God."

"I get what you're trying to say, Master, but there's no way you'll be able to make yourself as strong as the old Demon Lord."

Master was undeniably the strongest mage alive, but she was still on the same level as us demons and humans. She didn't have the godlike strength of the old Demon Lord. Master nodded and replied, "You are correct. However now that I have inherited the title of Demon Lord, I can no longer afford to

remain a weakling who loses consciousness after casting a few spells in succession.”

“You know, most people can’t cast half as many spells at once...”

In order to cast spells from different branches of magic, you had to gather different varieties of mana. Most people needed to spend time doing that, so their spells had cooldowns of sorts. Master, however, was skilled enough to hold multiple strains of mana at once.

“Fortunately, there is one way to increase my insufficient mana.”

Master’s declaration surprised me.

“Methods like that exist?”

“Indeed. If what I am about to attempt succeeds, I may be able to obtain power equal to that of Friedensrichter...”

“May be able to?”

“...There are risks.”

Well, that doesn’t sound good.

“In truth, I had wanted to carry out this experiment years ago, but that worrywart Friedensrichter forbade me.”

And now it sounds worse. Honestly, I didn’t think Master needed to become any stronger than she was.

“Master, you weren’t chosen to be the new Demon Lord just because of your strength.”

The first regiment supported her because of how much the old Demon Lord had trusted her. The second regiment supported her because of her kindness, and the fact that she’d saved most of their lives. And the third regiment supported her because they knew her well and valued her abilities. Though everyone had their own reasons, it wasn’t just because of her strength that the demons had accepted Master as their new Demon Lord. In fact, none of them seemed to care too much about her martial prowess. In a way, it was somewhat unprecedented. However, Master just shook her head.

“I understand that very well. But at the same time, I also understand that I cannot allow myself to be slain so easily.” Master rubbed her neck and looked off into the distance. “Every time a kingdom’s ruler dies, the people falter. If the demon army were to lose its second Demon Lord not long after their first, accomplishing Freidenrichter’s dream would become that much more difficult, no?”

“Well... Yeah, I guess.”

If Master died too, then everyone would be too depressed to go on. She gave me an impish grin and said, “Worry not. I have no intention of doing anything too rash. Theoretically, there should be no danger.”

“You’re not really doing a good job of reassuring me here.”

Master’s smile turned rueful.

“You really are a troublesome disciple. Very well, I shall explain what I am about to attempt, so listen carefully.”

Thanks to my excessive worrying, Master had decided to give me a lecture.

“Necromancy is not just a branch of magic. It is a philosophical school of thought. Necromancers learn about death in order to face it.” Master held a hand over a nearby candle and muttered, “For us necromancers, there is something known as the final threshold. Do you know of what I speak?”

There was only one thing those who studied death would call the final threshold.

“Your own death?”

“Perceptive.” Master’s playful grin returned. “Even necromancers must eventually experience death. It is the moment of their passing when their true worth as magician of the dead is tested. How a necromancer faces their death determines everything.”

While Master had nearly died once before, she hadn’t fully crossed the threshold. Were it not for her magic, she would have been stuck in an eternal coma, but still alive. However, simply coming close to death was not the same as crossing the final threshold. Reading my thoughts, Master nodded.

“When I pass into the realm of the dead, my existence will be tested. I will have to answer what life and death truly are.”

“That sounds like a tough question...”

“It is. But I have lived for centuries now, and I have found my own answer to that eternal question.” Master leapt off her chair and walked over to me. “Once I open that door, however, there will be no turning back. There is a possibility the experience will warp my personality.”

What’s that supposed to mean? Master looked up and said in a serious tone, “It is for that reason I wish for my disciple’s assistance, to keep me stable.”

“In that case, wouldn’t Melaine be a better choice?”

Master shook her head.

“Only you can help me with this. No one else has both the magical experience and martial abilities you possess.”

“Oh no, this is another one of *those* experiments, isn’t it...”

Among Gomoviroa’s disciples, I was the one most used to rough treatment. A werewolf’s body was sturdier than most demons, but thanks to that, I was always the one Master chose to help with her most dangerous experiments. Even though the only magic I had experience with was strengthening magic. *Well, whatever. If Master needs me, then I’ll be there to help her.*

“Alright. But please for the love of God, no more devil summoning.”

“Will you never let that go? I admit I made a mistake.”

Once, Master had summoned a devil from a different dimension, and it had spent the entire day trying to kill me. I never wanted to experience a nightmare like that again. I’d thought it would vanish after a night passed, but that damned devil continued attacking us for a full two days after that. Master came out fine since I was protecting her, but I wish she’d consider how much that took out of me. If I ever saw that devil again, I’d rip it to shreds. Master coughed awkwardly and changed the topic.

“Your task this time will be simple. Follow me to the underground laboratory.”

“We need to do this underground?”

“That will give me time to tell you a few old stories of mine.”

“Your stories always end up so long...”

“It’s not everyday you have the opportunity to receive a personal lecture from the Great Sage Gomoviroa.”

Master’s voice echoed down the spiral staircase. “Long ago, a tiny human kingdom used to be here. It was ruled by a family of mages. They used their magical prowess to defend their borders from demons and invading human armies.”

Master then went on to describe how the country eventually met its downfall.

“They put too much faith in their magical abilities, and let the power they wielded get to their head. As a result, they forgot one of the most important things. There is nothing more dangerous in this world than a grudge.”

Due to their arrogance, the rulers of the kingdom earned the resentment of their people, and were eventually betrayed from within. Rebellions sprang up, and soon enough the royal family was captured and executed.

“I was the only survivor of that purge. My mother put me into a near-death state, then cast a healing spell that would revive me over a long period of time.”

“I see... Wait!”

“What’s the matter?”

“Doesn’t that mean this is your birthplace, Master? And that would make you a princess, wouldn’t it!?”

“I was born into a branch family, so technically I was never in line for the throne. Though I suppose it wouldn’t be incorrect to call me royalty.”

That was the first I’d ever heard of this. It came as quite a shock. Master shrugged her shoulders as if it were of no importance.

“Did you never find it strange how easily the demon army was able to find this castle and convert it into their base?”

“I thought it was just a coincidence...”

“In truth, I serve as the demon army’s landlady.”

I didn’t realize she was renting the castle out.

“At any rate, once the nation fell, its villages and fields were reclaimed by nature. The thick forest that rose up in its place made this castle the perfect hiding place.”

She finished her story as we reached the end of the spiral staircase. At the bottom was an old, ornate door.

“The rebels speared me through the throat with a pike and put me on display with the rest of my family. By the time I was healed enough to regain consciousness, years had passed. You could imagine my terror at seeing what had become of my world.”

“That sounds horrible...”

I couldn’t imagine how much it must have hurt to be lanced through the throat.

“What surprised me most was that all traces of the kingdom had vanished, and only ruins remained. I know not what followed my family’s demise, but it appeared the rebels were unable to unite the country after their victory.”

They’d probably had another civil war after that. In the end, you reap what you sow.

“My relatives had rotted away until only their bones remained. And since my wounds had healed around the pike stuck in my throat, I had to relive the pain when I pulled it out. It was the most excruciating pain imaginable, and it lasted for days.”

I finally understood why Master was more scared of humans than she was of demons, and why she was so shy. Anyone would be after experiencing something like that as a child. After recovering from her wounds, Master had lived alone in the abandoned castle for years. Though it had fallen into disrepair, many rooms on the castle were still usable, and the outside world was too dangerous a place for a young child like her.

“Day after day, I thought to myself, why did this have to happen? I wanted so dearly to revive my departed mother and father that I began researching necromancy.”

Of course she realized soon enough that bringing back the dead was impossible. Death was permanent, irreversible. Not even the deepest secrets of necromancy could overturn its merciless verdict. It was theoretically possible to call back the spirits of the dead, but no matter how skilled one was, they could only return the spirit to the land of the living for a scant few seconds. On top of that, the spirit would be indistinct and unable to speak. Having lost all motivation to live, Master spent her years researching necromancy out of pure habit. The next time she met another soul was more than 100 years later.

“At that point in time, I had yet to discover my answer regarding the final threshold. But after taking in so many wide-eyed, innocent, disciples I finally understood.”

“I see.”

Master chuckled and said, “To be specific, it was you who taught me the answer.”

“Me? What?”

How did I teach her anything? Master removed her hat and said, “Remember back when you were a child, there was a time Melaine accidentally dropped my teacup and broke it?”

There was? I felt like there might have been. But I didn’t remember it very well.

“I remember wondering why it was that even though Melaine had dropped it with no force at all, by the time it reached the ground it was falling fast enough to shatter. Where was that force coming from?”

Now that you mention it, I do remember a conversation like this.

“You said, ‘The higher something is, the more power it has.’”

I don’t remember saying that though. Though if I had said that, I’d probably just been talking about how objects at height possessed lots of potential

energy. It was one of those things I'd learned in middle school science class. A teacup resting on a high ledge had a lot of potential energy. If you dropped it, it would start converting that potential energy into kinetic energy, causing it to break when it hit the ground. That was all there was to it.

However, it appeared Master had been sharp enough to understand my half-assed explanation. Energy could never be born from nothing, meaning that energy had been in the teacup all along, it had just been invisible. I do remember from there, Master had taken only half a day to discover the existence of thermal and chemical energy. There was a reason everyone called her a Great Sage.

Come to think of it, that was around the time Master had started researching destruction magic and teleportation magic as well, even though they weren't her specialty. Her disciples had all thought she was an odd one for branching out into unrelated fields of magic, but now I realized she had picked those to better understand the laws of physics.

"It was then that it occurred to me that mana might be just another form of energy. And if mana was simply energy, then might that not mean life is as well?"

"You think life is energy?"

"Correct. From the moment we are born, we are granted a measure of life energy that slowly dwindles away. As time passes, the rate our life force drains grows, until finally it is exhausted and we shatter onto the ground like my teacup."

I see now. Master was saying that the act of living was like converting our potential energy into kinetic energy.

"Upon shattering, that life becomes no more. But the energy that life possessed does not vanish. It continues to exist somewhere else, in a different form. In which case, what is there to fear in death?"

Master leaned her staff against the wall and opened the door. The room beyond was tiny and illuminated by a series of flickering blue lights. It was eerily quiet, and I could sense a disturbing flow of mana within. The room was clearly ancient, evidenced by the rotting books lining the crumbling bookshelves. *You*

really should clean this place up, Master.

Though the floor was coated in dust, I could still make out the large magic circle engraved on the flagstones. I could tell it was ancient because of how many outdated runes and patterns it used. It appeared the source of the room's lighting was this magic circle, as it was glowing with a faint blue light. Master strode to the center of the circle.

"This magic circle is what provides me with the supplementary mana I need to stay alive. From here on out, I will deactivate the circle and cross the final threshold. I want you to be standing here with me when I do."

"You want me to join you?"

"Indeed. You will be safer that way."

It's safer inside *the circle?* Gingerly, I stepped into the circle. The mana swirling around the center of the circle was dense. If I tried to cast a spell in this room, it was likely to spiral out of control.

"Now then, let us begin. No matter what happens, do not leave the circle. Am I understood?"

"A-Alright, Master."

Master nodded, then began chanting an incantation I had never heard before. As the incantation neared completion, the magic circle grew brighter.

"Nghh..."

Master grabbed her throat and groaned in pain. At the same time, the densely packed mana began swirling around us, forming a massive spiral. Master braced her legs against the maelstrom and shouted, "Death is not the end. It is simply a phase in the endless circle of energy. Death, it is you that should kneel to me!"

The whirlpool of mana started to glow. It spread out in a violent torrent, and the excess energy was converted to light.

"Master!"

My shout was lost to the storm, and the tornado of light grew so bright I couldn't see anything. *I have a bad feeling about this.*

“Fear not... I am...”

Though Master should have been standing right next to me, her voice was faint, as if it was crossing a long distance. *Should I stop the ritual?* If I acted now, I could still bring Master back. However, I decided to place my trust in her, and waited.

Finally, the light began to fade, and the magic circle diminished to its original faint glow. Because werewolves had superior night vision, they were doubly sensitive to light, meaning I was still blinded for a bit. With my senses blocked off, I couldn’t tell what was happening to Master. All I knew was the temperature of the room was dropping with each passing second. As my vision returned, I realized my breath was coming out in white puffs, and frost rimmed the walls and floor. Eventually, even the faint glow of the magic circle faded, and all that remained was darkness.

After a while, the magic circle began to glow again, and I spotted Master standing next to me. She looked the same as she had moments ago. If I had to say, her skin was slightly paler than before. However, I knew the moment I laid eyes on her that she’d been transformed. She raised her hand, and then the room’s temperature plummeted even further. Motes of light gathered near her palm, forming a sphere. The water vapor in the air froze, turning into a constellation of glittering diamonds. From what I could tell, Master was absorbing the heat from the nearby air.

“As I suspected...” Master muttered, and turned to me. “Life truly is just another one of the multitudes of forces that exist in this world. Life is power, and power is life. In which case, it stands to reason that by gathering power, one can bring forth life.”

Master swung her hand down, and the room stopped growing colder.

“I will no longer trouble anyone by collapsing after exhausting my mana supply, nor is there anyone who can match my current power. So this is what my answer to the final threshold bestowed upon me.”

Master had become a vortex, capable of attracting not just mana, but any kind of energy. Whether that energy came in the form of mana, life force, heat,

or some other physical manifestation, Master was now capable of absorbing it. Not only that, she had surpassed both life and death. For the center of a vortex was an empty void. Lips trembling, I said, “M-Master... You’ve really transformed into something incredible...”

“As I thought, you can tell, can you not?” She smiled. “I now perceive all life as nothing more than bundles of energy. Do you understand what that means?”

“I do.”

Lives were nothing more than a power source to her now. And that wasn’t all. She had the ability to absorb heat from a fireball, or even the kinetic energy of an arrow or blade. In other words, she could convert enemy attacks into her own ammunition. She was like one of those overpowered isekai heroines.

From the beginning, Master had been skilled at absorbing the mana from her surroundings or objects. That was why she’d easily been able to convert the fake Hero’s enchanted equipment into energy. But now she was on a level far beyond that.

“Umm, Master?”

“Yes?”

“I don’t think I’m exaggerating when I say you’ve become someone so powerful no Hero can defeat you.”

Master smiled ruefully and shook her head.

“This power of mine is not as great as it appears. Ultimately, it’s primary purpose is recovery. If I were to attempt absorbing a force greater than my ability to withstand, my body would be torn apart. A Hero with the power of Arshes would easily destroy this vortex.”

So there’s a limit to the attacks she can absorb.

“The greater concern is my personality. Right now, I can drain the lives of others and make their power my own. Just the knowledge that I am capable of such things may warp my humanity.”

“Please don’t say that Master, you’re scaring me.”

I didn’t even want to imagine what would happen if Master turned evil.

However, she gave me a reassuring smile.

“I believe so long as I have my bonds with my disciples, I will never turn into a heartless monster who reaps the lives of others for no reason. After all, Melaine is a vampire, but she never sucks her victims dry, correct?”

“Yeah, you’re right, there.”

She cleared her throat and looked pleadingly up at me.

“So in order for me to retain my sanity, I need you to... Well, you understand?”

“Understand what?”

“You truly are a dense boy, you know that? I want you to spoil me like never before so that I do not succumb to evil.”

“So we just have to keep doing what we have been?”

“I-Indeed. That is what I desire.” Master looked crestfallen for a moment, but then her expression brightened once more. “Naturally, I have a plan in case the worst does come to pass.”

“What kind of plan?”

“You were in this magic circle together with me. You too have inherited a portion of my vortex. That means my powers are ineffective against you. I cannot steal your life force or your mana.”

“Wait, doesn’t that mean...”

Master grinned, “Correct. You alone have the power to harm me freely. A single bite from your jaws will put an end to my existence.”

Why would Master purposely create an Achilles’ heel for herself? Oh wait, I understand now.

“If I ever succumb to the temptations of power, or break under the pressure this knowledge has burdened me with...”

“Master, surely you aren’t serious?”

“I want you to kill me.”

Dammit, I knew it!

“Fear not. Even if my vortex dies with me, you will not be affected at all. While you have inherited a fraction of its power, the vortex does not reside within you as it does me.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about here!”

“If the time comes that I must die, I wish it to be at the hands of my beloved disciple.”

When she put it like that, I couldn’t bring myself to refuse. But was it really alright for her to entrust such an important job to me?

“What if I become greedy for power and try to kill you just to take your position?”

Gomoviroa sighed, “What a foolish question. I know full well you’re not that kind of person.”

I mean I’m glad that she trusts me, but I really don’t know to react to that.

“If you, the least ambitious person I know, ever desires my death, it will mean I have strayed far off my original path. And knowing that, I will gladly accept oblivion.”

No, no, no. This isn’t right. That’s not the kind of thing you’re supposed to say with a smile!

“Indeed, I do believe this is a perfect plan. I feel relieved knowing I have someone to stop me if I ever lose myself. As a ruler, it gives me confidence to act with decisiveness.”

*Well, **I’M** not relieved at all!*

“As my adjutant, I presume you have no objections?”

“I-I mean, I guess not...”

In the end, I was forced into accepting the most unenviable job.

The two of us left the room together and started the ascent up the spiral staircase.

“Are you sure that was a good idea, Master?”

Honestly, I would have been fine with Master staying the way she was. In fact, I think I would have preferred if the demon army became an organization that didn’t require it’s leader to be the strongest among them. Master gave me a troubled smile.

“I understand what you’re thinking. But we are in the middle of a war. Right now, the demons need a powerful Demon Lord.”

Master floated off the ground and seated herself on my shoulder. *Man, this feels nostalgic.* Though her body was colder than usual.

“However, I believe we will be able to transform the demon army into a place where the next Demon Lord is chosen for their leadership skill, and not their martial might.”

“I hope so.”

If that really did happen, then we’d have no trouble negotiating with humans. Master looked down at her fingertips and muttered, “I am no longer human nor demon. I have become a shell, a phenomenon moving on force of will alone. At long last, I embody the title Friedensrichter bequeathed me.”

“Come to think of it, what title did he give you? You never told us.”

Master grinned and said, “Tranquil. I am Gomoviroa the Tranquil, Weremage.”

Considering her powers, she certainly did have the ability to turn things “tranquil.” However, I suspect the old Demon Lord gave her that name because of her shy personality and her tendency to hole herself up in her room and devote everything to her research.

Thus, Master gained an unbelievable new power, giving her the strength to truly call herself Demon Lord. However, she continued to downplay its significance.

“My powers pale in comparison to Friedensrichter’s noble might. This new ability of mine is a blight, only useful for blotting out the souls of others. The

less I have to use it, the better."

Well, she's not wrong about the fact that it's dangerous. However, I didn't think she needed to be that pessimistic about it. Perhaps if she was still alone she might have been twisted by her newfound power, but right now she had me and Melaine by her side. *Still, it's weird to think that the old Demon Lord was a dragonkin warrior, and the new one's a mage of the void.* It felt like the last boss of an old school RPG had suddenly changed.

The next day, it was time for Master's coronation ceremony.

"How can anyone remain calm during these ceremonies?"

Firnir, Melaine, and I all came out to support Master, who was fidgeting in her new dress.

"Don't worry, right now, you're both the strongest and most experienced person here. You can hold your head up high and call yourself the rightful Demon Lord."

"You can do it, Master! And if it looks like you're having trouble, just get Veight to help you out."

"That's right, Vaito can take care of anything. Besides, you look super cute in that dress, Master!"

"You two..."

Before I could scold my fellow disciples for pushing all the work onto me, Master was called up to the dais. Melaine and I hurriedly fell into step with her as she walked forward. We were meant to be her attendants for this ceremony. The captains of all the demon army's units and representatives from the various demon races were gathered in the audience chamber. Most had come with a squad of their most trusted men. At a glance, I would say there were a few hundred demons filling the hall. *This reminds me of the time I had to get on stage during my elementary school assembly.* Master was stiff with nerves, and motes of light started rising up around her. It looked like she was unconsciously sapping the heat from the air, creating a localized cooling phenomenon.

"Calm down, Master."

“It only now occurs to me just how great a responsibility I am inheriting...”

I tried my best to reassure her.

“I’m sure Lord Friedensrichter would forgive you, no matter how badly you mess up.”

“I-I suppose.”

Master sucked in a deep breath, then strode to the center of the dais. Baltze had been given the honor of crowning Master as the new Demon Lord. But as the demon army had no crowns, the Demon Lord’s old helmet took its place. Naturally, it was far too large to fit on Master’s head.

She reverently took the helmet from Baltze and hugged it close. It was perhaps an unorthodox coronation, but all the demons gathered here understood its symbolic significance. Even I couldn’t help but be moved. With this, Master had officially inherited the Demon Lord Friedensrichter’s will.

Once she was coronated, Master—or, I suppose, Lord Gomoviroa now—turned to the gathered demons. Frozen droplets of water vapor hovered around her as she swallowed her nervousness and spoke.

“We may have lost our mighty and beloved Demon Lord, Friedensrichter, but his will lives on in each of us! I once heard from him that Friedensrichter means ‘Bringer of Peace’ in a long-forgotten language.”

Oh yeah, he did say that was what it was in German.

“Despite the vast power he wielded, Friedensrichter was a kind and compassionate lord. Not once did he abuse his might. I am sure you are all aware of the compassion he showed toward even humans.” Gomoviroa swept her gaze over the assembled demons before continuing. “I aspire to be as compassionate and merciful a ruler as he was. I was once human, but it was humans who stripped me of my life. However, I hold no grudge against the humans of the present. There is no reason to destroy humanity. We simply need them to accept our existence, and let us live in peace.”



Everyone’s eyes were glued to Gomoviroa. They were hanging on to her every word.

“This goal is not something a single Demon Lord can achieve on her own. I require the aid of all who are gathered here today. However, I will not force you to join me. Only those who wish to finish what Friedensrichter started should remain in this army. But know that if you fight with me, you fight for the creation of a nation where demons may live in peace!”

As Gomoviroa ended her speech, the demons raised their fists and cheered.

“All Hail Lord Gomoviroa!”

“Glory to the demon army!”

“We’ll follow you to the ends of the earth!”

“We’ll carry on the Demon Lord’s dying wish!”

Gomoviroa waved in response to the overwhelming applause. Once she gave them a good show she turned back to me, blushing. *That must have been really nerve-wracking. Good job, Master. We’ll follow you to the ends of the earth too.*

Veight's First Defensive Battle

I returned to my village for the first time in a while. Fahn spotted me as I walked through the entrance and hurried over, dragging a dead bear behind her. She'd gotten even more skilled at hunting while I'd been gone.

"Ah, Veight!"

The bear dug furrows into the ground as she ran.

"Fahn... it's been a while."

"Yeah, like half a year? You look well. Did you grow taller?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm too old to grow anymore..."

I looked down at the bear Fahn was holding and cast body strengthening magic on myself. If I was being honest, I wanted to show off the results of my training to her. Once my arms had been sufficiently boosted, I lifted the bear's carcass.

"Wow, you've gotten really strong Veight!"

"Nah, this is all thanks to the magic. Anyway, I'll help you carry the bear. Where were you taking it?"

"Just to the town square."

As we walked, we swapped stories about what we'd been up to these past six months.

"How's the demon army? Is it fun? Do you get to kill lots of humans?"

"Uhh, not really..."

I'd initially joined the demon army to help Master out with her work. But before I knew it, I'd become a combat mage and started fighting all kinds of battles.

"The other day we found some humans trying to mine in one of the dragonkin

tribe's mountains, so I chased them away."

"Wouldn't it have been faster to just kill them all?"

"I don't think it'd be right to kill a bunch of unarmed miners..."

I'd scared them witless, so I doubted they'd return anytime soon. Plus I'd gotten some interesting information regarding Meraldia from them, so I had something worthwhile to report to Master as well. Fahn examined my expression, then chuckled.

"Thank God."

For what? Before I could ask, she answered my question.

"Even after you joined the demon army, you're still you, Veight. I'm relieved."

"Well, yeah."

It wasn't like I'd sworn fealty to the Demon Lord or anything. In the end, I was just helping Master because I owed her for everything she'd done, and because helping the demon army would secure a better future for werewolves.

On our way to the square, I spotted a man I didn't recognize. He was wearing the traditional garb of the desert nomads. As we passed he gave me a nod, and I nodded back.

"Who's that guy?"

"He's a werewolf from outside the forest. Apparently he lost his old home, so he drifted here."

Werewolves had a hard time fitting in in human villages, which was probably why he'd been living as a nomad until now.

"This forest is basically the only place left where werewolves can live in peace. It's teeming with monsters, so humans won't set foot in it at least." Fahn sighed, "It's great that humans won't disturb us and all, but that means we have to deal with all the monsters."

"What's wrong?"

It was rare to see Fahn this depressed.

“Veight, do you know anything about a monster that looks like a lizard and has huge teeth?”

“Hmm... I wonder.”

I pulled a book out of my rucksack. It was a monster encyclopedia I’d received from Master.

“If it’s living in the forest it’s probably... this one, right?”

I flipped through the pages until I found the one I wanted.

—Fang Lizard—

A carnivorous lizard that inhabits the forests of Meraldia. Most are as large as ogres. («- Aka around 3 meters.)

They live and hunt in packs ranging from a few to a few hundred. («- I guess they’re social creatures?)

Their fangs are coated with a slow-acting poison, and anyone injured by them will die over the course of a few days. Detoxification magic is reported to have little effect on their poison. («- Maybe it’s not actually poison then?)

The annotations in parenthesis were all my own observations. Fahn looked down at the passage and tilted her head.

“What’s all this?”

Crap, I totally forgot people don’t measure things in meters in this world. However, that wasn’t what Fahn was confused about.

“I can’t read all that.”

Oh yeah... I’d grown so used to living with Master’s disciples, who could all read, that I’d forgotten most werewolves didn’t bother to learn. At most, they learned how to read and write numbers and the few basic phrases they needed in day to day life. The only things Fahn could read was the names of vegetables and animals. Relieved, I pointed to the picture on the next page, then to the tree behind me.

“Do they look like this, are about that big, and move around in groups?”

“Oh yeah, that’s them for sure.” Fahn looked down at the picture and nodded emphatically. “They’ve been causing us no end of trouble recently. Plus they stink, so they make everything worse. Oh, just leave the bear there. I’ll cut it up here.”

I dumped the carcass onto the ground and looked around. It felt as though the village had declined in the half-year I’d be gone. Fahn unsheathed a ridiculously long knife and started cutting up the bear with practiced movements. She’d already drained the blood beforehand it seemed, and she got right to skinning it.

“Those, uh... What did you say those monsters were called?”

“The fang lizards?”

“Yeah, those things. A herd of them moved in next to the village, and they’re hunting all the deer and rabbits in the area.”

“What about the wildeboars?”

“They’ve all been wiped out.”

To think they were strong enough to kill even those crazed wildeboars. No wonder they’d become a problem. As she skinned the bear, Fahn sighed again.

“The only things left to hunt around here are hibernating bears, but even those are nearly gone...”

The bears around here were tough, plus their meat stank and tasted gamey. But werewolves needed meat to survive, so if that was all there was left to eat, we’d still eat it gladly.

“It won’t be long before we run out of bears too, though. Since both us and those fang lizards are hunting them down.”

That sounded like a pretty desperate situation.

“There’s too many carnivores at the top of the food chain...”

“Food chain?”

“Basically, there’s too many meat-eaters living in this forest now.”

I gave Fahn a rough explanation, then ducked inside the town hall. It was the village's only government building, and one of the elders was always on duty there. It appeared today it was Vodd's turn to hold down the fort. Since he was a former mercenary, he was also in charge of the village's security.

"Good afternoon, Vodd."

"Is that you, Veight? Welcome back. Hmm? Did you grow taller?"

Why is everyone asking that? I sat down in an open chair and told Vodd everything I'd been up to while I was gone.

"I've been working as a mage in the demon army's third regiment. This is the pay I got for that."

I unwrapped a bundle full of monster fangs, pelts, a few lumps of iron, and some silver coins. Vodd's wrinkly face lit up.

"That's quite the haul you brought in, young man. However, these are riches you earned. It wouldn't sit right with me to take 'em. It'd feel like I was taking from my own grandson."

Vodd was a bachelor, but he'd treated all of the village's children like his grandchildren. It was a custom among werewolves to raise children as a pack. Still, it was a little embarrassing to be told that to my face.

"I'm working for the Demon Lord as a representative of this village, on behalf of all werewolves. So this belongs to all of us. Besides, you all protected my mom while I was gone."

"If anything, Vanessa protected us. She's always had a fiery spirit, she has."

Vodd made no move to take the treasures I'd put out in front of him, but I continued pushing them on him anyway. Considering the state the village was in, I knew this was no time to be hoarding money.

"I have a few silver coins I stole from humans as well. Couldn't we use them to buy up the supplies we need from human villages?"

"Hmm... Well, if you insist on giving us this money, then I suppose we could. There's a lot we need, so we'll have to decide as a village what to buy." Vodd grinned at me as he swept up the money. "Everyone will be relieved to hear

you're back, kid."

Relieved, huh? Those fang lizards must really be weighing on everyone's minds.

"I heard from Fahn. A group of fang lizards have made their nest around here, right?"

"That they have... And they're a right pain in the arse." Vodd's voice lowered in pitch by a few octaves. "Twenty years ago we had the same problem. They killed ten of our people before we were able to get rid of them. We don't got many fighters left in the village, so I'm glad to have you back."

Twenty years ago... I thought back to my first memory after being reincarnated. A funeral service for my dead father.

"Vodd, was that when..."

The old man nodded silently. *I knew it.*

There was a lot more I wanted to talk to him about, but I decided to go back home first. I wanted to see how my eternally 27 (according to her) mother was holding up.

"I'm home, mom! Have you finally turned twenty-eight?"

"Did you forget again, Veight? I'm turning twenty-six next year."

Since when did you start aging backwards? My mother was my only living relative, so I was glad to see she was doing well.

"I heard about the fang lizards, mom. They're the ones who killed dad, aren't they?"

"That's right..."

Her usually cheery expression clouded over as she thought back to her dead husband.

"Your dad was the strongest fighter in the village. But after the fighting was over he suddenly grew sick. None of the antidotes we tried worked, and he died a few days later."

So their poison really was difficult to purge. *What a troublesome monster.* I pulled out Master's encyclopedia again and explained their traits to my mom.

"Since they form packs, I'm guessing they're smarter than your average lizard. Whatever ones escaped twenty years ago probably bred and multiplied before coming back here. There's a lot of animals here so it's a good feeding ground."

"Oh my... you sure learned a lot."

"Well, I am studying under the Great Sage Gomoviroa," I said with a hint of pride.

From the looks of it, this fang lizard infestation was a serious problem. They were voracious enough to attack anything, and big eaters to boot. Almost all the nearby animals had been hunted to extinction by them. Once the bears were gone, the only other large animals left would be us and them. As I considered how to deal with them, I went to Jerrick's place to give him the iron I'd been paid.

"Yo, boss, thanks for the metal."

Jerrick looked up from the hoe he was repairing and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"There's nowhere to mine metal around here, so I can't smith new things. Fortunately, this should keep me set for a while."

As I handed Jerrick the chunks of ore, I asked him about the fang lizard infestation.

"How well is the village protected against the fang lizards?"

"We're doing fine for now. One wandered into the village a few days back, but we ganged up on it and killed it. Haven't seen any of them come near the village since."

"Well, that's good, at least."

Werewolves weren't much stronger than regular humans in their human form, but they couldn't stay transformed all the time. In that respect, they were pretty weak when it came to fighting on the defensive. We were hunters after

all. Jerrick adjusted the heat coming from the bellows and muttered, “If we were just up against a single enemy like that Golden Brute you killed years ago, we could hunt it as a pack. But there’s more of them than there is us. If we try to hunt them down we’d probably get mobbed.”

Group combat was a specialty of fang lizards as well. It was one thing if we were out on an open plain, but in a dense forest like this, there was no telling who’d come out ahead in an all-out melee. Within the village, there were maybe 60 werewolves capable of fighting against monsters as powerful as fang lizards. The rest were either too young or too old to fight. Worse, we needed to dedicate some of our already small force to protecting them.

“If we split everyone into two squads of thirty, maybe we could... No, that won’t work.”

“What won’t work, boss?”

“If fifty of those lizards attacked the village, half our fighters wouldn’t be able to protect them. And if all fifty of them were gathered in one place, half our fighters wouldn’t be able to hunt them all down without casualties. Unless we fight them where we hold the advantage, we can’t win.”

“I see. So this is what they call tactics.”

I felt like what I was saying was a bit too fundamental to be really called tactics.

“I wish I knew more about their habits, but the encyclopedia doesn’t have anything about them.”

According to Master, fang lizard hordes had attacked human villages before, but there were never any survivors to tell others about their traits. Now, most human villages had walls to prevent fang lizard invasions, so the monsters avoided populated areas. *I wish we had walls.* As I was agonizing over what to do, Vodd walked into Jerrick’s smithy.

“Veight, could you come with me for a bit? The elders want to talk to you.”

Is this gonna be about the fang lizards?

As I expected, the elders wanted my help in dealing with the fang lizards. One of the elders ran his finger through his white hair and asked, “Veight, could you ask the demon army to send us reinforcements?”

I considered the possibility, and made sure to choose my words before replying.

“If we were to ask them for help, they would probably impose some conditions on us.”

“Such as?”

“Swearing fealty to the demon army.”

“I see...”

The village’s elders were all renowned hunters and respected by the rest of the town.

“If we were to ask for aid, it would be admitting we’re weak. And it’s the law of nature that the weak obey the strong.”

That was indeed an ironclad rule among demons. The elder’s face fell and he said, “The demon army would ask for troops or resources if we swore fealty to them. However, we have nothing to spare. Our hands are full just protecting this village.”

“Don’t worry. If they want troops, I’ll just formally join the demon army.”

I wasn’t sure what kind of person the new Demon Lord—Friedensrichter—was, but according to Master he was “a true hero,” and “a man among men.” Considering the fact that he’d paid me though I’d only temporarily been lending him my services, I assumed he was a magnanimous ruler. Granted, he’d paid me more in stuff than in money.

“But even if they agree to help, it’ll take the demon army a few days to reach here. Right now they’re advancing toward the humans’ cities, so they have no squads stationed in the area.”

As the Demon Lord was a dragonkin, most of his army was comprised of dragonkin as well. Their territory was in the mountains far from here, so none of his troops were close. On top of that, the demon army was quite small.

The elder nodded and said, “Understood. We will try and hold our own during those few days. Please send the demon army a request for aid, Veight.”

“Understood. I’ll send it right... Oh, wait, I just thought of something.”

I grinned.

“Master, could you please deliver this letter to the Demon Lord?”

I handed the elder’s letter to Master, who’d teleported in. She’d been teleporting everywhere recently as a way to practice. Master flailed her limbs above me, attempting to extricate herself from the branches she’d gotten stuck in.

“Is that really the only thing you have to say to me after seeing me like this?”

“I’m sure someone of your skill can get down by herself.”

As I said that, the branch supporting her weight bent down. She slid down it, landing safely on the ground.

“Fufu, what do you think of my plant manipulation magic?”

It appeared she’d learned some new spells in the short time I hadn’t seen her. She was as enthusiastic about her research as ever.

“See, I knew you could do it, Master... I’m sure you’ll figure out teleportation magic eventually too.”

“How many times must I tell you? Teleportation magic is far more complex than the other branches.”

“It looks like you got the location right this time, just misjudged the height.”

“Indeed it appears my precision is lacking when it comes to vertical coordinates.”

Master brushed the leaves off her dress and looked up at me.

“So, what happened to your village?”

“Well, you see...”

I summarized everything I’d learned so far. Master took off her hat and

brushed some leaves off of it as she nodded.

“I suspect it is the same horde that had inhabited the woods at the foot of the mountains earlier. The demon army chased them away not long ago, so it is no surprise they wandered here.”

So first the werewolves had driven them out of here, then the dragonkin drove them away from their home and they came back here. The timing fit, at least.

“This is a serious problem, Master. If they end up destroying my village, then what point was there in me helping the demon army?”

“I know, I know. Disrupting the ecosystem is a matter of great concern.”

Master had done some studies on the food chain in her spare time, and she had a deep understanding of how ecosystems worked.

“Vice-Commander Baltze has just returned to Grenschtat with four hundred of his Azure Knights. I will request that he send them to your aid. If they leave now, they should arrive the day after tomorrow.”

The army’s most elite unit shouldn’t have any trouble taking care of a group of fang lizards.

“The situation seems urgent, so I shall return to the castle right away. If the Azure Knights are occupied, I have eight hundred skeleton soldiers I can lend to you. You still remember how to control them, right?”

“Yes, Master. Thank you very much.”

Master took the elder’s letter from me and carefully placed it into her pouch. She then started scratching a magic circle in the dirt with her staff. For teleportation, her circle also needed to incorporate geometric formulas.

“I need to go northeast... no, north by northeast... So these will be the variables I need for direction, and then this will be for... No, wait, if I do that, I’ll seal off my exit and be crushed between dimensions...”

“Master, are you sure you’ll be alright?”

I knew she was a genius when it came to magic, but I couldn’t help but worry when she started saying stuff like that. She scratched out a few more calculations next to the magic circle, then nodded to herself. Even for a genius,

it took some time to incorporate the complex calculations needed for teleportation magic.

“Perfect,” she exclaimed after a few minutes, and puffed out her tiny chest, which had remained unchanged for centuries.

“I should most likely be fine.”

“You’re not exactly inspiring confidence here.”

“I trust things shall sort themselves out somehow. At any rate, I’ll be going now.”

Is she really going to be okay? I watched with a mild sense of foreboding as Master vanished in a whirlpool of light. The fate of my village depended on her having calculated her coordinates correctly.

While we waited for reinforcements to come, Monza and the other hunters went out to scout the forest.

“There’s around a hundred fang lizards. They’ve made their nest around the watering hole. Also, there’s bear corpses everywhere.”

As they were reptiles, fang lizards didn’t need to feed more than once every few weeks. Cold-blooded creatures like them had slow metabolisms. If they’d killed and eaten all the hibernating bears, then they’d likely stay put until they got hungry again. This was a good opportunity to strike a preemptive blow against them, but I’d rather not attack them at the watering hole. Fang lizards were good swimmers, and if they dragged us into the water, we’d be at a disadvantage.

Monza shrugged and asked, “What should we do?”

“Now that all the bears are gone, we’re going to be their next prey.”

We were the only decently large-sized animals left in the area. Most creatures were too terrified of werewolves to attack us, but fang lizards possessed their deadly poison. All they had to do was injure most of us, then retreat until the poison had killed us.

“Fang lizard poison’s deadly even to us, isn’t it? I heard there’s no antidote...”

Monza muttered worriedly.

I gave her a smile and said, “Don’t worry about it. I’m sure my magic can heal it.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot we’ll be fine as long as you’re here. Ehehe.”

My chest swelled with pride. It felt like all the effort I’d put into studying magic had been worth it.

However, that didn’t change the fact that we didn’t have enough fighting power. Sure, I could heal anyone who got hurt during the battle, but that was only if we survived the battle in the first place.

“I went around the village, and it looks like we only got fifty-six people fit enough to fight in the village.” Scratching the back of his head apologetically, Vodd walked over to me. “Slipped my mind that Vosco died last year. Can’t believe he kicked the bucket already when he’s three years younger than me.”

“You’re the weird one for lasting this long, old man.”

He handed me a list of names, with his at the top. *How long does this guy plan to keep fighting?*

“Stelina’s pregnant, and Weshka’s got a newborn babe, so they’re off the list.”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want them fighting.”

In a remote village like this, babies were important not just for ethical reasons, but practical ones too. We couldn’t have the whole village dying out. *So we’ve only got 56 to work with...* As I mulled that over, one of the other elders walked over.

“We need two werewolves to safely take down one fang lizard,” he added calmly.

“Last time, we split people up into pairs, with one responsible for chasing down the lizard and the other finishing it off. Fang lizards are strong enough that they might be able to kill us unless we outnumber them.”

All the cop movies I’d watched in my past life had had cops paired up in two-man groups too. If we formed pairs though, we’d have only 28 pairs to face 100

fang lizards. The last thing we wanted in this situation was a head-on confrontation.

“Elder, how exactly were you planning on fighting them?”

He pulled a face and replied, “We’re hunters, not warriors. The knowledge our forefathers passed down to us is of no use in a defensive battle. All I can think of is to hole up in the village and protect our weaker family members.”

“I see...”

“Incidentally, Veight. I have a request for you.” The elder bowed his head. “I have heard that within the demon army, you are especially respected for your tactical insight. Furthermore, you have more combat experience than any of us. Would you be willing to lead the village in my place for this battle?”

“You want me to be the commander?”

It was true I’d helped out the demon army, but that had mostly been with odd jobs. Besides, I was a mage, not a strategist. Most of the battles I’d participated in, I’d just been casting support magic from the rear... Though, I’d occasionally charged the enemy lines to protect my comrades... Okay, maybe a bit more than occasionally. Misinterpreting my silence, the elder quickly added, “I know it’s customary for werewolves to obey the strong, but I believe you’ve grown quite powerful these past few years. I’ve heard much of your achievements from Lady Gomoviroa. I hear the other demons are calling you a werewolf Champion.”

I have no idea what Master told you, but it’s probably exaggerated. Master was always humble when it came to herself, but she praised her disciples to no end. She was like an overly doting mother.

“I’ll make sure the other werewolves agree, so please, Veight, won’t you use the strategies you’ve learned in the demon army to protect our village?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to help...”

I’m just an amateur at tactics. At best, I had the superficial knowledge I’d learned from strategy games. Seeing my hesitation, the other elderly people of the village voiced their support.

“Veight, we know you dislike being the center of attention. But our village’s existence is at stake.”

“You only have to take charge until the demon army gets here. Everyone else will be relieved to have a veteran mage commanding them.”

If everyone wants me that badly, I guess I have no choice. I gathered my resolve and agreed to take over command.

“Understood. I’m still inexperienced, but I’ll do my best to lead us well.”

The elders sighed in relief.

“Thank you... Without you, we might be doomed.”

Now you’re just making me blush.

Now that I’d accepted command, I had a responsibility to keep everyone alive. Using the knowledge I’d gained from my short time in the demon army, I reorganized our battle formation.

“I feel like two-man teams are too small, so we’re going to combine teams into four-man squads instead.”

“Won’t that slow us down?” The younger Garney brother spoke up. His older brother turned to him and tilted his head.

“So it’s gonna be me, you, and two others?”

“There’s twice as many lizards as us. The fighting’s going to be all over the place.”

It was probably a little harsh to say this, but I wasn’t expecting anything sophisticated out of these guys.

“You can fight in groups of two if you want to still. Just think of it as having another team with you at all times. That way if any of you get injured, the rest of you will be there to cover for each other. If there’s three of you left instead of one, it’s easier to guard the one injured guy, right?”

“Yeah, that doesn’t sound too bad.”

Werewolves were melee fighters through and through, so making the squads

any bigger than four would just make it hard for them to maneuver. Besides, four to a group was how many there were in tank squads too. With that, the werewolves split themselves up into 14 squads.

“Alright, these fourteen squads are going to be in charge of protecting the village. Make sure you always move in a group, whether you’re retreating or attacking, never do it alone. Understood?”

The younger Garney brother smiled and flexed his biceps.

“Don’t worry, whatever I do, my brother does too!”

Aren’t you forgetting about the other half of your squad?

After making some adjustments to the squad members, I had everybody start fortifying the village’s defenses. That being said, it wasn’t like we had walls or anything. Our village was a tiny one, surrounded by nothing more than a fence.

“Hey, boss.”

“Yeah, Jerrick?”

“You think this fence is gonna be any help?”

I looked at the moss-covered stake in front of me and gave it a slight push. There was a dry crack, and it toppled to the ground.

“Looks like a no.”

Fang lizards weren’t too different from the alligators or Komodo dragons that had existed back on Earth. Though they looked slow, they could put out short bursts of speed. A paltry fence like this wouldn’t even slow them down. Besides, they were dextrous enough to slip between the smallest of cracks.

“We don’t have the time to cut down trees and remake it, either. The demon army or the lizards will reach us by then.”

However, I had a different plan in mind for this fence.

“Let’s make a moat.”

“A moat, huh? That’s not a bad idea, but we don’t have any water.”

“A dry moat’s fine. We’re up against a bunch of huge lizards, they’ll have a

hard time climbing slopes.”

“Really?”

“...Probably?”

There was a lot about monster biology I still didn’t know. Jerrick folded his arms and cocked his head.

“Isn’t it basically anything goes with monsters? Considering werewolves like us exist, there’s no telling what crazy abilities they have. You sure we’ll be fine?”

“I wouldn’t say it’s *anything* goes.”

I tried visualizing how to construct the moat as I gave Jerrick my reply.

“Fang lizards are big and strong, but they’re still lizards. They can’t breathe fire, and they can’t fly. Plus they can’t talk or use tools either.”

They had a set physiology, and they had to follow the laws of physics. They just happened to be a mutated version of normal lizards. But even those mutations were still something that had to have followed the theory of evolution.

“Honestly, the weirdest thing about them is that they’re social. Reptiles are practically never social creatures. Even though they lack intelligence, they still hunt in packs. It’s strange.”

“I-I see... So this is what studying under a Great Sage teaches you.”

Actually, this is all stuff I learned in my past life.

However, even if a moat would be effective, we lacked the time and manpower to build one around the whole village. Instead, I had everyone dig one around the town hall and the village square. The rest of the village we’d abandon until the lizards had been dealt with. The younger Garney brother grumbled as he dug up the earth, his shirt tied around his waist.

“Our house is gonna get busted up again, isn’t it...”

The Garney Brothers’ house was pretty far from the town hall, so it wasn’t

protected by the moat. Their house was the only one that had been destroyed by the Golden Brute incident almost a decade back, so I understood his frustration. However, I had both limited resources and time, so I had no choice but to abandon his house. *Sorry, man.*

"Jerrick, did you finish what I requested?"

I walked into Jerrick's workshop and found him sweating at his forge. He looked up and held out a sharpened iron rod. He'd used the iron I'd gotten from the demon army to make it.

"This good enough, Boss?"

"Yeah... this looks plenty sharp."

"Course it's sharp, I forged it! It's sharp enough to cut through anything!"

There was no water to fill the moat with, so I'd decided to fill it with sharpened spikes instead. Fang lizard underbellies were soft, so their weight alone would impale them on these.

"The more we can kill with traps like these, the less casualties we'll have. We need to try anything that might raise our chances of victory."

"Yeah, don't worry. I'll protect this village with my skills!"

Our village had a carpenter and stonemason as well, and I'd thrown them all together in the same squad. They were serving as my makeshift combat engineers.

"We can jump over the moat in our werewolf forms easily enough, so there's no reason to build a bridge. Instead, take all the spare lumber we have and build up a barricade around the square. It'll serve to buy time."

The older Garney brother dismantled an abandoned house and carried over one of its supporting pillars.

"What good's buying time? If we don't kill them, what's the point?"

"There's way more enemies than there are squads. If the lizards attack us all at once, we won't be able to protect everyone."

I wanted to funnel the fang lizards as much as possible so that each werewolf

squad would only have to take on one or two at a time.

“Leave a few gaps between the walls. That’ll lure the fang lizards to those spots. They won’t be able to maneuver when they’re squeezing through the holes, so attack them when they’re pushing through.”

The villagers exchanged glances, then nodded to each other.

“That makes sense... So this is what they teach in the demon army.”

Actually, that’s also knowledge I picked up in my past life... I’d gone on a field trip to a nearby castle in middle school, and the tour guide had explained that to me. The demon army was more a ragtag band of guerilla fighters than anything, and none of them had experienced a siege before. Though at some point, one of the demon army’s commanders would be tasked with sieging a city.

Hunting was werewolves’ forte, so I focused my defensive measures more on luring lizards into traps than into holding them off. That way, everyone would have an easier time understanding and incorporating my strategies.

“Focus building up the wall around the open square. The town hall’s sturdy enough to take their tackles, and they’re not limber enough to climb up to the roof. Worst comes to worst, we’ll hole up in the hall ourselves as a final line of defense.”

“Gotcha!”

Assuming fang lizards were like most large reptiles, they relied on their sense of smell like us. Meaning they’d make a beeline for the square, where all of us were gathered.

“If I know where they’re coming from, guarding against them won’t be too hard. At the very least, this is a lot easier than dealing with human armies.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, they won’t try and pull any fancy tactics. See, that’s why humans are scary. They’re masters of strategy.”

As a former human, I felt a strange sense of obligation to emphasize their good points. I grinned and added, “So compared to them, these fang lizards are

nothing. We just have to hold on till the demon army gets here."

The werewolves exchanged another glance.

"If you say so..."

"If that's what you say, I guess that's how it is, Veight."

I wasn't completely confident about that, but if I looked worried it'd just lower morale.

A few days later.

"The horde's on the move!"

One of the scouts yelled as he dashed toward the village square.

"They're all coming at us at once!"

Everyone's expressions grew nervous. They took off their shirts in preparation to transform.

"Veight, you're in charge," one of the elders said as he finished herding the last of the sick and elderly into the town hall.

"We'll guard the young'uns, so don't worry about them. We might be old, but we can still fight for a little bit. So don't keep fretting about how to keep 'em safe."

"Understood."

Alright, time to see how well I can lead.

"Monza, your squad's in charge of the western side. Keep a lookout from the rooftops and tell me if the lizards come from there!"

"Aye-aye, sir."

Monza's squad leapt across the rooftops and headed west. We'd be in trouble if we were expecting only 20 coming from that side and they all came instead.

"Jerrick, how're the crossbows looking?"

"They're in perfect shape, boss. All working like a charm."

Jerrick grinned and held up his handmade crossbow. However, he and his

squad then added, “I’m not much of a shot though.”

“Yeah, we haven’t really practiced archery. Sorry if we miss.”

Well yeah, normally you guys would be better off just biting your enemies to death rather than using things like these... As I’d feared, human tactics couldn’t just be copied wholesale for demon forces. Demons’ fighting styles and physiques were just too different. *Guess it won’t be that easy to come up with strategies.* As I was mulling over my tactics, the Garney Brothers transformed early and started hyping themselves up.

“Let’s do this, Nibert!”

“You got it, brother!”

I’d put them in Fahn’s squad specifically because I knew how rowdy they were. Seconds after they transformed, Fahn came running over.

“Stop right there, you two! Your posts are on the east side!”

“But the enemy’s coming from the west...”

Fahn grabbed the two brothers by the ears and dragged them away. *Looks like I picked all the right people to be squad captains.* As I was patting myself on the back, I heard Monza’s howl from afar.

“Enemy, coming.”

“Lure them in.”

Perfect, everything’s going according to plan. The werewolves I’d posted on our makeshift walls turned back to me. They were waiting for my orders. A little nervous, I gave out my first order.

“All squads, to your posts! Defend your designated areas for as long as you can! If you’re struggling, ask for help from other squads who’re free!”

I’d created five openings in the walls to funnel the fang lizards through. Meanwhile, we had 14 squads, so I was able to allot 2 per opening. The extra 4 squads I’d kept as a reserve, and to serve as the rearguard.

“Aha, watch out guys, they’re coming!”

Monza yelled as she and her squad ran back to the safety of the village

square. Right after they cleared the moat, the first of the fang lizards appeared from behind a nearby building. The stench of raw garbage filled the air. *Ah, so this is the smell Fahn was talking about.* I wanted to shoot down the lizards right away, but because of how low it was to the ground it'd be hard to hit from this distance.

"Hold your fire! Wait until they're trapped in the ditch before shooting! It'll be easier to hit them when they're right below you!"

"You got it, boss!"

The fang lizard in the lead avoided the spikes I'd planted as it navigated the moat. However the ones behind it weren't as careful, and they found themselves impaled. They writhed in pain as Jerrick's iron spikes stopped them in their tracks. It would've been great if they'd all just been impaled and killed there, but soon enough the spikes stopped being effective. The three-meter lizards were large enough that they could force their way past them. On top of that, I'd underestimated their agility.

"Here they come! All squads, stay at your posts! Intercept only those that come your way!"

After making their way past the moat, the fang lizards quickly spotted the holes in our makeshift barricade. They slithered forward and wriggled their way through the openings.

"Attack now!"

"UOOOOOOH!"

The werewolves loosed a battle cry and started beating down on the lizards. Werewolf blows were powerful enough to destroy most creatures in a single hit, and these fang lizards were no exception. Trapped in the narrow passages I'd made, they were unable to dodge the deadly blows raining down on them.

"We can do this!"

"Don't let them bite you!"

"They might be trapped, but don't let your guard down!"

The werewolves fought ferociously, but carefully, so as to avoid being bitten.

Natural hunters that we were, werewolves didn't let their guards down even when we had an overwhelming advantage. Unfortunately, our walls weren't sturdy enough for this strategy to work forever. Fahn's side was the first to crack.

"Veight, the wall's starting to creak!"

Since the barricade was made of scrap lumber it wasn't very sturdy.

"Hold on as long as you can! If they make it past the walls the fight's going to get a lot harder!"

Their coordination ability made fighting a group of fang lizards exponentially more dangerous than fighting a single one. I confirmed the situation from my post on the roof, and ordered the crossbow squad to attack.

"Jerrick squad, provide covering fire for the western wall!"

"Gotcha!"

Crossbows twanged, and heavy quarrels embedded themselves into the lizards in the distance. Anxious, I checked to see how the other sides were doing. To my surprise, the fang lizards had stopped their assault.

"Hm?"

They abandoned their wounded comrades and beat a hasty retreat. They scaled the moat again with even more speed than when they'd been attacking, and vanished. The rotten stench that had filled the air began to lessen. At first I'd thought they smelled of raw garbage, but now that I was able to analyze the stench with a calm mind, I realized they smelled more like rotten oil. Either way, it was an unpleasant odor.

Twenty-odd corpses littered the area around the town hall. I thought we'd gotten more, but it turned out they were so large killing them took some time.

"They sure gave up easy," the elder Garney brother spat as he kicked a corpse out of the way. I just shrugged in response.

"They're probably just trying to hunt carefully."

Carnivores like fang lizards preferred to hunt prey that didn't pose much of a threat to them. Since if they were injured, they'd be unable to hunt and thus

starve. Herbivores, on the other hand, just needed to survive so they fought without holding anything back.

“All squads, report any casualties or damage to the wall that you’ve found! If you’re injured, come to me right away!”

A few werewolves ambled over to my rooftop. Their wounds were light, but even light wounds were deadly when poison became involved.

“Sorry, I got bit while I was kicking one.”

“Yeah, one got my fist when I was punching it...”

If you’re fighting barehanded, it’s bound to happen. I smiled at the wounded werewolves and opened up my spell book.

“Don’t worry. Healing magic’s my specialty.”

I wasn’t sure what kind of poison the fang lizards possessed, but my guess was it was either a neurotoxin or a blood-infecting poison.

“Alright, let’s get you all treated before the poison’s had a chance to spread. Line up, all of you.”

I cast a purification spell on each of them in turn. *It’d be nice if the fang lizards gave up after this, but...*

That night, the werewolf on watch came to me just as I was about to doze off.

“Veight, get up!”

“Hwuh?”

I lifted myself off the town hall’s wooden floor, where I’d been sleeping. Unlike most werewolves, who were instantly alert after waking up, it took me a while to become fully conscious. *I wonder if that’s because I was a human before?* I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and lumbered to my feet. The werewolf pushed me along in a hurry.

“Sorry, but there’s no time. Monza and the others aren’t doing well.”

“What!?”

That jolted me awake. I sprinted over to the corner of the town hall where

Monza and a few others were groaning in pain. Sweat drenched their clothes.

“Monza, Justin, Yuuzu...”

All three of them were werewolves I’d treated this afternoon. *Don’t tell me even magic can’t cure this poison? What kind of poison is this effective even against werewolves anyway!?* I shook my head. This wasn’t the time to be shocked.

“Oi, get a hold of yourself!”

I knelt next to Monza and placed a hand on her sweaty forehead. As I’d feared, she was burning up.

“This is strange... it’s not poison.”

In fact, it looked more like a bacterial infection. *Maybe this has nothing to do with the fang lizard’s poison.* But just then, I remembered something. Back on earth, I’d read about how the Komodo dragon had been thought for a long time to be non-poisonous. Those bit by the Komodo dragon weakened and died, but people had thought that was because the bites caused bacterial infections. They’d discovered the truth later, of course, but it was possible that really was the case with these fang lizards.

“Wait just one minute!”

I ran outside to where we’d stacked the lizard corpses and pulled one out. I held a torch close to its face, examining its fangs.

“Oi, Veight! Hurry up and heal them!”

“I need to investigate these fangs to find out how!”

I examined the lizard’s fangs from every angle, but I couldn’t find any venom glands. These fang lizards were nontoxic.

“I know what’s causing this!”

I hurried back inside and flipped through my spell book. Purification magic wouldn’t help here. What I needed was magic to cure diseases.

“Veight, how much longer is this gonna take!?”

“I’m ready now! Shut up so I can concentrate!”

I fixed a mental image of calm waves in my mind to help me control the flow of my mana. Then I touched the nape of Monza's neck and chanted, "Guardian within, grant this soul the strength to resist this unseen rot."

I then touched her armpit and repeated the procedure, and again on her stomach. I was pouring my mana into her lymph nodes basically. I did the same for the other two werewolves, and after a while, their breathing steadied. Their temperature dropped as well, and they stopped sweating as much.

"They should be fine now."

The gathered werewolves breathed a sigh of relief and smiled at me.

"Thank you so much, Veight!"

"You're amazing, you know that!"

"No wonder the Great Sage made you her disciple!"

Embarrassed, I shook my head and quieted everyone down.

"Shh. We need to let Monza and the others rest until morning."

"Oh yeah..."

They nodded, but I could tell my earlier display of magic had them excited still. It did feel good to be praised, but honestly, I'd only been able to do it because I had knowledge from my past life. It wasn't really *my* achievement. That aside, using so much magic had tired me out.

"I'm going back to sleep. If anything else happens, wake me up."

"You got it."

"Thanks again."

"You can leave lookout duty to me."

I nodded my comrades, then nodded off.

I was woken early the next morning when someone raised the alarm.

"The lizards are back!"

I figured as much. I stepped outside and spotted fang lizards skulking in the

shadows of nearby buildings. *Damn, they're persistent.* They'd probably pulled back to wait for their infections to kill Monza and the others. Considering how fast the infection had spread, they probably would have died already if not for my healing. If that was the case though, it meant these guys were spiteful.

In an attempt to raise morale, I shouted, "They lost a fifth of their number after yesterday's fight! But we're all just fine!"

We weren't exactly fine though. Yesterday's fight had tired us out, and we didn't have enough food or water. I thought it would have been fine if we just held out until the demon army arrived, but it turned out werewolves weren't suited to siege defense. That being said, there were too many lizards for us to fight them in a direct battle.

This time, none of the lizards got caught on the spikes when they charged. They were learning.

"Man, these fuckers stink!"

The younger Garney brother frowned as he transformed.

"Let's end it today, Veight! I'm tired of holding up in this building!"

"You know we can't do that..."

However, it was true this style of combat didn't suit us werewolves at all. We were aggressors, not defenders. *Ah well, guess we'll just have to go on the offensive today.*

"Jerrick, you and your squad fire as many bolts as you can into the lizards in the back! Aim for the ones who aren't moving!"

"You got it, boss! Let's get 'em, guys!"

"Yeah!"

"I'm gonna shoot down ten today!"

Ten, huh... You guys haven't been hitting that often, plus it's hard to land a fatal blow with arrows. I guess archery's only effective en masse. Still, if Jerrick and his men were able to get 10 with their crossbows, and we'd already killed 20 yesterday, that left about 70. Meaning that if each squad was able to kill around 5, we'd be able to mop them all up. I knew how to heal their bites now

too, so it was possible we could win this.

“All squads, make sure you stay in formation! Protect your squadmates!”

“Yes, sir!”

Since werewolves hunted in packs to begin with, figuring out this new squad formation hadn’t been hard for them. We definitely had a good chance to win this now. Just as I thought that, I heard a scream from Fahn’s squad.

“The wall!”

“Veight, the wall’s breaking!”

What!? The moment I turned around, the barricade gave an ominous creak.

“Wha— Uwaaah!”

The werewolves on that section of the wall jumped back. One of the planks I’d used to board up the space between pillars caved inward, and a few fang lizards spilled into the gap. Jerrick looked grim as he loaded another bolt.

“If only we had sturdier walls...”

I wished we had them too, but complaining about it wasn’t going to get us anywhere.

“Slaine, Vodd, take your squads and back up opening number four! Someone close the town hall’s doors!”

As I barked out orders, I desperately tried to think of a spell that could turn this situation around. However, all I could cast was buff spells. I had nothing which could slow enemies down, or defeat them outright. I debated jumping off the roof and joining the fray myself, but Jerrick stopped me before I could take a single step.

“Don’t you dare leap off, boss. There’s no one else who can heal except you.”

“...Alright.”

Now that the lizards had made it into the barricade, the stench of garbage was overwhelming. *Hmm, yeah. On second thought, it does smell more like garbage than oil. Though I was certain it smelled like oil yesterday when they started to retreat... Whatever, now’s not the time to be worrying about how*

they smell. I need to figure out how to kill them.

Fortunately, they'd only broken one section of the wall so far. The reserve squads were reinforcing that side now, so they were holding up for the moment.

"Bring it, you scaled freaks!"

"I won't lose to you, brother!"

It certainly helped that those two moronic brothers had strength to spare. However, the situation quickly took another turn for the worse.

"Veight, they're about to break through this wall, too!"

"We need backup!"

Another section of the wall shattered and the fang lizards tried pushed their way in. I hurriedly sent a reserve squad to their assistance as well.

"Monza, can you handle it!?"

"Yeah, just leave it to me!"

She'd only just recovered from her infection, but I was so low on spare troops that I had no choice but to send her. If it was just us fighters I could have ordered a retreat to give us time to regroup, but there were kids and old people here too. We'd struggled together to survive in this harsh forest devoid of amenities like convenience stores and internet. Like hell I was going to let any of them die here.

"All squads, retreat to the town hall! Abandon your posts!"

At that, the werewolves fighting on the walls that hadn't been breached shouted, "Are you sure, Veight!?"

"We're still good here!"

I responded immediately, "Yes, if you keep fighting you'll be surrounded by the lizards invading from the other sides! Get back here now!"

There was only value in protecting the barricade if it was intact. We'd already shaved the lizards down to half their original number. On top of that, we still had no casualties. These walls had served their purpose.

“We’ll have our final showdown in front of the town hall! Kill them all there!”

“Understood!”

The moment the werewolves abandoned their posts, the fang lizards started flooding in. Because of how big each one was, it was quite an intimidating sight to see 50 of them in one place. As they fought, old man Vodd shouted, “Don’t grapple with them! They’ll tear your arms off!”

Fang lizards had formidable biting power. A transformed werewolf could shrug off hits from a human sword or spear, but a fang lizard’s bite was another matter altogether. And if someone got their arm ripped off, that wasn’t something I could heal. Maybe Master could, though.

“Don’t panic, just focus on protecting your squadmates!”

Since fang lizards had as much destructive power as we did, we needed to be careful. One of the werewolves leapt back and growled, “Goddamn, this is getting tough...”

Because of how low to the ground the lizards were, we could only really hit them with kicks. But if they managed to wrap their jaws around someone’s foot, they could drag one of us to the ground easily. However, if we wanted to get them with a punch we needed to crouch down. And that carried its own risks. The fang lizards’ body type made them hard to deal with. The older Garney brother glanced back at me.

“It’s hard to punch and kick these guys... Oi, Veight, are you sure we can’t wrestle these scaled bastards?”

“Try it if you want. You’ll die.”

I could tell the lizards were just waiting for an opening. The moment one werewolf slipped up, I knew the whole horde would gang up on them. If Garney or anyone else tried to wrestle with one, the others would swarm him right away.

“Yeah, this really is annoying...”

Even Fahn was getting irritated. Werewolves specialized in hunting human-sized prey, so they didn’t have as many options when it came to attacking

creatures that stayed low to the ground. It hadn't been much of a problem when they'd been ganging up on trapped lizards, but now they were having trouble landing hits. Slowly but surely, the fang lizards began to constrict their encirclement.

It was hard to believe they were just dumb reptiles. At the very least, I was certain their movements were being coordinated by a single leader. Similar to how an ant colony moved with one will. To make matters worse, the stench was becoming unbearable. It was doubly painful because of how acute our sense of smell was.

Wait. That smell is laced with mana... Most monsters could use mana in some way or another, usually in relation to their unique characteristics. And it appeared these lizards diffused mana through scent. *Wouldn't they normally imbue their fangs with mana? They're called fang lizards and all.* My musings were interrupted by Fahn's warning shout.

"Here they come!"

Crap, I don't have enough time to think.

"All squads, get into defensive formation!"

Each squad put two people forward, and two people in the back. Those in the front were meant to handle offense, while the back row kept the front safe.

"Take them down!"

Until I could come up with a plan, all I could do was order everyone to fight. *What can I do to help? There's gotta be something.* As I was now, I didn't have the mana to cast strengthening magic on everyone. Even if I did, it wouldn't be very effective with this many people, and it'd take too long.

God, that stench though. Why would they bother to lace it with mana? There's no point... Wait. If there's no point, then they wouldn't be doing it. Meaning there is a reason. And that reason is most likely...

"I've got it!" I turned to my men and shouted, "I'll handle this!"

"Veight!?" Fahn, who was in the middle of a duel with a lizard, looked up at me in shock. "What are you saying!?"

“She’s right, Veight. If you die here...”

I ignored everyone’s complaints.

“The moment I give the signal, I want all of you to charge, got it!?”

Without waiting for a reply, I leapt into the crowd of fang lizards. This was our only chance. Victory or defeat would be decided in a single moment. The moment I landed, I unleashed a howl with all my strength.

Soul Shaker: It was a spell I’d created, and one only a werewolf mage could use.

Mana-filled shock waves of sound thundered across the battlefield. Most humans would faint just from hearing the sound alone. However, I wasn’t even sure these lizards had ears. The auditory component of my spell may not have been much use against the lizards, but that wasn’t where Soul Shaker’s true worth lay anyway.

Monza, who’d lowered herself into a stance seconds before, just stood there dumbly.

“H-Huh?”

I waved to her from my spot within the fang lizard horde.

“Now it’s over.”

The fang lizards had been gripped by fear. On top of that, the odor they’d been emitting had disappeared. To be more accurate, I’d blown it away. I picked up a nearby lizard by the tail and swung it down like a living club. Its skull slammed into that of another, and both died instantly. I kicked their corpses away and grinned.

“These bastards had laced that stench with mana to communicate. Kind of like how we use our howls. That’s how they were able to coordinate so well.”

“Uhh... okay?”

Monza blinked a few times, still clearly confused.

These lizards weren't truly social creatures, but eusocial creatures like ants or bees. I'd read about how there were mammals like naked mole rats that happened to be eusocial, so I supposed it wasn't that surprising to find reptiles like that as well. After all, this was a totally different world. And just as how ants and bees used pheromones to communicate, these lizards used those disgusting smells to relay commands. At least that was what I had assumed when I'd noticed the smell was purposely pungent and had mana mixed into it. Seeing as I was still alive, my guess had been accurate.

In retrospect, if I'd been wrong I would probably be dead by now. *I should be more careful in the future.* As I heaved a sigh of relief I picked up another lizard and smashed it against the ground.

"My howl has the power to override any mana floating nearby and control it freely. That's why these guys' smell vanished, and they can't exchange information anymore. Even though their comrades are all right next to each other, they can't communicate, and it's confusing them."

"...I see." Monza finally understood what was going on, and nodded. She then smiled and made a fist. "Aha, in that case, we can slaughter them all we want! Follow me, guys!"

"Yeaaaah!"

"We're getting on the action too!"

"Kill those scaled freaks!"

All 56 werewolves charged at once. In minutes, the remaining fang lizards had been wiped out.

"What did he say after that?"

The Demon Lord Friedensrichter asked the Great Sage Gomoviroa with a smile.

"He said that what he did could hardly be called a great achievement."

"What a fascinating young man."

The Demon Lord picked up the report Veight had sent him.

“Their fangs aren’t poisoned, but they cause disease instead. On top of that, they mix mana into the odor they emit, which is what allows them to communicate information, much like ants or bees...”

Gomoviroa peeked at the report and muttered, “My disciple writes some strange things, does he not?”

“Certainly, it’s odd that he brought up ants and bees as an example here.”

“Indeed. Though now that I think about it, it is true that such insects often seem to be working under a single will. I haven’t taught him anything about insects yet, so it’s quite impressive that he made such an observation on his own.”

“Hmm...” Friedensrichter scanned the report’s contents one more time, then put it back down on his desk. “What is this werewolf doing now?”

“Helping his village dry fang lizard meat. He said it would help them last while meat was still sparse.”

The Demon Lord tapped his chin thoughtfully, then asked his longtime friend, “Is he not going to ask for a reward? Were it not for his efforts, we would have been hard-pressed to earn the werewolves’ support.”

“He won’t. To him, this isn’t even deserving of a reward. Though he did mention that he would like to have some more building materials.”

“Building materials, you say?”

“To repair the village and make its fence sturdier. He truly has no wants of his own.”

Gomoviroa smiled proudly, but Friedensrichter looked pensive.

“He rallied the werewolves, defended his village, and even discovered the unique traits of one of the most troublesome breed of monsters while he was at it; and yet he claims it’s not an achievement worth mentioning.”

“That’s right.”

Gomoviroa looked up at her friend with a smile. Though it was difficult to

read the expressions on a dragonkin's face, she knew her friend well enough to know what he was thinking.

"What do you think? He might be the Champion you have spent so long searching for."

"Perhaps."

He tried to sound disinterested, but Gomoviroa could hear the curiosity in his voice.

"That man... you said his name was Wight, correct? Does he have any interest in formally joining the demon army?"

"I'm unsure of that myself. Like I said, he has no ambition." Gomoviroa smiled wryly. "Among my disciples, he is one of my brightest. If he were to join the army, he would no doubt distinguish himself."

"I see you've grown even more skilled at flattering your disciples, Gomoviroa."

Gomoviroa puffed her chest out proudly and retorted, "Only because all of my disciples are such excellent students. That being said, Veight is special. This isn't simply my bias toward my disciples talking, I truly do believe he has the qualifications to be a regiment commander."

"I see..."

The Demon Lord folded his arms and lapsed into thought. After a few minutes he said, "I would like to meet this Wight. Could you persuade him to officially join my army?"

Gomoviroa smiled and bowed reverently.

"Gladly, my lord."

I trembled nervously in front of the audience chamber of Grenschtat Castle—the Demon Lord's home. After we'd defeated the fang lizards, we'd started smoking their meat. In the middle of that, messengers from the demon army had come bearing lumber and stone, along with a vast quantity of dried and pickled meat. They'd also brought a letter which had turned out to be a

summoning from Master.

One thing had led to another, and I'd ended up formally joining the Demon Lord's army. And not as a foot soldier either. No, I'd been given the title of Weremage, and made one of Master's vice-commanders. On top of that, I was to be in command of the werewolf platoon the Demon Lord was planning on organizing. At first, I'd tried to insist that Vodd or one of the elders lead the werewolves since they were the heads of our village, but even they'd wanted me to take command, so I'd been forced to accept the position. And now I was here.

I turned to Master, who was floating beside me, and asked, "Why me?"

"Who knows." Smiling, Master poked me in the back. "Now then, hurry it up. You don't want to keep His Highness the Demon Lord waiting."

"O-Okay..."

I nodded and walked up to the large double doors. The two dragonkin guards exchanged a glance, then tapped the butts of their spears against the stone floor. At the same time, the doors swung inward. Beyond them lay the Demon Lord.

I wonder what kind of human... I mean, demon he is. Cold sweat poured down my back as I took my first step into the room.

Afterword

Hello readers, Hyougetsu here. It is both an honor and a relief to be able to meet you all again in this afterword. Though since I usually focus on the story and characters, I never have any idea what to write for these afterwords. But then again, the only people reading this are the ones who go out of their way to read afterwords in the first place, so I guess it doesn't matter what I write.

Anyway, the reason I felt like writing this story was because of all the villainess stories I saw popping up on Narou. The style of those stories has changed a lot as time passed, and I have no idea what kind of stories people are writing now, but at the very least this shares one thing with them. The protagonist ostensibly starts out as a villain.

Villain. The word has a nice ring to it, don't you think? Villains don't have to be held down by morals or justice, and they're usually the final boss in games, so they're always strong. And if you think about it, there's nothing more awesome than being strong and doing whatever the hell you like.

So when I first picked up my pen—or keyboard, if you will—and started writing up a fantasy story, I decided I'd make my protagonist a villain. Usually when people think of a villain they think of a Demon Lord or some evil God, but people like that aren't as free as you might think. They have responsibilities and restrictions. So I figured I'd make my villain a side character. That was how I came up with Veight, a middling general in the purported army of evil. But as the story progressed, I realized he wasn't all that free to do whatever he wanted either...

But to be honest, I like the "side character" role as much as I like the "villain" one. They say everyone's the protagonist of their own life, but as far as the world's concerned, most people are just minor characters. More of us end up being the filler player on our school's sports club, or the artist who only gets a consolation prize at an art contest, or the person who just ends up friends with their crush. In general, most of us are side characters.

That’s why I can’t ever really find myself empathizing with Heroes and Demon Lords and the like. After all, I can relate so much better to the side characters. The silent warrior who always fights alongside the Hero or the Demon Lord’s mage advisor are way cooler in my opinion. Personally, I want to give the world’s side characters a chance to shine.

Now then, it’s time for the acknowledgments. I’d like to thank my editor, the great Fusanon. You were the shining side character who helped make this book happen. Thank you so much. Despite your sharp, cool demeanor, you’ve always done your best to support me, and I really can’t thank you enough for that. I’d also like to thank Nishi(E)da-sensei for his wonderful, entrancing illustrations. Really, thank you so much. Whenever I see your work I feel like I have to write well enough to live up to it...

Incidentally, around the time I’m writing this afterword, I got a notification that Der Werwolf is getting a manga adaptation. The art for that is going to be handled by the esteemed Terada Isaza-sensei. I took a look at his rough manuscript, and it looks absolutely stunning. I can’t wait to see what it looks like when it’s finally out. I hope you all are willing to give the manga version a try too when it comes out.

Now then, I have no idea how far the annals of Veight and his story as a villainous side character are going to get published, but I hope to at least meet you again in the third volume.


☆Rough sketches☆
Nishi(E)da





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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 2

by Hyougetsu

Translated by Ningen Edited by Meiru

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