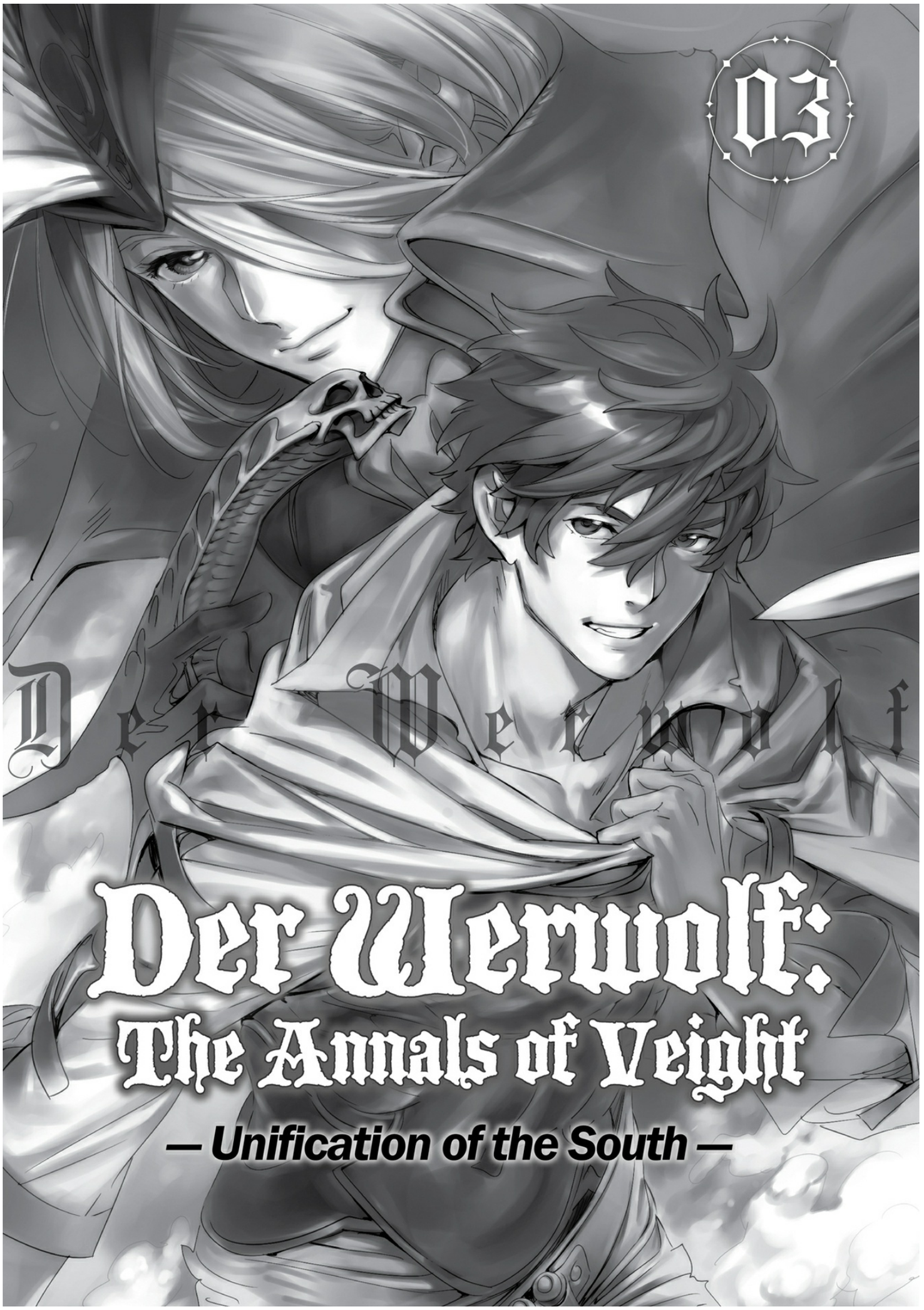

Der Werwolf
03
Der Werwolf:
The Annals of Veight
— Unification of the South —
Hyougetsu
ill. Nishi(E)da




illustration:Nishi(E)da


03
Der Werwolf
Der Werwolf:
The Annals of Veight
— Unification of the South —

Character



Veight

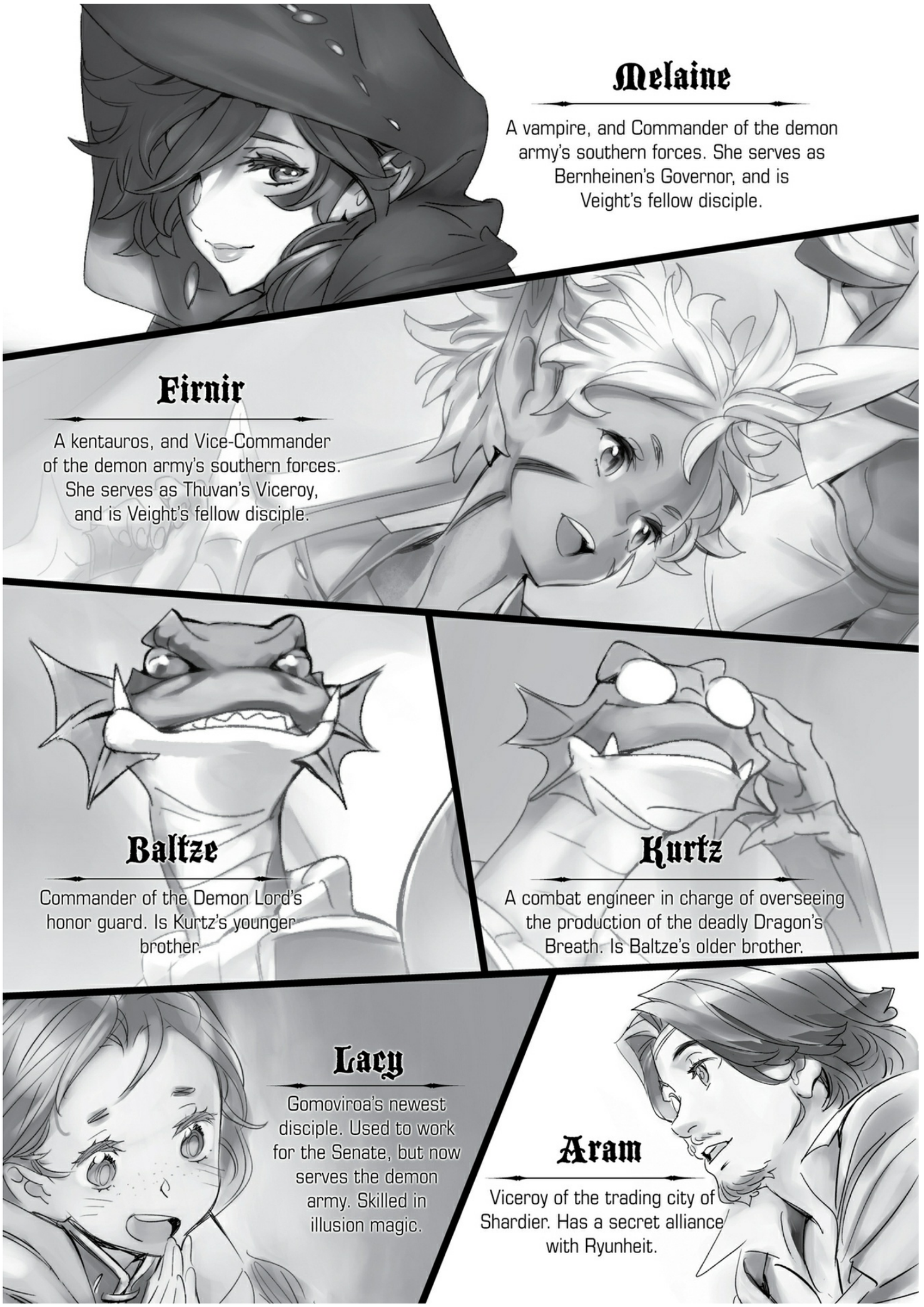
A former human who's been reborn as a werewolf. Currently serves as the first regiment's Vice-Commander.

Gomoviroa

The demon army's new Demon Lord. Veight's master, and a powerful necromancer who has crossed the final threshold.

Airia Lutt Aindorf

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


Melaine
A vampire, and Commander of the demon army's southern forces. She serves as Bernheinen's Governor, and is Veight's fellow disciple.
Firnir
A kentauros, and Vice-Commander of the demon army's southern forces. She serves as Thuvan's Viceroy, and is Veight's fellow disciple.
Baltze
Commander of the Demon Lord's honor guard. Is Kurtz's younger brother.
Kurtz
A combat engineer in charge of overseeing the production of the deadly Dragon's Breath. Is Baltze's older brother.
Lacy
Gomoviroa's newest disciple. Used to work for the Senate, but now serves the demon army. Skilled in illusion magic.
Aram
Viceroy of the trading city of Shardier. Has a secret alliance with Ryunheit.

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.

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Chapter 3

The first thing Gomoviroa did after ascending to the position of Demon Lord was order a full retreat from the northern front. Her plan was to use the extra troops to strengthen our defenses in the south, and focus entirely on diplomacy and protection of our borders. These were all measures she'd outlined before in a meeting of officers, so there was no opposition when she made the official proclamation.

Master also declared that Grenschtat Castle would be converted into a training academy for new recruits. In truth, the castle had originally been made to train troops, so it was outfitted with all the necessary facilities. Here, we'd train new demon recruits from the rural villages in marching formations, weapon maintenance, and any other basic foundations they needed to be good soldiers. If I were to put it in SRPG terms, Grenschtat was now a base to produce new units from.

I was also planning on staying in Grenschtat until I'd fully recovered, so I'd be serving as a military instructor until I was fit enough to return to Ryunheit. My primary goal was to retrain the remnants of the second regiment. Master was planning on disbanding the second and merging the survivors into the third. Meaning that, eventually, they'd be stationed in Meraldia's southern cities.

Thanks to our relatively bloodless conquests in the region, we were still in a position to negotiate with the viceroys of the south. Hence why it'd be a problem if the demons of the second went on a rampage there. My job was to teach them how to communicate with humans instead of killing them. And for that, I needed to purge them of the primitive mindset that might makes right.

"Men, I know you experienced battlefields more terrifying than hell itself during the northern campaign."

I swept my gaze over the giants and ogres seated before me. We were in one of Grenschtat's larger halls that we'd converted into a classroom. It was a pretty surreal sight seeing bloodthirsty giants and ogres sitting hunched over desks. The second regiment had suffered devastating losses, and it wasn't their

strongest warriors who had survived the slaughter. In fact, it was mostly their weakest who'd made it out alive. Only the cowardly and the wise had possessed the presence of mind to run.

"You aren't the best of the second regiment. The best of the second died during the fight with the Hero. And I'm sure you guys know that best of all."

The gathered demons hung their heads. *Wow, these guys really are timid.* The repeated defeats they'd suffered had probably scarred some of them, but my guess was most of these guys had been timid to begin with. And that was precisely why I needed to cheer them up.

"But you were the only ones who didn't balk at the thought of retreat. After learning how terrifying humans could be, you chose to run. And that's why you're still alive right now. From now on, I'm going to teach you even more about humans, so that you can keep surviving the battles to come."

The giants and ogres exchanged glances, confused.

"What's he talking about?"

"Dunno. Veight's lectures are too difficult for me."

"But he's right. Those humans were scary. I never thought they'd be that strong."

"Yeah, they were terrifying..."

I couldn't tell if my words were getting through to them or not.

"What's truly terrifying about humans is their tenacity. Even if you kill their strongest warrior, someone else will just step in to take their place. You have to understand, they're not like us."

After all, humans weren't led by their strongest fighter. That was why they could afford to send their best soldiers out into the field.

"Also, know that in a fight, they'll try to protect their weaker comrades."

That wasn't always the case, and there were definitely times when humans fought against each other, but in general, soldiers tried their best to protect civilians. Ogres and giants didn't form packs, so that was an alien concept to them. As far as they were concerned, weaklings who couldn't fight deserved to

die. Hobgoblins at least formed simple groups, so they were able to grasp what I was getting at to an extent. The rest, however, could not.

“Th-They protect people weaker than them?”

“Why? What do they get for protecting weaklings?”

“Shouldn’t you protect the strong? The strong can kill enemies and keep everyone safe.”

I should have figured this would happen. Let’s try a different approach.

“Okay, how about this? You guys liked the old Demon Lord, right?”

Everyone cheered in response. *Guess I didn’t even need to ask.*

“And do you like the current Demon Lord?”

More cheers.

“Alright, and do you like them both because they’re strong?”

The demons looked to each other in confusion.

“I... don’t know?”

“The old Demon Lord was strong. But he was also kind. That’s why I liked him.”

“The new Demon Lord’s nice, too. She’s our saint, that’s why I like her.”

Looks like this method’s working. Perfect.

“See? Strength isn’t everything. Demons always follow the strong. But just because you follow someone doesn’t necessarily mean you like them.”

A few of the demons nodded. They were probably the ones who’d had more overbearing commanding officers. Because of how much value demons placed on strength, there were many stronger demons who liked to abuse their authority. Most of those had died during the Hero’s onslaught in Bahen, though. They’d been the first to be abandoned by their subordinates, and faced the charging human army alone.

“If the Demon Lord was weak, would you no longer want to protect her?”

The demons rose to their feet and protested hotly.

“Of course not!”

“The holy saint saved our lives! There’s no way we’d abandon her!”

“If she ever became weak, we’d protect her!”

“Yeah, we’d risk our lives for her!”

“Who dares threaten her!?”

A few of the hobgoblins clambered on top of their desks and started shouting battle cries. *I really wish they wouldn’t get riled up so easily.*

“Okay, calm down before I get angry and chew up the lot of you.”

The demons fell silent instantly. Those that had gotten up on their desks slowly got off, and soon enough everyone was obediently seated.

“If Lord Veight bit us, we’d die...”

“Yeah, his bites killed the Hero...”

“Hey, don’t you think we should apologize before he gets mad?”

Uhh, guys, I was just joking. You don’t have to look so scared. Perhaps it would be best if I continued my lecture.

“So even if the Demon Lord was weak, you’d protect her, right?”

The demons all nodded in agreement.

“Humans are the same. They want to protect the people they like, regardless of whether they’re strong or not. So if you kill their weaker members, they’ll all come at you to take revenge. The Hero was like that too.”

The giants and ogres exchanged glances and started whispering to each other.

“Humans are scaaaary...”

“They’re like bees!”

“If we’re not careful they’ll swarm us to death...”

“Yeah, we gotta be careful, or else...”

It appeared they were finally starting to understand. There was hope for them yet.

While I was busy reeducating our demons, the entire demon army was undergoing a huge overhaul. Chief among the changes was the standardization of the vice-commander position. Until now there hadn't been any clear hierarchy between vice-commanders. That wouldn't normally have been a problem, but everyone from squad captains to a regiment commander's most trusted general had been a "vice-commander."

From now on, only those serving directly under the Demon Lord or a regiment commander would be granted the title of vice-commander. Master had decided to appoint no vice-commanders other than me, making me the Demon Lord's sole vice-commander. When Baltze had heard the news, this was what he'd had to say to me: "Did you know the other soldiers have taken to calling you the 'Demon Lord's Right Arm'?"

"I feel like that's a bit of an exaggeration."

"Personally, I don't believe it's an exaggeration at all."

Really?

With the destruction of the second regiment, Master had decided to reorganize the regiments as well. Half of the first regiment, and all the remaining forces of the second, would be incorporated into the third. The third regiment would then be rebranded the southern division. Master's plan was to focus the demon army's entire efforts on conquering Meraldia's southern cities. As a result of the reshuffling, Melaine had effectively been put in charge of the majority of the demon army. When she'd heard the news, she'd screamed, "Did you trick me again, Master!?"

Wait, she's tricked you before? On the other hand, Firnir had been quite happy when I'd told her the news. She'd seemed to have believed it meant she was free of her responsibilities.

"I'll finally be back to being just a field general. It's a relief knowing I'll only have to worry about governing Thuvan from now on."

Sorry, but you're not getting off that easy.

"Actually, Melaine has nominated you to be her vice-commander."

"What!?" Firnir shot to her feet. "Why!? What does she even need my help

with?”

“She needs a lieutenant to help her organize military affairs and handle the actual fighting.”

Firnir was the best warrior among Gomoviroa’s disciples. There was no way Melaine could run the third regiment without her. It was true she was still young, but with a few dragonkin generals from the first regiment to advise her, I was certain she’d do a good job of handling military affairs.

“This was your suggestion, wasn’t it, Vaito? Don’t think I’ll forget this...”

“It wasn’t me. If you want to complain, go complain to Melaine.”

Firnir held her head in her hands, her tail swishing back and forth wildly.

“Ugh, why do I have to do such a difficult job...”

“What’s so bad about being a vice-commander? I like the job, personally.”

“Maybe you do, but I don’t!”

The only parts of the first regiment that hadn’t been folded into the third were the Azure Knights, the Crimson Scales, and Master’s personal bodyguard. They had been reformed as the new Imperial Guard regiment, and their job was to protect Master and the other essential members of the demon army. Their commander was Baltze, with Shure his vice-commander. It was a bit too small in scale to be a full regiment, but Master was planning to rectify that by adding her undead soldiers to its numbers. Meanwhile, me and the other werewolves had become Demon Lord Gomoviroa’s personal troops, and our job was now to serve as her eyes and ears. Thanks to my unique position, I had authority over even the Imperial Guard regiment. Which, I supposed, was why everyone was calling me the Demon Lord’s Right Arm. I was effectively her representative.

A month after Master’s coronation, I was finally fit enough to return to active duty. Werewolves healed far faster than most other races, so the fact that it had taken me a whole month to recover was proof that the battle with the Hero had nearly killed me. Still, now that I was healed, there was no reason to keep lazing around. I decided to return to Ryunheit along with a batch of soldiers on their way to join the third regiment.

Even though Ryunheit wasn't my home, a wave of nostalgia washed over me as I gazed upon the main gates. *Guess I've gotten pretty attached to the city.* Airia was waiting for me outside the main gates, along with the various Demon Lord generals stationed here, and the captain of Ryunheit's garrison. While they were all dressed in different clothes and had different appearances, all of the people lined up before me were wearing matching black armbands. Airia had also pinned a black bouquet to her ceremonial viceroy's dress, indicating her mourning for Friedensrichter's loss. As I approached the gates she stepped forward and saluted.

"Welcome home, Sir Veight."

"My thanks for preparing such a grand reception."

As Airia was an official diplomat of the demon army, she had of course been notified of the Demon Lord's death. However, perhaps out of consideration for me, she didn't dwell on the topic for too long.

"I'm truly glad to see you return safe and sound."

"Thank you. And my apologies for making you worry."

Not only had I made Airia worry, I'd likely cause her no end of trouble in the near future. However, Friedensrichter's death was still being kept a secret from the other humans, so I couldn't go into details about that here. While the garrison commander hadn't been told of the Demon Lord's death, he and his men had at least been informed that someone important had perished. I returned Airia's salute and the two of us walked together through the city's gates. As we headed to the viceroy's manor Airia turned to me and said, "You look more mature than you did when you left."

"I don't feel any more mature, just tired."

I needed to hurry up and regain my old vigor so that I could help achieve Master and Friedensrichter's dream.

My office hadn't changed one bit in the time I'd been gone. The manor's maids had kept the room clean, but nothing had been moved. I made myself a cup of green tea and heaved a sigh of relief. Melaine was busy handling the organization of all the new troops the third regiment had received, but that

wasn't my concern. After all, she was the regiment commander. *Now then, it's time I got back to my own job.*

I unfurled my map of Meraldia's southern region and pored over it. At present, Bernheinen to the northwest and Thuvan to the northeast were both safe. A combination of kentauros, vampires, and undead soldiers were protecting both. I doubted Meraldia would be able to launch an offensive from the north anytime soon, so now was the time to focus on gaining more allies in the south. As I perused the map, Airia gave me a brief explanation of the state of the south.

"Meraldia's southern half has two large main trade routes running through it." She pointed to the city of Beluza, which sat on the continent's southern tip. "The first is the southwestern road. It runs from the port of Beluza north through Ryunheit, then northwest into Bernheinen."

Airia's finger traced the trail marked on my map.

"The road follows the route our ancestors took when they first came to this continent. They built up Beluza as their capital and created a kingdom that stretched north up to Bernheinen."

I see. Oh yeah, come to think of it, Aram said something about how the people of the south were descendants of immigrants who'd come from across the sea.

"The second route is the southeastern one. This one goes from the southeastern maritime city of Lotz north up to Shardier, then from Shardier to Thuvan. This route connects to the northern half of Meraldia as well, but..." Airia lowered her voice and continued, "Because of that, there were many citizens from the north who used it to immigrate to the south. The constant flow of people leaving the north and entering the south was one of the main issues that sparked the Meraldian Unification War."

Ah, that explains why Shardier's especially hostile to the north. Airia grimaced and added, "Though you might have a hard time understanding such long-standing human grudges, Sir Veight."

Don't worry. I used to be human, too.

Airia then pointed to Beluza and said, "Beluza's also known as the pirate city.

It barely follows Meraldia's laws, but it's also the largest city on the southern half of the continent, so it's hard to restrict their freedom."

"How large is it exactly?"

The larger its population was, the more resources and soldiers it would be able to produce. Airia grinned.

"It has a civilian population of two thousand."

"That's not that much... Wait, civilian population?"

Is the non-civilian population really big or something? Airia's grin grew wider and she said, "Correct, there are only two thousand civilians living in Beluza."

"And how many non-civilians?"

"A little over ten thousand."

Seriously!?

"So if they're not civilians, what are they?"

"Well, I guess you could still call them civilians."

"Okay, now you're not making any sense."

Still smiling, Airia apologized, "Sorry for phrasing it in such a confusing manner. Put simply, they're illegal immigrants."

"Illegal immigrants?"

This might have been biased of me, but illegal immigrants didn't exactly have the best reputation.

"Is Beluza really alright having that large a population of illegal immigrants?"

"It is indeed. While they might have arrived in the city illegally, most of the immigrants have been living there for generations now."

Honestly, that just made me more worried. Regardless, if it had a population that large, it wasn't a city I could afford to ignore. While Beluza was a good distance from Ryunheit, it was still the city's closest southern neighbor.

"Well, I guess we better start negotiating with them soon, then. Lady Airia, would you be willing to go as our official diplomat?"

“Gladly.”

She was still smiling. From the looks of it, she really enjoyed surprising me.

“But first, I’d like to hear more about this city. What kinds of people are these illegal immigrants exactly?”

Before Airia could respond, Nibert—the younger Garney brother—barged into my office.

“Veight, there’s some weirdo at the southern gate! Who the hell is he!?”

“Seeing as I’ve been here the whole time, how the hell would I know?”

Realizing his mistake, Nibert quickly explained the situation to me, “H-He’s a skeleton!”

“You sure he’s not just one of Master’s undead soldiers?”

Nibert shook his head.

“No, he’s different. He can *talk*. Brother’s trying to deal with him, but he keeps talking about...”

“About what?”

“A-About stuff that doesn’t make sense.”

Oh, so that’s *who it is.* Sighing, I waved languidly at Nibert.

“I know who it is... I’ll go deal with him in a bit.”

Nibert gave me a strange look, then nodded hesitantly.

“O-Okay. In that case, I’ll go help my brother out. You better hurry, though!”

I stood up and dragged my feet out the door. I really didn’t want to talk to him.

As I reached the southern gate, I found my werewolves already gathered around it. With a heavy heart, I stepped forward. As I drew close, I heard a familiar voice say, “Is a mouthful still a mouthful for you even after you’ve transformed into a werewolf? In that case, would it not be to your benefit to transform every time you try a mouthful of your friend’s snacks?”

“W-Wait... now that you mention it, that makes sense, doesn’t it?” Garbert

responded somewhat hesitantly. A frivolous voice answered him.

“A splendid answer, my boy! Wait, are you perchance older than I am? I suppose in that case you should be the one calling me, your boy.”

“Huh? Why would I do that?”

“I suppose you could call me your girl if you so desired. Though despite appearances, I am a man. Can’t you see how silky smooth my skin is?”

“What skin...”

“Oh heavens, I forgot to shed my second skin. Behold, my unblemished pale beauty!”

“W-Well... you’re definitely pale at least.”

You’re not supposed to take him seriously, guys... I pushed my way through the crowd of werewolves, heading toward where the voice was coming from. *I knew it. It’s him.* He was wearing a high-class suit, and a broad-brimmed hat adorned with a feather. His gestures and mannerisms were overly flamboyant, but the effect was ruined by the fact that his face was just a skull.

“Oi, Parker.”

The skeleton whirled around with a flourish upon hearing my voice.

“If it isn’t Veight! Hello, my beloved brother!”

“I’m NOT your brother!”

The other werewolves started whispering to each other.

“Wait, that skeleton’s the boss’ brother?”

“They don’t look anything alike...”

“Why’s his brother a skeleton, anyway?”

Do you guys realize how stupid you sound right now?

“We’re not related. This is Parker the Mysterious. He’s another one of Master’s disciples, and a former human necromancer. Technically he’s one of the demon army’s generals.”

Just saying that tired me out. Parker’s jaw clacked loudly as he spoke.

“Indeed! I am Parker, wearer of parkas!”

“Please stop, your puns are terrible.”

Parker hung his head and started drawing circles in the ground with a bony finger.

“Don’t you think you’re being a bit too mean to your gentle older brother?”

“How many times do I have to tell you we’re not related just because we’re fellow disciples!?”

God, this guy’s annoying. What’s he even been up to this whole time? Before I could ask, Parker swiveled his head toward me.

“Oh, are you perhaps suspicious that I’ve been away frolicking while you were hard at work?”

I never understood how he was so good at reading my mind.

“Hahaha, despite appearances I am still one of the third regiment’s loyal vice-commanders! Naturally, I have been working myself to the bone for the prosperity of the demon army. Though I suppose I’m nothing but bone!”

Finally, a chance to shut him up!

“Sorry, but we’ve abandoned the vice-commander system. Right now, you’re just Parker, Gomoviroa’s disciple.”

“Huh?”

Parker fell silent, a confused look on his face. I turned back to the werewolves gathered around us and clapped my hands and said, “Alright everyone, go back to your posts! I’ll take care of this clown!”

That seemed to jolt them back to their senses, and they slowly dispersed. Though they were still clearly confused. *God, it’s so hard to hold a proper conversation with Parker...* I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him back to my office.

“Under Master’s orders, I traveled to the city of Beluza in the south. It was her wish that I establish an alliance with the mermaids living there.”

Parker poured himself a cup of my green tea without permission as he spoke.

“And were you able to?”

“Not in the least.” Parker guffawed, his bony jaw clacking. “The mermaids are pacifists through and through, you see. And when I told them we’d like to work with them even if they have no intention to fight, they told me they couldn’t travel on land.”

That made sense. They were mermaids, after all.

“So then I told them it would be fine if only half of them came.”

“Half?”

“Indeed, just their upper halves.”

“Please tell me you didn’t actually say that.”

Parker guffawed again, “They nearly drowned me for that one.”

“You’re a skeleton, you can’t drown.”

Master, I really don’t think you should send this guy on diplomatic missions. Parker stared at the steam coming from the tea he’d poured himself and said lightly, “Alas, I must leave the honorable task of cajoling the mermaids to you. Knowing you, you will be attacking Beluza soon in order to strengthen your hold over the south, will you not?”

“I was planning on attempting talks with them before going for the violent option.”

If we could bring them over to our side peacefully, that’d be ideal.

“But seriously, how badly did you make the mermaids hate you if you’re pushing negotiating with them onto me?”

“You wound me! Ah, but I suppose I can no longer be wounded.”

For the love of God, just stop. Incidentally, that particular pun was one I’d heard dozens of times.

“Oh, but that doesn’t necessarily mean I am incapable of feeling pain. Though I digress.”

“Whatever, just go home.”

I waved him away and tried to formulate a plan on how to deal with Beluza, but Parker wasn't done yet.

"By the way, I heard you defeated the Hero and took revenge for the Demon Lord?"

"You heard wrong. The Demon Lord practically killed the Hero himself, I just happened to land the finishing blow."

"Oho..."

Oh great, he's about to get started on one of his rants again, isn't he? If he makes fun of the Demon Lord I'm seriously going to punch his lights out. However, Parker took off his hat, pressed it against his breast, and bowed low.

"You have my gratitude, Veight. You truly are the pride of Gomoviroa's students."

"Huh?"

"I, too, was fond of the late Demon Lord. There was something truly soothing about spending time with him. He was not only a powerful demon, but a visionary. There exist precious few like him."

It felt like it had been ages since I'd last heard Parker's serious voice. He scratched his skull awkwardly and muttered, "How unfortunate that I no longer possess the ability to cry."

"Parker..."

Parker scrunched up his cap and looked solemnly at the ground. After a few moments of silence, he looked up at me and said, "I'm proud to have a younger brother as outstanding as you."

The fact that he didn't come at me with another pun proved how deeply he was grieving. I walked over to him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You're not my brother, but you are a good teacher."

After another minute of quiet reflection, Parker donned his hat.

"Well, I can't stay down in the dumps forever. If even I'm depressed, the whole army's morale will drop. After all, it is a jester's duty to entertain his

guests even when he himself is crying tears of sorrow."

"Except you're annoying, not entertaining. Besides, didn't you just say you can't cry?"

"Hahaha, well played."

What do you mean, well played? Parker headed for the door and said in his usual cheery voice, "If you plan on visiting Beluza, allow me to accompany you. I can, at the very least, be your guide."

"You kind of stand out too much for a covert visit."

"Oh, you mean this outfit of mine? Never fear, I have prepared quite the fashionable disguise."

"I'm talking about your face, you buffoon!"

How the hell am I going to negotiate if I'm bringing a walking skeleton with me? The moment I said that, Parker's skull-face vanished, only to be replaced by the visage of a handsome man. It took me a few seconds to register the transformation. While I was still blinking away the surprise, Parker said in a frivolous voice, "Impressive, is it not? I have been studying illusion magic as of late. While I cannot yet replicate the sensation and warmth of a human face, I can at least perfectly recreate the look."

"Of all the faces out there, why'd you pick that one?"

"This was the face I possessed when I yet walked the mortal plane. Considering how much time has passed since my death I suppose I should look much older, but alas, I lack the skill to create an elderly face."

Had he really looked so handsome during his lifetime? Even though he was such a joker?



“What do you think? Among Master’s disciples, surely there are none as proficient in the illusory arts as I? Perhaps I should stop studying necromancy and become a master of illusions instead.”

Oh yeah, this guy doesn’t know about Lacy yet.

“Master’s newest disciple is actually a master illusionist. She was able to raise fake walls around Ryunheit so realistic you could touch them.”

“Do... Do you speak truly?”

Finally, I’d managed to surprise him. Though the fact that he was able to replicate even expressions was rather impressive. Parker folded his arms and dispelled his illusion.

“A-At any rate... now that you’ve seen my illusion, surely you have no objections to my accompanying you?”

Honestly, I had a hard time refusing Parker anything.

“Well, I guess it’s not like you have any other jobs to be doing. Fine, you can come.”

“Hahaha, I knew I could count on you, brother.”

“Seriously, give the whole brother thing a rest! And don’t you dare butt into my negotiations. If you mess things up I’ll dump you into the sea!”

“Understood. You can put your faith in me. Literally, my body’s hollow.”

“Oh, shut up.”

While he acted like an empty-headed clown, Parker was actually quite reliable. In fact, I’d relied on him more than once in the past. He was one of Gomoviroa’s best pupils, and a master of necromancy. Which was why his usual frivolous attitude pissed me off so much. *Damn worthless older brother.*

Before heading out, I collected as much information on Beluza as I could. I also gathered all the materials and people I felt I’d need for this mission. As a result, a certain merchant ended up joining the delegation as well.

“I expected you would call for me soon,” Mao grumbled as he packed his bags. “You understand that I buy my salt from Lotz and not Beluza, correct?”

“But you still sell salt to Beluza, don’t you?”

Sighing, Mao replied, “I suppose that’s true. Beluza’s viceroy is a loyal customer of mine.”

I’d put Mao’s trading company in charge of procuring all the supplies we’d need for this trip, making my job a lot easier. It also gave us the perfect cover story. We could meet Beluza’s viceroy under the guise of salt traders. Mao glared at me as he folded a set of robes.

“Is there a problem?”

“I will take full responsibility for seeing you to Beluza, but in return I expect you to pay for our travel expenses.”

“Don’t worry. I plan on paying you and everyone else I’m bringing along for your troubles. And as a bonus, we’ll guard your caravan along the way.”

There was nothing more reliable than a team of werewolf bodyguards. Next to Mao, the former fake Holy Priestess Lacy fidgeted uncomfortably.

“Umm, do I have to come too?”

“Yeah, we’ll be needing your illusion magic, Lacy. I’d prefer it if you could come.”

Lacy’s illusions were detailed enough that she could easily fool anyone who wasn’t a mage. If things turned sour, we’d need her help to flee the city. Even if they didn’t, she might come in handy if I needed to intimidate the viceroy. Besides, she was a former government official. The very fact that we’d recruited a former Senate aide to our side would be a powerful negotiating tool. However, she was still a novice when it came to negotiating.

“Listen up, don’t try anything crazy, okay? And while we’re negotiating don’t say anything unless I give you permission.”

“O-Okay.” Lacy nodded vigorously. “I don’t really trust myself anyway, so I’ll just do whatever you say, Veight! I’ll be quiet, too!”

“Good. Don’t worry, if anything happens, I’ll protect you.”

“Thank you!”

Her skills as a mage were top-notch, but I wish she'd be more confident in herself. All that was left now was to deal with that self-proclaimed brother of mine.

"This is rock salt, you say? Why would anyone sell salt to a city that specializes in producing it? Oho, so rock salt tastes different from sea salt? Let me have a taste."

"Mister Parker, you can still taste things?"

"Of course not, I have no tongue after all! Hahahaha!"

God, he's so annoying. Since none of these members would be any use in a fight, I'd also picked two werewolf squads to accompany me on the journey. Among them were the Garney brothers and Monza. I'd picked the Garneys because they were plenty strong even in their human forms. Meaning they'd be a valuable asset even in places where transforming wouldn't be advisable. Monza, on the other hand, was the best spy I had. With her around, I didn't have to worry about being snuck up on by assassins, or tailed without my knowledge.

"Hey, bro, I heard Beluza's in this place called the sea."

"That's right. The sea's like a huuuuge lake, except it's also salty."

"Wow, you know everything!"

"That's not all. The sea's also got these huge waves, and they always crash into the city."

"Whoa, that sounds scary. Does that mean Beluza's underwater?"

"Nah, there's no way a city could... Hey, Veight, Beluza's not underwater, is it!?"

No, you idiots. The water pulls back after the waves hit land. Honestly, I'd wanted to bring along a few more demons skilled in negotiation, but the few of those we had were busy managing other cities.

"Leave negotiations to me! I'll have you know I have quite the eloquent tongue. Though I suppose I no longer have a tongue!" Parker tried to clap me on the shoulder, but I grabbed him by his shirt and dragged him over to a

nearby box. “Oh my, what is the meaning of this, brother of mine?”

“I figured we’d be able to fit you in a box if we take you apart. You’ll be more portable that way.”

“How could you ever think of turning your precious older brother into a shut-in(to a box)!?”

“It’s because I want to make you mine and mine alone. Anyway, someone get me a hammer and some nails.”

I wasn’t really planning on shutting him into a box, but it’d be nice to have the threat available if necessary. Parker slumped into the box and looked despondently up at me.

“You’ve become a lot meaner since you first became Master’s disciple...”

“And whose fault do you think that is!?”

Once our preparations were complete, our caravan set out for Beluza. For this trip, we’d be taking horses instead of a carriage. The road was patrolled and maintained, so I didn’t expect any trouble.

“Our ancestors made Beluza their base of operations when they first arrived in this continent and began expanding to the north. As you can see, there were few areas nearby suitable for growing crops,” Mao explained as he bounced up and down on his horse. “As they traveled further north, they built cities on the plains to serve as relay points between the explorers and Beluza. One such relay point was Ryunheit.”

Airia had told me the same thing. However, this was a good opportunity to hear Mao’s take on the current state of Beluza.

“So Ryunheit and Beluza are like sister cities, then?”

“They are. As we share common ancestors, the cultures and values of both cities are quite similar. Though the distance between us has weakened our relationship somewhat...”

Still, that was good news for me. It’d make negotiating easier. Since we were already on the subject, I decided to ask Mao about the north as well.

“So if the people of the south immigrated from across the sea, where’d the

northerners come from?”

I’d asked Airia the same question, but she hadn’t known. However Mao had spent a lot of time trading in the north, so perhaps he’d heard some stories. Mao frowned and said, “To be honest with you... I’m not sure.”

“But you trade with the north a lot, don’t you? Haven’t you heard any origin stories from the people you do business with?”

“I have, but the thing is everyone’s told me a different story.”

Mao shrugged his shoulders. “One trader told me that they were natives to this land while another said that they’d traveled across the mountains in the north, fleeing a crumbling empire. Yet another told me they had gathered here because God had told them it was the promised land.”

Those were wildly differing accounts, alright. There was no way to know which one was true, or if there was a kernel of truth hidden in all of them. Either way, it was clear their ancestors weren’t the same as the people of the south’s.

I was starting to see why there was so much discord between the two sides. It wasn’t just about grievances of the past, both people had differing experiences and cultural values. I nodded to Mao with a sigh, and he asked, “Now do you see just how tenuous the existence of the Meraldian Federation is?”

“Yeah. All too well, actually. Honestly, I’m amazed someone managed to unite all these cities into one country.” Mao gave me a smile. “You’re an interesting man, you know that?”

“How so?”

“I never imagined a demon to understand our internal discord. However, you are quite an empathetic demon, Lord Veight.”

Well, I was a human once before. I’d lived a pretty carefree life since reincarnating, though, so I never thought I’d end up dealing with ancient racial conflicts. After hearing all this, I realized it was smarter to focus on conquering just the south first. If all the southern cities saw the north as their enemy, the atrocities we committed there wouldn’t close the door to negotiating. If anything, they’d help. When all was said and done, Master was human too, so

she'd understand if I explained all this to her. However, Mao was right in assuming that normal demons would be unable to comprehend such grudges. Just thinking about how I'd have to explain this to the other demon generals made my head hurt.

It appeared Mao had more to say on the topic too, and he added, "I've heard that it was the north who was desperate to win the Meraldian Unification War. For whatever reason, they absolutely wanted to have the south under their control."

"I take it that's what the people of the south say?"

"Indeed."

Then it was probably best to take that story with a grain of salt. The way Mao told it, the south had just wanted to be left alone, but the north had wanted everyone to join under the same alliance no matter what. In the end, the north had won, and the south had been forced to become part of Meraldia. I could see why the south was unhappy with that. But I doubted the people of the north were unilaterally evil, so they likely must have had their own reasons for forcing the alliance onto everyone. Though whatever those reasons were, they hadn't told the south. *I wonder why they'd been so desperate...*

We camped out in the open that night. The road we were traveling was well-maintained, and there were plenty of suitable camping locations off to the side of the road. It reminded me of the camping trails we'd had in national parks back on earth. By arraying our wagons in a ring around our campground, we were also able to create a makeshift barricade to defend against any surprise bandit attacks. It'd be a problem if someone started shooting fire arrows into our wagons, but since most bandits were after loot, I doubted they'd want to destroy what they came to steal.

It was always possible they might sneak up and steal our cargo while we slept, but that wouldn't be too huge a loss. If they were going to steal our stuff quietly, they'd only be able to carry away so much. It probably wouldn't even put a small dent in Mao's profits. Bandits knew if they were too aggressive people would stop using the highways they roamed, and even worse, cities would send out armies to flush them out. It was common wisdom among them

not to go overboard.

"Most of the bandits roaming this area are people who were exiled from their tribes or the nearby cities. They're civilized enough to negotiate with," Mao explained as we set up camp. "Salt is a necessary part of everyone's diet, so it's even more valuable than hard coin. If needed, we can always relinquish some as tribute."

That being said, Mao had no intention of giving bandits any of his precious rock salt. All they'd be getting was sea salt.

"Each bandit group has their own territory, and I've already paid the ones who control this highway enough to buy us safe passage."

Oh, so that's why you were talking to that group of shady looking guys earlier. This way Mao didn't have to worry about being attacked, and the bandits got what they wanted.

"But don't you still hire guards, normally?"

"Of course. They're leverage to help convince the bandits it's in their best interests to just quietly accept our tribute rather than fight us for our cargo."

I pointed to the sword strapped at Mao's belt.

"Do you actually know how to use that thing?"

"I learned a bit of swordplay from one of the warriors in the merchant's guild. Though, I am proud to say I've never needed to use it before."

That's something to be proud of?

"It is my opinion that any conflict that can be resolved without violence."

Ah, I get it now. So never having to fight is the pride of a merchant. As we were serving as Mao's guards for this trip, I had my werewolves alternate the watch, just in case.

"Would you like me to take charge of the caravan's security?"

While I appreciated Parker's offer, I shook my head and replied, "If we do things your way we'll scare the merchants to death."

Necromancy tended to terrify non-mages. After making sure the Garney

brothers were keeping watch properly, I returned to the campfire. Naturally, Parker followed and sat across from me.

“Oi, why’re you here? Go to sleep.”

“I’m afraid I’ve already fallen into a slumber from which I will never wake.”

He was just waiting for a chance to say that, wasn’t he? It wouldn’t have been so bad if he hadn’t used the same joke four times already. *Have some originality at least.* Seeing my lackluster reaction, Parker drooped a little.

“I suppose that joke is getting old... Perhaps it’s time I thought up new ones.”

“I’d prefer it if you never make another bad pun again, personally.”

Joking aside, there was actually something about necromancy that I wanted to ask Parker. But it was a rather sensitive topic, so I didn’t know how to bring it up. *Maybe I’ll just ask Melaine when I get back to Ryunheit.* Parker studied my expression, and then, as if he’d read my thoughts, said, “If there’s something you wish to inquire of me, don’t hold back on my account, my dear brother.”

I’m terrible at keeping a poker face, huh? Though even if I wasn’t, it was hard to keep secrets from Parker. Now that he’d figured me out, there was no point in holding back.

“What do you think will happen to Master?”

This had been weighing on my mind since the coronation ceremony. Right now, the demon army absolutely needed Gomoviroa. Not only was she the only one who truly understood the old Demon Lord’s will, but she was also our most powerful demon. I didn’t even want to think about what would happen to the army if the fact that she’d crossed the final threshold began to change her. More importantly, though, I personally didn’t want anything to happen to her. I didn’t want to be forced to kill her. The mere thought was abhorrent to me. After a few moments of silent consideration, Parker answered.

“What was the answer Master gave to the question the final threshold posed to her? You’re worried precisely because you heard it, are you not?”

“She said that death is a phase in the endless cycle of energy.”

“Hmm...”

The light of the campfire gave Parker's skull an eerie glow. He shook his head and replied, "Her answer was different from mine, so I cannot be sure... but she'll probably be fine."

"Aren't you taking this a bit too lightly?"

I was worried Parker was about to pull out another terrible pun, but it seemed that wasn't the case. While his tone was light, he was still completely serious.

"Not at all. You see, I crossed the final threshold by accident. However, Master only opened the door to death after careful preparation. That's why I believe she'll be fine."

"What do you mean, you crossed by accident?"

Seeing as Parker had achieved immortality, I'd always thought he was a complete master of the necrotic arts. However, he shook his head sadly and muttered, "I told you how I suffered from a severe illness while I was still alive before, did I not?"

"Yeah. You said the reason you picked up necromancy was because of that, right?"

Going off how he'd described his symptoms to me in the past, he'd probably had tuberculosis or something similar. Most illnesses were cured by magic in this world, but you'd need to be one hell of a healer to figure out how to treat tuberculosis. Even I didn't know how to cure it.

"Indeed. As the end drew near, I became even more desperate. I threw myself into my research, frantically searching for a way to evade the reaper."

Then, just before his death, Parker had crossed the final threshold.

"To me, life was a complex puzzle—a maze. A maze one can traverse only so long as one still draws breath. And at the end of that labyrinth lay the secrets to surpassing life and death."

So that's why he's called Parker the Labyrinthine.

"And you found those secrets?"

That was a redundant question, since if he hadn't he wouldn't be sitting in

front of me right now. But to my surprise, Parker shook his head.

“I have indeed surpassed death. When I escaped the labyrinth, I escaped the clutches of the reaper.” The flickering flames illuminated Parker’s expression. “But there was nothing there. No hidden answer to the mysteries of life and death. Beyond the maze lay nothingness. A vast, empty void. There was no happiness, no sadness, practically no emotions at all.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

Parker’s analogy was a bit too abstract for me. It sounded like he was saying he lost all his emotions, but he was far too cheery and annoying for that to be true. Parker scratched his skull and tried to clarify, “I suppose that would be a difficult explanation to grasp. Let me see... To put it simply, the maze’s exit did not lead where I expected it to.”

“Okay, now you’ve simplified it too much.”

That explanation was just as unhelpful, only for different reasons. Parker folded his arms and thought about how to convey what he’d found.

“Hmm, it’s hard to find the words to explain it to a strengthening mage such as yourself. When I escaped the maze I believed I’d achieved my goal, but in truth, it was the opposite.” Parker threw a branch into the fire and looked up at me. “I wanted to solve the mysteries of life and death, but crossing the threshold just brought me even further from the truth. In fact, it left me stuck in a void where I would forever be denied the answers I sought. Does that make more sense?”

“Not really...”

I knew necromancers were philosophers, but that didn’t make it any easier to understand their ramblings. All I got out of Parker’s explanation was that he’d messed up bad, and there was no undoing the mistake.

“Suffice it to say, I failed. However, it appears our esteemed Master did not. Which is why there’s no need to worry! Simple enough?”

“I guess, but...”

While that did allay my worries regarding Master, now I was worried about

Parker.

“So then, are you okay?”

“Me? Fear not, I am fine.” Parker clacked his jaws together in a strange facsimile of laughter. “You see, there’s something the previous Demon Lord told me back before I had officially joined the army. ‘If all you found is emptiness, that means you are free to fill it with whatever you wish.’”

Okay, now this makes even less sense.

“His words opened my eyes. Crossing the threshold had given me the freedom to choose my own path. If I wanted to tell horrible puns, I could. If I wanted to make illusions that looked like my old self, I could. If I wanted to annoy my cute little brother, I could!”

“You wanna repeat that last one?”

I raised a fist, and Parker held up his hands in mock surrender.

“At any rate, this is why I’ve started to think that having an eternity full of nothing isn’t so bad. Hahaha!”

“Don’t try to change the subject on me. I’m not letting that one go.”

“And the reason I pun so often is because I wish to share my humor with others! I have to make the most of what few emotions I have left, after all!”

“Oh no, you’re not deflecting me this time.”

I grabbed Parker’s shoulders and shook him hard. However, he just kept laughing without a care in the world.

* * * *

—Parker’s Recollections—

I still remember the day you became one of Master’s disciples. You looked a little nervous, but mostly I remember the deep resolve in your gaze. Your dazzling radiance was too bright for these old, empty eye sockets. To me, you were like an arrow of light, shooting headlong toward the future. It made me, who’d been frozen in time all these years, a little jealous.

“So you’re Veight. I’m Parker. Master’s second disciple.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mister Parker!”

From our very first conversation, you stirred my heart. Or you would have, if I still possessed a heart. My emotions withered so long ago that I couldn’t even remember what these feelings were. Since crossing the final threshold, I had lost all but a few of my negative emotions. Which of course meant that whatever I felt then had to be a positive one. Whatever that feeling was, it was a comforting one. I wanted to bask in it for a while longer, at least until I remembered what it was.

“Oh yes, would you like me to tell you who you were in your past life? A necromancer of my considerable talents can do so with ease.”

“Wha!? N-No thanks! I’m not interested in necromancy anyway!”

Then why are you studying under a famed necromancer? I must say, young Veight, your reactions are surprisingly entertaining to watch. Wait. Surprising? Entertaining? I can’t recall the last time such words applied to me.

“Parker, stop teasing the newbie. Don’t worry, even necromancers can’t read people’s past lives. In fact, we’re not even sure reincarnation exists or not.”

Oh Melaine, must you always ruin my fun? Well, I suppose seeing how flustered the poor boy is, I can let him off the hook for now. After all, it would be more fun to pull the rug out from under him when he least expects it. Wait. Fun? Oh my... it’s almost as if I’ve returned to the person I was when I was still alive.

In the years following, I searched for the reason my emotions resurfaced. No, perhaps it would be more apt to say I pretended to search for them. I had, in fact, realized it long ago. The time I spent with Veight had returned them to me, but because I was so clingy, he began to grow distant.

“Oi, Parker, you’re getting in the way of my training, so shove off.”

“You wish to shove me off a cliff, you say? Feel free. I’m already dead so it won’t even hurt!”

“Can’t you at least make a better pun out of that one?”

Haha, you’re sulking, but I know you’re secretly happy I give you so much attention. Though I suppose I should *think up some better jokes for the future.*

“Anyway, do you know where the spirit-sealing charm is, Parker?”

“Indeed, it sits in that purple box over there. What do you need it for?”

“I was hoping to let you rest in peace...”

“You want to use them on me!?”

In retrospect, I probably was a bit too attached to him. I just hope it didn’t make him hate me too much. Being hated by Veight would make me sad, after all.

Looking over now, I saw him sleeping peacefully in his bedroll by the campfire. *Don’t catch a cold now, you hear? Taking care of you’s quite troublesome. Besides, then we’d have to send you back, and we all know how easily you get lonely.*

I unrolled another blanket and covered him with it. I didn’t need sleep, so I could stay up all night. *Sleep well, Veight, I’ll be here keeping watch.*

I threw another branch into the fire and looked up at the stars. Life became rather dull when Veight was sleeping. There was so much I wanted to say to him that a day’s worth of talking wasn’t enough. But I suppose I’ll save the fun for tomorrow. I just wish the sun would rise already.

* * * *

We traveled for a few more days after that. After cresting the last mountain in the range that divided Ryunheit and Beluza, we finally caught our first glimpse of the sea.

“Oh, there’s the sea.”

A vast blue expanse stretched out toward the horizon. This was my first time seeing the sea since reincarnating. Though Mao and his fellow traders had gotten used to the ocean, my fellow werewolves and Lacy were all awed by the sight. As they looked down at the sparkling azure waves, they gave voice to their thoughts.

“So that’s the ocean... it’s nothing like I thought it would be.”

“Holy shit, it’s huge. I can’t even see the far shore...”

“Are you sure this isn’t just an illusion of some sort?”

I guess I should have expected that reaction from Lacy, seeing as she’s an illusionist and all.

“Let’s go, guys. I guarantee it looks even more impressive up close.”

Mao cocked his head and gave me a quizzical look.

“Sir Veight, isn’t this your first time seeing the ocean?”

Crap, I messed up again.

“W-Well... that’s what Master told me, at least.”

“I see.”

Thank God I became the disciple of a great sage. People will believe anything if I say Master told me about it. Or so I’d thought, but I’d let my guard down. For there was another one of Master’s disciples here.

“Oh my, Master even told you about the sea? I wish she’d been as varied in her education with—”

I forcibly shut Parker’s mouth and hurried everyone along.

“Come on, let’s go. We don’t want to waste any more time here.”

“I-I suppose so...”

The pirate city of Beluza had been built in the shape of a crescent, following the shape of the bay it opened into. Though it did have walls, most of the city’s protection came from the high peaks that surrounded it. The walls were short enough that an invading werewolf army could easily scale them if they were coming down the mountainside. The city sloped downward a little to the south, letting it catch all of the blazing afternoon sun. Furthermore, its harbor seemed to be bustling. That being said, there were an awful lot of boats milling about. *Are those all the illegal citizens Airia was talking about?*

Our party headed toward the main gates on horseback. As we grew closer, it became clear that the city was a disorganized jumble. Streets crisscrossed at random intervals, and buildings of wildly differing sizes stood next to each other. I admit I might be a little biased, but the city didn’t seem all that safe

either.

A rugged group of armed men approached us as we arrived at the gate. For a moment I thought they were pirates, but it turned out these were the city's guards. And here I'd been ready to call the city guard *on* them. Mao handled the formalities, and we were permitted into the city without incident. As we walked past, I decided to make my intentions clear.

"My name is Veight, Vice-Commander to Demon Lord Gomoviroa. I would like to meet with Beluza's Viceroy."

Everyone in the vicinity froze.

"Sir Veight, I really would prefer it if you would stop announcing yourself to every city we visit."

Mao sighed as he watched the nearby townspeople flee in terror.

It didn't take long for an army of garrison troops to push their way toward us. Thanks to Mao's skillful mediation, they agreed to escort us to the viceroy's manor, albeit under heavy guard. I'd wanted to enjoy the view on my way there, but now all I got to see was a bunch of hairy dudes around me. *I was looking forward to seeing what a different world's ocean looked like, too.* The troops escorting us whispered to each other in hushed tones, but my superior hearing caught every word.

"Th-That guy's the butcher of four thousand?"

"Not only did he kill four thousand men, he blew up Thuvan's walls."

"They call him Hero-Slayer Veight... he's buried dozens of Heroes already."

"L-Listen up, you cowards. You better defend the viceroy with your life."

"I'll see you in the afterlife, buddy."

The south's been the picture of peace for the past few months, these rumors are uncalled for! The viceroy's manor stood at the top of Beluza's Hill, the city's tallest point and namesake.

Me, Mao, Lacy, Parker, and my werewolf guards were escorted to an open terrace that overlooked the sea. As we took in the gentle sound of waves crashing against the beach and the dazzling sunlight pouring down on us, a

stern-faced old man came out to greet us.

"I am Garsh, the Viceroy of Beluza. What business does the demon army have with me?"

Garsh had the appearance of a pirate king, which was fitting since this was known as the pirate city. *This guy's definitely made some people walk the plank in his time.* Burly, muscular bodyguards flanked the viceroy, further cementing my image of him as a pirate lord. Or maybe a mafia boss. Granted, if I gave the order my 8 werewolves would make mincemeat out of his 20 guards, so the effect wasn't as intimidating as he probably hoped. I got the feeling this guy might be hard to deal with, but it wasn't like I could leave negotiating to anyone else. Sipping the tea one of the maids had brought me, I sucked in a deep breath. I'd messed up big time with Aram, so I figured this time it'd be better to speak more naturally.

"Lord Garsh, I'll get straight to the point. Would you be willing to ally with the demon army?"

"Oho." Garsh folded his arms and stroked his beard. "If we ally ourselves with the demon army, we'll be making enemies of Meraldia. As it is, it's uncertain who would make for a scarier foe."

I'm pretty sure we're the scarier enemy here. But if I said that, it'd come out sounding like a threat. And this guy didn't seem like the kind of person who'd cave to threats. The fact that he was so confident even while dealing with a werewolf proved he had guts. Picking my words carefully, I responded, "Right now, Ryunheit, Bernheinen, and Thuvan are all under the demon army's control. Furthermore, we've allied ourselves with Shardier."

"Yeah, I know. I've already heard about how you helped that whelp out. My thanks for that, kid."

This pirate king was more informed than he looked.

"Truth is, I already talked to Aram in secret. He told me the demon army's someone we can trust."

Nice going, Aram. I hadn't expected him to open up negotiations of his own.

"But see here, Airia and Aram both lack experience when it comes to being

viceroy. So sorry, but just because they recommended you doesn't mean I hafta trust you."

Considering his position, that was the natural reply. Meaning I had to really sell this alliance to him.

"In that case, Lord Garsh, let me just say this. If, as planned, the demon army is able to win over the rest of the southern cities, Beluza will be completely isolated from the north." If that was all I had to say, it'd just sound like a threat, but I wasn't done yet. "However, even were that to happen, we have no intention of cutting off your trade routes to the north. Our goal is not to make the people of Meraldia suffer."

"What?"

Garsh's eyes went wide with surprise. He'd likely never heard of a potential enemy straight up promising not to cut off their trade routes. Even Parker seemed taken aback by my declaration.

"Are you sure you want to promise something like that?"

"It's fine. Both the Demon Lord and Lady Airia have agreed to this proposal."

In all honesty, even if we cut off their land routes, Beluza could always use the sea to ship goods to Lotz. And even if Lotz joined the demon army, it would be easy for them to trade with nations other than Meraldia. So long as we had no means to enact a naval blockade, cutting off Beluza's trade routes would be an empty gesture. In which case, we were better off earning Beluza's goodwill by not doing so.

Besides, letting them trade, but levying a toll on them, would be more beneficial to us in the long run. Plus, if I had to, I could always have my werewolves dress up as bandits and start raiding Beluza's caravans. That would be a much more effective way of crippling their economy. I doubted I'd need to take measures that drastic, but it was always good to leave your options open. At any rate, it seemed Garsh still hadn't recovered from his shock.

"I don't understand. What did you come here for!?"

"To try and forge an alliance, of course."

The fact that he was this surprised came as a surprise to me. Arms still folded, Garsh lapsed into thought. After a few minutes he asked, “Then why have you blockaded our seas?”

“We haven’t?”

Now it was my turn to be surprised. Considering it’d be pretty obvious if I lied, I decided to come clean about the state of the demon army’s navy.

“Unfortunately, the demon army has no navy of its own. Even if we wanted to, we couldn’t blockade your seas.”

Garsh gave me an odd look.

“You mean the mermaids aren’t part of the demon army?”

They aren’t. Because a certain skeleton here failed to persuade them. I shot Parker a sidelong glance and he innocently looked away.

“Oi, Parker. What the hell is this?”

“It’s as I told you, Veight. The mermaids said they dislike violence and so would not be joining the demon army.” Parker, who was in his handsome guy disguise, replied in a confused tone. Seeing our exchange, Garsh, too, grew confused.

“The mermaids don’t wanna fight us? Then why in the bloody hells are our ships going missing? I thought this was all the work of the demon army!”

It appeared Beluza had run into quite a rough patch. This was something I could use as leverage.

“Veight, you do realize everyone can see the wicked grin creeping up your face right now, right?”

“Can you just shut up for a minute?”

After I shut Parker up, I turned back to Garsh.

“It appears you seem to be having some trouble. We’d like to help, if possible.”

“Now that sounds shady...”

Garsh gave me a suspicious glare. *I promise we’re not secretly behind this and*

just trying to get the credit for solving your problems. Not this time, at least. Garsh examined our faces one after another, then sighed dramatically.

"Not like you boys are giving me much choice. Fine, I'll consider joining your alliance. But only if you do something about the mermaids."

"Then we have a deal."

I'll have you know, you never want to be indebted to the demon army. Though, it's good for us, so please keep asking us favors. Now then, let's see how hard it'll be to solve these pirates' problems.

After negotiations were over, Garsh said something about how caring for guests was a viceroy's job and ordered one of his men to prepare us rooms. Meanwhile, he took us to a nearby restaurant for a meal. It was more of a bar than a restaurant, but the smell of sizzling seafood was delicious enough to leave me drooling.

"All that stuffy negotiation can come later. For now, let's eat!"

Garsh led us to the restaurant's largest table. Seeing as the rest of the tables were empty, I assumed he'd reserved the whole place for the night. Including me, our party consisted of 12 people. On the other hand, Garsh had come here alone. I was amazed he was able to act so calm at a table full of demons. It seemed his guards—who were waiting near the restaurant's entrance—shared my sentiment, as they'd gone completely pale. As I was marveling at Garsh's courage, our food arrived.

"Most of what we've got to eat here is seafood, so I don't know if it'll suit your tastes."

Despite what Garsh had said, all the food looked delicious. Especially since I hadn't had seafood in a long time. Plates of fried shrimp and mushrooms, stir-fried scallops, and fish stew lined the table. Most of the dishes resembled ones I'd had back in Japan.

"At any rate, I'm tired of haggling and negotiating. My personal motto's 'feed diplomats well, and everything will go smoothly.' Whaddaya think? Good motto, right?"

"Definitely."

I took a sip of some garlic shrimp soup as I gave Garsh an enthusiastic reply. Most of the food had a Mediterranean flair to it. Aside from Mao, no one else from Ryunheit's delegation had had seafood before. Lacy and the other werewolves exchanged timid glances before poking at their food.

"Hey, Veight, I think this soup has bugs in it..."

"Those are shrimp. They taste good, I promise."

"Veight, what are these lumpy things?"

"Those look like fish eggs to me. I don't know which fish they're from, though."

Why is everyone asking me all these questions? This was my first time eating seafood since reincarnating, so I wanted to enjoy it without being interrupted. *Thank God I was reborn as a werewolf. I can eat as much as I want without getting full.* I ate with gusto, all thoughts of negotiating gone. Garsh grinned as he watched me wolf down my food.

"Damn, kid! Do all werewolves eat as much as you!?"

"Yeah. We can eat way more than this too. So seconds, please. This food's great."

"Hahaha! So what d'you think of my chefs, kid?"

"They're some of the best I've seen."

I squeezed some lemon onto a piece of fried fish and ate it whole.

"This is the first time I've ever tasted fish this good. Get me some more!"

"Eat as much as you want, kid!"

Just then, the chef came out of the kitchen and whispered something to Garsh with a troubled expression. Sighing Garsh replied, "You're already out of food? My guests are still hungry, you can't just leave them like this."

"Sorry, boss. We have the ingredients, we just can't cook everything fast enough."

Well, it is pretty hard to feed nine werewolves at once. Even Monza, who was a light eater by werewolf standards, was currently in the process of devouring a

whole chicken. Meanwhile, the Garney brothers had tucked away a dozen plates of food. There was no way the cooks could keep up with the pace we were eating at. Seeing the chef's troubled expression, Garsh smiled ruefully.

"I guess we can't let them eat raw fish like us. It's a shame, but we'll have to make them wait."

Now that I think about it, all the food they're serving has been cooked. The chef had even used vegetables and seasoning to erase the fishy smell of most things. He'd also used ingredients Ryunheit residents would be more familiar with, like chicken and cheese. Garsh was probably trying to be considerate of us, since we'd come from across the continent. However, I at least needed no such consideration. Garsh's earlier statement implied that Beluzans ate raw fish, right?

"Hey, Garsh?"

"Yeah?"

It doesn't hurt to ask, at least.

"Do you guys eat raw fish?"

The old viceroy grinned and said, "That we do, kid. There's nothing better than a freshly caught raw fish."

This guy knew his stuff. Technically it was best to let the fish refrigerate for a while, but there wasn't refrigeration in this world, so he'd have no way of knowing that. Anyway, that wasn't what was important right now. What was important was that I could eat sashimi.

"Mind letting me try some? I'm already here, may as well see what the local delicacy is."

"Oh, you've got guts, kid." Smiling, Garsh turned to the chef and said, "Bring our guest some fish."

"Are you sure, sir?"

"Course I'm sure. Worst case, we just end up eating it instead. Now get going, we don't want to leave our guest waiting."

Garsh watched me with a wicked grin as the chef returned to the kitchen. He

was probably expecting me to gag. I didn't expect to see such an immature side of him. Soon enough, a waiter brought over a large plate piled high with fresh fish.

"This is our most popular assortment combo."

From the looks of it, it was more of a carpaccio than sashimi. It even came with a separate plate of dressing. I didn't know what kinds of fish these were, but they had white meat at least.

I looked up from the plate and realized everyone was staring at me. They were all interested to see how I'd react to the fish.

"Hey Veight... that's just chopped up raw fish, isn't it?" The younger Garney brother asked hesitantly. When he put it that way, I could see why it sounded unappetizing.

"Do southerners really eat this stuff? Doesn't it make them sick?"

I stopped Lacy before she could accidentally blurt out anything too rude. Insulting another culture's culinary habits was a big taboo. Garsh's grin grew wider. He and the rest of his guards were watching eagerly. They wanted to see how I'd react. Even though it had been decades since I'd last had sashimi, everyone's curious gazes made it hard to eat. I poured a little bit of dressing over the carpaccio and tried a forkful. It tasted pretty similar to sea bream. It had a light flavor that was easy on the palate. Most of all, though, it was delicious. *I'm so glad I was reincarnated into this world!*

"You alright, boss?"

Monza watched with unbridled curiosity as I chewed on the fish.

"Delicious."

"You sure you're not just saying that?"

"Yeah, it really is delicious."

So shut up and let me eat. Garsh and his men watched with dumbfounded amazement as I tore into the fish. But while it did taste pretty good, it was a little lacking. The dressing was too light. I needed soy sauce. I ruffled through my pocket and pulled out a tiny porcelain bottle. *My apologies to the chef, but I*

really want sashimi right now. There was a reason I'd brought this bottle with me on our journey. Seeing the bottle, Garsh narrowed his eyes sharpy.

"Hold on, what's that?"

The guards standing behind drew their weapons. They were armed with short swords suited to indoor fighting. In response, the werewolves all got to their feet.

Goddammit, I messed up again. I'd been so obsessed with making this into sashimi that I hadn't stopped to think how me fishing through my pockets for a bottle must have looked to everyone else.

"Calm down, everyone. This is just a little seasoning I brought with me. I wanted to try it with your raw fish, that's all."

I popped the bottle's cork and poured a little of the black liquid into a small dish. Though my words had calmed everyone down, they were now staring at me with an even greater curiosity than before. I speared a piece of fish with a fork and dipped it into my soy sauce bowl. I slowly brought the piece of sashimi to my mouth.

Aaaaaaah... this is what I've wanted for so long. It's perfect. I'm so glad I lived to see this day. Everyone watched me with mild disgust as I drowned in bliss. *Well, this is awkward.* I'd come here to negotiate an alliance with Beluza, yet here I was trampling all over their culture. But while I did feel bad, I couldn't stop myself from eating more.

"Sorry, but could you get me another plate of this fish, without the dressing?"

"U-Uhh... sure."

After watching me dip fish into the soy sauce multiple times, Garsh finally asked, "What kind of sauce is that? I've never seen its like before."

"It's made from fermenting beans. We use it in Ryunheit to season dishes and as a dipping sauce for skewers."

"And what made you want to try it with our fish?"

Because I'm Japanese. Obviously I couldn't say that though, so I came up with another excuse.

“It does a good job of removing meat’s odor, so I thought it might work on fish too.”

“Can I try some?”

“Be my guest.”

Garsh scooped a tiny bit of soy sauce up with a silver spoon, then brought it to his nose and sniffed it. Then he poured a single drop onto his palm and licked it. The guards watched him worriedly, but he just nodded a few times and said, “May I have some to keep? This’ll be a hit in Beluza.”

Before I could even say anything, Mao butted into the conversation.

“Lord Garsh, if you like, our guild would be glad to supply you with this sauce.”

“Perfect. I need to show this to all the chefs I know. This will make the perfect dressing, and we can probably use it for grilling and stews too.”

“I shall make preparations to send you a shipment as soon as possible.”

I decided to leave those two to their business. Right now, all I cared about was enjoying my sashimi. *Though, now that I’m thinking about it, it’d be nice to have some wasabi too. Let’s see if we can find it somewhere.*

Garsh let his subordinates handle the details of his trade deal with Mao and returned to his seat.

“Sorry ’bout that. But I’ve gotta hand it to you, that’s some interesting sauce you’ve got there. Thanks for showing it to me.”

“Oh, it was nothing.”

To be honest, I was kind of regretting showing it to Garsh, but seeing how happy he was I couldn’t bring myself to say that.

“I’m impressed ya knew it would go well with food you’ve never even tried before.”

“Well, that sauce goes with pretty much everything.”

“If you say so.” Garsh folded his arms. “I always thought you demons were a barbaric lot, but it seems I’ve misjudged ya. Sorry ‘bout that.”

Actually, we are pretty barbaric. But if Garsh wanted to believe that, I wasn't going to correct him.

"We did live far from civilization until recently, so I don't blame you for thinking that. That being said, we'd like to live together in prosperity with humans from now on."

Garsh nodded in response.

"Looks I don't hafta worry about the demon army. Besides, you lot seem way more fun than to be with than the north. Assuming you're tellin' me the *truth*, that is."

He made sure to emphasize those last few words. It appeared he was still suspecting us of being the culprits behind his troubles at sea. I couldn't really blame him. We were demons after all. Either way, it looked like we definitely needed to have a chat with the mermaids. As I was musing over how best to approach them, Parker voiced a suggestion, "By the Demon Lord's command, I have spent the past few months negotiating with the mermaids. And in that time, they made no suspicious moves. Do you happen to have a map?"

"Yeah, give me a second."

Garsh brought over the map that was hanging on the restaurant's wall and spread it out on the table. Parker pointed to a section of shoreline southwest of the city and said, "I believe it's around here that the tide becomes gentler. There's also a coral reef and a few small islands, which is why the mermaids have made it their primary habitat."

"Hm?" Garsh looked puzzled. "That's nowhere near most of our sea routes. No sailor worth their salt would sail through a reef anyway. The ships we've lost were ones headed east to Lotz."

"Which is why I suspect that the mermaids are not the cause of your problem. They're wary of ships, so they tend to avoid the more populated sea routes." Parker said with a shrug. Garsh's expression grew pensive.

"Hmm... Hey, Veight. Can we trust this guy?"

You definitely can't. That being said, it didn't look like Parker was pulling this information out of his ass. I knew from experience that when he was serious, he

never joked around or lied. Loathsome as it was, I had to back him up here.

"Parker has both my trust and the trust of the Demon Lord. He wouldn't report information he hasn't first verified."

Parker turned to me with a grin. *God, I never thought I'd say those words.*

"Regardless, I'll meet with the mermaids as soon as possible. If they are behind your missing ships I'll convince them to lift the blockade. And if they refuse to listen, I promise the demon army will cooperate with you in full no matter which action you choose to take."

I was pretty sure this was just a misunderstanding. Garsh nodded and brought over a tankard of mead from the bar counter.

"Drink, kid."

"Huh?"

The old viceroy grinned and continued, "We're done negotiating for the day. Now it's time to party. So unless you've got a problem with booze, drink up."

"Ah, you don't say." I took the proffered tankard and smiled. "I hope you've got food that goes well with alcohol, then."

"Don't worry, we've got enough food for you, kid."

Looks like I'm getting a free buffet tonight. If Garsh was offering, I had no reason to turn down his hospitality.

The next morning, Parker and I headed to a beach on the outskirts of the city. The beach was a short distance away from the bay that made up Beluza's main harbor.

"Let's go see these mermaids, shall we?"

Parker got into the tiny rowboat we'd been given and turned back to me with a smile.

"We're sailing there in this?" I asked.

"The seas around here are calm, and I don't need food or water. As long as we hit the right currents, we should drift there in three days."

I had a bad feeling about this.

“And what exactly am I supposed to eat in those three days?”

“Whoops, I nearly forgot! In that case, how about we do this?”

As if he’d been waiting for me to ask that question, Parker drew a strange symbol in the air and began to chant, “Arise from the dark gates of Gevina, my sworn friend.”

His tone was cold enough to make me shiver. Mana twisted the space around Parker, and a pocket of air suddenly grew dark. The same process repeated itself in a few other locations, and a few undead skeletons appeared from the rifts Parker had created. There were four in total, and each skeleton was wearing a tattered sailor’s uniform. Parker continued in the same cold tone that was so different from his usual cheery self.

“Brave sailors, there is no time for you to rest. You must row.”

The skeletons boarded our tiny craft and picked up the oars with practiced movements. Once they were in position, they began to row. I hurriedly jumped into the boat before it got too far from shore. Though this was a rather gloomy way to travel, at least it would be fast.

Parker’s greatest strength as a necromancer was his ability to directly summon undead from the underworld. Since he didn’t have to create his own, he could summon a large number in a short period of time. However, they weren’t “his” undead; he was effectively renting them. Because he had to choose from the available spirits of whatever location he was in, he couldn’t choose what traits and abilities they had. Near a coast like this, most of the spirits would be fishermen or sailors who’d met their demise nearby. I watched the skeletons silently row and asked Parker, “Do these guys have any feelings or sentience?”

“My method of summoning them only allows me to give them orders, so I’m not sure. However, I imagine if they do, the only feelings that remain are lingering regrets.” Parker’s voice softened and he added, “I’m not too different from these poor souls, which is why I suspect I can summon them.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I just silently watched the shore recede in the distance.

After a few hours, I noticed something was off. The surrounding mana was punctuated with ripples. That meant that someone nearby was using magic. *Come to think of it, aren't most mermaids able to use magic?* They were primarily skilled in magic that affected one's senses and emotions. Before long, I felt a desire to return home growing within me. I began to miss Ryunheit, Grenschtat, and the old village I'd grown up in. Whoever was casting this spell on me had to be close. I ignored these implanted emotions and turned to Parker.

"We're close."

"You feel it as well?"

"Yeah. Even if they're not making any noise, I can see the ripples in the flow of mana. It's emotion manipulating magic of some sort."

"Indeed. This is the enchanting melody of the mermaids that convinces travelers to turn back."

According to Parker, mermaids could use their song to both lure people in or drive them away.

"Though it has no effect on me, and it appears little effect on you. It works well enough on humans, of course."

As our rowers were undead, they remained unaffected as well.

"If we row toward the source of the song we'll reach the mermaids' village before long."

"I see."

I kept my gaze fixed straight ahead, ignoring the voice in my head whispering to me to turn back. Around the time the shoreline dipped below the horizon, we arrived at the coral reef Parker had mentioned. Ripples appeared around the boat, indicating that something was moving beneath the surface of the water. A second later, a group of beautiful half-naked women surfaced all around us.

So these are mermaids. This was my first time seeing them. They were all smiling amicably, which I hadn't expected. Parker removed his cap and bowed

to the women.

“Long time no see, ladies. How do you do?”

The mermaids answered in voices clear as crystal.

“We’re doing well, Mr. Parker.”

“Who is that man traveling with you?”

“My, he looks rather handsome.”

As the boat’s only other passengers were undead, everyone’s gazes focused on me. It made me feel a little self-conscious. I nodded to the mermaids and said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am the Demon Lord Gomoviroa’s Vice-Commander, Veight.”

“Oh, so you’re the man Mr. Parker spoke of!”

Why’re they all so surprised? The mermaids crowded around the boat and started staring even more intently at me. I grabbed Parker’s skull and brought my face inches away from his.

“What the hell did you tell them about me?”

“J-Just that you were my little brother...”

“You mean your junior disciple. Anything else?”

Parker dropped to the ground like a sack of bones and pretended to be just a skeleton.

“Oi, answer me.”

Giggling, the mermaids answered for him.

“Mr. Parker was always praising you, Mr. Veight. He told us that out of all the wonderful, talented people the demon army had, you were the most amazing.”

“Mr. Veight, is it true that you can understand the thoughts of humans? I’ve heard that even humans follow you because of that.”

Judging by their tones, it didn’t look like the mermaids were lying. I looked down at Parker, and he bashfully turned away.

“I never imagined my doting side would come to light like this.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve been singing my praises everywhere you went?”

Parker grew even more flustered as he tried to talk his way out.

“I-I didn’t talk about *only* you. All of my fellow disciples are precious to me. I’ve long since lost my birth family, and all of you are like family to me. I can’t help but want to tell everyone about you guys!”

I never knew he was this easily embarrassed. Parker had self-destructed thanks to his own embarrassment, so I turned back to the mermaids.

“Sorry my fellow disciple is such a nuisance. It must have been painful, listening to him.”

“Oh, not at all. Fufufu.”

What are they all so happy about?

“It sounds wonderful, having siblings you can rely on...”

“How dreamy.”

The mermaids excitedly splashed their tails in the water. I wasn’t sure how to respond to this. Personally, I’d prefer to get down to business right away, but these mermaids didn’t seem the type to take things too seriously. Since we weren’t pressed for time, I decided to let them dictate the flow of the conversation. That being said, I still wanted to properly apologize.

“Parker’s a good guy, but his frivolous attitude makes him easily misunderstood. So if he was rude to you at all, I apologize on his behalf.”

The mermaids swished their tails from left to right.

“Oh, not at all! Mr. Parker is a true gentleman! In fact, he’s saved us on multiple occasions.”

A true gentleman? Now that I found hard to believe.

“But didn’t he tell you horrible jokes like ‘If you can’t leave the water just bring your upper halves to the demon army?’”

“He never made such jokes, no.”

The mermaids tilted their heads quizzically.

“Even though we refused his invitation to join the demon army, Mr. Parker still continued to assist us. He’s a very sincere man.”

This guy? Sincere? I could hardly believe it, but the mermaids just kept on talking about how amazing he was.

“Mr. Parker exorcized all of the nearby spirits for us. It’s thanks to him that we can live in this coral reef.”

“Were it not for his assistance, we would still be aimlessly wandering the ocean, awaiting our inevitable demise.”

According to the mermaids, they’d lived a nomadic lifestyle until recently. However, they hadn’t originally been nomads. Though they were hunter-gatherers, they preferred to settle in permanent locations. That was why Parker had exorcized the reef; so that it was habitable again.

“Those who die at sea long for land, and they often wander the waves searching for shore. Most spirits who fail to pass on drift to islands and reefs like these.”

Parker chimed in with a supplemental explanation, but he was still covering his face with his hands. *So that’s what he was up to the whole time he was gone.* I looked back down at Parker, and he scratched his skull awkwardly.

“Hahahaha. I suppose the cat’s out of the bag now. As you can see, I was slacking off! However, it turned out to be great exorcism practice! You would not believe how many spirits this reef had attracted.”

“Parker.”

“Yes?”

I smiled.

“Thank you. You did everyone a service.”

Parker scooted backward until his back was to the railing.

“You can’t just praise me openly like that! It’s embarrassing!”

“I’m serious. The demon army’s goal is to save demons everywhere. As the Demon Lord’s vice-commander, it would set a bad precedent if I didn’t

commend you for your actions."

"B-But, even after negotiations failed I remained here instead of returning as per orders!"

Wow, Parker really doesn't handle compliments well, huh. Guess I better compliment him more.

"Don't worry about that. How could I not be proud of what my wonderful older brother has achieved?"

"R-Really? Well, at any rate, we really should return to negotiating with the mermaids."

"I aspire to become as admirable a man as you, Parker."

"S-Seriously, give it a rest already..."

Parker squeezed himself into a ball and tried to make himself as small as possible. Finally, I had a way of dealing with him if he started spouting bad puns. *I should probably let Melaine know, too.* Once I'd silenced my annoying partner, I returned to my conversation with the mermaids.

"So you see, the reason I've come here is because the humans living in Beluza think you're responsible for attacking their ships."

The mermaids started muttering worriedly to each other. Legends had it that mermaids could control the seas and call down curses capable of burying frigates, but I somehow doubted these girls could do that. After all, there were plenty of stupid rumors about vampires and canines too. Humans had overactive imaginations, so they tended to come up with a lot of outlandish tales.

"We haven't attacked any human ships. The most we've done is use our songs to get human fishermen to turn back from our reefs."

"In fact, we believe the humans are the ones who've captured a few of our kind."

What's going on here? Parker clattered to his feet and explained, "If you recall, I used to be human myself. Many human villages believe that mermaids hold the secret to immortality. Mermaids always look young, which is why that

rumor started."

That, combined with the fact that they were all women probably gave humans the mistaken impression that they never died. And there were more than a few unscrupulous humans who were willing to kidnap mermaids to steal the secrets of immortality for themselves.

"It's true that our appearances seldom change, but we age just like anyone else. It just so happens that the older mermaids rarely leave their homes. The open sea is too dangerous for the elderly to swim in."

The mermaids looked down sadly as they said that. Though they all looked like they were in their late teens or early twenties, apparently some of the mermaids around us were over forty. Personally, they all looked the same to me.

"Many brutal monsters live in the sea. While we are fast swimmers and can use our songs to evade most creatures, there are some who our songs don't work on."

Which was why as mermaids got older and slower, they retired from an active life and focused on passing down their songs to the new generation and looking after the children. Meaning there were old mermaids, they just never showed their faces. Also, it appeared mermen existed too, but they were more skilled at swimming than singing, so they were often out of the villages hunting for food. It appeared the mermaids had a hard time getting enough seafood to feed their village, so the men were almost always gone.

To make matters worse, many mermen died to monster attacks or went missing, so there was always a shortage of males. As a fellow male, I felt bad for them. At any rate, like all other demons, it appeared mermaids were neither as mysterious or as amazing as humans made them out to be. I understood why Parker had stayed behind to help them now.

"Young mermaids like us are both good swimmers and singers. But quite a few of our generation went missing when we still lived in our old home."

"None of them were particularly solitary mermaids, so we can only assume that they were killed by monsters or captured by humans..."

The mermaids' expressions grew glum.

"We don't possess the strength to fight humans, but even if we did we don't wish to fight. That was why we left our old home in search of a new one."

I see. And that was when this bag of bones found you guys. Previously the mermaids had lived much closer to Beluza, which was why they'd been wary of humans. But the new coral reef they'd found had been haunted by the undead, and their songs hadn't been able to chase those spirits away. The mermaid's old home had been east of Beluza, smack in the middle of one of their sea lanes. Both the humans and the mermaids were claiming that they hadn't attacked the other. If both sides were telling the truth, it meant there was a third party attacking both of them. Chances were, that third party was either some kind of monster, or a group of humans from somewhere else.

"Hey, Parker."

"Yes?"

I thought back to all the books I'd read back when I was training under Master.

"Are there any sea monsters powerful enough to prey on both mermaids and human ships?"

"Hmm... I'm not sure. We know giant monsters exist on land though, so it would not be surprising to see they exist in the sea as well." Parker shrugged his shoulders, then added, "Though, when I was originally searching for the mermaids, there was a time where I wandered into a deep fog."

"A deep fog?"

Apparently on his first journey to find the mermaids Parker had become lost in a fog for a few days.

"The wind and waves died away, and the fog trapped me in its darkness. Sensing something was off, I hid my tiny craft using the illusion magic I'd learned."

However, nothing had happened and eventually the fog had lifted. After that, he'd had little trouble finding the mermaids.

“That does sound strange, but, how do I put this...”

Parker was a skeleton. Even if monsters spotted him, they’d have no reason to try and eat him. Chances were, they’d just leave him be. Either way, it was probably best to keep Parker’s story in mind.

“Alright, now that I’ve got an idea of where you guys stand, I need to go back and discuss this with the humans. If possible, I’d prefer it if some of you would be willing to tag along.”

The mermaids exchanged uneasy glances. They looked visibly afraid. *I guess it’s too much for them.*

“Oh yeah, who’s your guys’ chief, anyway?”

“We don’t have one. Since we don’t fight among each other, we don’t know who’s the strongest...”

You could just talk it over and elect one too, you know. Despite being a peaceful race, they still had an oddly demonic mindset. Either way, it looked like I needed to go back and speak with Garsh. Considering how things were shaping up, it might be best to send a message back to Ryunheit as well.

After returning to Beluza I sent off two of my werewolves back to Ryunheit.

“I want you to transform and run back to Ryunheit at full speed. Deliver this letter to Airia, and if the Demon Lord is there as well, make sure you give her my report, too.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Leave it to us!”

If there was something strange happening at sea, it was entirely possible it was more than I could handle alone. I needed help just to investigate this. I made Parker my liaison, tasking him with relaying events to the mermaids.

“Am I imagining things, or are you trying to get rid of me?”

“You’re imagining things. Now hurry up and get going.”

“Very well... but only after telling you this amazing joke I came up with.”

“Get out of here already!”

There was a slim possibility the mermaids actually were up to something, so I needed someone to keep an eye on them. Though, personally, I doubted they were behind this. Unfortunately, my position demanded that I be more distrustful than I would like. Naturally, this meant I had someone keep an eye on the humans as well. This, too, was more a precaution than anything. However, I still tasked Monza's squad with monitoring Garsh.

"Keep watch and make sure he doesn't do anything strange."

"Yeah, yeah. You got it, boss. If he does do anything strange, can I kill him?"

"No."

"Awww."

Pout all you want, I'm not changing my mind. That being said, when did she learn to act so cute? Right as that thought crossed my mind, Lacy brought her face to Monza's ear and whispered, "That's not how you do it, Monza. You have to emphasize how hard you're working for *his* sake."

"Ahhh, I see now."

Oh boy.

"Lacy, I'm glad that you're getting along with my werewolves, but please stop teaching them how to murder with a cute face."

"I-I'm sorry. I just wanted to be useful to you, Sir Veight..."

Lacy pulled a cute pouting face. *Are you really trying to pull that on me* right *after you told Monza to do the same thing? Do you really think that'll work?*

"That's not gonna work on me. As punishment, you have to learn how to swim while you're here."

"What!?"

There was a reason I'd picked this punishment. Teaching Lacy how to swim might come in handy later. I forced her to change into a swimsuit and start practicing swimming.

"S-Sir Veight, I'm a northerner. I can't swim!"

"That's why I'm teaching you. I thought you wanted to be useful to me?"

“NOOOOOOOOOO!”

I only gave Lacy a light shove on the back, but she screamed and jumped off the pier. Her actions reminded me of a certain comedian I used to watch back in Japan.

Of course I didn’t want Lacy to drown, so I’d assigned her some personal lifeguards. I turned to the Garney Brothers—who were currently splashing about in the ocean—and shouted, “Oi, you two! Stop messing around! You better look after Lacy properly, you hear!?”

The younger Garney brother shouted back, “We’re not that great swimmers either, you know! We just swam a little in the river when we were kids!”

“I taught you the breaststroke before, didn’t I? You can teach her that at least!”

When I was still young, I’d taught all the kids I played with how to do the frontstroke and breaststroke. Which was why most werewolves of my generation knew how to swim decently well. The Garney Brothers had been pretty poor swimmers back then, and I’d actually been pretty happy at discovering one of their weaknesses. That being said, werewolves had far more stamina than a regular human, so even if they weren’t very good, they could still swim well enough in a calm bay like this. Just in case, though, I decided to stick around and keep watch. If things got hairy, I could always use my magic to help out.

I sat down at the edge of the pier and started reading through a magic grimoire. I wanted to brush up on all the spells I might need. In this world, it took more than just chanting a few words and waving your hands around to cast a spell. You needed to understand the underlying principles behind the magic you were casting. On top of that, you needed a lot of concentration to manipulate mana. With the exception of the most basic ones, spells required time and preparation to cast.

If you wanted a spell to be ready to cast anytime in case of an emergency, you needed to practice it enough that you could store the formula somewhere in your subconscious. Then, by completing the incantation and cantrips needed to cast a spell ahead of time, you could hold it in reserve, ready to cast whenever.

It was similar to how in MMOs you could put your most-cast spells on your hotbar. A mage's combat potential was determined by how many of those hotbar slots they had. In a fight, it didn't matter how many complex and powerful spells you knew if you couldn't fire them off instantly.

Personally, I could hold about five or six spells to use at once. For an experienced mage, that was the average number. Though Lacy could use extremely complex illusion spells, she too could only hold around that many for instant use. The fact that she was clumsy probably didn't help. Parker and Melaine had spent more time studying magic, so I assumed they could use more. Meanwhile, Master could probably instant cast more spells than I could count. She was on a completely different level than all of us.

At any rate, that was why I was currently trying to decide what spells I would need at sea, and what spells on my hotbar I should swap out for them.

"I can't get rid of my muscle strengthening, reflex strengthening, and recovery strengthening magic, so that just leaves..."

"Sir Veight! Please at least let me go somewhere my feet touch the ground! I need to learn the basics before I—"

Lacy flailed around in the water while the Garney Brothers watched apprehensively.

"Don't worry, it's not that deep! Hmm— I don't really want to take out my defense-boosting magic either, but... should I add the spell that lets me walk on water? Wait, I should add a proper healing spell in, too."

There were a number of new spells that Master had taught me that I was itching to try out. In the time I spent agonizing over my spell slots, Lacy had learned to swim. When I looked up, I saw her gracefully swimming through the sea.

"Whoa! I-I think I'm doing it! Look, Sir Veight!"

"Oh, uhh, nice job! Uh— I guess the spells that don't need to be cast instantly I can take out..."

I shouted some half-hearted encouragement to Lacy and got back to work. Since I was a support type caster, I had to take the duration of my spells into

account as well. Buffs that lasted half a day or more I could cast ahead of any potential fight, but those that were only active for a few seconds I'd want ready to snapcast. *Man, picking spells is hard...* Lacy seemed to have mastered the breaststroke and was now swimming around excitedly.

"I did it, Sir Veight! I really did it! I can swim now!"

"Yeah, you picked up on that faster than I thought. Good job, Lacy. I'm impressed."

"Ehehe."

Now it was time for part two of her training.

"Next, learn how to dive. I want to see you pass underneath those boats over there."

"What?"

"Keep your eyes open while you're swimming too. I want to know what the undersides of those ships look like. Once you get used to swimming underneath those smaller boats, try some larger ones."

"Huh? Wait."

Sorry, Lacy. But I've got a good reason for making you do this. Good luck, fake priestess.

* * * *

—Head Honcho Garsh's Ramblings—

Where'd that kid run off to? Oh, he's at the harbor? Make sure to keep a close eye on him. Don't let him out of your sight for even a moment. He probably knows we're watching him, so don't get too close. Keep an eye on him, but keep yer distance too. And don't do anything suspicious. That kid's no fool, he's probably keeping an eye on us as well. God, it's giving me the creeps. I know he's watching us, but I can't tell where any of his scouts are.

Anyway, that kid's a real piece of work. What? You don't know what I'm talking about? You seriously think he's just some gloomy-looking kid? You fucking morons. Guys that act tough and pretend they're hot shit are never as important as they try to sound. After all, if you've gotta always talk about how

strong you are, you're not that strong. Do sharks howl at their prey? Of course not, because you can tell they're strong just by looking. But those shitty Senate bastards aren't like that. They're all bark no bite. Just a bunch of yappin' pups.

If the demon army had sent someone like that to negotiate, then I wouldn't even have given 'em the time of day. But that guy you just called a gloomy-looking kid never once tried to threaten me or shove his weight around. I heard the rumors that he's a monster who slaughtered 400 of Thuvan's soldiers in a single battle. Oh come on, you don't really believe it's 4000, do ya? That's an exaggeration I'm telling you. Besides, Thuvan doesn't even *have* 4000 soldiers. But that kid doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who'd kill for fun.

He's definitely a bonafide monster with the skills to match, though. You know what that brat Aram told me? When they were meeting for the first time, that Veight kid was able to tell how many guards Aram was hiding, and where they were. I believe those rumors that say he killed the Hero. So you louts better not try to take him out. Don't touch his men, either.

Anyway, you see my point now? That kid's done some amazing things, but he never once talked about any of them. That means he thinks racking up achievements like that's so normal it's not even worth mentioning. After meeting him, I realized. That kid's a shark, not a pup. Like all sharks, he doesn't look flashy, he just sneaks up on you and before you know it, you're trapped in his jaws. And once he's done eating you, he goes back to looking like nothing happened. He probably doesn't even remember how many people he's killed. That's just the kinda guy he is. If we piss him off, he'll probably wipe Beluza off the map. I'd bet my ship on it.

But ya know what's really scary about that kid? How good a negotiator he is. Did you see how he ate our raw fish!? No hesitation at all! And either he's one hell of an actor, or he actually liked it! Even the chef said he'd never seen anyone eat his dishes with that kind of gusto. That kid's a demon, but he sure knows how to make his hosts happy.

He'd never had raw fish before, but he didn't even hesitate to wolf it all down. All his other men looked scared, so he's probably the only one who's like that even.

Not only that, but he even brought out some seasoning we'd never heard of and used it on our cooking. I thought he was crazy, but that sauce tasted great. It's perfect to use with fish. You guys gotta try it next time, seriously. I'm telling you, that sauce is gonna revolutionize cooking in Beluza.

Man, this sauce is gonna make us a killing in the city. But yeah, there's no doubt he brought that sauce out to make negotiations go his way. He pretended like it wasn't planned, but it totally was. He doesn't use threats, but he dangles all these incentives in front of us. All while pretending like none of it's planned.

That kind of natural smoothness isn't easy to master. I still can't do it. Hell, I end up messin' up and getting too forceful all the time. That's why I started using this tough guy persona in front of others. Anyway, that guy's a master of the cultural arts and a great merchant to boot. After seeing him I finally realized that Beluza's falling behind in military and cultural and diplomatic power.

If we mobilized all of our forces, maybe we'd be able to stop a single invasion by the demon army. But do any of ya have the courage to fight Veight, Hero Killer and the butcher of 400? I sure as hell don't. Fighting him isn't bravery anyway. Us sailors know real courage comes from caution. Right now, the smart move is to not make an enemy out of the demon army. I'd rather have those pansies from the north breathing down our necks than the demons.

At least that kid promised us he'd leave our trade routes open. If we ask for any more concessions he'll probably get pissed and kill us all, so I'm fine with taking that much. That kid's seriously scary. I'm serious. I know I acted calm, but I was about to piss my pants back there. I was just as scared as you guys. I only managed to keep talking cause I knew it was my responsibility as viceroy.

I bet that kid must have thought I was pathetic. A big guy like me, quaking in my boots. But he didn't make fun of me even once. He kept treating me like an equal the whole time. Can you believe it? I guess that's just the way the strong act.

Actually... that kid probably doesn't care at all about who's stronger or who's weaker. I can't really explain it, but I feel like he's different. Like he sees the world in a totally different way. Different how? Hell if I know. I was too busy

trying not pissing my pants to figure that out.

What's that kid doing right now anyway? Playing around in the water? And that Lacy lass is in a swimsuit? What the heck, he's just goofing off with girls then? What's Veight doing there? Reading a book? Concentrating really hard? So he's not even paying attention to the girls in swimsuits and he's just reading a book at the pier? Okay, I have no clue what he's doing then. But whatever it is, there's probably a reason for it. Remember, don't get in his way. Just watch him from afar. Oh, and chill some beer for me, will ya?

* * * *

After a few days, information started trickling in, and the picture of the situation grew clearer.

"This is... from Bernheinen..."

"Good work. Let's see what they have to say."

I took the bundle of documents Seishess held out and broke the seal right away. Considering how slow Seishess spoke when he wasn't talking about fighting, it'd be faster for me to read the report than have him explain it.

This world was filled with numerous unknown monsters and unexplained phenomena. However, humans were about the onlyore, someone was bound to have recorded the details of that attack. And the ancient city of Bernheinen was said to have the largest collection of books on the continent. There were even tomes that dated back to when the residents of the south had first come to this area. And this was precisely why I'd asked Melaine to investigate the royal library for me.

Back in Japan, I could have just googled "What monster lives in the sea and hides in the fog" and gotten an answer right away, but this world wasn't nearly as convenient.

"Perfect, looks like my hunch was right."

There was one record which detailed an incident similar to what Garsh was dealing with now. When the residents of the south had first crossed the ocean on their way here, they'd been attacked by a similar monster. Said monster had attacked both humans and mermaids indiscriminately. Furthermore, whenever

it had appeared, the wind would stop, and a fog would descend. From what Parker had told me, the same exact thing had happened whenever the mermaids were attacked.

"An Island Kraken, huh?"

They were called Island Kraken because apparently each one was about the size of a small island. Though they had a slightly ridiculous name, they were no joke. Island Krakens were the most dangerous creatures at sea. There were a few other monsters that could be the cause of all these attacks, but none of the others fit the mermaids' descriptions quite as well.

The other possibilities were all flying monsters, and flying monsters would more likely attack humans than mermaids. There was a slight possibility a ghost ship manned by undead spirits was the cause, but if that were the case, Parker would have noticed them from miles away. Besides, undead who weren't summoned by necromancers tended to attack only their own race. While the mermaids had been afraid of the human spirits haunting their reef, said spirits hadn't actually attacked them for precisely this reason.

Another possibility was pirates, but only the most vicious pirates sunk ships. In general, though, they knew it was a bad idea to destroy when their goal was plunder. Furthermore, Garsh's ancestors had been pirates, and he'd told me all pirates operated under the Law of Half. The Law of Half was an agreement among pirates to not steal more than 50% of a trade ship's cargo. The reason being, that way merchants would still be able to break even, and therefore attempt another venture. If pirates stole so much that trade routes dried up, they'd be out of business, too. Worse, it might convince merchants to invest into naval armadas and wipe all pirates out.

All of this meant it was unlikely human pirates were behind this incident. After ruling all the other possibilities out, all that remained was the Island Kraken.

When I brought my conclusions to Garsh, he held his head and groaned, "Oi, oi, are ya kidding me? We've got a monster like that in our sea?"

The books that Melaine had compiled her report from were currently being transferred to a vault, so she'd sent her own drawing of an Island Kraken in

place of the book's. Her drawing made it look cute, but there was nothing cute about it. The Kraken had its tentacles wrapped around a three-masted ship and was in the process of dragging it under.

"An Island Kraken assaulting the Storm Petrel, one of the first immigrants' ships," her caption read. Garsh's subordinates exchanged terrified glances.

"Ya know, I've heard stories about this thing. They say when our ancestors came to Beluza, this monster sunk half our ships."

"I thought that was just an exaggeration, but..."

"You louts, did you think our ancestors were a pack of liars?"

"I mean, aren't you a huge liar, Boss?"

It appeared stories of the Island Kraken had been passed down here as well. I had no idea if this was the same Island Kraken that had assaulted Beluza's ancestors centuries ago, but I had no doubt it was an Island Kraken behind this incident.

I asked Master to investigate further into the Island Kraken, and she came back with more details. Apparently, while it looked like an octopus, it was anatomically closer to shellfish than cephalopods. It had a boulder-sized shell on top of its head, and often camouflaged itself as a coral reef to attract prey. Small fish would be attracted to the safety the fake reef offered, and larger fish would come to prey on the smaller ones. Then the Island Kraken would prey on those larger fish. It was quite an ingenious hunter.

No one knew why the wind and tides calmed around it, but Master hypothesized that it was related to how the Kraken manipulated mana. Similar to how the werewolves' instantaneous transformation was a unique skill that didn't correspond to the normal rules of magic, many monsters had special powers as well.

As for why a mist always surrounded Island Krakens, Master believed that was because they spewed water from spouts, similar to whales. Chances were, the reef the mermaids had been living in before had actually been an Island Kraken in disguise, which was why so many of their number had gone missing.

The only thing Master hadn't been able to explain was why it was attacking

human ships. Even if it could eat sailors, not enough ships passed by for it to make them its primary food source. Besides, ships were much larger and harder to destroy than large marine animals like sharks or dolphins.

Lacy, who'd been reading Master's report over my shoulder, tilted her head and asked, "Are you sure this is what's attacking Beluza's ships?"

"If it attacked Garsh's ancestors, there's at least a precedent for it."

Master's notes had mostly touched on the Kraken's biology, while Melaine's had detailed its history. I mentally compiled all the information I'd received and came to a conclusion.

"I think normally Island Krakens don't attack ships. But the one inhabiting the waters around Beluza acquired a taste for humans after eating them in the past. That's what I think."

Chances were, the first immigrants to Meraldia had accidentally grounded one of their ships against the Island Kraken, and it had decided to eat them because of that. Humans were slower than fish in the water, so it wouldn't have been hard for it to catch fleeing sailors after crushing their boat. While humans weren't the largest animal around, a couple dozen of them made for a filling meal. Since the Kraken was cold-blooded, it likely didn't need much food anyway.

After tasting human flesh for the first time, the Kraken had probably gotten hooked, and started looking for more. In the end, this was all speculation, but I felt like I had a decent amount of evidence to back up my hypothesis. Now we just needed to come up with a way to slay the beast. I figured that would be the simple part, but everyone else in the room looked oddly glum.

"The terror of the deep... I can't believe we've gotta fight that monster."

Lacy turned to Garsh and said in an apologetic voice, "I don't think the demon army or even the Meraldian Federation could handle something like this..."

Even my werewolves were losing hope.

"Claws and fangs aren't gonna be enough for that thing..."

"Yeah, this is too much for us."

Monza and the Garney brothers scrunched up their faces. I hadn't expected everyone to be this scared. *Man, you guys are hopeless.* I promptly put together a plan in my head.

"It's just a monster, guys. Let's hurry up and kill this thing so the mermaids and the people of Beluza don't have to live in fear."

Everyone turned to me in shock. *I guess that was a little extreme, considering the mood.* Parker asked the question on everyone else's mind, "Am I imagining things, or are you not scared of this beast? You do realize it's a creature large enough to sink ships, correct?"

"Well, yeah, but it's gotta be weaker than the Hero."

Arshes' strength had surpassed the bounds of mere mortals. I'd been through my fair share of tough fights in my time, but it was only when fighting him that I'd felt real fear. Compared to that, this Kraken was just an oversized octopus. *It shouldn't be too hard to cut it up and make takoyaki out of.* If we combined Beluza's naval might with the strength of the demon army and its magic, we'd have no trouble slaying it.

"The demon army was able to defeat the Hero. And I don't think this giant octopus is stronger than him. So we should be able to kill it too. I don't see any reason to be hesitating."

Everyone's jaws dropped open, but after a while, my werewolves nodded in agreement.

"Y-Yeah, you're right... If that's what you think, boss, then let's do it."

"We do have the man who killed the Hero on our side..."

I knew I could count on my brave werewolves. However, Garsh was unconvinced.

"Oi, do you really think we can win?"

"Nothing's ever certain, but I do believe we have a chance. I have a plan. And just in case, I've come up with an alternate strategy if we're up against something that isn't an Island Kraken. However, the demon army possesses no boats. We'll need to borrow some of yours."

Garsh folded his arms and muttered, “Ships, huh? Truth is, we built some new warships without Meraldia’s permission cause we thought we might have to fight you guys.”

“Then we’ll use those.”

Warships in this world were about as advanced as ancient galleys. In other words, they were oar-powered. Garsh gave me a troubled smile and replied, “To be honest I thought we’d be fighting you in those, not giving them to ya... Well whatever, it doesn’t look like we’ll be fighting anymore. You can have the whole arsenal. But you better bring my ships back in one piece, ya hear?”

“I can’t promise they’ll return intact, but I’ll do my best. I’d also like a few of your trade ships, if you don’t mind.”

“For someone who’s offering to help, ya sure are greedy. What’re you gonna use them for?”

“I was thinking of loading the demon army’s latest weapon onto them.”

Most trade ships were powered by sail, but they could hold more cargo. Garsh contemplated my request for a few minutes. Finally, he smiled.

“Well, why not. If you can clear up our trade routes for us, a few ships is no big deal! Take whatever ya need!”

What a generous fellow. Warships and trade ships were far more expensive than fishing boats, so I knew Garsh was investing a lot into me.

“Though, if possible, I would prefer to at least get my warships back in one piece, okay?”

Well, even he doesn’t want to throw money away. While Master’s notes had given me a great idea, I needed a few other people and some specialized equipment to make this plan work.

“Contact Thuvan’s factories and Ryunheit’s ballistae team. Also, Lacy, I’ll be training you personally.”

“Why me!?”

“Your illusion magic will be the key to victory. I’ll be whipping you into shape until the day of the operation.”

“Oh no...”

Sorry, Lacy, but I’ll need you if I want to bring Garsh his warships back. I’m counting on you.

While Garsh was getting his ships ready for us, the people and equipment I’d asked for started arriving.

“Yoooo!”

The first to appear was none other than the demon army’s strongest kentauros. Firnir arrived with such a bang that her clothes nearly fell off. Literally.

“Heeey, Vaito! I’m here!”

“Why the hell are you here!? You’re supposed to be Thuvan’s viceroy!”

Firnir clopped over to me, with a unit of 200 handpicked elites following after her. She raised her spear with a beaming smile and replied, “I left Seishess in charge of Thuvan. It’ll be fine. Probably.”

Wow, she just pushed everything off onto him, huh? I’d actually been planning on making Seishess the commander of the kentauros squad I’d asked for, but this would work just as well. Still smiling, Firnir showed me her front hooves.

“Look, I had Master make them just as you asked!”

“Let’s have a look.”

I’d asked Master to create enchanted horseshoes that would let the kentauros walk on water. Though they didn’t last long, they’d be invaluable for the upcoming battle. Back when I’d first learned how to cast the water walking spell, I’d discovered that large bodies of water were like wide open plains, tactically speaking. Meaning if I could get cavalry to walk on top of it, they’d have ample room to charge.

Had I been working with human cavalry I’d have to worry about what might happen if the human riders fell off their horses, but with kentauros that wasn’t a problem. So long as they could maneuver freely, they’d be a valuable asset. Not only were kentauros mobile, but they were skilled in all manner of weapons, from spears to swords to bows. Plus, they were fearless.

“How well do they work? Do you think you’ll be able to fight like you were on land?”

“Yeah, no problem! Though if we fall, we end up flipping upside-down.”

Oh yeah, cause the enchantment only affects your guys’ horseshoes. Ideally, we’d have enchanted all of their equipment, but we didn’t have the supplies or the time.

“In that case, why don’t you guys start practicing rescuing each other in case someone does get flipped around? We’ll need to be ready when the time comes.”

“Aye-aye, Vaito!”

Firnir and the others had also brought with them the weapons I’d ordered from Thuvan. Each and every one had been specially-made.

“Here’s the ballista you asked for. But is this really gonna be any use?”

“Hopefully.”

It didn’t have much range, but it had a lot of power. Even if we weren’t up against an Island Kraken, this would come in handy.

“I brought the catapult you wanted too, but is flinging rocks at a sea monster really gonna do anything?”

“Fear not, it’s not rocks we’ll be throwing with that.”

I’d come up with two possible uses for the catapult, but if I explained one of them I knew everyone would object, so I’d keep that one to myself for now. *I can’t wait to see the looks on everyone’s faces when they see a werewolf flying.*

That afternoon, the canine ballistae team I’d sent for arrived from Ryunheit, along with some of their engineers.

“Sir Veight, it’s been far too long!”

“I can smell the sea breeze!”

“I wonder what fish tastes like!”

“Look at all that water! May we swim in it, Sir Veight!?”

I didn't call you here so you could take a vacation! Well, at least I know these guys aren't scared to be fighting a giant sea monster. I'll be counting on you. While all this was happening, the ships were being readied.

"Alright, I want the engineers loading all these weapons onto the ships!"

"Yes, sir!"

Warships in this world were generally more like large transport ships filled with soldiers. Naval warfare amounted to little more than warships crashing into each other and then soldiers fighting on deck. However, we'd never be able to beat a sea monster using such ancient tactics.

I was planning on having the warships hold the kentauros. We had 5 in total, so I could split them up into 40 a ship. As for the trading vessels, they'd be holding my weapons. While merchants ships lost out on durability compared to warships, they had much more space. It made sense, considering they weren't designed with ramming in mind.

The ballista would be armed with whaling harpoons. Though they were heavy, I figured we needed something sturdy to damage a monster the Island Kraken's size. I'd brought a few backup ballistae as well, in case the first one broke. Between the ballistae and the catapults, the trading ships looked more like warships than the actual warships. *Well, I guess now that they've got makeshift cannons on board, they're no longer plain galleys. What did they call ranged warships again? If we had internet here, I could just look it up.* There were times I missed the convenience of my old world. As I was lamenting the lack of modern amenities, Garsh walked up to me and yelled, "Oi, your stupid mutts are destroying my ships! Make them stop!"

"Oh, they're not destroying them. They're just remodeling them to make it easier for kentauros to fit inside."

"If you take that much of the structure out, we won't be able to put them back together again!"

I could understand why he didn't want me changing too much.

"I debated just using human soldiers, but they won't be as useful on the open sea. Also, they have a harder time balancing on top of water. Sorry, but I've

gotta do this.”

“Do you have any idea how much it cost me to build those beauties?”

Garsh grumbled to himself for a few minutes, but he recovered surprisingly soon. *I guess he’s the kind of guy who can adapt easily.*

“Well, no use crying over spilled milk. You better kill the terror of the deep for us though, or there’ll be hell to pay.”

“I can’t make any promises, but I’m pretty sure we’ll be able to handle this.”

“Man, nothing ever fazes ya, does it?”

I’d have been more worried if we were up against some unknown creature, but I had a good grasp on this octopus’ ecology. There was nothing scary about how it looked either. Besides, I was a former Japanese. We were basically octopuses’ natural predator.

A few days later, the dragonkin combat engineers I’d asked for arrived, along with their Azure Knight guard. Kurtz saluted me, then said with a stern expression, “Sir Veight, please follow our instructions this time.”

“I know, I know.”

Unsatisfied with my lackluster reply, Kurtz repeated himself, “In all matters regarding Dragon Breath, you are to obey our commands.”

I know I hadn’t given him much reason to trust me, but he really didn’t have any faith in me. If I was being fair though, I didn’t have much faith in me either. Logically, I knew it was better to be safe when handling gunpowder, but every time I transformed I tended to go overboard. I decided to drop that particular subject for now.

“Did you bring the items I requested?”

“They’re used in the production of Dragon’s Jewels so we were able to procure enough stock, however...” Kurtz glared at me. “These items’ manufacturing process is a secret even more confidential than the existence of Dragon Breath. We cannot disclose it even to you.”

They’d probably used electrolysis. The old Demon Lord had been a pretty accomplished scientist, and I’d seen Master using electricity spells from time to

time. That was why I figured they'd be able to make this in the first place. It was probably best not to mention that, though. However, Kurtz seemed to read my thoughts as he sighed and said, "Though it appears you are already aware of it... I should have expected as much from Lord Gomoviroa's greatest disciple."

If anything, I had my science classes to thank for this, not Master. Kurtz scrunched his eyes against the sea breeze.

"At first I feared you were going to ask us to pack Dragon Breath into barrels for you again."

"The previous Demon Lord banned me from messing with fire after that."

"Strange to think that feels nostalgic now. However, I am warning you now that what you asked for is just as dangerous."

"I know. I'll leave handling this stuff to the experts, don't worry."

I had no idea how good the dragonkin engineers' waterproofing abilities were, so I couldn't rely on gunpowder here. If I could use desiccation magic I'd be able to dry the gunpowder right before we had to use it, but sadly I knew no such magic.

Thank God I'd paid attention to my science club friend back during my school days. I bet he never dreamed the stuff he taught me would be used to kill a giant octopus in another world. *If you ever reincarnate into this world, I'll treat you to some sashimi. You'll have to eat it without wasabi, though.*

It took about half a month to complete our preparations, but now we were finally ready.

"Attention!" I looked at the demon soldiers and Beluzan sailors lined up before me. "This will mark the beginning of the joint campaign between the demon army and Beluza's navy. You've rehearsed the plan dozens of times already so you don't need me to repeat it, I'm sure. Barring any unforeseen difficulties, this should be a smooth operation. Just remember your training, and stay calm."

I was downplaying the danger a bit. We had no idea what the true strength of our foe was. But I had to act confident to calm everyone's nerves.

“Our foe is just some oversized octopus. He’s no match for our elite squad. Besides, if things go south, I’ve got three separate trump cards ready.”

That was a total lie. I only had one. But it was one hell of a trump card, so it wasn’t *too* much of an exaggeration to count it as three.

“And even if all my trump cards fail, we’ll be able to fit everyone on the five warships we’re bringing and row to safety. Don’t worry about failure and focus on hunting the enemy before us!”

Even if there was no wind or tide, so long as we had oars we’d be able to move.

“This will be the first-ever joint battle between humans and demons. Let’s show the world that together we’re unstoppable!”

“YEEEEEAAH!”

The kentauros banged on their metal quivers as they cheered.

“Woof! Woof! Woof! Woof!”

Their cheering got the canines fired up, and they started barking as well. *Alright, let’s do this!*

“Parker, if you’d be so kind.”

Parker’s undead skeletons would serve as the rowing crews for the five galleys. If we used human teams, there was a possibility they’d panic and abandon their posts if the battle went unfavorably, and that was something I wanted to avoid at all costs. The normally cheerful Parker chanted in a cold voice as he called forth spirits from the underworld.

“Arise from the dark Gates of Gevina, my sworn friends.”

The space around us warped, and skeletons popped into existence all around the harbor. Judging by their uniforms, they were sailors who’d died in Beluza.

“I grant thee the opportunity to sail the deep once more. Come, join me on our fateful voyage.”

The skeletons responded to Parker’s voice and clacked up the gangway onto the galley he was on. Beluza’s sailors watched the scene with mild

apprehension.

“H-Holy shit...”

“So this is what a demon mage can do...”

Parker was one of the demon army’s best mages. After he was done commanding his undead army, Parker wiped a bead of nonexistent sweat off his skeletal brow and said in a bright voice, “Summoning undead sure gets the blood pumping.”

“Uh-huh. Thanks.”

“Not that I have any blood!”

I ignored his stale pun.

“Vampire squad, you’re in charge of controlling the undead on each ship.”

I’d borrowed ten vampire sorcerers from Melaine. They were Master’s disciples too, so that technically made us fellow students. I’d split them up to two a ship, and they were in charge of relaying the ship captain’s commands to the undead. Since the skeletons were utterly obedient, we wouldn’t have to worry too much about coordination.

“Now then.”

“*Yeeees?*”

“How come you’re here too, Melaine?”

Melaine, who was wearing a Beluzan-style dress, grinned.

“Why shouldn’t I be? Bernheinen’s functioning perfectly fine under the puppet viceroy’s rule. And I wouldn’t want to miss whatever fun adventure you’ve cooked up for us, Veight.”

“It’s not going to be some ‘fun adventure.’”

Why did everyone assume I was traipsing around the world enjoying myself? *Well whatever, let’s just set sail.* If I took any longer to set off, I’d probably get even more unwanted hanger-ons. Of the five warships, I’d designated the newest one to be our flagship. Or rather, Garsh had forced me to designate it our flagship. As a fleet’s flagship was usually put in the most secure spot, Garsh

had probably wanted to keep his most expensive one safe. Unfortunately for him, I didn't follow standard military theory.

"Welcome to the flagship Friedensrichter, admiral."

Garsh, who was wearing a pirate's outfit, greeted me with a grin. Incidentally, I'd insisted on being allowed to name the ship as part of our negotiations.

"Leave piloting the ship and fighting on deck to me and my mates. You just give commands safely from the backline, kid."

"Thank you for your cooperation. You can leave slaughtering that octopus to us."

"I'm looking forward to seeing what ya got."

All told, the combined demon army and Beluza fleet had 11 ships. The warship that served as its flagship was the Friedensrichter, as Garsh had mentioned earlier. I'd outfitted it with a single catapult. The other four warships served as transport vessels for the kentauros, as well as rescue ships in case anything went wrong. As for the six merchant vessels, I'd retrofitted them with weapons. They'd be using their ballistae to provide long-range support. I'd wanted to install more weapons onto the galleys as well, but between the soldiers they were carrying and the undead oarsmen, there was no space left. I'd had to move even the spare equipment to the cargo ships.

Beluza's citizens cheered us as we set sail from the harbor and into the bay. We kept our bearing east, following the same sea lane traders did when they were heading to Lotz. Before long, we arrived at the rendezvous point. The sailor on watch looked down from the crow's nest and shouted, "Admiral Veight! The mermaids are here!"

"Oh good, they came."

I looked out to sea, and indeed mermaid heads were popping out of the waves. There were about 20 of them. I'd been worried they wouldn't come.

"Hello, Mr. Veight. There may not be many of us, but we came to help."

"Please, let us assist you on your endeavor."

The human sailors on board were captivated by the pretty, young mermaids

waving at us.

“No way, a real, living mermaid!”

“They’re all beauties... I wish I could be down there.”

“This is my first time seeing a mermaid...”

Garsh alone kept his gaze fixed firmly forward, and he rebuked his gawking men.

“Stop leering, you louts! If ya want to impress those lasses so badly, show your courage in battle!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

Despite his words, I caught him sneaking a few glances at the mermaids later, when he thought no one was looking. *You should just be more honest with yourself, old man.*

Thanks to Parker’s persuasiveness, I now had a score of mermaids under my command as well. I had them act as our fleet’s scouts. If the Island Kraken attacked us from below, we’d need to retreat and regroup. So long as we could avoid that scenario though, I had confidence in my plan. I’d also asked them to help rescue any humans or demons who fell overboard. In other words, they were basically mermaid lifesavers. *You know... I probably can’t blame anyone if they fall in on purpose just to get saved by a mermaid.*

As luck would have it, both the tide and the winds were in our favor. Both our wind-powered merchant ships and our skeleton-powered warships made steady progress. I kept an eye on our progress as I doled out orders.

“Have the trading ships spread out up ahead and scout our surroundings. Our warships are our emergency rescue vessels, so I want to avoid getting them sunk at all costs.”

Each trading ship had at most 50 people on it, so even if all 6 of them sunk, we’d be able to pack everyone on them onto the remaining warships. Worst come to worst, we could dismiss some of the skeleton rowers to make space for more living people.

A few hours after our departure, around noon, we took a short break for

lunch. The Sea of Solitude—the southern sea's formal name—was surrounded on most sides by land and had relatively calm waters, hence its name. It reminded me of the Seto Sea which I'd visited back in my old life. The gentle waves and refreshing sea breeze helped calm my demons' nerves before the fight... or would have, if they weren't all getting seasick. Thanks to them, I was stuck running around curing everyone with magic. *Guys, I'm not a ship's doctor you know.* Around the time I'd seen to the last puking patient, one of the men on watch shouted a warning, "Admiral Veight! There's a fog up ahead!"

I pulled out my telescope and peered through. Far in the distance, I could see a dense fog. *Bullseye.* According to the sailors, the scope of the fog was unnaturally small. Around the fog, the wind was blowing normally, eroding its edges. However, if the reports were true, there would be no wind inside, meaning the sailing ships would be unmaneuverable. There was still quite a bit of distance between us and the fog. Now was the time to prepare.

"All hands, prepare for battle!"

The flagship hoisted a signal flag to alert the other ships, while Kurtz fired off a signal flare for the demons. The people aboard our warship sprang into action. Firnir held up her spear and rallied her kentauros.

"We will be the first kentauros warriors in history to fight atop the sea! Never again will such an honor be bestowed upon us! Fight well, so that your name is remembered for generations to come!"

"RAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

They were a noisy lot, but I was glad the kentauros had high morale despite the abnormality of the situation. They were the group that would take the most casualties, but I wanted as many of them to survive as possible. Praying for their safety, I gave the order to charge.

"Let's do this! All ships, charge! Trading ships stay upwind of the fog and await my signal! Stick to the plan, everyone!"

"Show this monster what Beluza's made off, you louts!"

"Charge, warriors! May the spirits of our ancestors bring victory to the demon army!"

“Woof! Woof!”

Human and demon cheers mingled together as the five warships plunged into the fog. The moment we entered the mists, the wind came to a halt.

“The hell is going on here!? This isn’t anything like the sea I know.”

Garsh’s confusion was understandable. The surface of the water was as flat as a mirror; it felt more like a lake than the sea. So far, everything was matching the reports I’d read.

“Mr. Veight. The sea is full of fish that normally live in the shallows,” one of the mermaids said as she swam close to the ship’s deck.

If there were shallow-water fish living here, that meant there had to be a reef nearby. However the fog limited visibility, and I couldn’t tell where that reef might be. And if we were up against an Island Kraken like I suspected, then that reef was actually the octopus in disguise. If we rowed into the reef, our ships would end up grounded, so I had the mermaids continue scouting the area around us.

“Report every minor detail you find! And let me know if you see a reef.”

“We’ve split up to search, but so far all we’ve seen is open sea.”

At the very least, this meant the Island Kraken was smaller than the radius of the fog it released. The fog was surprisingly thick though, and I couldn’t even see the ships to either side of us. I was expecting to be hit by a surprise attack at any moment. While I had absolutely no knowledge on medieval naval warfare, I’d read up a little on modern naval warfare. If this were a normal naval battle, now would be the time to send out fighter planes to pinpoint the enemy’s location.

“Kentauros squad, I want you to split up and search for the enemy. Do not, under any circumstances, stop moving. Make sure each squad takes a mermaid with them so you can be forewarned of any attacks coming from underwater.”

“You got it! Leave everything to us, Vaito!”

Firnir shouldered her two-handed spear and gave me a reassuring grin. *Please don’t be too reckless...* The 200 kentauros warriors filed out of their respective

ships and formed a column behind Firnir. She brandished her massive spear and passed down my orders.

“Split up and look for the enemy! Do not under any circumstances engage if you find the target! Come back and report to me! Our mermaid comrades are keeping watch underwater for us, so don’t worry about an ambush!”

The kentauros nodded and unslung their weapons. *I guess not cheering is their way of trying to be stealthy.* The kentauros split up and cantered off in every which direction. I waited for their return with bated breath, every second feeling like an eternity. We were up against a monster feared as the Terror of the Deep. As much as I wanted everyone to make it out of this alive, I feared there might be casualties.

Finally, after what felt like ages, the kentauros returned. Firnir galloped up to the flagship and shouted in a panicked voice, “We’ve got trouble! There’s another ship out here!”

“What!? Did you find any reefs!?”

“Nothing yet, but we’re still looking!”

So there was another ship out here besides ours. There was still a slim possibility an Island Kraken wasn’t behind these attacks, so this was something that needed to be investigated thoroughly. At the same time though, we needed to be cautious.

“Call the kentauros back! We’ll be switching to decoys now!”

It was Lacy’s time to shine.

“Lacy, make us an illusory ship, please.”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

Lacy steeled her nerves and started focusing.

“My will becomes manifest, an incarnation of the imagination that deceives sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing.”

She moved her hands through the air, as if sculpting an invisible statue. After a few seconds, a ship formed on the water’s surface in front of her. At first, it looked blurry, indistinct. But as time passed, it grew clearer, until eventually it

resembled the real thing. Her ship was a magnificent, triple-masted sailing ship modeled after the ones she'd seen in Beluza's harbor. It even had a fake crew manning the ropes. If I hadn't known it was an illusion, I would have mistaken it for the real thing. There was a rather elaborate crest engraved onto the main mast, but that was a small enough detail that I was willing to overlook it.

"By the way, what is that?"

"It's a wolf."

That's supposed to be a wolf crest? It looks more like a dog to me. Next to me, Garsh let out a sigh of wonder.

"That lass is one hell of a mage... Even a sailor like me can't tell the difference between that and a real ship. It's perfect."

"It's not just the part above water that's perfect either. Lacy's good enough to have reproduced the part that sits underwater too... I hope."

That was the reason I'd had her dive underneath ships over these past weeks. In fact, she'd come complaining to me the other day: "I've been staring at the underside of ships for so long that I've started having nightmares about them. I'm chained to the bottom of one while everyone screams 'Holy Priestess! Holy Priestess!' and you're just looking on and laughing the whole time, Mr. Veight. Though you do save me in the end."

I wonder, what exactly does Lacy see me as? Maybe I should ask her.

Our fleet continued advancing, with Lacy's illusory ship at the helm. She'd made sure to slow its speed and make it look like it was cruising on past inertia.

"You're pretty good at filling in all these little details, Lacy."

Lacy smiled bashfully as she adjusted the illusion with a wave of her fingers.

"A good imagination and strong observational skills are a requirement to becoming an illusionist. No matter how skilled you are at magic, you can't create something you don't understand, or can't envision."

That made sense. I had the feeling Lacy would make a good artist if she ever felt like going down that route. Now if only our octopus friend would oblige us by trying to eat this illusion, we'd be able to attack without suffering casualties.

Octopuses normally used sight to hunt for prey, so this one should end up fooled by the illusion. Just as I'd thought that, one of the lookouts shouted, "I think I see a ship up ahead!"

That was probably the one the kentauros had spotted.

"What's its make? Can you tell where it's from?"

The lookout answered Garsh's question immediately.

"I-I... think it's the Eraanya Company's Rainbow Clam, Captain!"

"What!? But that ship went missing months ago!"

That wasn't a good sign. I watched as the ship slowly came into view. It looked surprisingly normal, for all that it had been missing for months. One mast was tilted, but that was about it. Naturally, this meant we had to approach with utmost caution.

"A-Admiral, we have to rescue them! If they stay here much longer, they'll be killed!"

The Beluzan sailors began to panic. I shook my head sadly in response. There was no way anyone could have survived this long in a monster's territory.

"It's too late for them. Don't approach carelessly."

Though it was faint, I could sense a malevolent flow of mana in the air. There was *something* nearby.

"Lacy, send your illusion closer to that ship. Make it look like it's coming to help."

Lacy skillfully manipulated her illusion. Despite changing course, the fake ship still moved slowly, as a sailing boat without wind should. The moment it grew close to the Rainbow Clam a massive tentacle rose up and tried to wrap itself around Lacy's illusion. It was thicker than the mainmast, and many times longer than the ship. Countless suction cups dotted the tentacle's surface. Normally the tentacle would have slipped right through the illusion, but Lacy was skilled enough to have given it substance. However, every time the octopus thought it had latched on, its tentacle slid right off the ship.

"Eeeek! Waaaaaah!"

Lacy, who had never seen an octopus in her life, was terrified by the tentacle's grotesque shape. If she got any more freaked out, her illusion would shatter, so I grabbed her firmly by the shoulder and said in a steady voice, "Calm down, that's just what octopuses look like. I know it looks disgusting, but it's just an oversized fish."

"B-But..."

"Trust me! We need your illusion to protect everyone, Lacy!"

My pep talk got through to her, and Lacy recovered from her panic.

"O-Okay! I'll do my best!"

"Don't worry, I'll protect you. So just stay focused on keeping that illusion going."

Lacy wasn't the only one who'd been terrified by the tentacle's appearance. Human sailors and demon warriors alike were trembling in fear. But if they lost to that fear, our fleet would be wiped out. Before the terror could seep too deeply into their soul, I ordered the attack.

"Kentauros, charge! Cooperate with the mermaids to find the reef that makes up the core of its body! If its tentacles are here, it has to be close! Engineers, fire off the signal flares telling the merchant ships to advance!"

The flares were bright enough that they were dimly visible even through the thick fog. I had no idea if the ships waiting outside had been able to make out the entirety of the order or not, but hopefully they'd at least charge toward the light. Just in case, I sent off a few kentauros messengers to relay my orders directly.

The Island Kraken now had three tentacles wrapped around Lacy's fake ship. Thanks to its obsession with the illusion, the kentauros warriors were safe. However, there were still five other tentacles to contend with. And there was no telling when our octopus friend might start using them. It'd be a problem if it went after the kentauros, but it'd be an even bigger one if it targeted the ships.

Right now, my biggest concern was the merchant ship up ahead. The Island Kraken was ignoring it entirely, despite the fact that it had assaulted Lacy's illusion the moment it got into range. In fact, it seemed almost as if it was

waiting for us to approach the ship. That thought gave me an idea.

“Have the mermaids on standby investigate the underside of that ship! But tell them not to get too close!”

My hunch turned out to be correct. There was a huge hole in the hull of the Rainbow Clam. The ship and its crew had long since fallen prey to the Island Kraken. Normally it would have sunk to the bottom of the sea, but the Kraken had wrapped a tentacle around it to keep it afloat. The beast had learned that if it made the ship look like it was still intact, other ships would try to rescue it. It was using the ship as bait. *Damn, I forgot how smart octopuses were.* However, thanks to this, we knew where half of the Kraken’s tentacles were. I readied the catapult as I waited for our merchant ships to join us.

After a few minutes, I spotted the merchant ships’ silhouettes through the fog. They’d planned their approach well, and had managed to rendezvous despite the lack of wind. Garsh’s sailors knew their stuff. However, now that they’d arrived, they were trapped in this windless, tideless expanse. If our assault failed, we’d have to move the crew onto our warships and abandon those vessels. We were committed now. Even I couldn’t help but be a little nervous.

According to Melaine’s notes, the Island Kraken’s tentacles were powerful enough to lift a ship out of the water. But from what I’d seen so far, they didn’t look quite *that* strong. They were, however, the perfect thickness to maneuver through tight spaces while still being able to crush a human with ease. If one of those got around anyone, they were done for. Just then, the kentauros squad returned from their mission. Firnir galloped up to the flagship and shouted, “Vaito, we found the reef! It’s further in!”

“Well done, Firnir!”

“Be careful! There’s tentacles guarding the reef! We already lost two men!”

“Don’t worry, we’ll avenge them! Have your squad retreat!”

Octopuses used their tentacles to swim, as well as hunt their prey. So long as the Kraken was using all its tentacles to fight, it wouldn’t be able to move.

“Have the warships tow the sailing boats! Dragonkin engineers, load the

catapult's first barrage!"

Sailors hitched the merchant ships to the warships, and we rowed around the tentacles attacking Lacy's illusion. We needed to get closer to be able to see the reef through the fog. But if this octopus was smart enough to use ships as bait, chances were it'd realize the ship it was attacking was fake pretty soon. If we didn't hurry, we'd become its next target.

The mermaids started singing, and used the echoes bouncing off the reef to measure not only its size, but to pinpoint its location. I was pretty surprised, but apparently they had built-in sonar capabilities.

"Mr. Veight, the reef is about this big."

The mermaids formed a ring in the water to give me an approximation of the reef's size.

"Damn that's huge..."

Their circle was roughly the size of two tennis courts.

"Lacy, how many more ships can you make?"

"If all you want them to do is sit there I can make maybe 10-20 more, but I can only control one at a time. Moving them takes up all of my focus," Lacy replied apologetically. *So our decoys are limited.*

"Alright, leave your ship to its own devices for now. Start preparing the next illusion."

"Yes, sir."

Considering four of its tentacles were in sight, I doubted its main body could be that much further. As expected, the reef came into view after barely a minute of rowing. The fog was thickest here, which was why we hadn't been able to see it until we got much closer. If it weren't for the kentauros and mermaids scouting for us, we might never have found it. But now we had this octopus bastard in our sights. While a decent chunk of the reef jutted out of the water, most of it was still underwater. Using what was visible as a base, I tried to guess what the rest of the Kraken looked like underwater. I'd seen plenty of octopuses in aquariums back in Japan, so it was easy enough, even for a guy

with no imagination like me. *Alright, let's start with this spot.* I turned to the engineers and gave the order to fire.

"Target the section of sea right in front of the reef! Fire!"

The dragonkin relayed the order back, and with practiced movements the crew took aim.

"Target acquired! Firing the first barrage!"

Garsh turned to me with a smile, his earlier nervousness gone.

"So that's yer famous secret weapon, huh?"

"Something like that."

The catapult swung forward, launching a barrel into the air. It traced a neat arc through the air, and splashed into the sea right where I wanted it. The force of its fall sent it down a few feet, but then it floated back to the surface. And sat there. Garsh watched in disbelief for a few seconds, then rounded on me.

"O-Oi! Nothing's happening!"

"Calm down. That was just a calibration shot."

I only had one actual round of ammunition. I needed to make sure it hit, or we were screwed. On the other hand, as long as this landed, victory was a foregone conclusion. Hence why I was being cautious with my shots.

"Load the next shot! Prepare to fire the Silver Lightning!"

A nervous current ran through the engineers. However, Kurtz remained professional and relayed my orders.

"Roger, loading the Silver Lightning!"

He brought out a marked barrel and carefully lowered it into the catapult. While the Kraken's tentacles could turn onto us at any moment, it wouldn't do to rush this step. If this went off on the ship, it'd be a bigger problem than any tentacle. Unable to contain his curiosity, Garsh asked, "Is that it?"

"Yep, this is it."

Honestly, even I was terrified of our weapon.

“All mermaids and kentauros, retreat behind the flagship! Don’t stay in the open water!”

After making sure our allies had evacuated, I gave the order, “Fire the Silver Lightning!”

The catapult arm shot forward, the frame’s wood creaking with the strain. Like the last barrel, this one too shot through the air and came to rest in the water before the reef.

“Oi, this isn’t any different from last time!”

I had no time to deal with Garsh right now.

“Lacy!”

“I’m on it!”

Just as we’d rehearsed, Lacy created an illusion around the barrel. In seconds, it had been transformed to look like a human flailing in the water. More specifically, it looked like Lacy flailing around in the water. Her flailing movements resembled the way she’d splashed around when she’d first started learning how to swim.

“Is it just me, or is that an illusion of you?”

“It’s easiest for me to make a moving image of myself, so...”

I get that, but now you’re going to have to see an illusion of yourself get eaten, you know? Tired of grappling with a ship it just couldn’t seem to get a grip on, the Island Kraken changed targets to fake Lacy. It wrapped one of its free tentacles around her, and dragged her under. Even though I knew it was an illusion, it still hurt to watch.

* * * *

—The Terror of the Deep—

The Terror of the Deep was frustrated. He’d thought that if he put one of those creaky shell-things on the water, more creaky shell-things would come. And they had. Dozens of them. But something was different this time.

The creaky shell-things were supposed to have tasty meat-blobs on them.

They were slower than fish, and much warmer. And they had all these stick-things for gills that they flapped around with. But most of all, they tasted great. They had no scales, or shells, just soft, soft skin. Nothing gave the Terror of the Deep more joy than eating them.

Yet this time, none of the meat-blobs were falling into the water. Keeping the creaky shell-thing afloat took a lot of energy, and made him too tired to swim. How dare those weak creatures force him to work this hard! He would make them pay for this. Insolent prey such as them needed to be taught who was the ruler of these seas. Never once had the Terror of the Deep tasted defeat. So he had nothing to fear. He would teach these meat-blobs a lesson.

Just then, one of them started splashing around in the water. Finally, the Terror of the Deep would be able to enjoy a meal. First he would eat this one, then he would devour the rest. He extended a tentacle, and carried the hapless meat-blob to his mouth. However, something felt off...

* * * *

“Oi, what’s going on?”

I was just as worried as Garsh, so I didn’t even know what to say to reassure him. Still, I was the commander of this operation, so I had to look confident.

“Everything’s going according to plan.”

Just as I plastered on a fearless grin, an explosion rocked the sea. A huge pillar of water shot out of the center of the reef and rained down on us. Flickering yellow lights dotted the inside of the sea, and the water began to boil. All of the Island Kraken’s tentacles retreated back to the reef. In doing so, they abandoned the Rainbow Clam, which started to sink.

“Perfect!” I shouted, elated by our success. Seeing Garsh giving me a blank look, I decided to explain. “The thing we threw down there is one of the demon army’s secret weapons. It explodes when it touches water.”

“Holy shit... that’s insane.”

“Not only that, but it also turns the water around it into poison that melts flesh.”

“You guys are monsters!”

“No, we’re the demon army.”

Even if we weren’t really evil, we had to at least act the part. The barrel I’d fed the Island Kraken had been packed full of metal sodium. Back in high school, my science club friend had shown me a video of what happened to pure sodium when it touched water. It exploded. On top of that, it polluted the water due to the chemical reaction caused by exposure to water, so it was perfect for killing aquatic monsters. However, an element as unstable as sodium was liable to explode just being exposed to water vapor in the air, so on Earth it was normally packed in oil. It wasn’t the kind of thing you tended to find in nature. Naturally, that held true for this world as well. The sodium Kurtz had fired had been made by the old Demon Lord and Master. Before he’d died, the Demon Lord had experimented to see how much of the science he’d learned on Earth applied here. I’d only learned about it afterwards when reading his notes.

There were plenty of things that weren’t exactly the same across worlds, so many of the Demon Lord’s experiments had produced unexpected results. In truth, I wasn’t even sure if the substance I’d used just now was actually sodium. It had the same properties, so I’d just figured it was. *I guess since it did what I wanted it to, it doesn’t really matter what it is.* While that was enough to satisfy me, Kurtz sighed as he watched the water roil.

“To think the previous Demon Lord’s legacy would be used in such a way... Sir Veight, why is it that you seem to adore explosions?”

“Not sure... Maybe because I’m a soldier?”

I could feel the engineers giving me angry glares, but considering how helpful this would be in combat, I hoped they wouldn’t mind me doing this again. In response Kurtz said, “While I am glad this has proved an effective weapon, I hope you realize we will not be able to make yellow Dragon’s Jewels for a while now.”

“I know. Sorry about that.”

The yellow color in fireworks was made by burning sodium. That was the same reason dropping table salt into a fire turned it yellow.

“Actually, could you not substitute salt into the Dragon’s Jewels?”

“Salt absorbs moisture, and water makes Dragon’s Breath useless.”

So it’s not gonna work, basically. I thought back to the chemical formulas I learned in school. *Umm, Sodium’s Na, while water is H2O. If you put the two together, you get an exothermic reaction that makes sodium hydroxide, which I think is alkaline. And that molecule’s NaOH, so the extra hydrogen atom becomes... Ah, that must be the gas that gets released. So that’s why there’s an explosion and not just heat.* I’d never really thought about why sodium and water exploded when they came together, but now it made sense. *Science sure is interesting.*

My guess was right now, the Island Kraken was suffering from some pretty bad burns. Its tentacles were thrashing about wildly, churning up the water. One of them slammed into the sinking Rainbow Clam, knocking its mast clean off. I’d been prepared for a rampage, but this was more violent than I expected.

“Don’t get close, you’ll get caught up in its tentacles! The water around it’s been turned to poison so just wait it out!”

While I’d love to charge right away, I needed to wait for it to weaken some first. The magic the Island Kraken used to still the wind and waves wasn’t something it controlled consciously. The ability worked on instinct, so it couldn’t turn it off. Which was why it couldn’t just escape with the tide, or use it to wash away the sodium hydroxide. The longer it bathed in the alkaline solution, the more its body melted away.

Now then, while everything was going according to plan, I couldn’t relax just yet. Normally the Island Kraken lay in wait and attacked anyone who got too close, but now that it had been injured this badly, I suspected it would try to flee. Monster or not, it was still an animal with animal instincts. If it escaped deep underwater, we wouldn’t be able to chase it. So we needed to capture it while we still had the chance.

“Ballista squad, begin firing!”

The moment the signal flare went up, the six merchant ships started loosing long shafts at the reef. The canines on all six ships ran to and fro, fetching replacement quarrels and rewinding the ballistae’s strings. While it made for a

comical sight, they worked with exceptional efficiency. Their small builds worked to their advantage, allowing them to navigate the crowded deck without running into each other. The ballistae had been outfitted with bolts as thick and long as spears for this fight, so while the quarrels didn't travel far, they had a lot of power. The arrowheads had also been barbed, so any that hit, stayed stuck in the Kraken. On top of that, each bolt had a length of rope tied to its end. Any bolts that missed still tangled around the Kraken, and those that flew completely off their mark could easily be recovered. I'd basically turned the ballistae into harpoon-firing machines. The problem now was figuring out where to focus our attacks. The reef was too hard for our bolts to penetrate, and the tentacles were thrashing around too much to aim clearly at. However, the Kraken's main body was safely underwater. Thinking about it, the Kraken had a pretty solid defense too. *No wonder humans call it the Terror of the Deep.* However, I knew cephalopods had pretty low stamina. In fact, few creatures could keep fighting for as long as mammals and birds. I was relatively certain this octopus didn't have much stamina either. Besides, it was fighting in a bath of corrosive acid. *I guess we can wait and see.*

"The third merchant vessel, Surging Seas, has taken a hit on its mainmast! The fourth warship, Pirate Queen, has suffered some damage to its starboard side!"

It appeared some of the ships had gotten too close to the tentacles. But seeing as we really had no idea how far they could reach, it was understandable.

"Tell all ships to retreat a short distance! Surround it in a semicircle, but hold your fire!"

While a few ships might have gotten hit, so far we hadn't had any additional casualties. I wanted to keep it that way.

"Admiral, what now!?"

"This isn't looking good!"

Seeing the sailors start to panic, I leaned against the gunwale and scratched my head.

"Don't look so worried. Take a short break until it tires itself out."

“Are ya kidding me!?”

“This guy’s got nerves of steel...”

Sorry I’m a failure of an admiral who’s improvising things now.

Once the Island Kraken appeared to calm down somewhat, I ordered the merchant ships to resume their bombardment. While the ballistae didn’t have much accuracy, the canines made up for it with their tenacity. They kept on firing relentlessly, and before long the Kraken’s tentacles were riddled with harpoons. The ropes of the harpoons were tied to the ships, so if the Kraken tried to go anywhere, it’d have to drag six ships with it. As things stood, I doubted it could flee underwater. It might have been able to drag six ships at full strength, but right now it was likely exhausted.

“Recover any bolts that missed and fire them again! This is our only chance to reel in that monster octopus!”

“Yes, sir!”

The nearby canines waved cheerfully to me as they acknowledged my command. After repeating the process a few times, all our harpoons were either embedded into the Kraken or broken; meaning the ballista squad’s work was done. That damn octopus was bound to six ships, so it wouldn’t be going anywhere anytime soon. On top of that, half its tentacles were tied up. Furthermore, the explosion and resulting acid bath should have done a lot of damage to its vitals.

However, the Terror of the Deep proved to be a far more fearsome foe than I had anticipated.

“Admiral, look over there!”

One of the engineers pointed to the surface of the water. A few of its tentacles were wriggling ominously. There were a total of three of them visible. The same three we’d shot harpoons into. *Shit.* I’d totally forgotten octopuses could cut off their own tentacles in emergencies. However, the fact that it was willing to sacrifice its tentacles meant we had it cornered. After detaching its tentacles, the Island Kraken attempted to flee. It was clearly desperate. Garsh turned to me with a look of panic.

“Oi, admiral! Shouldn’t you be sending your kentauros out right now!?”

“I can’t, the water around it’s been turned to poison. We won’t be able to attack it until it leaves this area.”

Besides, the kentauros had no way of attacking the parts of the Kraken that were underwater, and the mermaids weren’t fighters. If I’d had another sodium bomb, I could have used that. Our only option now was to chase it and keep harrying it with the kentauros until it slowly bled to death. *I’ll chase you to the ends of the Earth if I have to. You’re not getting away from me, you octopus bastard!* Just as I thought that, the air around us suddenly grew cold.

“Is it just me, or did it get colder?” A sailor muttered. The fog around us began to sparkle, then dispersed. No, not dispersed. Froze. The frozen dew particles dropped into the sea, causing the fog to clear up. Weather like this was unthinkable in the southern sea. Kurtz’s breath came out in white puffs as he muttered, “Sir Veight, is this...”

“Yeah, it is.”

Our beloved Demon Lord had arrived. No one else could create this phenomenon. *Not that anyone asked you to show up.*

“It would appear I arrived in time after all.”

Gomoviroa descended from the sky, landing lightly on the flagship’s deck. While everyone else was shivering from the cold, she looked perfectly warm despite the thin dress she was wearing. I supposed that made sense, since she was the one absorbing all the heat.

“Master! Hey, Master!” I whispered furiously. She turned to me and floated over.

“What is it?”

“Are you sure you should be out on the front lines like this?”

Overprotective as she was, I’d expected her to show up, but that didn’t make her entrance any less surprising. Master grinned and replied, “Right now I am nothing more than a wandering old sage.”

Who do you think you are, Gandalf?

“I will eventually need to reveal my identity to humans. If such a reveal is inevitable, it would be better to make a grand entrance.”

“Are you sure you’re not just trying to copy the wizard in the story I told you a while back?”

“For even the very wise cannot see all ends.”

“Now’s really not the time to quote cool-sounding lines.”

The Island Kraken was still trying to flee. Master floated off the flagship and alighted atop the sea.

“You shall not escape me.”

Master tapped her staff to the water, and the sea began to freeze.

“Wh-What in blazes...”

“So this is a demon’s magic...”

“Holy shit, I’ve never seen so much ice in my life!”

“Is she a fairy?”

I guess if you live this far south all your life, ice would be a pretty rare sight.
Entranced by Master’s performance, the sailors forgot their fear of the Island Kraken. At the end of the day, Master’s specialty was necromancy. She wasn’t very good at other forms of magic. Freezing this much water this fast would be impossible if she were using normal magic. However now Master had become a thermodynamic vacuum, capable of sucking in any and all forms of energy. She was converting the sea’s heat energy to mana, and then using that mana to cast a cooling spell. The heat that was lost thanks to the cooling spell was then absorbed by Master, giving her more mana. Thanks to that infinite loop, Master could freeze as much of the sea as she wanted. Once she was finished, our esteemed Demon Lord turned to me with a smile.

“I had always wished to try this at least once. Theoretically it was possible, so I wished to make sure it could be done in practice.”

“You sure are devoted to your research...”

Just don’t go overboard, or you’ll plunge the world into an ice age, Master.

The field of ice spread out in a circle, with Master at its center. The Island Kraken's reef and our ships were both trapped in a sheet of ice. Meanwhile, the octopus' tentacles were trapped below. There was nothing it could do to protect its head, the reef. This was our chance to finish things.

"Kentauros squad, charge! Smash that reef to smithereens!"

Firnir led her men down the gangway and charged. As she galloped forward, she pressed a small switch on her spear, and a sharp blade popped out of one end. It appeared she'd installed some gimmicks into her weapon. That folding blade looked like the work of Thuvan's engineers.

"Let's do this, guys!"

"RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

From the looks of it, the other kentauros had all switched out their weapons for axes, which they whirled over their heads as they ran. I remember Firnir had told me axes were the kentauros' traditional weapon.

"Wait, Firnir! I told you not to strip in public!"

I really wish she would do something about that bad habit of hers. At any rate, the kentauros surrounded the Island Kraken and started hacking it to death.

"DIEEEEEEEEEEE!"

"FOR MY ANCESTORS!"

Axes rose and fell, cutting off chunks of the reef. Any section that fell to the frozen ground was then kicked away by a kentauros hoof. Fired up as they were, the kentauros were avatars of destruction. I watched the reef grow progressively smaller through my telescope. Though I called it a reef, it was more like the octopus' shell. And from the looks of it, it was made of the same material as a clam's shell. While everyone else was hacking off chunks, Firnir was running around stabbing her spear into the Island Kraken's more vulnerable spots. Still, this Kraken was a tough nut to crack. Right around the time the kentauros' war cries were growing hoarse, one of their messengers came up to me.

“I bear a message from Chief Firnir! She says that the core of the monster’s shell is too thick for the kentauros’ weapons to break through!”

“What!?”

I hadn’t expected its shell to be *that* strong. Looking over, I saw that a good portion of the kentauros were standing off to the side to catch their breath. If those muscle-bound freaks were that exhausted, that meant we’d need a bomb or something to punch through that shell. As if sensing my thoughts, Kurtz turned to me and said, “We have no more explosives.”

“I see...”

We’d brought only a small amount of gunpowder with us, and that gunpowder was needed to light signal flares. We were also out of ballista bolts, so there was only one option left. I flipped through my grimoire and double-checked the spell I wanted to use. I then turned to Beluza’s sailors and said in a voice quiet enough that Kurtz couldn’t hear, “Alright, I’ll handle this myself.”

“Are you serious, admiral!?”

Though the sailors looked shocked, it was standard among demons for the general to show off their valor at the very end.

“I’ll be using magic, don’t worry. Anyway, I want you to launch me using the catapult.”

“What!?”

“Look, just hurry up and do it!”

If the demons caught wind of what I was attempting they’d stop me for sure. I clambered into the catapult’s bucket and transformed.

“I’ll adjust myself in the air, so you don’t need to worry about aiming. Just launch me at full force. As long as you get the direction right, I’ll be fine.”

“A-Aye-aye, sir!”

The sailors readied the catapult and bent the arm back as far as it would go. Just then, Kurtz, who was readying another signal flare, glanced back. The moment he saw me his expression froze.

“What are you doing!?”

Crap, he saw me! I turned to the sailors and yelled, “Do it!”

“Aye-aye!”

They released the rope, and I shot through the air. It felt similar to when an elevator dropped sharply, but with the sensation dialed to eleven. It was like I was floating. I crossed my arms and legs to reduce the amount of friction caused by air resistance and loosed a war cry, “AWOOOOOOOOO!”

While the speed and pressure made me a little dizzy, it actually felt good to fly this fast in my werewolf form. *Now then, I better cast the spell before I crash.*

The spell to walk on water was a derivative of body strengthening magic, and to use it, one first had to know how to control their weight. There were other techniques incorporated into the spell as well, but manipulating weight was the most important one. In order to learn how to walk on water, aspiring mages first learned how to change their weight. However, the spell to manipulate one’s weight put a lot of strain on the user’s body, so it wasn’t very useful by itself. That being said, what if a mage decided to multiply their weight to a few hundred kilograms while they were hurtling through the air? Wouldn’t they make for quite a powerful cannonball? Assuming, of course, the technique didn’t kill the user.

As I flew, I used hardening magic, muscle strengthening magic, and damage enhancing magic on myself. With this, I’d be able to withstand the impact without causing undue damage to my skin or joints. Plus, this magic made my kicks and jabs stronger. I made minute adjustments to my trajectory by changing my posture as necessary. All that was left now was to make sure I magnified my weight right before impact. As I reached the height of my ascent, I took aim at the Island Kraken’s head and dove.



The kentauros had spotted me now. I could see Firnir looking up at me in shock.

“GET CLEEEEEAAR!”

As I shouted that, I increased my weight to the maximum my strengthened bones could withstand. With how much mana this drained, I’d only be able to maintain this state for a few seconds. Back when I’d first become Master’s apprentice, I’d used this spell to kill a boar monster, so I knew it worked. As I fell, I heard Firnir shouting something to me, “Vaito, what the heck are you doing!?”

Just a little physics experiment.

“AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

I shot my leg out for a kick the moment I fell onto the Island Kraken’s shell, hitting it with maximum force. My abnormal weight, the speed of my fall, the power of a werewolf, and the added strengthening magic I’d used all came together to strike the octopus at a single point. With how much destructive force I’d packed into my attack, I doubted anything on Earth could withstand it. The shell the kentauros couldn’t break no matter how hard they tried shattered in an instant. Before my might, it was as fragile as an eggshell. All of my senses went momentarily numb as pieces of the Kraken’s shell rained down around me. When they returned, I realized I’d sunk waist-deep into what was left of the outer parts of the reef, and was standing on something squishy. Thanks to my strengthening magic, my legs were unharmed. My neck stung a little, but it wasn’t a huge deal. The squishy thing I was standing on was likely the octopus’ body. *I guess this is it’s weak point, since it tried so hard to defend it.* It was time to end this octopus once and for all.

“DIE!”

I sunk my talons into the Kraken, cutting into its soft skin. The moment I pierced its body, it started thrashing about. *I can’t believe it’s still got this much energy left.* I heard Firnir yell something from above me.

“You really are crazy... Men, follow Vaito! Let’s finish this!”

“UWOOOOOOOOH!”

“Support the Vice-Commander!”

A one-sided slaughter followed. The Island Kraken writhed in pain as the kentauros hacked away at it. My attack had cracked its shell beyond repair, and even the kentauros’ hooves were enough to shatter the rest. As time passed, the hole in the reef grew larger, until finally the Kraken’s entire head was exposed. Without its sturdy defenses, the Kraken was helpless against the horde of kentauros.

“Ancestors guard me!”

“This is for my friend, you monster!”

“Die, you damned octopus!”

As we continued pounding on the helpless Kraken, my eight werewolf guards joined the fight. Since the sea was frozen, they’d been able to walk across it. The Garney brothers were the first to arrive, and they shoved me aside so they could start ripping into the Kraken.

“Oi, Veight, we’re here to help!”

“Leave this to us!”

I was grateful they were eager to assist, but the octopus’ head was cramped enough with all the kentauros, so I really didn’t need more helpers.

“Shut up! Stop trying to hog the spotlight! Go clamming over there or something!”

“Hey bro, what’s this clamming thing Veight’s talking about?”

“Hell if I know! Get outta my way, Nibert!”

Next to arrive was Monza.

“Boss, you know Fahn’s gonna chew you out for this, right?”

“Don’t you dare tell her what happened! I’ll knock your lights out if you do!”

“Haha, my lips are sealed!”

We jostled each other around as we continued gouging out the Kraken. Unfortunately, our rampage ended up indirectly damaging the fleet. Though the Kraken was still trapped in the ice, it managed to break a few tentacles free and

started lashing out.

“Firnir, you take care of those tentacles!”

“What!? Come on!”

Firnir pulled a face, but I put my foot down.

“Your spear’s better suited to cutting up those tentacles than anything we’ve got! Now hurry it up!”

Firnir reluctantly shouldered her spear and rounded up a few of her men.

“Fine, if you say so! First platoon, on me! Let’s cut those tentacles down to size!”

Firnir and the 40 men she’d handpicked to join her on the flagship galloped back toward the tentacles.

It took another half hour to finish the Island Kraken off. Finally though, the infamous Terror of the Deep breathed its last, and its bloated corpse lay limp in the water. Blue blood and black ink spilled from its body in rivulets, staining the shattered ice around it. It smelled repugnant and looked worse. After a while though, the tide began to return, and it washed away the octopus’ fluids. A breeze swept past us, blowing away the putrid stench. I gulped in a lungful of air, savoring the sea air’s salty tang. The Island Kraken’s magic had been completely dispelled.

“Looks like it’s finally over. We did it, everyone!”

The werewolves and kentauros around me nodded in satisfaction, then cheered.

“Wooooooooo!”

“Long live the Demon Lord!”

“Thank you for this blessing, ancestors!”

Monza and the Garney brothers smiled and shook their heads.

“Haha, that monster was nothing!”

“I guess werewolves really are the strongest!”

“That’s great and all, but I really want to take a bath now. I’m covered in monster blood.”

I was glad to see my werewolves were in high spirits too. The octopus had lost its buoyancy after death, and half of it was already underwater. From what I could tell, its shell had served as its air bladder as well. Without it, it sank. At this point, this section of the sea had become so polluted with various substances that I didn’t want to touch any part of it.

“Alright, guys, let’s go back. Be careful, though. Sharks might show up to feed on this thing’s corpse.”

I cast water-walking magic onto my werewolves, and we all trekked back to the flagship. On the ship, everyone was twirling their cap or bandana, or whatever they had as they cheered us on. We’d won. That realization finally hit me. Kurtz glared down at me from the deck. He clearly wanted to say something, but I pretended I didn’t notice.

As always, the clean-up looked like it would be the hardest part. While preparing for battles might be fun, cleaning up after them wasn’t.

“Dragonkin engineers, collect samples of the water around here! After we’ve discovered how far the poison’s spread, pour in the antidote!”

In case of accidents, we’d brought a sodium hydroxide neutralizer with us. We wouldn’t be needing it, so I figured it’d be more eco-friendly to fix the damage we did to the sea. The remaining ice would melt in time, so we didn’t need to do anything about that.

“I want Beluza’s sailors working double time on ship repairs! Meanwhile, all canines work on recovering all the harpoons and rope we can!”

Canines loved picking up trash, so I’d left that task to them. They slid joyfully across the ice, retrieving everything within their reach.

“We’ve completed testing and detoxifying the water, sir.”

One of Kurtz’s engineers brought me a few strips of purple cloth as he said that. The cloth worked in a similar manner to litmus paper. Going off the color this dragonkin was showing me, the sea was mostly neutralized. We wouldn’t be able to completely erase the effects of our battle, so this was good enough.

If anything, the Island Kraken's fluids were more polluting to the sea right now than anything we'd done. If it had been a squid, I could have retrieved at least its ink to eat, but octopus ink tasted nasty.

"By the way, Sir Veight, what shall we do with the Terror of the Deep's corpse?"

I guess if we just left it, it'd become a hazard, huh? Maybe I should have Master disintegrate it. Though I felt like even if we left it, other fish would eat it soon enough.

"I'm still thinking on how to deal with it, so if you have any ideas I'm all ears."

One of the novice engineers timidly said, "Sir, Beluza's viceroy is saying he'd like to take it back with him if possible."

"Seriously!?"

What did he want with a giant octopus? *Don't tell me you're planning on eating it!?* The engineer's voice grew tinier as he added, "He wants to show the people of Beluza proof of their victory."

"Oh, that's what it was."

In that case, I didn't particularly mind. Showing your people the proof of your might was important for any leader. Besides, this would make for great advertisement for the demon army. If we froze the whole thing it'd float again, and it'd be easy to tow.

"In that case, ask Lord Gomoviroa if she would be willing to freeze the Island Kraken's corpse for us. We'll tow it back with us."

"Yes, sir!"

Though if we were going through all the trouble of preserving it and taking it back, it seemed a waste to just throw it away after we were done showing it off. *Its tentacles, at least, have come out of the battle mostly unharmed, so... Hmm...*

After finishing emergency repairs, we hooked the Island Kraken to our eleven ships and sailed back to Beluza. Master sat atop the Kraken's corpse, which she'd frozen into a hunk of ice. The body of a famed sea monster made for a

surprisingly good throne for our Demon Lord. The mermaids rendezvoused with us on our way back, though they kept their distance from the Kraken's corpse.

"Holy shit, you demon army folks are crazy! Especially you, kid! But thanks to that, I guess our sea lanes are safe again." Garsh said with an astounded smile. Now was the time to put on the finishing touches.

"That monster ruled the nearby seas, but now that it's gone, a new ruler of the deep might emerge."

Whenever the top of the food chain was eliminated, there were huge changes to the local ecosystem. For example, if wolves were removed from an area, deer would multiply to unsustainable levels, and eat all of the nearby vegetation. While we'd only taken out a single monster, it was possible this would still have a huge impact on the monster ecosystem. Garsh seemed to understand that as well, and he folded his arms thoughtfully.

"That doesn't sound good. So what are we supposed to do?"

"That should be obvious."

I flashed Garsh a charming smile.

"Have the demon army protect you."

Garsh understood the implications behind my words. He shrugged his shoulders, his expression troubled.

"You sound like a pirate now, kid. 'We'll guarantee your safety, so pay us a toll.'"

That was basically what I was saying. But after a few seconds, Garsh smiled.

"Well, I've never been one for fancy diplomatic talk! At least I know how to deal with scoundrels like you, kid! Looking forward to working with ya!"

"Likewise."

To be honest, monsters were as much of a problem for us demons as they were for humans. Unlike humans, we couldn't even have a rational discussion with them. In the past, demons had been forced to fend off both humans and monsters. Even if we managed to make peace with humans now, we'd still need to fight monsters. *As fun as being a werewolf cannonball was, I should probably*

look into creating a dedicated monster extermination squad.

The sun was just beginning to dip below the horizon when we returned to Beluza's port. The sky to the east was midnight blue, while in the west it blazed orange.

"Launch the victory flare!"

At my command, Kurtz fired off one of the night-use flares. These ones were even more like fireworks than the others. Upon seeing the fireworks, the engineers stationed at Beluza launched their own congratulatory fireworks. They made for quite a stunning display, what with the light reflecting off the water and all. As we drew closer, the men at the harbor started to shout and point when they saw the giant frozen Kraken we were towing. Beluza's main port was where most of the city's citizens worked. Many of them were either dockhands, shipwrights, or fishermen. Quite a few of them even lived on their boats. Which explained why half the city seemed to be at the port even at night.

"Whoa! That's the Terror of the Deep!?"

"All hail the demon army! Long live Beluza's navy!"

"Thank you so much! Now we can trade safely again!"

Cheers filled the air, extolling both us and Garsh's soldiers. Garsh seemed to be used to the praise, as he casually walked to the front of the ship and waved at the citizens.

"There's nothing out there that can handle Beluza's navy! Especially not when we've teamed up with the demon army!"

The people's cheers grew louder. Some of them climbed up the masts of their ships to get a better view. Garsh turned back to us and said with a smile, "Look, the crowd loves you guys."

I guess we should show our appreciation for their gratitude. This is part of politics too, after all.

"Attention!"

I had my eight werewolves line up on the deck.

“Transform and let them hear you roar!”

We transformed simultaneously and shot our fists into the air.

“AWOOOOOOOOO!”

Our deafening roars scared the nearby Beluzan sailors witless. Once we were done howling I yelled, “The demon army promises to keep your city’s trade routes safe! We won’t let anyone disrupt Beluza’s prosperity!”

Garsh picked up where I left off and added, “This is the man who cracked open the Terror of the Deep’s head! Show this reckless brat yer appreciation, lads!”

“Yeeeeah!”

“What a hero!”

“The savior of Beluza!”

I was showered with applause so loud it sounded like thunder. I called Firnir and the others over too to join in. Blushing slightly, Firnir trotted over and held her spear up high. Melaine elegantly waved, while Kurtz gave the people a demon army salute. Master, on the other hand, sat atop the Kraken’s corpse and cradled her knees. The mermaids swam around her, occasionally popping their heads out of the water.

Still in my wolf form, I wrapped one arm around Garsh’s shoulder and waved to everyone with the other. Firnir then wrapped her arm around my shoulder, and soon enough the canines and dragonkin joined in as well. The cheering continued for what seemed like ages. *I guess Beluza’s residents love to celebrate.*

Ever since I’d reincarnated, humans had always feared and attacked me. And aside from Ryunheit’s residents, that was still generally the case. So it was really moving to have people I didn’t know cheering me like this.

“It sure feels nice being welcomed by humans,” I muttered.

“Ya say something, kid!?” Garsh hollered. I smiled and yelled back, “Looking forward to working with you, Garsh!”

“Same kid, same!”

The two of us laughed loudly. Parker sidled up behind me and asked, “Why did you not ask for me to come with everyone else?”

“Why don’t you try asking your heart that question?”

Parker placed a hand on his bony ribcage and said, “Oh my, it appears I have no heart!”

“Seriously!?”

“Oww! That hurts, Veight!”

This was exactly why I hadn’t wanted to call him over. Still, he had been instrumental in the operation. I wrapped my free arm around his shoulder.



That evening, Garsh personally took a hammer to the door of his wine cellar and hosted a lavish feast for the whole city. Apparently, it was customary for informal parties like these to be started with the viceroy breaking open their own wine cellar. For that reason, they'd come to be known as "Hammertime Festivals." Garsh had changed into a bonafide pirate costume, and he swung his saber in the air as he yelled, "None of ya are going back to work until every single one of these casks is empty, ya hear me! Now get to drinking, lads!"

The Garney brothers each lifted a cask of wine and started drinking straight from the barrel. The sailors around them placed bets on who'd be the first to fall. *Oh, looks like Firnir's joining in the fun.* In the end, Firnir's stamina proved greater than either of the Garney brothers. She gulped down alcohol like a horse would water, so it was barely even a contest. She didn't even look tipsy, but the poor brothers were lying unconscious on the floor. While everyone was partying, I decided to have my own fun.

Even before I'd reincarnated, I'd always wanted to eat giant octopus tentacles. Octopus had some of the best texture of all the seafood. Fortunately for me, we'd managed to kill this Kraken with most of its tentacles intact. Even better, the harpoons sticking through them made for perfect skewers.

This was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Though the tentacles had a rather unappetizing appearance, I had to at least try one. Ideally there'd be wasabi to season it with, but I still hadn't been able to find a good wasabi substitute. Also, while I was okay with eating fish raw, there was no way I was eating this thing raw. If I was going to cook it anyway, it'd be best to make takoyaki or tempura out of it. The reason I was doing this away from the party was because this monster had killed more than a few Beluzan sailors. I doubted the other residents would want to see me cooking it.

Since I didn't have too many seasonings, I decided to just grill it and drizzle on some soy sauce. I borrowed a deserted bonfire and secretly started grilling a tentacle. Before long, an appetizing smell wafted through the air, and the tentacle started browning and curling up. I took it off the fire and applied a soy sauce glaze. *Now then, let's see how this tastes... Mm... That wasn't what I was expecting.* It still had the same pleasant texture all octopuses did. While I'd grilled it so long it had gone from crisp to hard, that was perfect for a werewolf

like me. Transformed, my fangs could tear right through it.

The problem was the taste. I hadn't been expecting it to have much of a taste, but this was even blander than I'd predicted. The Kraken was lacking in umami, and tasted like chewed-up gum. I didn't know if that was just how it was supposed to taste, or if we'd ruined the meat's flavor by making it suffer so much before killing it. Either way, it wasn't very good. The only way this would be edible was if I stewed it in sauce. *Do I have to eat all of this?* As I was lamenting the hole I'd dug myself into, Firnir spotted me and staggered over. She had another wine barrel in her hands.

"Heeeey, Vaito! Just so you know, I'm not druuuunk."

"That's what all drunks say."

"Oh, is that an octopus tentacle? Why're you eating that?"

Firnir hugged me from behind and rubbed herself against me. *I wonder if this is how zookeepers feel.* Cheeks flushed, Firnir gazed at me with unfocused eyes. Suddenly, she clapped her hands together and said, "Ah, I get it! I see now!"

What exactly do you see? Just then, Garsh showed up. He was smiling, with his arms wrapped around the Garney brothers.

"What're ya doing here, kid? You're the guest of honor! Now drink up! ...Hm? Is that the Island Kraken's tentacle?"

Why can't people just leave me alone? Smiling, Firnir turned to Garsh and explained, "This is one of those, you know, rituals. Vaito's eating his defeated foe and absorbing its strength. Us kentauros do that allllll the time."

Garsh and the Garney brothers exchanged glances.

"I didn't know you wanted strength that badly, Veight..."

"No wonder he's so strong, bro."

"Oi, are all you werewolves like this?"

"Nah, he's just special. I mean think about it man, no normal werewolf shoots themselves out of a catapult."

"Oh yeah, you've got a point there. That kid's insane."

And now everyone's jumping to conclusions. Afterwards, Garsh and the others spread the story that I was eating the Kraken to gain its strength. Before long, my nickname went from "The werewolf who crushed the Terror of the Deep" to "The werewolf who ate the Terror of the Deep." I would have preferred the former though, it sounded like a much cooler title for a mage.

The night wore on, but the party showed no signs of stopping. For Beluza, which relied on its fishing and maritime trade, keeping the seas safe was its top priority. Fortunately, the residents had learned the mermaids weren't their enemy, and their true enemy, the Island Kraken, had been defeated. Even better, the party had been a great icebreaker to bring the demon army and the city's populace closer together. *Looks like things are going well. Guess I'll drink a bit too.*

I couldn't afford to overdo it though, so I ended up retiring from the party early, and headed to the viceroy's manor. There, I began planning our next course of action. *I should probably make doubly sure the routes to Lotz are 100% safe.* If it turned out there was another Island Kraken terrorizing the sea, we'd be in trouble. Besides, this was a good opportunity to build relations with the fishing city of Lotz as well. As I lounged on the living room sofa, Garsh walked in. Surprisingly, he didn't look drunk at all. He wiped his face down with a damp towel and looked at me with clear eyes.

"Yo, Veight. Good work back there."

"You too, Garsh."

Despite his gruff nature, he was a dutiful viceroy. He knew that those in positions of power needed to be ready to act at any time. He turned to one of his burly maids and ordered her to bring some food up. *Looks like I'll get to enjoy some more sashimi.*

"I'm guessing ya like quiet meals more than wild parties, huh, kid?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

I'd just been getting hungry too. The maid brought an assorted plate of raw fish, on which there was surprisingly also some raw octopus.

"You guys eat octopus in Beluza too?"

“Catches recently have been bad, so it’s become a bit of a delicacy, but yeah. Most fishermen who manage to nab one eat it themselves though, so you rarely see it on the market. You looked like ya wanted to try it, so I got some for ya.”

Ah, so that’s why they didn’t have it before. This octopus sashimi had all the umami I’d come to expect, and tasted just as good as the stuff I’d had in Japan. I ate my way through the plate while I discussed my plans with Garsh. After explaining my plan to sail the sea route to make sure it really was safe, I asked, “Are you close with the viceroy of Lotz?”

Garsh swallowed the fish in his mouth, then said with a smile, “Course I am. Old man Petore’s like a father to me! If ya want a recommendation, you’ve got one! Assuming the old fart hasn’t kicked the bucket, that is!”

Though his words were irreverent, it was clear he respected Lotz’s viceroy.

“It’s been twenty years since I became viceroy, and that old man still getting on my case. Always complaining about how I don’t act dignified like a viceroy should, or that I need to be more diplomatic.”

“He sounds like a stubborn old man.”

“You bet he is! Ya won’t find anyone else that stubborn in Beluza *or* Lotz! But he’s saved my hide more times than I can count, so I’m indebted to the old fart, much as I don’t like it.”

I was starting to understand the kind of relationship they had. It reminded me a little of how my relationship with the old Demon Lord had been. *I bet he would have loved to try this sashimi.* Knowing him, he would have eaten it while gazing out at the harbor, with a bottle of sake to wash it down. I could already imagine how our conversation would go down.

“It looks just like the Seto Sea, doesn’t it, sir?”

“Indeed, it is quite a nostalgic sight. This is the perfect place to relax and forget about my duties.”

“How’re you liking the sashimi?”

“It’s quite high-quality. It would be nice if we could make sushi out of it.”

“I don’t see why we can’t. I hear they grow rice around here, too.”

“Splendid. As I suspected, we should spread rice cultivation across the land. Let us organize a survey team to see if it’s possible to get the required amount of water from the nearby rivers.”

“Can’t we leave talking about work until tomorrow?”

“Hahaha, my apologies. I couldn’t help myself.”

I must have been making a strange face, since Garsh gave me a funny look.

“Did I say something weird?”

“Oh, no. Don’t worry about it.”

Garsh smiled ruefully.

“Hahaha, no need to brush me off. I can tell, you were remembering someone close to you, weren’t ya? Was it your dad? Grandpa?”

“No. Both my father and my grandfather passed while I was a baby. I couldn’t remember them even if I wanted to.”

In this life anyway. As for my past life... I’d rather avoid thinking about my dad if I could. He wasn’t a bad person, but I never really liked him. That was just how our relationship had become. In this life, there was at least someone who’d taken the place of my father. But we were keeping his death a secret from the humans, so I couldn’t tell Garsh I was recalling my memories of the old Demon Lord. So instead, I answered, “We weren’t connected by blood, but... someone who was like a father to me passed away recently. I was remembering him.”

“I see.”

Garsh’s expression grew solemn. He didn’t pry any further. Sensing it was a sensitive topic, he changed the subject.

“Ya know, I always thought demons were way scarier.”

“Oh? Really?”

“Yeah, even you. I mean in terms of pure strength, you’re a monster. You’ve got skills, and the guts to back it up.”

In all honesty, I just happened to know a lot about octopuses. I didn’t say

anything though, and Garsh added with a smile, “But even a monstrously strong brat like you tears up when he’s reminiscing about his family. Just makes me realize yer not too different from us.”

Wait, tears up? No way. Garsh skewered a small piece of octopus and held it up to me.

“Go on, eat. Unlike that monster, these tentacles are actually good.”

“You’re not wrong there.”

“Did that old man of yours like octopus?”

Since he’d talked about eating it back in Japan, I’m pretty sure he did.

“I’m not sure... but I get the feeling he would have loved it.”

“He must have been an interesting fellow. What kinda person... err, werewolf was he?”

“Actually, he was a dragonkin. He was a real handful. All he thought about day and night was work.”

I looked out of the window as I reminisced about the former Demon Lord. Outside, humans and demons were carousing together. *If only you could have seen this.* Feeling nostalgic, I griped a little more to Garsh.

“Both of us were busy with work so we only got to see each other occasionally, but every time we did, all he’d talk about was work still.”

“Hah, now that’s a riot. I don’t know anyone like that. Tell me more about this guy.”

“With pleasure. You should tell me more about that Petore guy too.”

“You got it, kid.”

Looks like it’s going to be a long night.

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—Monza’s Ramblings—

Oh, what’re you doing here, Lacy? You want the boss? He went back to the viceroy’s manor. I’m not sure, but he’s probably doing business with the pirate

guy or something. Why does everyone think I always have all the answers? I don't spend my whole life tailing people you know. Anyway, best not bother him while he's working. You can see the entrance from here, so let's just kick back and relax until he comes out. Ahaha, yeah, it's a habit of mine. When we go on hunts I'm always the lookout, so I've just gotten used to always keeping watch. Oh, I don't drink. Alcohol tastes like crap, and it makes you dumb.

Our boss is a pretty interesting guy, don't you think? It doesn't matter how crazy something is, if he says he can do it, I get the feeling he really can. Plus, he actually does it every time he says he will. Like this fight. Everyone thought he was insane for going after that Terror of the Deep, but he really killed it. What a guy. He does all these crazy things without batting an eyelid, like it's totally normal. But he doesn't even boast about it. Once he's done he just goes on to do the next crazy thing. It's like he loves danger or something. He's a weird one, our boss.

Huh? Oh no, I'm pretty sure I'm not in love with him. Though, I haven't really ever been in love with anyone so I couldn't tell you for sure. Besides, I'm pretty sure he isn't interested in me at all. If anything, you're a lot closer to the boss than I am, Lacy. You're both mages, too. Well, I guess I'm a werewolf like he is, though. Ufufu.

If anything, I guess I kinda respect how reckless boss is. There's no telling what he's gonna do next, and whenever he decides on something there's no telling how it's gonna turn out, so I never get bored following him. Though in hindsight, he's always succeeded. Either way, I'm looking forward to seeing where he takes us next. Wherever it is, it'll be interesting for sure.

Course there's no telling when he might screw up big time and get us all killed. Honestly, it's a miracle none of us have died yet. But I don't mind. Because the danger's what makes it fun. And if there ever comes a time that the boss ends up dying, that'll be when I die too. I'm pretty sure the rest of us werewolves feel the same.

Back when we were hiding in our tiny village, our lives were miserable. We were scared of humans, and all we could do was cower in our forest. We were all alive, but we might as well have been dead. Compared to that, our lives now are way more fulfilling. Sure, we're flirting with death, but thanks to that we get

to do amazing things like kill giant octopuses. I'm glad I chose to follow the boss. We even started getting along with humans. And we got to try seafood for the first time. I didn't know it was this delicious.

Oh, but I hope we don't become friends with all the humans out there. Boss needs to leave a few bad guys for me to kill. Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I guess to you guys we're scary, but we're just born hunters. We can't help but want to hunt. Don't worry though, Lacy. You're one of our pack now. If anything happens to you, we'll protect you.

Oh hey, it's Garbert. Hm? Yeah, of course I can tell them apart. The one who looks all "Graaah" is Garbert, and the other one's Nibert. You don't understand? Well, don't worry about it. They're basically the same person anyway. Oi, Garby! What's wrong? You're making a weirder face than usual. Boss did what now? He *ate* the Terror of the Deep? Wait, you're asking me why? How the hell would I know? Haha, he's an incomprehensible guy alright.

* * * *

"Alright, this looks perfect."

I nodded to myself as I looked down at the small shrine I'd had the canines build. It was a shrine honoring the deceased Island Kraken. We'd lost two kentauros and one mermaid to the Island Kraken. While casualties had been kept to a minimum, they hadn't been zero. For those three demons, this mission had brought an end to their lives. Furthermore, plenty of Beluzan sailors had been killed by the Kraken before we'd killed it.

We'd created a separate memorial epitaph honoring the dead and celebrating our victory over the Island Kraken already, but I'd also wanted to make a small shrine for the monster. The Japanese part of me wanted to at least pray for every creature, even our enemies. There was also a superstitious side of me that was worried the Kraken would come back to haunt us if we didn't honor it. Hence why I'd asked the canines to make a shrine for it. Though while I called it a shrine, it was really just a small box I could carry in my arms. I wasn't expecting anyone to understand my beliefs anyway, so I'd had the canines design it like a shinto shrine. Though my memories of shrines were a little vague, so I wasn't sure how accurately I'd reproduced it. As for the spiritual

symbol that needed to go into each shrine, I'd used one of the harpoon's arrowheads.

"Lord Veight, what exactly is this?"

The canine who'd made it for me gave me a confused look.

"It's a ritual to pray that the Island Kraken never comes back. I'm not that well versed in religion though, so I guess it's more for my peace of mind than anything."

Alright, I'll call this the Island Kraken Shrine. I dipped my paintbrush in black ink, and wrote on the small signboard "Island Kraken Shrine." *Rest in peace, you damn octopus. If you get reincarnated, I recommend being a werewolf next time.*

Once I was done praying, I boarded the warship Friedensrichter. The ship was back under the Beluzan navy's command. I was no longer an admiral, but a simple passenger. Honestly, I was glad to be free of the responsibility.

"Admiral! We're ready to depart anytime! Are these all the men you're bringing?"

I'm not an admiral anymore, you know. Well, whatever. I turned to the sailors and shouted, "This is everyone! I'm only taking my werewolves and a few of my trusted men this time!"

"Aye-aye, admiral!"

Seriously, I'm not an admiral anymore. Since I was going to Lotz to negotiate, I'd only brought a few guards and a few other people I trusted. Specifically, I'd brought eight werewolves, Lacy, and, because I had to, Parker.

"Am I imagining things, or are you thinking something rude about me right now?"

I ignored Parker's outburst.

"By the way, Veight. Are you certain it's wise to leave rowing to the Beluzan sailors? If you need manpower, I can summon as many undead as necessary."

Garsh smiled and said, "Don't worry, Beluza's got soldiers to spare too!"

Lacy tilted her head quizzically.

“But according to the Senate’s documents, Beluza’s population is only two thousand. They’ve only allotted a hundred soldiers for the city’s protection... though I can see you’ve obviously recruited more men than that.”

As Lacy had said, Beluza’s garrison was clearly larger than 100 men. The city had grown to the point where buildings crowded the bay, and its busy streets were patrolled by burly men armed with sabers. Those men had been recruited by Garsh, and it was their job to solve disputes by force. Looking down, Parker muttered, “The city’s population appears to be more than ten thousand, and I believe its garrison numbers a few hundred.”

Garsh’s grin grew wider.

“Your documents aren’t wrong, lassie. Beluza’s population is two thousand. That is, of course, assuming you only count the bit on land as part of the city. We just happen to have a lot of moored ships, and some of them just happen to have buildings on them.”

“So everyone just lives on those boats, huh?”

Garsh shook his head smugly.

“Not at all, kid. I’m sure they’ll weigh anchor as soon as the wind and the tide’s right! Ya can’t blame them for waiting for the right opportunity.”

The sailors guffawed. Even among the southern cities, Beluza’s hatred for the north was exceptional. Meraldia had purposely stunted Beluza’s growth by limiting the number of residential districts it could build, and building walls around them to stop them from expanding. However, they hadn’t been able to stop Beluza from expanding seaward. By claiming that the ships were just anchored here temporarily or in for repairs, Beluza’s viceroys had been able to build houses onto the man-made island while skirting Meraldia’s regulations. Hence why everyone pretended the ships were going to leave someday.

“Thanks to that, we’ve gotten a bunch of immigrants coming to the city. But hey, they’re all really just passengers waiting to depart.”

It appeared all of the southern cities had population limits forced onto them by Meraldia. The northern cities didn’t want their southern rivals growing in

power. Because of that, whenever any of the other cities grew too crowded, their people immigrated to Lotz or Beluza. The Senate's power was weaker this far south.

"My grandpa came from Shardier, you know."

"Yeah, my old man's from Ryunheit. His cousin's still in Ryunheit's merchant's guild."

"Oh, I'm from Thuvan. I moved here a decade ago with my family."

Beluza's sailors took this opportunity to introduce themselves to me. It looked like almost everyone was from somewhere else. Garsh added, "Since we take in any vagabond who comes to our gates, our city's got a bit of a public safety issue though. We've got houses popping up all over too. But thanks to our increased population, the Senate's making us maintain an army of six thousand."

"Six thousand!?"

Lacy glanced around in shock.

"That's what they asked us to do, at least. Technically it might be a bit more than that."

The fact that Beluza was supposedly raising troops for Meraldia meant they hadn't completely cut ties with the north. Though in truth, every member of the "army" was actually just a fisherman or shipwright who'd signed on to be a soldier on paper. Amazed, I shook my head.

"You guys are scoundrels alright."

"We're pirates, remember?"

Garsh grinned and shouted to his sailors, "Alright, ya louts, it's time to set sail! Set our course for Lotz!"

"Aye-aye, captain!"

The ships' respective drummers began pounding out a rhythmical beat, and the rowers got to work.

As we left the bay, a few mermaids swam over. After the Island Kraken

operation, they had started to meet regularly with the demon army.

“Hello there, Mister Veight, Mister Parker.”

“Where are you two headed?”

“If you would like, we can accompany you to your destination.”

I saw no reason to refuse, so I gratefully accepted their proposal.

“I was thinking of going to Lotz, while making sure that the sea route’s actually safe. If you don’t mind tagging along, I’d be grateful for the assistance.”

“A journey like that is no problem for us. We’d be glad to.”

Having the aquatic mermaids with us would make confirming the sea lanes’ safety much easier. With a galley this size, the trip to Lotz would take around two days. Rowing ships like these were slower than sailboats and needed to stop at regular intervals to let the rowers rest; in exchange, they could travel even when the winds weren’t in their favor. Though sailboats could too, by zigzagging through the headwind.

“Are you certain you don’t want my undead doing the rowing instead? They can work all day and all night without rest.”

I firmly shook my head.

“Garsh offered to take charge of negotiations for us. The demon army is still feared in the other cities, so we have to make this look like we’re just part of his retinue.”

“Humans sure are troublesome creatures.”

“You used to be human yourself, you know.”

Parker smiled sadly and shrugged his shoulders.

“I no longer need to eat or sleep, and I have long since forgotten the sensations of pain and love. Whatever humanity I once possessed has faded away.”

“Oh, I see...”

It was easy to forget, but Parker’s circumstances were far from enviable. However, Parker’s frown quickly disappeared, replaced by his usual frivolous

smile.

“But thanks to that, I can come up with new ways to toy with you even as you sleep.”

“Seriously, how many times have I told you to stop that!? Do you want me to stick oranges into your eye sockets!?”

“Oh, that sounds like a wonderful idea. Would you mind if I used that for my next joke?”

Do whatever you want, I don’t care anymore.

Two days later we arrived at our destination. I could see Lotz’s harbor in the distance. Garsh folded his arms and grinned.

“Men, prepare your landing parties!”

A group of fierce-looking men piled out of the cabin. They were all either bald or had mohawks, and they were all equipped with large maces or battleaxes.

“You got it, cap’n!”

“Hahahaha, is it finally our time to shine!?”

“I can’t wait!”

Did these guys come from the wrong century?

“Oi, Garsh, who the hell are those guys?”

Garsh shrugged.

“If you’re trying to convince that stubborn bastard Petore to do anything, ya gotta bring at least this much negotiating power.”

“*This* is what you call negotiating power?”

Seems more like brute force to me.

“Don’t worry, just leave things to us. We owe you a debt, so the least we can do is make diplomacy easier for ya. Let’s go, boys!”

“Woohoo!”

“URAAAAH!”

Is it really okay to leave things to these guys? Despite my misgivings, I decided to wait and see for now.

As we approached Lotz's harbor, a score of four galleys that had been moored there unfurled their sails and headed toward us. All four them bore Lotz's official crest.

"Tch! That damn old geezer's eyesight's as good as always," Garsh cursed cheerfully and barked out commands to his men. "Listen up, you louts! Right now we're allies of the demon army! Lotz's troops are nothing before our new might! Slaughter anyone who gets in our way!"

"Oi, wait."

But before I could say anything the situation grew even more incomprehensible. Lotz's ships continued closing in on ours. Naval warfare in this world was mostly conducted by ships lining up next to each other while boarding parties tried to eliminate the other ship's crew. *Are those guys seriously trying to board us?* Right as I thought that, I heard a yell from Lotz's flagship.

"Garsh, you fucking braaaat!"

It was loud enough that I could hear it even over the waves and the wind. Undaunted, Garsh yelled back, "Shut up, you damn geezer!"

"What was thaaat!? I can't hear you, kid!"

"You sure as hell can, you old fart!"

What kind of comedy skit was this? As Lotz's ships grew closer, I could see an old man lounging on their flagship. What little hair he had left was white, but he was surprisingly spry for his apparent age.

"You fucking braaaaat! Beluza's only allowed four warships! Who d'ya think you are, building one extra!?"

"Shaddap! I ain't listening to anything those northern fucks say anymore! You should join the demon army too, you stubborn old man!"

"Don't fuck with me, the demon army's got nothing on us!"

The two viceroys were screaming at each other. The Beluzan landing party,

which looked like a bunch of delinquents from the nineties, raised their crossbows. On the other side, Lotz's hardened sailors readied their throwing spears. Were they seriously trying to spear us to death? *If this is the welcome we get, I can see why we need a bunch of soldiers as "negotiating power."* In order not to get mixed up in their brawl, I took Lacy and the others to the back of the ship where it was safe. The viceroys were still in the middle of their shouting match.

"Ya damn moron! I thought ya finally settled down some, but now I hear ya went and joined up with the motherfucking demon army!?"

"Yer the one who's gone senile, ya old mutt! I can't believe you've become the Senate's lapdog! I can't believe they used to call you Lotz's Great White Shark!"

"Stop getting ahead of yerself, kid! Yer still a brat who's wet behind the ears! Just you wait, I'll kick you off that mast and drop ya into the sea!"

"What's an old man with one foot in the grave gonna do to me, huh!?"

This could hardly be called negotiating. Fortunately, despite my exasperation, things didn't escalate any further. No one fired any shots, and both fleets were able to peacefully enter Lotz's harbor. Once the ships were moored, we were finally able to disembark into the city of Lotz. *Seriously though, what the heck was that?*

I, Lacy, Parker, and my werewolf bodyguards followed Garsh's party down the gangplank. He led us straight to the viceroy's manor. While Beluza had grown famous due to its unorthodox housing methods and its leniency towards pirates, Lotz was a more traditional port city. The buildings had the same Mediterranean architecture that Beluza's had, but this city seemed much safer. It was the kind of place you'd want to go sightseeing. The viceroy's manor was impressive too. Judging by how ostentatious its decorations were, the city was doing well financially. We were led to the manor's audience hall and found ourselves face to face with Petore, Lotz's viceroy. He scrutinized us carefully, examining each face in turn. At a glance we all looked human, so his eyes shouldn't have been able to tell who was a werewolf and who wasn't. But when he reached my face he straightened up and said, "I am Petore Orio Fikartze,

Viceroy of Lotz. I take it you're the demon army's representative?"

I'm surprised you could tell. The Garney brothers looked stronger than me, Monza had an air of confidence about her that made her seem like a leader, and Parker had the look of an official. His insight had shaken me a little, but I kept my cool and responded, "I am the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, Veight."

Petore nodded, confirming his suspicions.

"The Demon Lord's vice-commander, eh? I see they sent over quite the big-shot."

"I'm impressed you could tell, old man," Garsh interjected.

"It's easy enough to tell who everyone defers to by looking at their posture and mannerisms. This man may not act self-important, but it's clear he holds power."

"Oooh... impressive," Monza muttered. It was rare for her to be impressed by a human. However, Petore didn't seem to think much of the feat and urged everyone to sit.

"Settle down, you lot. I'll bring out some tea for you."

It appeared this viceroy was quite experienced as well. Garsh started off the negotiations by explaining recent events.

"And that's why the demon army helped us slay the Terror of the Deep. These guys keep their promises, and I saw with my own eyes just how strong they are. We can trust these guys, old man."

However, Petore wasn't moved at all by Garsh's heartfelt speech.

"Pah! I don't have time to listen to a youngster who can't even secure his own trade routes!"

"It's not like you were able to secure them either, you damn geezer. What'd Lotz's navy do to stop that Kraken, huh?"

Garsh's counterarguments didn't get through to Petore at all.

"Beluza's the one who needed those routes to be kept safe the most. Lotz

trades mostly with the east, so the loss of a sea lane to Beluza's no problem for us at all."

"Grr..."

So Beluza's more dependent on Lotz than Lotz is on Beluza. That aside, Petore was being surprisingly harsh. While their quarrel looked more like an argument between father and son than a serious fight, as Beluza's ally I should probably intervene here.

"I've heard that both Beluza and Lotz are essential strongholds of Meraldia's southern sector. Of the two, Beluza has already agreed to ally with us. Would you not at least consider allying with us as well?"

I made sure to keep my tone respectful, since I was dealing with someone much older than me. Petore folded his arms and scowled at me.

"I can consider it all you want, but what do you plan to do if I refuse?"

Any demon other than me would have instantly replied "Conquer you." In fairness, that was my plan as well. But forcing people to submit via force only bred resentment. While I was considering how best to reply, Garsh butted in and said, "Beluza'll take ya over, of course. If you won't join the demon army, then you're our enemy."

Damn it, Garsh, I'm trying to settle things peacefully here. As I'd feared, Petore glared at Garsh.

"Oh, you really think you can do it, kid?"

There was a sharp glint in his eyes. But Garsh didn't back down.

"Course we can. I brought five hundred men with me, and if you don't give us what we want we ain't leaving without a fight."

Oi, seriously, cut that out. But I'd been left completely out of the conversation, and could only watch as Petore grinned and replied, "You truly believe you can kill me, kid?"

Garsh responded quietly, "I'm Beluza's Viceroy. If it's for the sake of Beluza, I'll kill anyone, even you. Don't think I won't do it just cause you were a father to me. Don't worry, I'll make sure to govern Lotz well in your place."

With how the conversation was progressing, my werewolves were growing eager as well. They were ready to transform at any time, and if I gave the order they'd rush Petore. Garsh's subordinates silently gripped the hilts of their weapons as well. Naturally, Lotz's armored troops responded in kind. They'd lowered their centers of gravity, and had their hands on their weapons. This could turn violent at any moment. But then Petore roared with laughter, breaking the tension.

"Looks like ya finally grew a pair! Bwahahahaha!"

"Wh-What!?"

Garsh's eyes widened in surprise, as did his men's. Petore got to his feet and clapped Garsh on the shoulder.

"Now that's how a viceroy should act! Glad to see ya finally grew up! I can finally brag about what a great viceroy ya are to Grasco's spirit. He can finally be proud of his little boy!"

"O-Okay?"

After his sudden fit of laughter, tears welled up in Petore's eyes.

"It's been what, seventeen... no, eighteen years since ya took over your father's post? I wanted to make sure you grew up into a respectable young man before I joined your old man."

"I never knew you were that worried about me, geezer!" Garsh exclaimed, shocked.

"Course I was, ya damn brat! The Great White Shark of Lotz and the Black Whale of Beluza were a combination so terrifying even the Senate was scared shitless of us! I couldn't possibly leave this world knowing Grasco's only son was a lazy good-for-nothing brat!"

I'd really like to know what part of Garsh looks like a lazy good-for-nothing. Sniffling, Petore heaved a long sigh.

"A viceroy must always be putting the safety and prosperity of his city above all else. Even if that means fighting his own brother. I'm glad ya finally have some backbone in ya, Garsh."

“...Thanks.”

Garsh looked away, embarrassed, and stroked his beard. Petore then turned to me.

“It looks like you helped my best friend’s son out quite a bit. You seem like an interesting fellow, so I’ll hear you out at least. So what’s your story, kid?”

Petore sure switched gears fast.

I told Petore about the demon army’s current condition, our alliance with Ryunheit, and our relationship with the other southern cities. I finished my speech by saying, “The Demon Lord wishes to form an alliance with all of Meraldia’s southern cities. He is aware of the rift between the north and the south, and is willing to aid the southern cities in improving their infrastructure since the north will not.”

Petore absorbed everything with a calm expression, a stark contrast to his earlier boisterous attitude. After careful consideration, he asked, “You make it sound like an appealing proposition, but this will mean we will have to cut ties with the north.”

As I’d expected, he didn’t buy my initial sales pitch that easily. *Guess we’ll have to do this the usual way.* I grinned wickedly.

“You appear to be mistaken.”

“How so?”

“You won’t be cutting ties with Meraldia because the demon army intends to wipe Meraldia off the face of the map.”

“What!?”

Naturally, I meant Meraldia as a nation. I wasn’t planning on physically obliterating all of its cities.

“The demon army wishes for the southern cities to declare independence from Meraldia and ally with us instead. Our goal is to build a new nation where humans and demons can live together in harmony.”

A hint of nervousness flashed across Petore’s expression.

“That’s quite the bold claim. Do you understand the chaos your actions could bring?”

“The only ones who’ll suffer from that chaos are those in the north. From what I understand, the southern cities do not wish to see Meraldia survive.”

“Hmm...”

Petore wiped a bead of sweat off his forehead and asked, “What will you do once you’ve unified the south?”

“Our eventual goal is to force the northern cities to accept our authority as well, and unite all seventeen of them under a single country that welcomes humans and demons both. Considering the time and effort such an endeavor would require though, I suspect it will be my successors who see it to completion.”

After how many civilians the second regiment slaughtered, I doubted anyone currently alive in the north would be welcoming of demons. It would take a lot of time to erode those memories of bloodshed, and I doubted I’d still be alive when the eventual unification happened. Depending on how things went, it could take as long as a century.

“Hmmm...”

Petore wrinkled his brows and ruminated on my words.

“I believe I understand your position now. But before I give you my reply, there are two things I must confirm. Firstly, your capabilities. Secondly, your trustworthiness.”

Those two certainly were important to know. Petore continued, “Regarding your abilities, I’ve heard much from the various scouts and spies I have scattered across the nation. Your control over Ryunheit appears solid, and the people do not resent your rule, so I am willing to believe you’re capable.”

“Wait, you’ve got spies, old man?”

Petore turned to Garsh and sighed.

“If you don’t know what’s happening in the room next to yours, how can you sleep peacefully? I even have spies in Beluza.”

“Seriously?”

Petore shook his head and turned back to me.

“As for your trustworthiness, I believe you are more likely to keep your word than the north. It’s clear Meraldia’s Senate is hiding something from us southerners. Despite that, they unilaterally request our support. And that rubs me the wrong way.”

Fortunately, the demon army had Airia to vouch for its trustworthiness. The fact that she’d been willing to cut ties with Meraldia proved how much faith she had in us. However, there was still some suspicion in Petore’s gaze.

“That being said, if we throw our lot in with you, us southern cities will inevitably be drawn into a conflict with the north. We will be forced to spill blood to maintain our alliance. When that time comes, what will you do?”

That was a difficult question to answer. In terms of just resolve, we were of course resolved to fight together with the south. But at present, the demon army had few troops left. If the war front grew too large, we wouldn’t be able to cover it all. Depending on the situation, some areas would have only humans fighting. Which was why I couldn’t just promise we’d extend a helping hand.

I knew this was devious of me, but my only real choice was to dodge the question. After thinking about it for a few minutes, I finally replied, “We plan to try negotiating with the north first. Military might is just another facet of diplomacy, one we can use as a threat rather than a promise. And it just so happens that’s what demons are best at.”

Werewolves, vampires, and giants were all races the humans feared. We could use their own imagination against them, and spread the seeds of terror without lifting a finger.

“Naturally, if the north insists on fighting, we will show them no mercy. Razing a city to the ground is a simple task for the demon army.”

While it would take a lot of preparation and cost us a lot of lives, we could do it if we really had to. I doubt we’d be pushed that far though.

“The demon army... no, not just them. All us demons want from you humans is a place to live in peace. We just want warm food, a roof over our heads, good

friends, and not have to fear a human army will come to eliminate us."

Petore looked somewhat surprised, but I kept going.

"But if we want all that, we need to integrate ourselves into human society. Fortunately, Ryunheit has begun to accept demons into its walls. I'm sure that if Meraldia's southern cities welcome demons with open arms, both humans and demons will prosper. So please, I beg of you, open Lotz's gates to us."

Petore once again asked, "Allow me to ask you again: If the north were to invade, you won't just stand idly by and watch as we're overrun, will you? As Lotz's viceroy, this is something I must be sure of."

"Don't make of light us, Petore. We're demons."

I snapped my fingers, and the werewolves standing behind me transformed. Lotz's soldiers trembled as they saw eight werewolves tower over them. Smiling confidently, I said, "You have no idea how much effort it takes to keep these guys from going wild. They would never miss an opportunity to go to war."

Unlike his soldiers, Petore remained calm. He nodded and said, "I see, so you've got the bite to match your bark."

"Of course. But no matter how sharp our fangs or how savage our claws, they won't grant us a warm place to live. Which is why we plan to act with integrity, and build a bond of trust between demons and humans. I swear to you now that we will never betray our allies."

As I finished my speech, the werewolves behind me turned back into their human forms. I was glad their training was finally paying off. Petore scrutinized my expression for a few minutes, then finally nodded.

"I can tell you're a man of your word. Everything you told me matches the information my spies brought. Besides, if we were to refuse you, Lotz would be surrounded by enemies. You've already won the nearby cities over. Truth be told, we have no choice but to join you."

"Thank you. As for the details of the alliance, I'm sure we can come to a deal that both parties are satisfied with."

Petore gave me an uneasy smile.

“Unfortunately, there are a few things that still worry me. But with how much you’ve helped keep our seas safe, I can hardly refuse you out of hand.”

I suppose it’ll take some time before you really trust us. Don’t worry, we’ll show you we’re handy to have around.

Afterwards, we started discussing the particulars of the alliance. All Petore asked for was that Lotz remain free to fish and trade as it saw fit, so I granted all of his conditions. In return, he offered to open his residential areas to demons, and if necessary, send military aid.

“Lotz’s official population is around five thousand, but we’ve actually got more than twenty thousand people living here. In addition to the official garrison, we’ve got a thousand veteran fisherman who can double as harpoon throwers.”

Apparently if we ever needed help, Petore would send his harpooners. Since they were masters of ranged weapons, they’d actually prove quite useful in defending city walls. Furthermore, Petore could muster 3,000-4,000 militia at short notice, so he was a dependable ally to have.

Negotiations wrapped up smoothly, and Petore invited me to eat lunch with him. While I doubted he’d try to poison me at this point, it didn’t hurt to be careful. But when he brought out a steaming plate of seafood pasta with olive oil and garlic sauce drizzled all over it, all thoughts of testing for poison flew out of my mind. The appetizing scent of spices and grilled seafood filled my nostrils. An extravagant meal like this would easily run me over 2,000 yen back in Japan. But that wasn’t all Petore had to offer. He also brought out a fish bouillabaisse, and then an assorted tray of grilled fish. The crowning jewel of the meal was wine-cooked crab. I couldn’t believe all these fancy dishes were being served just for lunch. Grinning, Petore said, “This is Lotz’s traditional fare. We’re a far cry from those country bumpkins in Beluza. Eat as much as you want, we’ve got lots more.”

“The fuck you just say, old man!?”

Petore and Garsh started arguing about the respective merits of their dishes. Personally, I was fond of both so I didn’t care either way. Since I wouldn’t be able to enjoy food like this once I returned to Ryunheit, I made sure to eat my

fill. I went through five plates of pasta before I realized I should probably have some of the crab too. While everyone was enjoying the feast, Parker looked forlornly down at the food. Since he was a skeleton, he couldn't eat. Though he made an effort to converse with the people around him, he eventually stood up to leave.

"I'm going to see how the mermaids are doing. You don't mind if I leave, do you?"

"Yeah, go ahead. They probably want some company too."

Petore broke off his argument and turned to me.

"Did you just say mermaids?"

His expression was serious. *Uh oh, is there something wrong?* I grew momentarily worried, but when I explained the situation to Petore he grinned happily.

"So you even saved the mermaids, huh!? The Fikartze family, nay the entirety of Lotz believes they're guardians of the sea, you know!"

Seriously?

"Our ancestors were only able to make it safely to this continent because mermaids assisted them. Not only did they show us which routes were safe, they used their songs to keep monsters away."

Petore's grin grew wider.

"You know, a mermaid saved my life back when I was young."

"No way!? First time I heard that, old man!"

Garsh shot Petore a dubious look, his mouth full of crab. Petore puffed his chest out proudly and said, "I'm quite the lady-killer, I'll have you know."

It was possible he was handsome back in his youth, but right now I doubted he was slaying any ladies. Garsh looked down and muttered to himself, "Man, if I'd known that, I wouldn't have worried mermaids were attacking our ships..."

Petore slapped Garsh upside the head.

"Of course they wouldn't attack ships, ya addlepated moron! If mermaids

were dangerous, I woulda told ya when you were a child!”

“Owww! You could have told me they weren’t dangerous too, you know!”

“You should decide for yerself whether someone’s dangerous or not on your own, and not trust other people’s words for it!”

“So then I was right to be wary of them!”

“Shut up, ya blockhead!”

There they go again. While the two viceroys bickered, I continued devouring the food. As I was washing down my meal with a cup of black tea, Petore grew tired of bickering with Garsh and turned to me.

“Veight, do you think you could let me meet with those mermaids, if it’s not too much trouble? I’d like to know what happened to the one who saved me all those years ago.”

“Sure, I don’t see why not.”

A chance to put Petore in my debt had just fallen into my lap.

When we arrived at the pier, Parker seemed to be in the middle of telling the mermaids another one of his horrible jokes.

“But you see, Veight mistook the quantity of medicine he was supposed to use, and...”

I’d thought he was telling a joke, but it turned out he was telling them something much worse. I ran over, picked Parker up, and threw him to the Garney brothers.

“Get rid of him.”

“O-Okay.”

“W-Wait! Right as Veight was about to mix the ingredients together, Melaine walked in and—”

The Garney brothers hauled Parker away before he could complete his story. Petore looked down at the mermaids, stunned. After a few seconds, he walked reverently to the edge of the pier.

“Excuse me, young ladies. Do any of you remember who I am?”

The mermaids exchanged glances, then shook their heads.

“I’m sorry, but we don’t know who you are.”

“I see... I suppose that ain’t too surprising. It was almost fifty years ago now.”

Considering the mermaids’ average lifespan, I guessed few lived that long. But Petore wasn’t about to give up just yet.

“I am Petore the sailor. Do any of you know a mermaid named Reena?”

One of the mermaids raised her hand.

“Reena is my great aunt, mister.”

“Oho.”

Petore walked over the mermaid and asked her, “Is she doing well?”

The mermaid shook her head and said sadly, “She died of illness when I was young. That was around twenty years ago.”

“Oh...”

Upon hearing Petore’s despondent reply, the mermaid added, “But she told me all about you, Mister Petore. She said she met a brave young human sailor in the middle of a fierce storm.”

Petore stared into the mermaid’s eyes for a few minutes, then nodded to himself.

“I see... so she still remembered.”

It appeared there was a story here.



Garsh gave Petore a suspicious look and asked, “Oi, geezer! What happened between you and that mermaid? Is it something I need to tell ma?”

“Fool! This happened back when I was still single! And a young brat to boot! You better not tell Tanya a thing, ya hear?”

This probably wasn’t a story for our ears. It looked like Petore had a lot he wanted to talk about, so we decided to give him some space. As we left, I looked back and saw Petore deep in conversation with the mermaids. Though he was smiling, there was a tinge of sadness to that smile. After a while, Petore came over and joined us.

“Good grief, I never thought I would be regaling them with tales of my heroic deeds for that long. But thank you, Veight.”

“Heroic deeds, huh?”

Petore puffed out his chest and said, “When I was still a youngster, I threw my name around quite a bit. The prince of the Fikartze family was quite well known back in the day, I’ll have you know.”

“I take it these heroic deeds are ones you can’t tell your wife.”

“Yep. Please don’t tell her about this. Though she knows half of my escapades anyway.”

I didn’t think he’d admit it that readily. Petore waved at the mermaids on the pier, then closed his eyes.

“To think she remembered the young man she met only once fifty years ago, and did nothing but cause her trouble. You demons are a lot more human than those cold-blooded monsters at the Senate.”

Petore turned to me.

“I see you’ve been taking good care of those lasses. If even the mermaids like you guys, you must be trustworthy. I have no misgivings about allying with you now.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t betray that trust.”

I grabbed Petore’s wrinkled hand and gave him a firm handshake.

Petore and I returned to his manner to exchange information and discuss our plans going forward. After we'd been talking for a while, Petore asked, "By the way, Veight? What're ya gonna do after this? Go back to Beluza?"

The people I'd left behind in Beluza had likely all returned to their respective cities. A few kentauros had remained to serve as messengers, but that was all.

"We'll be returning to Ryunheit. I've been away from my post for too long. I also need to convince the remaining southern cities to join us."

"Yeah, best to hurry if that's the case."

Petore opened his desk drawer and pulled a sheaf of documents out.

"From what my spies tell me, the northern cities are still in chaos. The loss of their Hero Ranhart seems to have hit them hard."

"Oh, that fake Hero."

I hadn't heard that name in a while. Petore continued his report.

"According to those who knew him, Ranhart came from Krauhen, the city famous for its salt mines. While I don't know the full details, it appears there's some kind of civil dispute happening there now."

I glanced over at Lacy. She gave me an apologetic look. I signaled with my eyes that she should keep quiet, and she nodded in acknowledgment. Petore noticed our little exchange and said with a sigh, "You did something to that city, didn't ya? Krauhen's position has grown precarious in the north."

I didn't do anything on purpose. I just respected Lacy's wishes and had her letter delivered. Well, I guess I may have spread some propaganda that could lead to a revolt while I was at it.

"Furthermore, the three cities the demon army attacked, including Bahen, are dissatisfied with how little aid Meraldia's been giving to help with the reconstruction. Meraldia's control over the north is starting to wane."

It seemed the north was in no position to mount a counterattack. Despite the good news, Petore's expression was grim.

"But ya know, even those morons at the Senate aren't so incompetent that they'll keep letting this bog them down. No doubt they'll try something soon."

Petore sighed. It was precisely because the Senate threw out hasty plans one after another that they were such a pain to deal with. Lacy nodded emphatically in agreement, but she stopped after a look from me. *Still, looks like I can't afford to take it easy.*

"Thank you for the information, Lord Petore. I'll do my best to finish negotiating with the remaining two cities as soon as possible."

"You better, Veight. The cities closest to the north are the ones who are in most danger, so if you want to make them your allies, ya have to act fast."

Now I had even more of a reason to hurry back to Ryunheit. Before I left, I went to the pier to say my goodbyes to Garsh.

"Garsh, you were a real lifesaver," I said as I shook his hand.

"It's only natural for allies to help each other. Come visit whenever you're free."

I smiled. Garsh and I had grown pretty close over the past month or so. I then turned to the dangerously dressed thugs behind me and asked Garsh, "So what're these guys here for?" They were from the group of soldiers Garsh had brought with him. Smiling, Garsh replied, "They're all immigrants from Ryunheit, or descendants of immigrants. I figured it'd take time to send reinforcements if ya end up needing them, so you can take 'em with you. Think of it as a symbol of our friendship."

He was just handing them out like one might extra vegetables left over from the harvest.

"I hear rumors that you're expanding Ryunheit and building a new set of walls. I'm sure you'll be able to handle a few extra people. Don't worry, I'll be the one paying their salaries still."

"That's not really the problem here..."

We weren't anywhere close to done building the expansions. Plus, if we had hooligans like this loitering around, it'd ruin Ryunheit's public image.

"Don't worry, I promise these louts are law-abiding citizens."

"I'm not sure I can trust your promises when it comes to that."

“Hahahaha, I suppose not!”

Never mind, I’m sick of this old man. As I was trying to figure out how to best turn Garsh down, one of the hoodlums stepped forward. He was a giant of a man, easily two meters tall, and all muscle.

“Don’t worry, Bossman Veight! We’re Cap’n Garsh’s loyal men! We would never do anything that would bring shame to his name!”

The huge man shouldered his mace as he said that, his mohawk swaying in the wind. *How the hell can I believe you when you look like that!?* However, Garsh backed him up.

“I knew I could count on my lieutenant. Oi, you lot, introduce yourself to the Demon Lord’s vice-commander!”

“Aye-aye!”

The mohawk-man stomped on the ground, sending tremors across the floor, and swung his mace in a huge arc.

“I’m the Commander of Beluza’s landing forces, Grizz! They call me the King of the Harbor!”

Never heard of you. Since I didn’t say anything, the other hoodlums started introducing themselves as well.

“I’m Gonzas the Netter! They call me Master of the Stormy Seas!”

“I’m Barossa the Mast Smasher! No one beats me when it comes to pure strength!”

“I’m Vashka the Eel! My knife skills will leave you speechless!”

“Oi, I’m the eel! Espeo the Eel!”

“No, I am! Chalza the Eel!”

Why does everyone want to be an eel so bad? Wait, don’t tell me I have to listen to all five hundred introductions?

“Alright, enough. I get it. You can all be eels. I’ll take you with me, so please just stop.”

“Aye-aye, Bossman Veight!”

In the end, I was forced to take these 500 gangsters with me. Though they did seem well-disciplined and well-trained.

“Bossman Veight, when are we raiding those northern bastards!?”

“If we’re going north, we better stock up on pelts!”

“Yeah, we won’t be able to last up there with just these shoulder pads!”

For the love of god, just wear normal clothes. Things had been bad enough when the Garney brothers had been the only muscleheads I had to deal with.

* * * *

—Petore’s Heroic Deeds—

Yo, Tanya, finally back? Our guests are about to leave. Good grief, they were a real handful. That damned brat Garsh is hanging out with good-fer-nothing scoundrels again. Give him a scolding for me, will ya? Honestly, I shoulda never let him marry Merida. Least he coulda done was bring me a grandkid to spoil.

Oh, the demon army? Yeah, it was just some werewolves and mermaids that came this time. According to Garsh, they’ve got lizard-people and horse-people too. They’re a rowdy bunch, alright. Make a good match for Garsh. Oi, don’t lump me together with those uncultured lot. Sheesh, everyone just likes to make fun of me, huh?

Yeah, I allied with ‘em. I mean, it wasn’t much of a choice. Compared to those rotten bastards at the Senate, these guys are a hundred times more sincere. Course I’d pick them! The demon army even helped Beluza slay the Terror of the Deep so they could get their sea routes back. When I begged those crusty Senate fucks for help they didn’t give me the time of day, but that Veight fellow helped Garsh out without even asking fer a reward.

If my choice is between two scoundrels, I’d rather take the demon army than the blasted Senate. No really, that’s the only reason. I’m telling ya, that’s all. Seriously. Yeah, that’s right. Oh, could ya get me a cup of tea?

Hm? Mermaids? How come ya always ask me about the stuff I don’t wanna talk about? No, course I’m not hiding anything from ya. Really. Umm... Well... So you see... Look, this happened when I was still a young brat who didn’t even

have his own ship. One of my relatives set sail during the wrong season cause he couldn't control his greed. Thanks to that we got swept up in a huge storm, and our boat sank. Everyone else drowned, but I managed to tie myself to a plank and stay afloat. Still, that storm nearly killed me. Thought I was a goner fer sure. Worse, sharks sniffed out all the blood and started closing in. Ya know, when sharks are around yer not supposed to move. If you splash around, they can find ya even easier.

So there I was, waiting fer the end to come, when a mermaid saved me. She used her song to drive the sharks away, and protected me till the storm passed. She even carried me back to port. I dunno why. But she told me her name was Reena. She told me all about her people, and suddenly I realized why she'd saved me. Hm? Isn't it obvious? It's the same reason ya fell for me, ya dork. Man, it's tough being popular. Hahaha.

Ah, Tanya... Would you like to go to Veira and see one of their outdoor plays? I've got business with Viceroy Forne anyway, so we might as well. We can get you a new dress while we're there too. Can't have the wife of a viceroy looking plain, can we? Sure, yer old, but that doesn't matter one bit to me. If anything you've gotten even prettier since when I first met you.

What? What's so funny? Well I mean we're gonna be there anyway. Good grief. I guess as long as yer happy, that's all that matters.

* * * *

I left Lotz, with Beluza's landing force, Lacy, Parker, and my werewolf bodyguards in tow. Our party was so large and well-armed that no bandits dared attack us.

"Woohoo, I can't wait to slaughter some bandits!"

"We'll teach those fuckers that pirates are stronger than bandits!"

"They'll never dream of attacking travelers again!"

To be honest, these 500 hoodlums were way scarier than any bandit group. After a few days of traveling, I arrived at Ryunheit's familiar gates. *Oh? Looks like they finished the wall already.* An imposing wall circled the city, protecting it from outside threats.

“From what Azul told me, I thought it’d take a little longer...”

I cocked my head and strode through the gates. Airia was waiting for me inside.

“Welcome home, Sir Veight.”

Behind her stood the city’s garrison. That much was normal, but behind them stood a row of giants. There were ten in total, and each stood a few meters tall. I’d heard the remnants of the second regiment had been reincorporated into Ryunheit, but I hadn’t known they were serving Airia. The Beluzan fighters standing behind shrunk back in fear.

“G-Giants...”

“Holy shit, they’re real...”

“O-Oi, those guys are our allies, right?”

Even the way they got scared reminded me of gangsters from the 90s. I returned Airia’s greeting, then asked about the wall.

“Lady Airia, I see the walls have finished ahead of schedule. You also seem to have made some new giant friends.”

Airia smiled and replied, “The giants assisted in the construction, pushing it ahead of schedule. They were able to build the wall in a flash.”

That made sense. Giants were as dexterous as humans, but like five times the size. They made for the perfect laborers. Still, it was impressive Airia had managed to win them over so fast. I turned to the giants and said, “So you were responsible for finishing the walls? Well done.”

Blushing, one of the giants replied, “We just did as we were told...”

“When we helped the humans here, they thanked us lots. It’s not like the north was.”

The giants here were gentler than most. That was because it was only the least aggressive ones who’d survived the rout. Most of the hot-blooded ones had died fighting the Hero and Meraldia’s forces. The survivors had been so traumatized by the battle that a few had even come to fear humans. But now they were working for a human, and they even seemed happy living here.

Airia's smile grew wider.

"After completing the walls, these wonderful giants helped us build new houses and repair the roads. They've done Ryunheit a huge service."

The giants scratched their heads in embarrassment. Just then, a few canines trotted over. One of the canines who looked like a terrier appeared to be a foreman. He brushed down his fur and shouted, "Oi, it's time to get to work!"

The giants turned around, surprised.

"Yes, sir!"

"Excuse us, Lord Veight, Lord Airia."

They bowed to us then lumbered after the canines. As they caught up, they lifted the cute creatures and carried them on their shoulders.

"Alright, Dwaaji and Groat, help lay the foundations for the barracks over there. Zuv and Grunge, please start carrying over lumber from the lumberyard."

"Understood, sir."

The giants nodded amicably, and the canines got themselves pumped up to work.

"Let's make the new city the greatest city there is!"

"Yeaaah!"

In all my life as a demon, I'd never seen anything like this. Tiny canines and weak humans ordering giants around. Most worksites had humans working at them as well, and plenty of humans and demons both came to see how things were progressing. Everyone was smiling, and they all spoke casually with the giants, as if they were friends.

"Look, guys, the giants are here!"

"Whoa, they're even huger up close! And man, they're strong!"

"Thanks for the help, Mister Dwaaji, Mister Groat!"

Children and adults alike marveled at the giants' strength. Airia chuckled to herself.

“They’ve become the talk of the town you know. Quite a few of the residents know them by name.”

“Now that’s a surprise.”

I’d been hoping they’d learn from their defeat, but I hadn’t expected the giants to transform this thoroughly. No doubt Airia’s leadership skills and assistance from the demon army’s upper management helped accelerate that transformation.

“You’re really living up to your title of Demon Ambassador.”

Airia chuckled again and shook her head.

“That’s not true. This is all thanks to your achievements, Sir Veight.”

“What did I do?”

I mean I did give them a few seminars on human behavior, but that was all. However, Airia’s tone was serious.

“You’re the one who taught them how to interact with humans, aren’t you? They all learned because you led by example, Disciple of the Great Sage. Oh, they also call you the Hero-slaying Weremage and the Demon Lord’s Right Hand.”

She had a point, but I felt like I’d just been struggling to solve one problem after another so I hadn’t really actively tried to set a good example or anything.

“No, I think suffering defeat changed them. They learned from that experience and grew wiser.”

“That’s certainly true, but...”

Oh, who cares who deserves credit for this. What matters is that they learned. Airia sighed.

“You truly are a strange man, Sir Veight.”

“Really?”

Maybe it seemed that way because I’d been a human before. Well, as long as I was doing a good job I didn’t care too much. After all, there was always more work to be done.

As I walked back to the viceroy's manor with Airia, I discussed my plans with her.

"Beluza and Lotz are both willing to join the demon army's alliance. That just leaves two other southern cities."

"The labyrinth city, Zaria, and the city of craftsmen, Veira. Lord Aram is good friends with the viceroy of Veira, so I've asked him to negotiate on our behalf."

"Are you sure we can entrust it to him?"

I was a little worried about leaving it all in his hands. Airia nodded and said, "Rest easy. Veira and Shardier are strongly linked via trade. I'm certain he will be able to negotiate a favorable deal, so long as the Demon Lord is willing to accept their conditions."

That reminds me, the glass Aram showed me when I first met him came from Veira, didn't it? That was some good stuff.

"Alright, I'll trust him. What should we do about Zaria?"

At that, Airia's expression clouded over.

"Zaria is the city that the Senate tries to exert the most control over. During the unification war, it was the site of a gruesome battle."

According to Airia, Zaria had been thoroughly sacked, and its walls reduced to rubble. While the city had been rebuilt after the war, Meraldia had refused to let them build new walls. However, that meant they were eternally exposed to bandits and monsters. When I asked Airia about that, she answered, "Zaria's streets are designed like a maze, they twist and turn in random directions, with plenty of dead-end walls. All of the city's residents live in three-story buildings or higher, the entrances to which are cleverly disguised."

"So instead of walls, they use a maze to confuse their enemies and eliminate them from above?"

"Correct. Most of Zaria's residents are skilled huntsmen and know how to use bows and traps. They show no mercy to their enemies, which is why the city is actually feared by bandits."

I get that they needed to go that far to survive, but it was still impressive how

thorough they were. However, I had a feeling it'd be difficult to negotiate with hardened veterans like those.

"Guess I'll have to be the one to go."

"In that case, allow me to accompany you. I have been communicating in secret with Zaria's viceroy, and they wish to meet me directly."

Surprised, I attempted to dissuade her.

"It'll be dangerous, you know? In case you've forgotten, you're Meraldia's number one enemy. Being out in the streets is dangerous enough, I cannot allow you to put yourself in peril."

"However, Zaria will be a difficult city to win over. Because of their proximity to the north, their situation is extremely precarious. If you mishandle the negotiations, it's possible they'll strengthen their ties with Meraldia instead. Furthermore, the things I wish to speak with Zaria's viceroy about are classified. I cannot send anyone else in my place."

Though I was still a little worried, it was true that Airia was a skilled negotiator. She'd be reassuring to have around.

"Can't you invite Zaria's viceroy to Ryunheit?"

"Unfortunately not. Officially, Zaria is Ryunheit's enemy. If its viceroy visited the demon army's headquarters and the Senate discovered that visit, Zaria would be in a politically tight spot."

"True that."

Beluza and Lotz had allied themselves with us so easily that I'd forgotten that we were still technically inhuman invaders to a human land. That put us in a pretty bad position to be negotiating for peace. Meaning it might be best if Airia joined me. If I went alone, it's possible Zaria's viceroy would be intimidated.

"Is there any possibility Zaria's viceroy might be luring us into a trap?"

"There is. The city is the perfect place for an assassination," Airia replied coolly. She then added, "However, I doubt Zaria would wish to make an enemy of the demon army. Labyrinths may work for human enemies, but a city without walls wouldn't stand a chance against werewolves and giants."

“True, tricks like those don’t work on demons. So are those guys smart enough to realize that?”

I was relieved to know Zaria was someone we could negotiate with, but it seemed Airia thought I was foolish to have worried at all.

“Zaria’s viceroy, Melgio, is an exceedingly cautious man. In fact, he has to be, or he wouldn’t be able to remain viceroy.”

“Let’s just hope he’s not *too* cautious.”

“That is one fear we share. But that is also precisely why I wish to visit in person, to show that we are resolved to our cause.”

So we’ll be able to negotiate, but it’ll be tough. Before I could worry about that though, I needed to solve the difficult problem of choosing who’d serve as Airia’s bodyguards.

Preparing for our secret meeting with Zaria’s viceroy proved more troublesome than I expected. I couldn’t afford to assign normal humans to be Airia’s bodyguards, but I couldn’t pick most demons either. They stood out too much, and this was meant to be a covert meeting.

“I guess this means I’ll have to ask my werewolves again...”

In retrospect, our race sure had a lot of useful traits. At this point, Ryunheit was protected well enough that the loss of some werewolves wouldn’t hurt its defenses, so I decided to take them all with me. I called Fahn to my office and told her, “Fahn, I want you to make a unit of all women. I think Airia will feel more at ease if she has other women guarding her. It’ll also make our negotiation partner less wary of us.”

“Yeah, we can pretend to just be her maids or something. We’ve got seventeen women total, so we can make four squads.”

Since nearly the village’s entire population had enlisted into the demon army, my werewolf force had a higher ratio of women than most other sections of the army. There were quite a few other divisions who were jealous of our abundance of women, but a good number of them were old grannies like Mary. In truth, all our women were either old like Mary, or young and unmarried, like Fahn. Incidentally, my mom had pushed herself too hard a while back and was

now living a peaceful, retired life back in our village. My parents' generation was the one who'd suffered the most living in that remote village, so a good number of them were too frail to fight now. Of course, if I started giving my own men impossibly difficult missions, they'd end up that way before long too. It was precisely because I wanted my race to have a bright future that I was being especially careful with the tasks I gave my men.

"It's possible we might be attacked while we're in our human forms, so take that into consideration when picking your guards. Also, this is going to be a covert mission, so we can't take too many people."

"In that case, I'll pick our youngest elites and make a squad out of them. I'll be the leader of the squad, right? Also, you don't mind if I poach Monza for a while, do you?"

"Yeah, feel free."

I decided to keep my nose out of girls' affairs and let Fahn take care of everything on that side. There was too much about girls I didn't understand, and I didn't want to accidentally offend anyone.

While Fahn was organizing her team, I went to find some bodyguards for myself. *I'll want people with sharp wits over those with sharp claws, I think. If we're beset by assassins, quick thinking will save more lives than brute strength. In which case, Hamaam's a good choice.* Like Monza, he was skilled at tracking and stealth.

Hamaam had come to our village from the desert, but before that he'd been part of a bandit crew. There was no one better at setting up ambushes than him. Furthermore he was one of the few werewolves skilled at fighting in his human form, since he knew how to handle swords and bows.

His squad had picked up a few tricks from him, and they'd become skilled ambushers in their own right. In fact, Hamaam's squad had been come to be known as the assassin squad. While most werewolves were good at laying ambushes, Hamaam in particular was skilled at spotting them as well. *Alright, that settles it. I'll have Hamaam's squad be my guards for this mission.* One squad was also a small enough force that it wouldn't seem out of place as a guard retinue for a viceroy traveling incognito. With this, we had two werewolf

squads coming with us. The guys would look like actual guards, while the women would pretend to be attendants.

For a secret visit, this was probably as large an entourage as we could feasibly hope to bring with us. Besides, these eight werewolves were more useful than an army's worth of human guards. With them around, we'd be able to handle even two dozen assassins with ease.

As for the rest of my werewolves, they'd just be accompanying us on the road to the city. Once we reached Zaria they'd remain outside, keeping our path of retreat secure. Of course, if we got ourselves too deep into trouble, I could also call them in to help us. Since they looked no different from humans normally, I doubted they'd raise much alarm. *Perfect, that's one thing figured out.*

Normally, my werewolves earned their keep by patrolling Ryunheit's streets. If I was taking all of them with me, I'd need someone else to take over their jobs for a short while. I went out into the city to look for Baltze, who was in charge of the city's safety. The Azure Knights also patrolled the city on a regular basis, so they were my first choice.

As I expected, I found him in the city's main guardhouse. He was surrounded by a few of his dragonkin soldiers. But something was off. He looked like he was carrying something with great care.

"Sir Baltze, what's that you have there?"

I called out to him, and Baltze turned around.

"Ah, Sir Veight. You came at the perfect time."

To my surprise, the thing he was cradling was a human baby. It was fast asleep. From the looks of it, it was old enough to crawl, but not yet old enough to walk. Baltze looked awkwardly down at the baby in his arms.

"One of the townspeople asked me to look after her hatchling."

"Err, why?"

"Her neighbor suddenly collapsed, so she needed someone to look after the child while she went to help them."

While Ryunheit's original garrison had also functioned like the city's

handymen, I hadn’t expected the residents to treat the demon guardsmen the same way. Though, personally, I thought it was a good thing that the people were starting to see the dragonkin as no different from the rest of the city watch. Baltze kept his gaze fixed on the baby’s face, his expression serious.

“Sir Baltze, is something wrong?” I prompted.

“Oh, no. There’s nothing wrong... It’s just, I was thinking his face resembled the previous Demon Lord’s.”

“Really?”

Though I was surprised, I remembered that the idea of reincarnation had become something of a fad among demons recently. Originally, demons hadn’t believed in reincarnation. Most of them either believed that the spirits of their ancestors were protecting them from afar, or sleeping peacefully in the afterlife.

However, humans did believe in reincarnation. They thought that the soul was immortal and indestructible, but while souls were reincarnated into new bodies, memories from their past lives weren’t preserved. After living together with humans, a few demons had converted to that way of thinking as well. Thanks to that, the astrologer Mitty was seeing a lot of demons visiting her for divinations as well. They all wanted to know what had happened to the souls of their dead friends or family. In general, most dragonkin had little interest in magic or spiritualism, but the thought that their beloved Demon Lord had reincarnated somewhere held a lot of appeal for them.



I smiled at Baltze and said, “If he was reborn, wouldn’t he be reborn as a dragonkin baby?”

Though since a human like me had class changed into a werewolf, it was possible Friedensrichter had ended up a human this time. Baltze shook his head.

“According to the astrologer Lady Mitty, the reincarnation of souls can transcend species. Considering the previous Demon Lord’s star sign, it’s possible he was reincarnated into a human.”

“Hahaha, no way.”

I laughed off Baltze’s words, but privately I wanted to believe they were true. Baltze’s expression grew lonely and he said, “I still don’t fully trust humans. After all, it was a human Hero who killed our beloved lord.”

You’ve got a point there. There had actually been quite a few demons who’d come to resent humans after the Hero had killed Friedensrichter. However, Baltze quietly added, “Alas, when I think about the possibility that the Demon Lord’s soul now rests in this infant’s body, I can’t help but pray he lives a happy and fulfilling life. It’s strange, don’t you think?”

As I groped for a reply to that, a young woman came running over to us.

“Sorry about that! Looks like the old man next door’s fine! He just had a seizure, is all!”

Baltze turned around with a look of relief.

“That’s wonderful news. Here, your son.”

Baltze held out his arms, and the woman held out a package of her own.

“Thank you so much for looking after him. We’ve heard that dragonkin love smoked chicken, so the old man told me to give this to you as thanks.”

“Oh, I was only doing my duty. There’s no need to thank me...”

Baltze seemed lost, so I decided to help him out a little.

“That’s just how happy she is you agreed to help, Sir Baltze. It’s customary among humans to thank each other for favors, so you should just take it.”

“I-I see. In that case, I humbly accept your offering.”

Baltze couldn’t figure out how to take the package and let go of the baby at the same time, and began to panic a little. None of the dragonkin around him had ever held a baby before either, and they hesitated to lend a hand. *Wow, you guys are hopeless. Alright, I’ll help, then.*

“Would you mind letting me hold him for a second?”

While I hadn’t had any siblings in my past life or this one, I’d helped take care of a lot of babies back in the werewolf village. At the very least, I knew how to hold one. The tiny human baby passed from a dragonkin to a werewolf, then finally to his mother.

“My. It looks like he was sleeping quite soundly in your arms.”

Baltze breathed a sigh of relief as his burden was lifted.

“I’m glad nothing happened to either your son or the old man.”

“Sorry for pushing that onto you so suddenly. And thank you.”

The woman bowed to us a few times, then went back up the street she’d come on. The dragonkin all slumped, drained.

“To think being surrounded by an army of hundreds of humans didn’t make me nervous, but dealing with a single child did.”

“You did well. I’m sure that kid will grow up to be a brave warrior after the time he spent in your arms, Sir Baltze, Commander of the Azure Knights.”

“It would be wonderful if he did. Incidentally, did you think he looked somewhat like the old Demon Lord as well?”

How the hell would I know?

“I’m afraid I couldn’t tell you.”

Please don’t tell me he’s going to start asking me that every time he sees a baby.

I didn’t even give myself time to rest, and I, Airia, and my 56 werewolves left Ryunheit the same day. With the exception of Airia’s secretary, I’d forbidden any other humans from traveling with us this time. If we were attacked, I wasn’t

confident I'd be able to protect them all. As the ranking officer in charge of this mission, it fell to me to decide who to prioritize guarding in the event of an ambush. And if we did fall into one, I'd likely tell my men to keep Airia safe at all costs, even if it meant letting all other humans die.

The authority to decide who lives and who dies was a heavy responsibility. For that reason, I wanted to take as few humans as possible. No one wanted to be told they weren't as important, and thus expendable. Nor did I really want to end up in a situation where I had to say that. It'd leave a bad taste in my mouth. Unfortunately, because of my position, I'd have to if it came down to it.

Which was why I'd had as many humans as possible stay behind. I'd probably have to keep it that way for all of my trips in the near future. Having Lacy come with us would have been a huge boon, but I couldn't expose her to danger. Especially since she was a wanted traitor. The further she was from the north right now, the better. Honestly, since her illusions improved the more she traveled and experienced new things, I'd wanted to take her everywhere with me, but her safety was more important.

My first impression of Zaria was that it was a weird place. The city itself was located in the middle of a wasteland, and as I'd heard, it had no walls. This was the first large city I'd seen in this world without walls. *I guess unless you've got the Senate explicitly forbidding you from doing it, there'd be no reason not to build walls around your city.* Every single one of the city's buildings was three to four stories tall. The first two stories of all the buildings were made of sturdy stone, but the upper floors were made of brown, sun-dried bricks. A city with this kind of architecture was a rarity in this world.

I had most of my werewolves stand by in the nearby wasteland while I, Airia, and our eight guards headed to the city. As we drew close to the entrance, Airia explained some more about the place.

"The lower floors of most buildings serve as storehouses, and they're made of stone to prevent enemies from breaking in. On the other hand, the upper floors are all residential areas, and they're made of brick, which is easy to rearrange in case someone wants to remodel."

"I see. So the lower floors serve the function of a city wall."

The thick stone walls that made up the buildings' foundations were strong enough that I doubted even a werewolf could break them. As we walked through the streets, the irregularity of the city grew more apparent. Though it was noon, the alleys were dark. Furthermore, they were so windy and twisting that it was impossible to tell where you were going. Especially since there were no landmarks to tell the different intersections apart.

"This really is a labyrinth..."

Though there were buildings everywhere, I hadn't seen a single door. While a few of them had windows, they were fitted with metal bars and were only on the upper floors. Because of how narrow the streets were, it would be impossible to deploy troops effectively here. Cavalry would be practically useless.

We spotted no one on our way, but I could tell there were people here. Their scents, voices, and footsteps were all over the place. Airia smiled ruefully and said, "This is the labyrinth that earned Zaria its moniker. No bandits or monsters have been able to harm this city's residents in decades."

"Makes sense."

Small groups of monsters or bandits wouldn't stand a chance here. They'd keep running around in circles and get picked off. However, if an army brought catapults with them, they'd be able to devastate the city with ease. *Maybe that's what Meraldia was really after by forbidding Zaria from building walls. This way they can crush the city if it tries to revolt. No wonder Zaria's viceroy has such a hard job.* One of the city's officials came out to greet Airia, and led us to a small staircase hidden between alleys.

"This way, please."

The official took us to what looked like a normal house's back entrance. As I stepped inside I realized it really was a back entrance, and that we were inside a kitchen. A series of pots could be seen hanging from hooks on the wall. The official picked up a wooden pestle and banged the pots in a specific order. Once he was done, a part of the stone ceiling slid away, and a voice called out from above.

"Who goes there?"

The official glanced back at us, then replied, “The Blue Lily Flower and the Black Half Moon. Two by eight.”

After a moment of silence, a ladder dropped down.

“Lady Airia, Lord Vice-Commander, please ascend.”

Just in case, I asked Hamaam to go up first. As he climbed the ladder I smiled to Airia and said, “I guess that earlier exchange was some kind of secret code. In which case, I suppose you’re the blue lily flower?”

“Meaning you are the black half moon.”

She smiled back, and the two of us climbed the ladder after Hamaam. The ladder led to a small room filled with doors. In a quiet voice, the official said, “The fake doors are booby-trapped. Be careful not to touch them by mistake.”

“Understood.”

I felt like I’d walked into some kind of secret base. The official led us through a series of doors until finally we arrived at what I assumed was the viceroy’s manor. The stucco walls had complex patterns painted on them in bright colors, and the manor’s furniture had a west-Asian flair to it. Unlike the other buildings we’d walked through, this one didn’t smell of people. Meaning it wasn’t used often. *I guess they only come here for meetings.* I eased into a sofa and murmured, “I see Viceroy Melgio is as cautious as the rumors claim.”

The official bowed respectfully and replied, “Lord Melgio changes the location of his office at regular intervals. It is customary for Zaria’s viceroys to keep their location a secret.”

“Understandable.”

Though if you’re that secretive, isn’t it hard to get anything done? The official stepped out of the room and returned a few moments later.

“My lord wishes to speak with the demon army’s representative before negotiating with Ryunheit. Vice-Commander, if you would please follow me.”

That’s odd.

“Are you sure it’s not Lady Airia he wishes to speak to first?”

“No, my lord’s orders were clear. He wishes to first meet with the famed demon general Veight.”

“My apologies, but I will have to refuse. The demon army and Ryunheit are one and the same now. Please inform him that we decline to negotiate separately.”

The official’s request struck me as unnatural. But even if it hadn’t been, I didn’t want to leave Airia alone. The official hesitated, and Airia took the opportunity to say her own piece.

“Seeing as this is an informal audience, I would like to be present as well.”

“I’m not sure...”

Before the official could refuse us, Airia added, “Or do you mean to imply that there would be a problem with me, the Demon Ambassador Airia Lutte Aindorf, being present for a negotiation meeting between the demon army and Zaria?”

“Perish the thought.”

Overwhelmed by Airia’s forcefulness, the attendant shook his head.

“Very well, Lady Airia, Lord Veight. I shall inquire if the viceroy will be willing to receive you for an informal introduction before we begin official negotiations.”

Airia and I exchanged glances, then got to our feet.

“Guards, attendants, remain here. ‘Relax, and take this time to rest.’”

Hamaam saluted me and replied, “As you wish, ‘exalted vice-commander.’”

You guys aren’t the only ones that use secret codes. We do, too. “Relax, and take this time to rest,” was code for “Assume we’re in enemy territory. Remain vigilant. I grant both squad commanders the authority to engage hostiles at their discretion.” Hamaam’s reply meant that he understood and would obey. No one had made any overt moves, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that that official was suspicious somehow.

Airia and I were led down a long, narrow corridor. The official stopped before the door at the far end and turned to us.

“Lord Melgio awaits.”

The official bowed and made to take his leave.

“Hold a moment.”

“Is something the matter?”

I grabbed his shoulder as he turned around and said, “I smell blood and vomit up ahead. Just what state is Lord Melgio in?”

The official whirled around and tried to dash away. *You won’t escape me!* I transformed into my werewolf form and tightened my grip on him.

“I believe I asked you a question.”

I dug my claws into his shoulder. I was still holding back, but my grip was tight enough to hurt now. The official screamed in pain and shouted, “Gaaaah! I-Intruders!”

Loud footsteps thudded down the hallway. That was the sound of armored soldiers. *So that’s how you want to play?*

“Alright, I understand what’s going on now. For now, let’s put you to sleep.”

I socked the official on the jaw, knocking him unconscious. A few of his teeth were knocked loose from the force of the blow, but I had no obligation to hold back anymore. While I could fight here, the hallway was too narrow for me to move freely, and I was still worried about whatever might be behind the door the official led us to.

“Lady Airia, stick close to me.”

“Okay.”

Airia nodded nervously and drew the saber at her waist. Realizing the hallway was too narrow to swing it in, she got into a thrusting stance. I howled to my werewolves, telling them to attack, then kicked down the door behind me.

Inside the room a man lay on the floor, covered in blood. His three guards lay next to him, also bloodied. Considering how much blood there was, and the fact that it was dry, it was clearly too late. They were all dead. I sniffed around for assassins, but smelled no one else.

“That’s Sir Melgio,” Airia declared as she looked down at the man. Remaining vigilant of my surroundings, I knelt next to the corpses. The viceroy and his guards had all had their throats slashed. There were also a number of parallel gashes on their chests. The assassins had wanted to make it look like a werewolf’s claws had killed the men.

“It appears these assassins wish to use your reputation against you, Sir Veight.”

Sighing, I got to my feet.

“It irks me that they’re trying to make such a shoddy job look like my handiwork. I won’t let these guys get away.”

My guess was the Senate was behind this. Meaning that Meraldia had judged Zaria’s viceroy a foe. The only reason I could they would want him dead was because he’d been planning on allying himself with us. *It’s a shame he had to die.* Though we’d never met, it pissed me off that someone I could have forged a bond with had been killed. For his sake too, I’d send these assassins to the afterlife.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t be sure if the soldiers the official had called were on the viceroy’s side, or his. If they’d been bribed by the Senate, or were Senate soldiers disguised as the city garrison, I could kill them without reservation. But if the assassins had wanted to make this look like I’d done it, it was possible the soldiers were still loyal to the viceroy. In which case, the last thing I wanted to do was kill them. Though I had no hints to go off of, I couldn’t afford to get this wrong.

Maybe I should just take Airia and run? No, that won’t work either. I needed to secure the crime scene, or the blame for killing the viceroy would automatically fall on me.

“Lady Airia.”

“What is it?”

Though she was pale, Airia tried to put up a brave front. In my gravelly werewolf voice, I said, “Sorry, but I’ll need to carry you for a bit.”

“Huh!?”

I apologized preemptively, then picked Airia up.

A few seconds later, a knot of soldiers burst into the room and discovered Melgio's corpse.

"Lord Melgio!"

"M-My Lord!? Someone, call a doctor!"

"The captain's been slain too! Raise the alarm!"

The soldiers drew their swords and scanned the room.

"Where is the demon army's vice-commander and Ryunheit's viceroy!?"

"Are they the ones who did this!?"

"Look, those wounds look like claw marks!"

Well, I guess that's the natural conclusion. Judging by their reaction, I doubted they were the Senate's soldiers. Just then, a young girl flanked by a brace of guards strode into the room. She had short hair and a boyish face. A jeweled dagger hung at her waist, and she was dressed in fine clothes, so I assumed she was a noble of some sort.

"Lady Shatina, you mustn't be here!"

"It's too dangerous!"

The girl called Shatina shook off her guard and ran to the viceroy's corpse.

"Father!? Father!"

Crap, she's the viceroy's daughter. I'd heard that Zaria's viceroy had a single daughter who was his heir. And it looked like this was her. Because she was in public she held back her tears, but I could tell the death of her father had hit her hard. She clenched her fists and choked back a sob. It would take a lot of courage to show ourselves now, but I needed to solve this misunderstanding fast, or it'd be too late. Still holding Airia, I soundlessly leapt down from the roof beam I'd been hiding on.

"Who're you!?"

"A-A werewolf!?"

In my most dignified voice, I said, “I am the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, Veight, and this is Ryunheit’s viceroy, Airia. I swear to you that we were not the ones who killed Zaria’s viceroy.”

The men readied their weapons, but Airia leapt down from my arms and stopped them from attacking.

“Please wait! We’re innocent!”

Airia’s sharp glare caused the soldiers to falter. But then Shatina got to her feet and glared at us, her expression a mixture of fury and sorrow.

“As if I would ever believe a werewolf!”

The loss of her father was causing her to act rashly. Considering how young she looked, I couldn’t blame her. Though she didn’t seem the least bit interested in hearing us out, I really did need her to. I wasn’t the greatest of mediators, so I decided to defuse the situation the only way I knew how. Using intimidation. I gathered my mana and howled, casting Soul Shaker. The air in the room crackled from the force of my shout.

“Eeek!”

“Uwaah!”

“Kyaaa!”

My howl penetrated their souls, striking fear into their hearts. It also shattered the vases lining the wall and the mirror off to one side of the room. *Sorry about that, guys.* I walked over to the paralyzed soldiers and brought my face close to Shatina’s.

“Shut up and listen.”

Though she was trembling in fear, the anger in Shatina’s gaze was as strong as ever. However, she was directing her hatred toward the wrong target. I shook my head and said, “If I was the culprit, I would have killed the lot of you already. Besides, look at your father’s corpse.”

“What do you...”

“I’ll admit that Zaria is an arid place. But even then, would a person’s blood dry this fast?”

As I said that, a gust of hot wind blew through the room.

“Well...”

Shatina faltered, and I pressed further.

“Besides, if all of those wounds had been inflicted on the viceroy while he was alive, his blood would have splattered the walls. However, it’s all pooled here, underneath him.”

If a living person was cut deeply, their blood spurted pretty far. But if their heart had already stopped pumping, then the blood just dripped out.

“Someone cut your father’s corpse after he was already dead to make it look like a werewolf’s claws had killed him. You can see traces of vomit in the blood, so it’s clear he’d been poisoned to death, not slashed. And I’ll have you know, werewolves don’t use poison on people,” Airia added, supporting my case.

“Sir Veight is a ferocious warrior, it’s true, but the rumors about him are mistaken. However, the assassins used those rumors to their advantage and attempted to frame him as the murderer.”

Airia frowned apologetically.

“You’re still young and lack experience, Lady Shatina. Because of that, the assassins underestimated you. They believed you would mistake us as your father’s murderers, and thus destroy any possibility of an alliance between Zaria and the demon army.”

Shatina exchanged a silent glance with her guards.

“So then, you aren’t the ones who killed my father?”

“Naturally.”

I heard a faint noise coming from one of the walls, and walked over to it.

“There’s one other, very big discrepancy. You see, humans killed by a werewolf’s claws don’t end up looking like that.”

Shatina gave me a puzzled look.

“They don’t?”

“That’s right.”

I nodded and laid a hand against the wall. *Right about here, I think.*

“Watch closely. This is what happens to people shredded by a werewolf’s claws.”

I cast strengthening magic on my arm and raked my claws across the wall. There was a huge puff of dust as I sliced the wall apart.

“GRAAAAAAAAH!”

Blood sprayed everywhere. A second later, something thudded to the ground.

“Someone was hiding in the walls!?”

I nodded in response to Shatina’s question and looked down at what I’d slashed. The corpse of a man, cut in half by the force of my claws, lay on the floor. Half of the rope he’d been hanging onto dangled from the ceiling, swaying slightly. From the looks of it, he’d been trying to eavesdrop. I ran my hand across the section of wall I’d cut up, then turned to Shatina.

“I heard people jumping across the rooftops, so I destroyed the entire wall to stop them from coming.”

Of course, my claws alone hadn’t been long enough, so I’d created mana blades that extended further out from them. I’d seen Master use a similar spell before, so I’d wanted to try it out. *But man, I didn’t think it’d make my claws hurt so much. I think I’ll only use this when I need to show off.* I ignored the pain and said quietly to Shatina, “I understand that losing your father must be painful for you. But those who stand in positions of power must be able to remain calm even when people close to them die.”

As I said that, I thought back to when the old Demon Lord had died. I certainly hadn’t acted very calmly back then. Honestly, I had no right to be saying this. So in return for saying such irresponsible things, I decided to protect Shatina.

While Shatina still hadn’t sorted out her feelings, she was slowly coming to understand that I wasn’t the culprit. As the effects of my Soul Shaker wore off, I held out a hand to her. She hesitantly took it and got to her feet.

“So then you really aren’t my father’s... my enemy?”

“That’s for you to decide. But whether you believe me your enemy or not, I’ll

protect you.”

“Protect me from what?”

I moved so that both Shatina and Airia were behind me, then said, “There are still plenty of assassins left.”

“Th-There are!?”

“Since they failed to trick you, they’ve likely decided to kill you.”

There were a few people on the roof above, and a few others coming in from the hallway. Furthermore, there were a few people running around the adjacent buildings’ rooftops. Shatina seemed too shocked to think, so Airia started giving out orders.

“Soldiers, protect Lady Shatina! Keep an especially close eye on the door and windows!”

Just then, I heard a commotion from the hallway.

“Enemy attack!” Someone shouted, then another group of soldiers spilled into the room. The moment Shatina’s guards saw the soldiers’ faces, they began to attack.

“Imposters!”

“Do you truly believe you can pass as part of the garrison!?”

Personally, I couldn’t tell them apart at all, but it was obvious there were two factions since the garrison troops were fighting amongst each other.

“How dare you wear our honorable uniform!”

“Be careful everyone, the enemy has disguised themselves as part of the regular garrison! Don’t let anyone suspicious near Lady Shatina!”

“Cut down anyone who tries to enter this room!”

From the looks of it, Shatina’s guards were able to tell apart the intruders by sight. Unfortunately, I’d just gotten here so I had no clue.

With how muddled things had gotten, I had no way of telling who was friend or foe. It was far too dangerous for Airia and Shatina to stay here. Just as I thought that, another three assassins dropped in through the open window.

They were wearing masks and carrying daggers. I pushed Shatina behind me, kicked the first assassin out the window, and sliced the other two in half using my claws. While the assassins were clearly dexterous, they had little skill with the blade.

"These guys have no manners, barging in through the window like that."

"Sir Veight, you do realize..."

Airia gave me a reproachful look. She had her saber in one arm, and Shatina in the other. *Oh yeah, come to think of it, I did the same thing. I'm surprised you still remember. Wait, now's not the time to be waxing nostalgic.* From the looks of it, there were still plenty of assassins left.

Another assassin in the next building over readied a crossbow and aimed it through the third story window. But I'd spotted him a while back, and I already knew he was trying to take advantage of the confusion to sneak a shot in. The moment he loosed, I stepped in front of Shatina.

"Wha!?"

In response to her surprised shout, I showed her the poisoned arrow I'd caught. So long as we knew it was coming, us werewolves had fast enough reflexes to catch arrows in midair.

"This arrow has the same odor as your father's corpse. They're probably using purple osier poison."

In this world, there was a species of tree known as purple osier. It grew in the north, and its leaves and bark contained poison. As winters in the north were long, most herbivorous hibernating creatures tended to eat everything they could get their hands on, so the only trees that had survived were those that evolved to be poisonous.

The poison caused severe vomiting, and was lethal when taken both orally, or injected. It was popular in the north among hunters, demon slayers, and assassins. I'd been on the receiving end of this poison before too. There was a similar species of purple osier that grew in the south, but that wasn't poisonous, so no one in the southern cities used it.

These assassins had just given themselves away. This arrow would serve as

proof who the real culprits were. *I really should thank that archer for this.* Just as I thought that, blood sprayed from his chest and he slumped to the ground.

“Sorry we’re late, boss. Leave things here to us!”

Hamaam walked into view and gave me a salute. He, along with his squad, were in the process of hunting down the snipers.

“Well done. Some of the city’s garrison are traitors, but the rest are on our side. Since we can’t tell them apart, don’t lay a hand on them.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hamaam nodded and then walked out of sight.

The room had devolved into a melee between people all wearing the same uniforms, so I had no idea who to be wary of. To make matters worse, there were still a few snipers left. It really was too dangerous to remain in this room. Besides, the assassins were after Airia and Shatina. If they managed to kill Shatina, the Senate would be able to strengthen their hold on the city. My guess was their plan had been this: First, they’d assassinate Zaria’s viceroy, who was sympathetic to the demon army. Then they’d pin the blame for the assassination on me. Shatina would then swear vengeance on the demon army, and Zaria would invade Ryunheit.

But since Shatina had learned the truth, the Senate’s plan had ended in failure. So they’d switched to plan B. Instead of just assassinating the viceroy, they’d eliminate the viceroy’s entire family and try to make it seem like the whole thing was my fault. Then they’d appoint their own lackey as viceroy, giving them full control of the city. They’d then reorganize Zaria’s military and invade Ryunheit as originally planned.

In some ways, the Senate had probably been hoping for this development. If anything, pulling this off would give them more control. *These guys sure are underhanded, though.* This world had no internet or printing press. Even major events spread only as rumors through word of mouth. Furthermore, because of the vast authority Meraldia wielded over its cities, it could easily control the flow of information. Framing the demon army for a slaughter at Zaria would be an easy task.

The only way to stop that from happening would be for me to keep Shatina safe, and bring her over to our side. If she was willing to testify my innocence, then it'd be impossible for harmful rumors to spread. For that reason, I needed to defend Airia and Shatina with my life. Meaning I no longer had the leeway to try and protect the loyal members of Zaria's garrison still fighting here. I needed to get Shatina and Airia out of here. While I despised ranking some lives as more or less important than others, as the commander in charge, I had no choice. *Sorry guys. I hope you make it out of this alive.*

"Lady Airia, Shatina, we're escaping. Grab on to me."

Airia grabbed on right away, but Shatina hesitated.

"But my father... and my men..."

For someone as young as her, abandoning her father's corpse and the soldiers who were fighting to protect her was more than she could stomach. Unfortunately, I didn't have time for her sort her feelings out.

"If you die here, what do you think will happen to Zaria? You'll only be bringing the people who love you sorrow while the whole city suffers."

"Ugh..."

Shatina bit her lip. However, it took her only a few seconds to overcome her reluctance. She looked up at me, her gaze resolute.

"Sir Veight, please take me to safety!"

"Good, that's the kind of determination a viceroy should have."

I lifted Shatina up and dashed toward the window. As I ran, I turned back and saw one of Shatina's loyal guards fall to the ground. Blood started pooling underneath his stomach. *I'm sorry I couldn't save you... But I swear I'll keep your lord safe.* I tightened my grip on Airia and Shatina, then leapt out the window.

"Hyaah!"

Shatina screamed as we fell. I couldn't blame her, this was the fourth floor. Normal people would die if they fell from this height. While Airia managed to hold back her scream, she still clung to me for dear life. I sailed over the street below and flew neatly into the window of the next building over. This one

looked to be a normal house. I'd been worried someone would shoot at me while I was in the air, but it looked like Hamaam's squad had managed to suppress the snipers. I breathed a sigh of relief as I got to my feet.

However, it seemed the assassins noticed we'd escaped right away. I put my ear to one of the walls and heard a group of people thudding up the stairs. I turned to Shatina and said, "From here on, I'm going to assume any human we meet is our enemy, and if they're carrying weapons, I'll attack. If any of them happen to be allies, tell me right away."

"U-Understood."

Blushing slightly, Shatina nodded. At the same time, two men kicked down the door to the room we were in. Like the other assassins, they were wielding daggers. Shatina remained silent, so that confirmed they were enemies. They ignored me and headed straight for Shatina and Airia. *Looks like they're not even trying to fight me. You guys know I'm as mortal as the rest of you, right?*

"You fiend!" Airia screamed as she gallantly drew her saber and slashed at her foe. *Come to think of it, she had the courage to try and face me alone. A few assassins probably won't scare her.* Shatina hurriedly drew her own short sword, but she was clearly unused to fighting. Airia realized that as well, and moved to cover Shatina.

Unfortunately, Airia was no expert with the sword herself. She wasn't able to match a group of professional assassins. I couldn't allow the battle to drag on, so I quickly dispatched the two men. One I stabbed through the heart with my claws, while the other I kicked into the wall. He slammed into it so hard that the wall shattered along with his spine, and he coughed up a lungful of blood before falling lifelessly to the ground. The battle lasted only a second.

The assassins were lightly armored, so they weren't much of a threat to me. Furthermore, they had to get within range of my claws to use their short daggers, making my job even easier. The problem was I needed to keep Airia and Shatina safe while I fought. I picked up one of the assassin's daggers to see if it, too, was poisoned. After discovering that it was, I turned to the two girls and said, "I'm going cast detoxification magic on you two. To do that, I'll need to touch the right side of your stomach."

“Understood.”

Airia nodded without hesitation and rolled up her tunic. I placed my hand on her abdomen, now only covered by her undershirt, and willed my mana into her liver. For as long as my spell lasted, Airia would have increased resistance to poison.

“Shatina, you too.”

Shatina twitched when I addressed her.

“Y-You need to touch me?”

“The right side of a person’s stomach contains an organ that protects you from poison. I need to inject mana into it to strengthen its abilities.”

“I-I see. Very well. Give me a moment.”

Shatina sucked in a deep breath. Then she closed her eyes and grabbed the hem of her shirt.

“There!”

She lifted it up, revealing her bare skin. *Uhh, you didn’t have to roll up your undershirt too, I just need to have decent contact.* I tried to calm Shatina down while I placed my hand on her stomach and willed my mana into her.

“Alright, that should do.”

“Th-Thank you.”

Shatina gave me a dazed look, but then shook her head and composed herself.

“L-Let’s go! I can guide you out!”

“Alright, I’ll be counting on you. The rest of my werewolves are waiting outside the city. Leaving through the city’s south gate would be best, but if that’s impossible we can detour around.”

“Okay, leave it to me!”

Where’d she get all that energy from?

We dashed through Zaria’s labyrinthine streets, following Shatina’s directions.

Strictly speaking, Zaria had two mazes, one on the ground and one up above. Most buildings were connected to each other via aerial walkways, or had their balconies within jumping distance of each other. As the upper paths had been made mostly by the residents for convenience's sake, and were rerouted all the time, they were actually more confusing than the maze that was the city's streets.

"Umm, so after you clear plum foof, you need to climb the red rat stairs and... no, wait, you have to cross rust hatchet street first."

Shatina was having a hard time giving directions. To make matters worse, Zaria's laws forbade streets or intersections from having names or distinctive landmarks. So without Shatina's guidance, I couldn't tell them apart. And the assassins had already realized we were trying to flee. Hamaam had howled a few moments ago that some of the enemies had escaped his squad. If they'd left the battlefield, it meant they were tailing us. Since they were more familiar with the area than I was, they were also able to head us off despite my superior speed. Anytime my ears picked up any suspicious noises, I told Shatina the direction they were coming from, and she adjusted our course accordingly. But no matter how much we weaved, our pursuers kept catching up.

A barrage of arrows shot toward me as I sprinted down a skywalk connecting two buildings together. While I managed to strike them all down, I was once again reminded of the fact that my opponents were exclusively targeting Airia and Shatina. Before the assassins could reload, I leapt onto the roof and slaughtered them all. Four cowardly snipers fell to the ground, blood spilling from their chests.

That makes 23... no, 24. Man, there's so many of them I can't keep track. Just how many assassins are there? For some time now, all the assassins we'd encountered had been equipped with either bows or crossbows. Those were the weapons I hated dealing with the most, since my only long-ranged attack was my howl. In the case of the other werewolves, they didn't even have that, so these assassins made for troublesome enemies. I debated signaling the rest of my werewolves to come help, but in a twisting city like this where it was impossible to tell who was friend or foe, they'd have a tough time fighting to their full potential.

“Damn, there are enemies here too.”

I used the mirror I’d picked up along the way to see what was beyond the next corner. Shaking my head, I turned back to my companions. At the end of this corridor were two buildings, and on each building were two snipers. Though their uniform bore no affiliation, they were obviously enemies. While I’d be able to run past safely if I was on my own, it’d be harder while carrying these two, nor could I afford wasting time killing them. There was no way to dispatch them all simultaneously, and unless I did that they’d call for reinforcements and we’d be surrounded.

Still holding her saber, Airia wiped a bead of sweat off her forehead.

“They seem intent on killing Lady Shatina.”

“Well, she is the viceroy’s heir.”

The position of viceroy wasn’t one just anybody could attain. Being a skilled governor wasn’t enough. You also needed influence, popularity, and a measure of trust from your citizens. Furthermore, you also needed to be well-versed in local culture, history, and geography. For that reason, the usual candidates for a new viceroy ended up being the old viceroy’s heir or disciple. Which was why Shatina was such an important person to Zaria.

At this rate, escaping to my werewolves waiting outside the city would be impossible. Because all of Zaria’s buildings were made tall to double as watchtowers, no matter where we ran we’d be found eventually. Not only was Zaria’s maze a measure to prevent intruders from causing too much damage, but it also kept intruders from escaping alive. And even if we did get lucky and escape, the moment we left the city we’d be in even more danger. Past the city was a barren wasteland, and there’d be no cover. After weighing my options, I decided against escaping the city. It was too risky.

“Shatina.”

“Y-Yes?”

I looked down at her and said, “As the future viceroy of this city, I need you to tell me if there’s anywhere in the city that meets the criteria I’m about to outline. And if there is, I need you to guide us there.”

“O-Okay.”

We once again began weaving our way through the maze-like city. After going down a series of progressively narrower streets, we finally stopped in front of a door. At a glance, the door seemed to lead to just another house.

“Is this really the place?”

“Yes. It fits all of the criteria you asked for, Sir Veight.”

“Alright, then let’s settle things here!”

Together with Shatina and Airia, I entered the building. Once I cast the necessary magic on them, I had them hide nearby. *Now then, it’s all up to me.* Just in case, I cast detoxification magic on myself as well. For my peace of mind, I also cast an arrow warding spell.

Whenever something approached at high speed, the spell would unleash shockwaves of mana to divert the approaching object. It functioned similarly to how reactive armor did back on earth. However it burned a lot of mana and was only good for stopping a single bolt so I couldn’t rely on it for much. Depending on the speed and angle of the arrow, it might not even deflect it at all. Trusting it to save me wasn’t a good idea.

Lastly, I cast sound dampening magic on myself. So long as it was active, I, along with things near me, ceased making noise. The downside was that I couldn’t cast any spells that required a verbal incantation, but I rarely used such spells to begin with. Once I’d completed my preparations, I waited for our assailants to appear.

After a few minutes, the door was kicked open. In order to protect the documents stored within from sunlight, the place we’d holed up in had almost no windows. The few windows near the ceiling had all been boarded up with thick planks, and the storage room was pitch dark. Because of that, the assailants stopped to light a few torches before walking further into the room. Everything was going according to plan.

I scooted backward, hiding in the shadows. I’d asked Shatina to find me a dark, enclosed space. Preferably one with a complex layout. And this building fit the bill perfectly.

It was Zaria's library. The building was as large as a gymnasium, and tall bookshelves filled most of the space. The library's interior was more labyrinthine than the city streets. However, in this world that lacked advanced printing techniques, it should have been impossible for a poor city like Zaria to own this many books. The existence of this building was unnatural.

In truth, most of the books contained here were fake. While the shelves appeared to be packed, they were actually just disguises to hide secret rooms and cupboards. This library was actually an escape route made for Zaria's viceroys. It was also a convenient place to lure enemies to finish them off. This place was also known as Zaria's Fangs. Only the viceroys and their family knew the true nature of the library. Zaria's viceroys were known for being tight-lipped, and when they did open their mouths it was to reveal their fangs before devouring their foes.

Once the advance party confirmed there was no immediate threat, they signaled behind them and another group entered the building. They appeared to be ordinary traders and pilgrims, but no normal person would come here. I kept an eye on the entire room from atop a bookshelf, making sure to keep myself shrouded in darkness. The group of assassins split up and began their search. Because of how narrow the aisles were, they'd probably decided it wasn't a good idea to stick together.

Time to hunt. Hunting was, after all, a werewolf's specialty. Among the maze of shelves, there was only one route that didn't lead to a dead end. But that route was circuitous, so I decided to focus on killing the enemies closest to me before tackling the ones that had chanced on the correct path. Besides, if I left corpses on the fake paths, more enemies would be drawn toward them.

I silently dropped down behind a man who was dressed like a pilgrim. A second later I'd parted his head from his shoulders, and he crumpled soundlessly to the ground. The torch he'd been carrying was extinguished with his own blood. I then once again slipped into the shadows.

* * * *

—Shatina's Darkness—

Right now, I'm hiding in the darkness while being chased by a horde of

assassins. Father, you were always so careful and cautious. Why did you have to die? I hate myself for being so weak that I cannot even get revenge on your killers. In fact, I'm being hounded by them right now. Not only do I have to hide, I'm stuck being protected by people I just met. I truly am pathetic.

Compared to me, the viceroy of Ryunheit, Lady Airia, is so much braver. Though the Senate calls her a traitor to Meraldia, she's a very sincere person. Not only that, even though she wears men's clothes and wields a saber, she looks so pretty.

When we'd been running around the city earlier, she hadn't hesitated at all. She'd even saved the werewolf from the demon army from assassins a few times. Is she used to fierce fighting?

Lady Airia must have noticed that I'm staring at her, since she gives me a smile.

"Don't worry, Lady Shatina. Everything will be alright."

"How... How can you be so sure?" I can't help but ask. Her smile grows wider and she replies, "Sir Veight is a very reliable man. He's strong, wise, and possesses a virtuous heart."

There's no hesitation or fear in her voice.

"But Lady Airia, even if he is a werewolf, there's too many..."

Before I can finish, Lady Airia puts a finger to her lips. I instantly fall silent, and Lady Airia covers our lamp. It seems our enemies have arrived. I'm about to draw my sword when I remember we need to stay quiet, and I stop. Now I wish I'd drawn it earlier.

We're hiding in a secret room hidden behind a bookshelf. I can hear people on the other side. The noises are faint, since they're professionals, but they can't erase the sounds they're making entirely. There's a faint swishing noise as one of them waves their hands. If we make even the slightest sound, they'll find us. I don't know how many of them there are, but I hope that werewolf general, Sir Veight, can handle them.

Overcome by worry, I look up at Lady Airia. But it's pitch black, and I can't see her face even though she's inches away from me. Suddenly, something soft

envelops my palm. Lady Airia's holding my hand. I can feel the kindness in that gesture. Even though I only met her moments ago, I feel safe with her.

After a while, I notice something strange. I can't hear any sounds anymore. It's so quiet it hurts... No, that's not quite right. It's not quiet, my ears just can't pick up any sound. What's going on? I'm scared.

I try to stand up, but Lady Airia pushes me back down. There's still no sign that anyone's found the hidden entrance to this room. I suppose it would be wiser to remain here. After a while, sound returns to the world. I can hear the faint sounds of Lady Airia's breath and the rustling of clothes again. Lady Airia quietly gets to her feet and places her ear against the wall. A few seconds pass. She comes back and uncovers the lamp. Dim light illuminates the tiny room we're in.

"Sir Veight defeated the enemies near us. Let's keep hiding here for a while longer."

"O-Okay."

How is she able to trust Sir Veight so completely? Though I can't deny the only reason we're still alive is thanks to his efforts. Dozens of assassins came after us, but we're still safe. Now that I think about it, it's obvious he wasn't the one who assassinated my father. He really is an amazing person... or werewolf, I suppose. I'm sure someone with his abilities will be able to make the Senate pay for killing my father. I slump back down into my seat and look up at Lady Airia, who's smiling confidently.

* * * *

I chased after a pair of assassins who'd happened upon the correct route to the hidden room. They were dressed as merchants, but considering their speed and skill, they were obviously not merchants. *Damn, that was a close one.* By the time I reached them they were in front of the hidden room. While the bookshelf disguised its entrance pretty well, I still didn't want them anywhere close to it.

I jumped down and crushed the first assassin's skull and collarbone with a dropkick. Enveloped in my silence magic, he fell soundlessly to the ground. However, his companion sensed something was off, and turned around. Before

he could even register what he was seeing, I sliced his head off.

Around the time I'd finished off half of the assassins, they finally realized that there was someone attacking them. However, it seems they'd expected retaliation, as they weren't surprised even when they found their comrades' corpses. Rather than panic, they simply called in the men they'd stationed outside on standby. From the looks of it, they were planning on overwhelming us with numbers. They reorganized into small squads and began verbally signaling each other. It looked like they'd abandoned stealth and were relying entirely on their numerical superiority.

Unfortunately for them, this was a cramped place. Whenever a group found a dead end and attempted to backtrack, they had to shuffle around. And at that moment, they were vulnerable.

"Squad five reporting! It's another dead end!"

"Squad two here! We've discovered Yajim's squads' corpses! The werewolf got to them!"

"Squad three, come in! What's your status!?"

Every squad I attacked attempted to hail their comrades. But so long as I was in the vicinity, their screams were nullified. As time passed, the assassins began to panic.

"This is squad one! Are there any squads left alive!?"

"Squad six is still alive! We're looking for squad four's—"

Their voices cut off.

"Hey, what's wrong!? Hello!? Anyone there!?"

No matter how many times the first squad called out, there was no response. Nor would there be, since I'd just killed them all.

"A-At this rate we'll be wiped out! Retreat!"

"We can't, this mission is—"

The library went silent.

I hopped up onto one of the bookshelves and surveyed the carnage I'd

caused. Forty-odd assassins lay in pools of their own blood. *You reap what you sow.* Despite that, I still prayed for the souls of these pawns of the Senate. I then put my ear to the wall and listened. As far as I could tell, there was no one inside the library or outside nearby. I returned to the hidden room where Airia and Shatina were waiting.

"We're the only living people left here. So for now, I think it's safe."

Shatina crawled out of the hidden passage and sucked in a deep breath.

"D-Does this mean... you killed them all!?"

"Yeah. Sorry I got your library drenched in blood."

"That's fine, it's just..."

Since becoming a werewolf I'd become pretty inured to gore, but this might have been too shocking a sight for a young girl. Shatina's expression grew grim and she hung her head.

"If I'd been as strong as you, I could have protected my father."

"You're overthinking things."

I guess my actions had left her shocked, but not in the way I was thinking. Rather than terrifying her, they'd made her frustrated at her own weakness. In some ways, her personality was rather extreme. *Thinking about it, since she's a viceroy's daughter, she's probably seen a few corpses already anyway.*

I heard a howl in the distance. That voice sounded like Fahn.

"Wh-What now?"

Shatina gave me a worried look.

"Don't worry, that's one of my comrades' howls. She's on her way here."

Thank God, Fahn should be able to help me figure out how to act around Shatina. And I'd be freed from escorting her and Airia.

"Veight, are you in here?"

Fahn stepped into the library a few minutes later. She was together with Pia, a young werewolf who was her squad partner. However, I didn't see Monza or her squad partner anywhere.

“Yeah, I’m with Lady Airia and Zaria’s viceroy’s daughter. Where’s Monza?”

Fahn swept her gaze across the sea of corpses as she replied.

“She spotted a group of suspicious people leaving the city so she’s tailing them. They were marking walls with circles or Xs, and that got her curious.”

That definitely sounded like they were assassins. Locals would have the topography memorized.

“Those marks are probably to guide Meraldia’s army when they come to invade. If we have the time, we should record them and erase them.”

Fahn gave me a blank look, then clapped her hands together in realization.

“Oh, I get it. Humans can’t just remember routes by their smell.”

To be honest, I wasn’t very good at that either. But other werewolves seemed to have no problems recording things via smell. According to Fahn, the group that had fled the city had consisted of maybe ten people at most. I turned to Pia and said, “Let the rest of the werewolves into the city. We can’t move from here as long as there are still assassins around, so have all the squad leaders secure the area.”

“Aye-aye, sir!”

Until the city was safe, I had no intention of leaving the library. Though I was worried about sending Pia off on her own, I needed Fahn to help guard Shatina and Airia. I couldn’t guarantee their safety on my own.

After Pia left, Fahn took up a lookout position at the entrance. Thanks to that, I could finally talk to Shatina uninterrupted.

“Allow me to introduce myself properly. I am the Demon Lord Gomoviroa’s Vice-Commander, Veight. I’d wished to meet with Lord Melgio, so it’s a shame he passed away. You have my condolences.”

Shatina responded in kind, and gave a formal introduction.

“My name is Shatina Stahl, daughter of Melgio Yewm Stahl. My father...”

Shatina tried to keep herself together, but when she mentioned the word father she broke down and started crying. She covered her face with her hands

and slumped to her knees.

"F-Father... Why... Why did this happen..."

She kept bawling for a few minutes. *If I recall correctly, she has no other family. Not only did she lose her only parent, now she has to bear the burden of Zaria's future. I don't blame her for crying.* I looked over at Airia and saw her wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. *She must be remembering the time her own dad died.* Like Shatina, Airia had been forced to become viceroy after her father's sudden death. Airia squatted down next to Shatina and gently laid her hands on Shatina's shoulders.

"Lady Shatina, we are your allies. If there's anything I can do to help, just ask."

Still crying, Shatina nodded a few times. She was still in her mid-teens. While she'd be considered an adult in this society, that was still far too young to bear such a heavy burden. After she'd cried her heart out, Shatina muttered, "Father always used to say that Zaria was stuck in a difficult position. He wanted to improve the city's defenses, but he knew doing so would earn the Senate's wrath."

Airia nodded and rubbed Shatina's shoulders.

"The north sees Zaria as a dagger pressed against their throats. Lord Melgio did well to protect the city until now."

The cities closer to Meraldia's northern section, Bernheinen, Thuvan, Zaria, and Veira, had always been worried about their relationship with the Senate. Bernheinen had tried to pass itself off as a harmless city which only preserved old relics, while Thuvan had developed its industry and sold its tools to the north. Veira did something similar, and sold its exceptionally high-quality handicrafts to the north and built economic and cultural ties with the north's residents.

However, Zaria had been devastated by the unification war, which had hampered its development. Merchants didn't want to do business in a city without walls, and the area around it was too barren to harvest resources from. But because it had fought the hardest during the unification war, the north was wary of it. I could imagine just how precarious a position Zaria's viceroy must have been in.

As I was trying to figure out how to console Shatina, Monza popped into the library.

“Is the boss here?”

“Yeah. Everyone’s safe too.”

To my surprise, Monza sounded nervous.

“Boss, we’ve got bad news. When I was trailing those guys who ran, I spotted a huge army heading to Zaria.”

“What!?”

“Oh, but don’t worry. I wiped out all those assassins before they made it back to their army.”

Monza flashed me a wicked grin. *I knew I could count on the werewolves’ best hunter.* If the assassins were heading toward the army, it meant that force was under the direct control of the Senate. During wartime, Meraldia could conscript the garrison or militia into the regular army, at any time, and place them under their chain of command.

“They have about two thousand infantry, of which half are spearmen and bowmen. And they’ve brought about seven or eight catapults disguised as wagons.”

“Did you say they brought catapults!?” Shatina screamed. “What do they intend to do with those!?”

Monza shrugged in response.

“I’m guessing they think your tall brick buildings won’t be too hard to smash with catapults.”

As all of the upper floors of Zaria’s buildings were made with baked bricks, they weren’t very sturdy. Even the famed city of labyrinths stood no chance against the power engineering and physics. I smacked Monza’s head, admonishing her.

“Don’t be rude. But you’re right, they’re likely after Zaria. It’s not like catapults would be any use against werewolves.”

Shatina already knew it was the Senate who had assassinated Zaria's viceroy. So now it was only a matter of time before Zaria left the Meraldian Federation. Since none of the assassins had returned to the army Meraldia had stationed outside, the Senate was probably aware that their covert operation had failed. Which was why they were planning on launching a preemptive strike against Zaria before the city could rally. While their tactics were a little sloppy, it was clear they'd been planning this for a while now. It was for this reason they hadn't let Zaria rebuild its walls, after all. Even without a watertight strategy, they had more than enough firepower to take down the city. Airia's expression grew grave.

"We don't have enough soldiers to fend off two thousand men. Zaria's garrison is exhausted from eliminating the traitors in its midst, and it's possible Meraldia still has a few spies in the city."

"All I brought with me were my werewolves. Two thousand is more than we can handle."

The army was practically at Zaria's gates. While there were 500 kentauros stationed in nearby Thuvan, they wouldn't make it in time. Nor was 500 enough to handle an army this size. And while undead soldiers were perfect for defending cities, their slow speed made them unsuited as reinforcements. Shatina bit her lip in frustration.

"If only we could do something about the catapults, Zaria could withstand an assault from just two thousand soldiers."

Uhh, I know your maze is good and all, but I don't think even the labyrinth city can handle 2,000 professional soldiers. However, Shatina had a point. Removing those catapults was of paramount importance. While my werewolves might be able to hold the streets, they wouldn't last long if catapults were bombarding the nearby buildings. I put a hand to my chin and weighed my options.

"Alright, send a request for reinforcements to Ryunheit, Thuvan, and Shardier. Until then, we'll have to hold out on our own."

Airia turned toward to me in surprise.

"Do you have a plan to survive that long?"

“Yeah. I’ll be heading out for a bit.”

“Huh?”

Airia, Shatina, Fahn, and Monza all gave me an incredulous look. A moment later, Airia shouted, “Someone, stop him!”

“On it!”

“Gotcha!”

Fahn and Monza grabbed me by the shoulders and held me in place. Shatina watched them both with a confused look on her face.

“U-Umm, Lady Airia, what are you doing?”

Airia replied in a threatening voice, “I’m aware that you’ve achieved more heroic feats on the battlefield than any of us can count, Sir Veight, but without fail, you’ve recklessly put yourself in mortal danger each time. So I’m restraining you.”

Now that’s just not fair.

“Name one time I acted recklessly, Lady Airia.”

“Every single battle so far!” Fahn, Monza, and Airia yelled simultaneously. I still didn’t buy it, but now wasn’t the time to be arguing.

“It’s fine, I promise I won’t do anything dangerous this time.”

“You say that every time, too.”

Fahn was pretty tough, and with her pinning me down I couldn’t escape.

“Just calm down and listen. I’m one of Demon Lord Gomoviroa’s best disciples, and have learned many of her secret spells. So long as I use deflection magic, I should be able to repel the catapult shots. I’ll buy us some time, so evacuate the citizens. I promise I won’t be in any danger.”

Frowning suspiciously, Monza brought her face close to mine. *Holy crap, that’s way too close.*

“You mean it?”

“I mean it.”

I didn’t mean it. The most deflection magic could repel were crossbow bolts. It was practically useless against large stones. But right now, I needed to convince everyone to let me go.

“We don’t have much time. Shatina, get me the most impressive-looking Zarian outfit you have. Also, some food.”

“D-Did you say food?”

There was more I needed to prepare, so I didn’t have time to explain.

“Also, have the werewolves congregate on the northern buildings’ rooftops in squads once they’ve finished securing the city.”

This time Fahn gave me a confused look.

“What’s the point of putting us on the rooftops? We can’t fight from there.”

“Don’t worry about it. Oh yeah, it doesn’t matter if it belongs to Zaria or the demon army, but hoist every single flag you can find.”

Looks like things are about to get busy.

I returned to the viceroy’s manor and scarfed down every dish Shatina brought me. While it looked like I was slacking, that wasn’t the case at all. I was planning on sortieing alone for the upcoming conflict. Once I headed to the battlefield, I wouldn’t be able to refuel until this fight was over. While I could replenish my stamina using magic, that didn’t change one fundamental fact: Both stamina regeneration and healing required nutrients.

If I didn’t have enough proteins in my body, regenerative magic wouldn’t be as effective. And if I ran out of carbohydrates, my strengthening magic would wear off faster. Which meant I needed to store as many calories as possible while I still had the chance.

One of Shatina’s attendants timidly brought be a whole roast sheep, and I wolfed it down in seconds. Meat was the best source of protein. Of course, I made sure to get in plenty of fruit too. Sugar was just as important. Next up the servants brought me some kind of bean paste. *No clue what’s in it, but it looks like it’s got protein.* Pastes were also easy for the body to digest. But this still wasn’t enough. I needed more.

“What’s this?”

I pointed to a strange white lump, and Shatina’s servant jumped with a start.

“I-It’s goat cheese, milord.”

Goat cheese? That’s got protein and *calcium! Perfect!* Calcium would come in handy if I broke any bones.

“Works for me. Bring me more.”

“Y-Yes, milord.”

While I was busy preparing for the harsh battle to come, the others apparently had the free time to gossip about me.

“What’s the boss doing? The enemy’s gonna reach us any minute now.”

“He said he’s stocking up on energy before the fight.”

“That’s way too much to just be ‘stocking up.’”

Vodd smiled gently at the other werewolves.

“We’ve only got two thousand men to kill. All you need to prepare for a skirmish like that is a hearty meal. If anything, it’s reassuring to see young’uns these days still have an appetite.”

“*Only* two thousand?”

“Well I guess compared to crushing the Hero, two thousand soldiers is nothing.”

“You said it.”

Stop just making up whatever explanations you feel like! Thanks to their muttering, the servant felt compelled to bring me alcohol too.

“W-Would you like some grape liquor or pear liqueur, milord?”

So they’ve got wine, huh? While alcohol was dense in carbohydrates, I didn’t want to tax my liver right now. It’d be a waste of the strengthening magic I’d already cast on it. So I politely declined the servant’s offer.

“Thank you, but I’ll refrain from now. I’ll enjoy it later, after the battle’s over.”

“U-Understood.”

As the servant backed away, the other werewolves once again came up with outlandish reasons for my refusal.

“I can’t believe it, Veight plans to end this in one go.”

“Knowing the boss, he might take down all two thousand humans by himself.”

Seriously, guys, that’s not it! No one understands my suffering.

Once I was done eating, I borrowed Shatina’s father’s armor and cape. The cape had Zaria’s crest embroidered into it, so it served as a symbol of the viceroy’s status. Honestly, I wasn’t sure I deserved to borrow something this important.

“Are you sure I can wear this Shatina? Isn’t it important to you?”

Shatina gave me a determined look and said, “I want you to get revenge for my father while wearing his crest. Show those cold-hearted men of Meraldia Zaria’s pride and anger.”

“Well if that’s what you want, then I’ll strike fear into those Meraldian mongrels’ hearts!” I said without thinking. I regretted a second later as I realized how much more pressure that put on me.

After I finished my preparations I went out to the wasteland north of the city and started stretching. As I stretched, I methodically applied strengthening magic to my muscles. Each muscle possessed different amounts of stamina and force, so I needed to customize the amount of mana I applied to each. While strengthening myself this way took much longer than just applying strengthening wholesale to large swathes of my body, it lowered the strain on my joints and bones, and also reduced the amount of stamina I consumed while fighting. I never thought health class and all those biology documentaries I watched back on Earth would come in handy here. Lend me your strength, soleus muscle, trapezius muscle.

Before long, I spotted Meraldia’s army crest on the faraway hills. At a glance, they certainly did seem 2,000 strong. And while 2,000 seemed a daunting number, it was easier to visualize if I just imagined them filling twenty 100-person-capacity storage rooms. In truth, all 2,000 of them barely filled one corner of the wasteland.

Trailing behind the soldiers was a small group of huge, lumbering wagons. I could see pieces of wood sticking out from them. It seemed they brought the catapults in parts that were easily assembled on-site. The catapults of this world were all loaded using manpower and used ropes to launch their arms. *Back on Earth these would be classified as man... What was the word again? Mandrills? Mandarins? No, that doesn't sound quite right.*

At any rate, they were similar to that form of catapult. I'd seen similar designs in classic war games. Since these were designed to be built on-site, they weren't very mobile once assembled. If they were erected on the wrong spot, they became effectively useless. And if one wanted to take it down and rebuild it somewhere else, they had to reload all the parts into wagons and move to the new site, all while taking enemy fire. In general, it was more trouble than it was worth. Of course, all of this knowledge was something I learned from a game, so it might have been wrong, but from what I could tell this world's catapults weren't too different from medieval Earth's.

I was hoping to take advantage of those catapults' weakness. *Now then, let the battle begin. I think I'll make use of the rumors you've been spreading about me, Meraldia.*

"Veight, the Killer of four hundred!"

"Veight the Destroyer!"

"The Bane of Schverm!"

"The werewolf who ripped apart the Hero!"

"The Demon Lord's right-hand man!"

"The Terror of the Seas!"

Those were all the nicknames I'd heard other people refer to me by. Each and every one of them sounded terrifying. Which meant that once the advancing Meraldian army realized I was here, they'd hesitate. Meaning just standing here was already a somewhat effective strategy. My primary goal was to prevent the catapults from getting too close. If I forced Meraldia to deploy them far away, they'd be useless.

While I imagined the infantry had been brought to occupy Zaria, they'd likely

stick to defending the catapults at first. None of them wanted to die in the infamous labyrinth city. Chances were they'd hold off on the main assault until the city was in ruins. In which case, if I pulled this off, I'd be able to keep the entire army at bay for a while longer. Of course, our opponents were no fools; I'd need more than just my infamy to keep them from closing in.

In order to confuse them, I cast the Phantom Mist spell I'd prepared beforehand. This was a spell that combined illusion magic and strengthening magic, and summoned a fog around the caster. The fog's primary purpose was to make its caster difficult to see, and thus difficult to target with ranged attacks. That alone would be vital for the upcoming battle, but that wasn't the reason I cast it.

For whatever reason, whenever I cast this spell, it wreathed me in illusory flames instead of a fog. While the fake fire did a decent job of hiding me as well, it was far too flashy to be as effective as fog would. According to Master, the reason I summoned flames instead of fog was because I was still inexperienced with illusion magic. Though it irked me, she was probably right.

Still, I was grateful for my defective version of the spell right now. Because now, the Meraldian army was staring down a jet-black werewolf clad in a viceroy's armor and surrounded by purple flames. I looked like an evil overlord. *My appearance, combined with my reputation, should be enough to scare Meraldia's troops a little.* Honestly, when I'd tested this spell out in front of the mirror I'd terrified even myself, so there was no doubt it'd work on humans. Though it was possible they wouldn't be as scared because of how far away they were. Two thousand troops was a terrifying number to face on your own, but if I could scare them even more than they scared me, it'd be my win. This was a game of chicken.

Steeling my resolve, I poured mana into my vocal cords. I was using strengthening magic that amplified my voice. Once I'd boosted my voice to max volume, I said in the most villainous voice I could muster, "Bwahahahaha! What are those pathetic toys you've brought with you? Do you really believe you can conquer the great labyrinth city of Zaria with such trifles? Especially knowing that it is under my, the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander Veight's, protection?"

The Meraldian army halted their advance, their formation wavering. I'd

shaken them more than I'd expected. *Maybe their morale wasn't all that high to begin with?* A gust of wind caused my cape to flutter imposingly, and I sneered at the terrified soldiers.

"Dogs of the Senate, you made a mistake in coming here!"

My magically enhanced hearing picked up a few cries of "Shut up, demon!" and "So what if you've killed four thousand!?" From this distance, even my enhanced hearing could only pick up shouts, so if they were muttering other things, I couldn't tell. *So I've been upgraded from killer of 400 to killer of 4,000? You guys really need to stop upping the numbers every time.* But since they were kind enough to exaggerate my achievements, I decided to roll with it.

"Do you truly believe a mere two thousand soldiers are a match for my power? Foolish mortals!"

Though I sounded confident, I was inwardly terrified they'd start lobbing arrows at me any minute. While I had cast deflection magic on myself, if they fired an entire volley I'd need to guard with more than that. Fortunately, no one shot at me. *Guess I should keep going for as long as I can.*

"You curs have neither strength, nor cause! You are nothing more than maggots crawling through the dirt!"

In response I heard a few shouts of "Our cause is justice!" and "Don't listen to him! We came here to liberate Zaria!" I wasn't certain, but it sounded like the commanding officers who were shouting back. *Oh don't worry, I'm not done yet.*

"Listen well! Your cowardly Senate assassinated Zaria's viceroy, the noble Lord Melgio! Not only that, they even attempted to assassinate his daughter, the young Lady Shatina! Your treachery will not go unpunished!"

My voice grew louder as anger welled up within me. This wasn't part of the act anymore, I really was going to make these bastards pay for what they'd done. My words seemed to cause a stir among Meraldia's troops.

"It can't be!"

"The Senate assassinated Zaria's viceroy!?"

“Commander, is this true!?”

I’d expected that reaction. There was no way the Senate would have told their rank and file soldiers what dirty deeds they’d ordered behind the scenes. Once the soldiers realized their cause wasn’t just, their morale would plummet. Which was why I needed to take advantage of this opportunity.

“You refuse to believe me? Very well then, perhaps you will believe Lady Shatina!”

Shatina stood up on the roof of a nearby building and shouted at the top of her lungs. I’d cast the same vocal chord strengthening magic on her earlier, so it carried loud and clear.

“I am Shatina Stahl, daughter of Zaria’s viceroy, Melgio Yewm Stahl! Sir Veight spoke true! The loyal viceroy of Zaria, Lord Melgio, died at the hands of Senate assassins!”

Most of the soldiers should have been able to tell that that was Shatina’s voice. As the daughter of a viceroy, she’d often made public appearances to strengthen her and her father’s position.

She continued her speech, her voice trembling with anger, “My father devoted his life to bringing peace and prosperity to Meraldia, and he was rewarded with an assassin’s dagger! I will never forget this injustice for as long as I live! I swear here and now to eradicate every last one of you northerners! Your souls will be my offering to my late father!”

I get that you’re mad, but you really shouldn’t swear vengeance on an entire people. If Shatina was planning on inheriting the position of viceroy, she’d need to learn to act with prudence. *I’ll give her a lecture on that later. For now, let’s see what else she’s got to say.*

“As my father’s successor, I hereby declare independence from the Meraldian Federation! From this moment forth, Zaria will be allied with the demon army! Together with the Vice-Commander Veight, the demon army’s strongest general, I shall massacre you all!”

Though she was Melgio’s daughter, naming herself his successor without the Senate’s permission was an act of treason. Declaring independence on top of

that was paramount to a proclamation of war. The fact that she was willing to go that far proved just how angry she was. But at this rate, there was no telling what she'd say next. I'd really prefer it if she stopped there. Fortunately, it seemed my prayers were heard, as Shatina said nothing more. She was a real handful, that girl. *Now then, it's my turn.*

"Cowardly dogs of the Senate, prepare to die! Even if you beg for mercy I will not spare a single one of you!"

More like, I wouldn't even hear you if you beg for mercy. Even now, I was preparing to flee. Despite all my big talk, 2,000 men was way more than I could handle alone. Fortunately, it seemed Shatina's speech had been effective. The Meraldian soldiers were wavering. As I'd suspected, their morale hadn't been too high to begin with.

In truth, I'd had good reason to believe this army hadn't been too eager to fight. Complex pieces of machinery such as assemblable catapults needed skilled engineers to operate them. Scholars versed in construction and ballistics. Of course, those weren't formal fields of study in this world, so that knowledge was passed down between craftsmen, but the point remained. The engineers in charge of these catapults weren't fighters. Since the Meraldian Unification War, siege weapons hadn't been used at all, so while men were technically soldiers, they had no combat experience.

Naturally, they held drills and occasionally did demonstrations during military parades, but that was all. Being hit with the brunt of Shatina's righteous anger was more than enough to rattle them, regardless of whether or not they believed her.

Though the engineers in charge of the catapults remained rooted in place, the archers began to advance. For them, their superiors' orders were more important than whether or not their cause was just. These guys were professionals. Mere words wouldn't faze them. I strained my ears, waiting for the command to open fire. Archer squads were trained to fire in unison, so I only needed to draw out my full strength the moment they loosed.

"Fire!"

The moment I heard that word I cast all of the strengthening magic at my

disposal on myself. I raised my perception and reflexes to the maximum while hardening my fur as much as possible.

A torrent of arrows descended upon me. Because of how far I was from the archers, they'd had to angle their shots upwards to reach me. But while firing at an angle increased an archer's range, it decreased their accuracy. Only a tiny fraction of the archers' volley actually reached me.

"Futile!" I shouted, and swept aside the few arrows headed for me. A werewolf's kinetic vision could easily track an arrow in flight, especially when it had been shot at an angle. But while I'd weathered the first wave, the archers weren't done. They launched a second, which I desperately fended off as well. Arrows were a werewolf's worst nightmare.

"Bwahahaha! Shoot all you wish, but you won't be able to hurt me!"

For all my grandstanding, I knew if they kept this up I'd be in trouble. Fortunately, seeing me weather two volleys unscathed had shaken the archers. They stopped firing. In the lull that followed I surveyed my surroundings. The Earth around me had been turned into a pincushion. Archers were most effective when they were raining arrows into a large force. In that respect, these archers were quite skilled. However, none of them were trained in sniping a lone werewolf at the very edge of their effective range.

Terrified of me, the archers retreated. Going by standard theory the spearmen should have charged next, but they didn't. They seemed rather wary. Not of me, but of the city behind me.

Because of how tall all of Zaria's buildings were, their rooftops made for perfect platforms to position archers on. I was standing only a hundred or so meters in front of Zaria's northernmost buildings. More than close enough for the archers standing atop them to cover me if the spearmen charged.

On the other hand, Meraldia's archers would need to get past me in order to reach the rooftops with their arrows. Naturally, that was impossible. Which meant if the spearmen charged now, they'd be running headlong into a hail of arrows without any supporting fire to cover them. On top of that, they'd still have to contend with me. That wasn't the kind of situation they were eager to throw themselves into.

In truth, Zaria had few troops left in fighting condition. But since we'd killed all of the assassins, the Meraldian army didn't know that. In the following silence, I was able to make out the voices of soldiers arguing with each other. Though I couldn't make out all of the words, it seemed the commanders of the spearmen, the archers, and the engineers were quarreling. My guess was the spearmen's commander was angry that the engineers hadn't started bombarding the city like they were supposed to. In my infinite benevolence, I decided to wait for them to finish bickering.

Finally, the spearmen got into formation and held up their shields. That wasn't a charging formation, but a defensive one. Archers covered them on both flanks, ready to intercept any attack. Behind them, the engineers started unloading their wagons and began assembling the catapults.

The engineers were setting up the catapults quite far from the city. While at that distance Zaria's archers couldn't reach them, their own catapults would barely be in range. If they used lighter stones they might just manage to hit Zaria's northernmost buildings. *Perfect, just what I was hoping you'd do.*

From the looks of it, assembling the catapults would take more time than I'd initially expected. The engineers needed to drive stakes into the ground and fix various pieces in place. *Wait, don't tell me this is going to take another hour...* The longer they took the better it was for us, but I was beginning to get a little bored. *Ah well, maybe I'll provoke them some more.* Now that they'd decided on the location of their catapults, the Meraldian army couldn't move until they were built. So I'd be fine no matter what I said. Probably.

"Puny humans. I suggest you do not keep me waiting."

I was just spouting whatever clichéd lines came to mind, but the moment I said that, the spearmen instantly leveled their spearheads at me. It seemed they really thought I might charge them alone. I couldn't help but laugh at their excessive caution.

"Hahaha..."

Crap, I'm still using voice amplification magic. However, it seemed the soldiers interpreted my chuckling as derisive laughter. The spearmen faltered, and their commander started shouting at them, telling them about how high the bounty

was on my head, and how proud Meraldian warriors didn't flinch in the face of the enemy. But no matter what he said, no one stepped forward. At this point the soldiers doubted the Senate would even pay a bounty, considering they'd ordered the assassination of a viceroy. And of course, there was nothing to be proud of in serving an employer who would do something like that.

To my surprise, the engineers finished assembling the catapults faster than I expected. As they began loading stones into the baskets, I thought back to the time I'd been launched by a catapult. Thanks to that experience, I had a better grasp of ballistics now. *I'm sure I can handle a few catapults no problem.*

There were eight catapults in total, and it took two hundred men to operate them. Because of the huge distance between them and their target, the engineers could only load the catapults with light stones. Heavier ones wouldn't reach the buildings.

The head engineer gave the order, and the eight catapults launched their payload. Or rather, seven of them did. One of them appeared to have misfired. That one's stone flew only a short distance through the air before landing among the infantry. *I knew it, these guys are inexperienced. Stopping shots like these'll be a piece of cake.*

I backed up a few steps and observed the trajectory of the incoming stones. From what I could tell, five wouldn't even reach Zaria. Of the remaining two, I decided to deal with the one with the more accurate trajectory first. Using my magic-enhanced muscles, I jumped as high as I could. A normal werewolf could easily jump three stories high. With my magic, I jumped higher than a five-story building.

I soared through the air, heading straight for the rock. While it would be cool to punch right through the stone, that would also hurt. All I needed to do was make sure the stone didn't hit any buildings, so I decided to knock it to the ground instead. I put my weight behind a powerful roundhouse kick and knocked the stone away. *You're not reaching Zaria on my watch.*

I landed elegantly, striking a pose as I did so. *I kinda feel like I've become an action game character. Anyway, time for some more taunts.*

"Is this the best human weaponry can do? Pathetic."

In response, the engineers fired a second wave of stones. This time only four catapults fired. It appeared they were planning on launching alternating shots, four at a time. This volley was more accurate than the last. But the stones were also lighter than before. I could tell because their trajectories were different.

However, I only needed to stop any shots that would reach any of the buildings' upper floors. Because it was only the upper stories that were made of brittle brick. All of the buildings' lower floors were made of sturdy stone. Both so they could support the upper floors, and so that they wouldn't get damaged during any fighting that occurred in the city. They wouldn't break easily.

I leapt into the air and caught another stone, which I summarily threw onto the ground. The rest wouldn't hit anything fragile, so I left them alone. *I know I'm buffing myself with magic, but this is still easier than I thought it'd be.* Perhaps I was being a little overconfident, but this was easy as playing catch. The stones Meraldia had fired this time were about as light as Airia. As for how many kilograms that was, I tried not to think about it, for her sake. *Whoops, almost forgot to throw in some more taunts.*

"Do you truly believe such puny pebbles will be able to topple the legendary city of Zaria?"

Naturally, the only response was a third wave of stones. *These guys sure are persistent.* Fortunately, I was getting better at reading trajectories with each successive wave.

While a catapult had a lot of power, it wasn't stronger than a werewolf buffed with strengthening magic. *You know, if I used both legs I might be able to kick these back at the enemy instead of straight down.* I raised both feet and kicked diagonally down at the next stone I needed to deflect, executing a perfect dropkick. A dropkick was the best choice to utilize all the strength in my muscles. As I applied pressure on the stone I also cast another strengthening spell, Power Burst. This spell momentarily raised my strength exponentially, but because its duration was so short, it was difficult to utilize effectively in a fight.

"You can have this one back!"

My boosted dropkick sent the stone flying back to the Meraldian army. *Please reach...* I somersaulted backwards to absorb the recoil of my kick and landed on

my feet. The stone I'd kicked away crashed among the spearmen's front ranks. Men shouted in surprise and the unit's formation grew disordered.

It seemed no one had been careless enough to get hit, but the spearmen seemed to be yelling something still. From what I could make it out, it seemed they were telling the engineers to stop firing. First they wanted the catapults firing, now they didn't. Those spearmen sure were a temperamental bunch. Of course, I had no intention of letting this chance slip past.

"Is this the extent of your power? Your pathetic display has left my warriors bored!"

I raised a fist, and the werewolves I'd had hide on the roofs all rose to their feet. At least, I hoped they did. I couldn't see, since I was facing away from them, but I imagined they did as we'd rehearsed. Like me, they were all wearing capes with Zaria's emblem emblazoned on them.

If it came down to it, I'd planned on having them throw those capes at the oncoming rocks to deflect them. Most of Zaria's citizens had evacuated to the lower floors of the southern buildings. If any stones had managed to fly that far, my werewolves would have needed to stop them with those capes. But since they hadn't, they were wearing them instead. Thanks to that, they looked even more imposing than usual. After the werewolves rose, Zaria's soldiers raised all of the flags Shatina had been able to find. Smiling confidently, I shouted, "Come, throw as many stones as you wish. But once you've had your fun, know that it will be our turn. When that time comes, I hope you're as willing to provide us your flesh as you are your stone. Mwahahahaha!"

It was true that werewolves loved flesh. But we preferred our meat drained of blood and properly cooked, not raw.

In the end, the Meraldian army decided to stop firing their catapults. *I kind of wish they'd fired another wave. I would've made sure to hit someone with the next stone I deflected. Well, I guess that's exactly why they stopped.* But now the Meraldian army was out of options. Because they'd set up their catapults too far back, they were of little use. And even if their shots did reach the city, I'd just send them right back. However, invading the city while it was still intact would lead to massive casualties. In truth, the Meraldian army still held an

overwhelming advantage, but they didn't realize that.

The soldiers' formation began to break down. The archers on the flanks started to back away. While the spearmen were still holding their ground, their shields were trembling. And while they maintained formation, they were clearly beginning to panic.

"We marched toward Zaria, and as ordered attempted to wear down the city with stones and arrows before invading. However, our strategy was rendered ineffective because one of the demon army's werewolves repelled our ranged attacks. Due to that, we deemed the plan a failure and judged it impossible to successfully conquer Zaria."

If the soldiers gave a report of that nature to the Senate, they likely wouldn't be punished for their failure. And it was for that reason I believed they'd retreat. Most of the rank and file soldiers were already on the verge of deserting. Though their commanders were shouting at them to show some grit, it was too late. Finally, one of the officers seemed to get fed up with his men, and rode out alone toward Zaria. He was a knight clad in thick armor, and he had a massive greatsword strapped to his back.

"Whoa, look at that sword! Could he be—"

"It's Sir Volsaav! The great demon hunter!"

Judging by the excited shouts coming from the Meraldian soldiers, this guy was famous. The knight unsheathed his greatsword and lifted it high above his head.

"My name is Volsaav, Hundred-Man-Commander of the Meraldian regular army!"

That's not really an impressive rank... Most of the army's higher-ranked generals were wizened old men, so the only people you saw demanding single combat were middle-ranking officers like these.

"Don't, you'll only be throwing your life away."

I'd planned to mutter that under my breath, but I ended up saying it loud enough for everyone to hear. *I'm pretty sure there's a way to temporarily turn off my voice amplification, but I can't remember it anymore.* Volsaav's face was

covered by his helmet so I couldn't make out his expression, but his tone was furious.

"You mongrel, who do you think I am!? I'm Volsaav the Boar Slayer!"

"Never heard of you..."

That wasn't meant to be an insult. I just really hadn't heard of him. I wasn't very good at conversing with humans I didn't know, so I decided to appeal to the whole army instead.

"If this is the strongest warrior you have, you might want to send a few more people to fight me."

"How dare you! I am the Master Fencer Volsaav, the man who placed first in both Wilheim and Aryoug's tourneys! Even you ignorant southern savages must have heard of me!"

I mean there's no internet or TV here, so it's kind of hard for news to spread. This guy looked like he wouldn't quit no matter how many times I told him I didn't know him, so I decided to change the topic.

"Foolish human, you've grown drunk on your meager successes. But you have no hope of besting me. Go home."

Volsaav really would just be throwing his life away if he fought me, so I'd prefer it if he gave up. Unfortunately, I still had to keep up the merciless werewolf act, so my warning came out more as a taunt. As I feared, Volsaav didn't like that. He dismounted his horse and held his sword close to his chest.

"As a soldier of Meraldia, I challenge you to a duel!"

Honestly, I didn't want to fight him, but I was a demon army general. I couldn't refuse. However, I could try warning him one last time.

"Do you believe yourself more powerful than a catapult?"

"Wha!?"

I was trying to subtly hint that he should reconsider, but thanks to the persona I was acting out, my message didn't get across. Enraged, Volsaav charged forward.

“My sword has cleaved wildeboars in two, a werewolf like you is no match for it! Die!”

Werewolf children hunted wildeboars for fun, the two weren’t even comparable. While it was impressive that a human had managed to defeat one with just a sword, that wouldn’t be enough to take out a werewolf. That being said, I couldn’t just ignore him. He’d challenged me to a duel in front of my men, and I was the commander of this battle. Mercy on the battlefield was a luxury I couldn’t afford.

“Know that I did warn you.”

I brushed aside Volsaav’s swing and thrust my claws into his head. I punched through his helmet with ease, and chunks of it flew through the sky along with his flesh. I then ripped his head off, and Volsaav’s corpse fell to the ground. The battlefield fell silent. Though he’d brought it upon himself, killing him still left a bad taste in my mouth.

“Who wishes to die next?”

I took a step forward and the line of spearmen took a step back. The Meraldian army’s morale had hit rock bottom. Neither arrows nor stones had worked on me. And if the army tried to charge, they’d have to contend with both a hail of arrows, and my werewolves. The one knight with the courage to challenge me to a duel had been beheaded in one slice. Right now, the Meraldian soldiers were probably terrified.

In reality, if they pushed forward with their army of 2000, I’d be crushed in a heartbeat. However, the first few dozen men to attack me would, without a doubt, die. No one wanted to be part of that first wave. Not with morale the way it was. Of course, I was pretty scared of an army this big myself, but if I wanted to come out of this safely I needed to act brave. I flashed the soldiers a feral grin and howled, “I ask you again. Who wishes to die next?”

I continued marching forward, as if the mass of 2000 infantry didn’t intimidate me at all. Seeing my reckless actions, my werewolves began howling.

“Oi, Veight, what the hell are you doing!?”

“Stop! Get back here right now, Veight!”

“The boss is trying to charge in alone, someone stop him!”

“Dammit, we’ve gotta follow him, guys!”

“Aye!”

My comrades cursed my foolishness as they reluctantly followed after me. But while I could tell what they were saying, humans couldn’t understand the howls of werewolves. To the Meraldian army, it sounded like my men were eager for blood. My battalion of werewolves arrayed themselves behind me, their capes fluttering in the breeze.

“Boss, are you seriously planning on charging all of them!?”

“I know you’re strong, Veight, but this is madness! We’ve gotta turn back!”

“Wait, look. The enemy’s retreating!”

“How’s this possible?”

God, you guys are so noisy.

“You guys, get back! It’s too dangerous to come with me!”

Unfortunately, it seemed no one wanted to listen to me.

“If it’s dangerous, then that’s all the more reason we can’t let you go alone, boss!”

“Hey Veight, didn’t you *just* tell me you wouldn’t charge in alone? Well?”

“When will you realize a commander can’t just rush in recklessly like this!?”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to put yourself in danger!? I hope you’re ready for a scolding when this is over!”

Me and my big mouth.

Fortunately, from Meraldia’s perspective, it appeared as though a knot of 50 werewolves were howling battle cries as they steadily advanced. The soldiers’ morale was already as low as it could get, and the thought of facing a battalion of werewolves terrified them.

“Th-These guys are monsters!” came a shout. That shout signaled the collapse of the Meraldian army.

“The devil of Ryunheit’s coming for us! Run!”

“Th-This isn’t what I signed up for!”

“As long as that monster’s guarding the city, we can’t capture it!”

The archers on the flanks slung their bows and started sprinting away from us. As for the engineers, they’d already abandoned their catapults and were running as fast as their legs would take them. At this point, there was no reason for the spearmen to hold their position. They no longer had ranged support to bolster their formation.

“Get back here you cowardly archers! Dammit! Drummer, signal the retreat! Have the spearmen fall back!”

The commander of the spearmen ordered a retreat, and the drummer beat out a steady rhythm. Now that an official order to retreat had been given, the spearmen had no reason to fight. They threw down their spears and shields and beat a hasty retreat. The faster they could run, the safer they’d be. Which was why they dumped all their heavy equipment like weapons and shields.

“Everyone, run! Now!”

“Retreat! Retreeeeat!”

“Waaaaaaah!”

The spearmen wearing full sets of armor started to panic. Even from this distance, I could tell they were way slower than their lightly armored counterparts. Hamaam walked over to me and casually asked, “Should we give chase, vice-commander?”

I smiled mischievously at him and replied, “There’s no need to waste our energy. If we let them return alive, they’ll spread more tales of our terrifying might.”

“Understood.”

I continued approaching the Meraldian troops at a brisk walk, and they scattered in every direction. *Aren’t you guys a little too scared of me?* They were running away twice as fast as they’d marched here. After the last soldier vanished beyond the distant hills, I stopped and scratched my head.

“That was honestly kind of a letdown.”

The werewolves around me grinned. *Must be nice to be so easygoing.* Had we actually fought, most of them would have died. It’s only thanks to the fact that they ran that we ended this with zero casualties. I doubted we’d be so lucky next time, but at least I managed to buy us some time. It’d be a problem if they found their nerve and returned to fight, so I decided to make that a bit harder.

“Since the enemy was kind enough to gift us all these weapons, it’d be a waste to let them rot. Collect everything, including the catapults. Dismantle them and bring them into Zaria. If it turns out they’re too hard to disassemble, smash them up.”

“Leave the catapults to my squad, boss.”

Jerrick the blacksmith walked up to me. All the people in his squad were either blacksmiths, stonemasons, or carpenters. They were definitely best-suited to handling machinery. *In the meantime, I should probably bury that knight. Hm? Wait a second, I can feel some mana coming from his sword. It’s not a lot, but his sword’s definitely enchanted.* Normally a mere hundred-man-commander shouldn’t have had an enchanted sword. Curious, I decided to investigate.

Upon returning to Zaria, I gave back Shatina’s father’s armor.

“Your father’s armor protected me. It was this armor that chased away Meraldia’s forces.”

I was exaggerating somewhat, but I wanted Shatina to feel proud. Seeing as tears were welling up in her eyes, my plan must have worked.

“Thank you, Sir Veight. I...”

She trailed off, at a loss for words. I could tell she was trying to say something proper and viceroy-like, so I gently patted her head.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to force yourself to act dignified.”

Shatina hung her head, clutched her father’s armor, and started sobbing.

Once she’d calmed down, we worked together with the city’s garrison to complete the arduous task of rooting out all the spies hidden in Zaria. While the

fake official I'd beaten up had told us everything he knew, it was possible there were other teams he hadn't informed us of. As I'd thought, we found a few other suspicious soldiers the official hadn't informed us about. We threw them all in jail and left interrogating them to the city's troops. While we were running about the city, someone snuck into the official's cell and poisoned him. My guess was one of his own comrades had killed him to keep him from spilling any more secrets. He deserved the death he got, but I wish I'd been able to interrogate him some more before he was killed.

"That traitor! He betrayed the trust my father placed in him when he appointed him to that post! I wish I'd been able to slit his throat with my own two hands!" Shatina shouted, her eyes burning with hatred. I quietly warned her, "I suspect he was working for the Senate to begin with, so in that respect, you can't exactly call him a traitor. Besides, you have more important matters to attend to than personally dispatching every single underling involved in your father's death. Don't forget, your real enemy is the Senate."

"Yet..."

"If you get too heated up, you'll only end up hurting yourself."

At that, my werewolves gave me an incredulous look.

"I don't think you've got any right to say that, boss..."

"You're the most hot-blooded soldier in the demon army."

"No one else charges enemy armies alone like that."

I turned back to Shatina with a rueful smile.

"See what I mean? This is what I get for being too hot-blooded. I work myself to the bone for these guys and they just complain."

At that, Shatina chuckled. She'd been looking down since the battle ended, so I was glad she was regaining her vigor. After she got her laughter under control Shatina glared reproachfully at me.

"Sir Veight, that was just mean."

"First I'm too hot-blooded, now I'm mean? I just can't catch a break, huh? No matter, right now we need to focus on restructuring Zaria's defenses."

Just as I said that, one of Zaria's soldiers ran up to Shatina.

"There's another army approaching us from the east, my lord! This one's comprised entirely of cavalry and is almost a thousand strong!"

"A thousand!?"

Shatina began to panic.

"Wh-What is their affiliation!?"

"They're flying Meraldia's flag, my lord!"

Shit, are we gonna have to fight another army? Before I could give out any orders, Airia returned and clarified the situation.

"It's true that they're flying Meraldia's flags, but the soldiers are also flying Shardier and Veira's flags as well. At least one portion of that army belongs to Shardier."

"I suppose that means Aram's negotiations were a success."

I was thinking of sending a scout to observe the situation for a while longer just in case, but then another messenger burst into the room.

"Veira's viceroy and Shardier's viceroy have sent reinforcements! Veira has sent us six hundred cavalry, while Shardier has brought two hundred horse archers!"

Looks like I won't have to play volleyball with another round of catapults after all.

I welcomed the allied Veira-Shardier army into Zaria without incident. With this, we were safe for now. Shatina and Airia were currently talking to the two viceroys who'd come with the army. I waited until the customary pleasantries and condolences were likely over with, then hurried over to the audience hall.

"My apologies for arriving late, ladies and gentlemen."

"It's been a long time, Sir Veight."

Aram didn't look too different from when I'd last seen him, but he had lost some weight. *He must be having it rough.* Veira's viceroy appeared to be a young man in his late twenties. He was both handsome and tall, and his

intricately patterned armor complimented his figure. However, when he spoke, his voice surprised me.

“My, what a pleasure it is to make your acquaintance.”

It sounded surprisingly feminine. But at the same time, there was a depth to his voice. He seemed unconcerned by my reaction and casually introduced himself.

“I am Forne Fom Foenheim, Viceroy of the city of beauty and craftsmanship, Veira. It is an honor to meet you.”

There were so many fos in his name that all I heard was fofofo. Also, his speech style didn’t match his appearance at all. A little put off, I nonetheless courteously returned his greeting.

“Nice to meet you. I am the Demon Lord Gomoviroa’s Vice-Commander, Veight.”

Now that the demon army has begun to interact more with humans, we decided that we would make the position of Demon Lord hereditary. For that reason, we’d begun referring to the Demon Lord as Demon Lord Gomoviroa when speaking about her to other people. In doing so, we reinforced the idea that even after she retired there’d be someone else after her to inherit the title. It was a message to other humans that no matter how many Demon Lords they killed, there’d always be another to take their place.

Fortunately, since the old Demon Lord had been quite secretive, we’d never publicly referred to him as Demon Lord Friedensrichter. Furthermore, he’d had almost no contact with humans. Thanks to that, most humans were unaware that a Demon Lord by the name of Friedensrichter had ever existed. Nor were they aware that the current Demon Lord had inherited her position. I was planning on eventually recording Friedensrichter’s name in history books, but for now his existence was being kept secret.

That aside, this effeminate viceroy had quite the presence. However, it wasn’t fair to judge him based on first impressions, and regardless courtesy was a virtue.

“It’s an honor to meet the viceroy of the famous city of craftsmen. You have

my deepest gratitude for coming to Zaria's aid."

Forne's expression clouded over when I mentioned Zaria.

"When Lord Aram told me that Lord Melgio was in peril, I rushed over as quickly as I could. However, I was unable to make it in time. You have my humblest apologies. 'Tis a shame Veira's beautiful honor guard missed their time to shine."

"This is an honor guard?"

From what I could tell, they were just regular knights. While it was true their equipment, from their armor to their harnesses, looked needlessly flashy, their weapons seemed anything but ceremonial. Furthermore, the troops looked seasoned. It was hard to believe they just stood and looked important all day. In fact, they seemed the best-equipped unit I'd seen out of any of the human armies. They were also the unit that best matched my mental image of medieval knights. Seeing my confusion, Aram smiled knowingly.

"Veira is only officially allowed a garrison of two hundred men, but they have recruited hundreds more by claiming the rest are a ceremonial honor guard. They sometimes hire out their extra forces to cities who need them."

And Meraldia lets them get away with that? Forne smiled and added, "By allowing Veira's elegant honor guard to perform parades at ceremonies, Meraldia can advertise their magnanimity. Furthermore, it is Veira which designs the Meraldian nobles' crests, mansions, and clothes."

I see now, they can't afford to anger Veira because of how important it is culturally. No wonder they let the city get away with having a few hundred extra soldiers. In the aftermath of the Meraldian Unification War, Veira opened its doors to all displaced artists and craftsmen, and offered them the workshops and studios they needed to do their work. As a result, famous craftsmen from every trade migrated to Veira after the war. Once he finished explaining all that, Forne smiled.

"While our proximity to the north means the threat of war is always looming, it also means we can attract capable personnel as well. At the very least, that was how the viceroy before last saw it."

Looks like Veira's citizens are pretty hardy too. I needed to make sure Forne understood us demons weren't just a hodgepodge of barbaric monsters.

"While the demon army is a coalition of demons, naturally we also value human culture and art. I would be glad if we could take this opportunity to learn about each other's customs."

Demon societies had plenty of culture of their own, like the canines' silverwork. *I'm sure there's something humans can learn from our culture, too.* Forne looked me over.

"I'd heard you were a butcher of a werewolf who'd slaughtered four hundred soldiers and ripped apart the Hero with your fangs. To be honest, I was expecting someone far more... ferocious. However, you're surprisingly agreeable, and handsome to boot."

Handsome? I was just a simple country boy who'd come from the forest. Forne paced around me in a circle, appraising my outfit and posture.

"Quite handsome indeed... Leaving your looks hidden behind obscurity would be an utter shame. You should make public appearances more often, as a way of advertising the demon army."

Who does this guy think he is, spouting all this crap? He barely even knows me! My feelings must have shown on my face as Forne smiled apologetically and waved his hand.

"Oh my, how rude of me. My apologies, my job is to sell works of art such as yourself, so whenever I find a worthy specimen, I tend to get ahead of myself."

I sarcastically bit back, "Is it also your job to tell plain-looking boring men that they're agreeable and handsome?"

Forne nodded with a grin.

"Yes, yes indeed! You'll make for a wonderful verbal sparring partner."

Nothing fazes this guy, huh?

"A skilled diplomat must be capable of selling not only art, but also talented personnel. Why do you think I converse in such an exaggerated manner? As the leader of the most artistic city on the continent, I must leave a lasting

impression on those I meet, no?”

So it’s like how a comedian creates a persona. Though I had a feeling his particular persona wasn’t the best choice. Personally, when someone mentioned the words “effeminate man” I thought of those burly dudes who enjoyed cross-dressing and were far more intelligent than their appearance suggested. But in this world, it seemed no such stereotype existed. In a way, Forne seemed to have transcended gender. Either way, we were both men who were forced to create a persona because of our respective positions, so I felt a kinship with Forne.

“As a fellow leader, I understand your struggle.”

“Ufufu, splendid.” Forne nodded to himself a few times. “If the demon army is willing to help Veira grow and prosper, then naturally Veira is more than willing to do the same for the demon army. As the city’s viceroy, I give you my solemn vow that we will repay kindness in kind.”

“You have my gratitude. I will do everything in my power to assist Veira’s growth and keep it and its culture safe.”

Though, uhh, could you tone down the high-pitched laughter? I didn’t bother asking him out loud since I knew he wouldn’t though. Forne responded with a smile, but a second later his expression clouded over.

“However, I suppose this means Veira’s art will only be appreciated by the southern half of the continent now.”

Oh, you were worried about that?

“Oh no, you’re free to continue exporting goods to the north even after declaring independence from Meraldia. My goal in allying with you is to protect your interests, not restrict them.”

“Huh!? Are you certain!?”

“If Veira stops supplying goods to the north, one of the northern cities will inevitably rise up to take its place. If that happens, Veira’s influence over the north will wane, and that would be bad for us as well.”

If the north began developing its own culture, it would weaken the influence

of Veira's. And that wasn't something the demon army wanted.

"The demon army wishes for Veira to remain the cultural center of all Meraldia. I know full well that sometimes art can be more powerful than swords."

Forne's eyes lit up in excitement.

"So you do understand! I see you are a man of culture as well! I am overjoyed that Veira's allies have such foresight!"

"Could you please let go of me?"

Being hugged by such a handsome and flamboyant man made me fear for my chastity. *Yep, culture's scary, alright.*



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—The Senate’s Clandestine Conversation—

“Let us begin this top secret meeting of Senate officials. Gentlemen, take your seats.”

“How did the Zaria operation fare?”

“Melgio has been dealt with. I’m sure that stubborn fool is regretting his decisions in the afterlife.”

“His daughter, Shatina, should be easy to control. Driving a wedge between her and the demon army will be no trouble at all.”

“Pinning the assassination of Melgio onto the demon army should be an easy enough task.”

“And if our assassins fail to effectively frame the demon army, then they simply have to erase Shatina as well. After all, it is the Senate who holds the power to appoint new viceroys. We have plenty of loyal puppets ready to take her place.”

“However, isn’t it possible that the citizens of Zaria might revolt and join the demon army?”

“It is, but we sent our army to the city to strengthen our hold on the city.”

“The fortress city Vongang’s catapults should have no trouble silencing Zaria’s residents should they choose to revolt.”

“Conquering a city that has no walls is child’s play.”

“Permission to take the floor? I’ve received a new report from the squad that infiltrated Zaria.”

“Splendid. What have they done with Shatina?”

“It would appear... the demon army successfully protected her from our assassins, and she escaped with her life intact. After receiving that report, our scouts lost contact with the spies we planted in the city.”

“What is the meaning of this!?”

“If she escaped, that means she is aware we orchestrated the attempt on her life.”

“But we dispatched over a hundred assassins to the city! How could our scouts have lost contact with all of them!?”

“It’s highly unlikely that they defected to the demon army. Meaning they were all...”

“Impossible!”

“Do not be so quick to dismiss the notion. The diplomat the demon army sent is that infamous werewolf.”

“His name is Veight, correct?”

“That werewolf is a heinous monster.”

“What are you all so afraid of? Our army has already departed for the city with catapults in tow. If Zaria has fallen into demon hands, we need simply raze it to the ground to set an example for the rest of the south.”

“Will conquering the city truly prove so simple if that werewolf is defending it?”

“I have already prepared countermeasures for him. I take it you gentlemen have heard of the Master Fencer Volsaav?”

“The man who uses that massive greatsword?”

“He was considered as one of the candidates for the Ranhart plan, was he not?”

“Correct. I bestowed upon him the enchanted sword Werewolfsbane. He has orders to hunt down the werewolf vice-commander if he sees him on the battlefield.”

“But Werewolfsbane is Krauhen’s viceroy’s prized heirloom. How did you convince him to loan it to you?”

“I didn’t. I used the Senate’s authority to requisition it from him.”

“Don’t you think that might have been... somewhat rash?”

“Whatever do you mean? Viceroys are servants of the Senate. It would not do

for them to forget that fact.”

“Hmph. Well, if things go well I suppose we can just return the sword once the battle is over. If necessary, we can confer an award onto the viceroy to smooth things over politically as well.”

“I bear urgent news!”

“What could possibly be so urgent that you need to interrupt this meeting!?”

“Our army failed to capture Zaria!”

“What!?”

“Unbelievable! I demand an explanation!”

“According to the report I received, a lone werewolf by the name of Veight repelled our forces. Supposedly neither catapults nor bows could harm him, and the army was forced to retreat.”

“Ridiculous! A mere messenger like you may not be aware of this, but werewolves are hunters by nature. They shouldn’t possess the strength to face an army of two thousand in a direct confrontation!”

“Yet...”

“Besides, what happened to Volsaav!? A man of his caliber should have been capable of besting any werewolf in single combat!”

“A-About that... Master Volsaav died in combat. He challenged Veight to a duel, but was slain in a single blow.”

“Incompetent bastard! Tell me you at least managed to recover his blade!”

“I’m afraid not. When the army retreated, they left most of their equipment behind, including the eight catapults. We believe the demon army recovered most of that equipment.”

“What a farce! Strip the commanders of their positions!”

“Calm yourself. Now is not the time to be punishing our allies. Our plan has splendidly backfired, and we need to formulate countermeasures.”

“You’re right. We must reorganize the army and prepare another campaign. Do we own any more catapults in working condition?”

“Of course not! How many decades do you think it’s been since the unification war?”

“Then I suppose we must conscript more soldiers from the northern cities.”

“You’re being unreasonable. The cities are still reeling from the demon army’s attack a few months ago. Those on the northwestern edge haven’t even finished reconstruction!”

“And Krauhen to the northeast will be unwilling to cooperate. Not only has the city grown more resentful towards us, but we’ve lost its viceroy’s heirloom. He will not be pleased to hear that.”

“Then we have no other choice. We must ask Veira and Shardier to organize a strike force.”

“Do you truly believe those two cities are still allied with us? Shardier at least has likely capitulated to the demon army.”

“Considering their past, I have no doubt Beluza and Lotz have rebelled against us as well.”

“We cannot trust any of the southern cities.”

“Then perhaps we should conjure up another patriotic hero. Not only will that raise morale, it will attract recruits and donations from all over.”

“Did you already forget how badly the Ranhart Project backfired on us?”

“Our citizens aren’t fools. The same strategy won’t work for another few years at least.”

“The demon who defeated Ranhart was the same werewolf, was it not? Why must he always get in our way?”

“Regardless, recruiting more soldiers will be difficult.”

“Perhaps we should tell the south about the Northern Peaks incident after all?”

“And then demand their cooperation? Don’t be ridiculous. We can’t afford to show any weakness to the south right now.”

“Just so. It’s possible informing them will galvanize them to invade, and we’ll

be pincered between then north and the south.”

“Any possibility of reconciliation vanished when we rose to the position of Senators. Regrettable though it is, it’s too late to undo our actions.”

“Then should we send a messenger across the Northern Peaks?”

“Wha-!? That would be tantamount to suicide!”

“Have you forgotten why our ancestors fled to this land!?”

“However, at this rate, all of the southern cities will fall into the demon army’s hands!”

“Still...”

“Now, now, let’s not jump to conclusions. For now, let us observe what actions the demon army takes next.”

“What for?”

“Think about it rationally. There is simply no way a band of uncivilized demons will be able to cooperate with humans.”

“You have a point. Not only are southerners stubborn, but they also reject authority. On the other hand, demons are prideful and violent. Their alliance cannot possibly hold.”

“Precisely. Given time the southerners will realize the error of their ways, and come crawling to us for help.”

“Of course, how did I not realize?”

“Once the demon army and the south’s alliance collapses, we can send our armies in. Not only will we be able to push back the demon army, we’ll be seen as liberators.”

“In which case, the south will be more willing to submit to our authority.”

“That being said, simply waiting for our enemies to self-destruct is foolhardy.”

“Then we should focus our efforts on eliminating that werewolf known as Veight as soon as possible. The spectre of his power has terrified our troops and rendered them useless.”

“This incident has made it clear he cannot be allowed to roam free.”

“But our plan to frame him for the viceroy’s assassination already ended in failure.”

“Then we should assassinate him directly... No, the assassins we sent out were already defeated...”

“What should we do?”

“Is there anything we *can* do?”

“Wait, if this man known as Veight is so intent on spreading his fame, he must be hungry for power.”

“And considering the fact that he tours the front lines with his men, he clearly hasn’t been granted much authority within the demon army.”

“You mean to say he’s been ostracized by his own lord?”

“I believe so. After all, the Meraldian Federation occasionally does the same with its own talented generals.”

“With how outstanding his achievements are, his superiors must be worried he’s aiming for their position.”

“Those that shine too brightly blind everyone around them. And those who stare at that light cast long, dark shadows.”

“The greater one’s ambitions, the easier they are to destroy.”

“Especially when they aren’t rewarded in proportion to their achievements.”

“I see now. We simply have to bait this werewolf to overextend himself, then let him fail of his own accord.”

“Quite. The bigger they are, the harder they fall, as the saying goes. If Veight falls, the demon army will suffer a serious blow.”

“In that case, let us concoct a plan to lure Veight to his doom.”

* * * *

In the following days, reinforcements continued to arrive.

“Firnir the Swift Gale, first of the requested reinforcements, has arrived!”

“Actually, beautiful, you’re the second to arrive.”

“Wh-Who’s this weird human!?”

Firnir shouted as she looked over at Forne. She’d come with a large contingent of her kentauros warriors.

“Arrr! Beluza’s raiding crew’s here to wreak havoc on your foes, boss!”

“The demon army’s imperial guard, the Azure Knights, reporting for duty! We will secure the perimeter at once!”

“Ah, Sir Veight! I brought the giants and canine combat engineers with me!”

“We brought stones with us, Lord Veight!”

A hodgepodge of soldiers had come from Ryunheit. While the immediate threat was gone, since they were here, I decided to have them help construct Zaria’s wall.

“Naturally, the labyrinth city would be incomplete without me, Parker the *Labyrinthine.* After all my title...”

I’m just gonna ignore this guy.

“Though, surprisingly, I wasn’t born in this city. Of course, when I was alive, Zaria looked nothing like this.”

I’m not listening, lalalala.

“Umm... Veight? I’ll summon seven hundred undead soldiers for you, so will you please stop ignoring me?”

“I’ll think about it if you can call up a few more.”

Once the city’s immediate defenses were seen to, we held Melgio’s funeral. Shatina’s memorial speech was so emotional that it scared some of the members in attendance, but that showed just how angry she was at his death. *Still, she needs to do something about that emotional streak of hers or she’ll get taken advantage of...* Forne promised to take care of mentoring Shatina, so after the funeral I left a few reserve troops in Zaria and returned to Ryunheit with Airia.

A few days later, Airia summoned all of the southern cities’ viceroys to

Ryunheit. The first to arrive was Thuvan's viceroy, Firnir.

"I can't do this anymore. Human society's too complicated for me... I should have never said I'd be viceroy..."

"If you're going to call yourself a leader, you have to take responsibility."

For all her grumbling, I knew Firnir was happy in Thuvan, since she was able to test out new equipment all the time.

"Look at this, Vaito! Thuvan's engineers smelted a new set of armor for me! It's way easier to move around in than my old one!"

"I see... it looks good on you."

Not that it mattered how it looked, since she'd be removing it when she fought anyway.

Next to arrive after Firnir was Melaine, who was standing in for Bernheinen's viceroy.

"Wait, Melaine, why didn't Bernheinen's viceroy come?"

"In his words: 'I finally got to become a vampire and you want me to continue working as a viceroy!? I refuse!' He's just maintaining the royal library now."

Bernheinen's viceroy traditionally also served as the custodian of the royal library. Now that this generation's viceroy had become a vampire, not only was he immortal, he could subsist off of just blood. Thanks to that, he could focus completely on his research and ignore the outside world. Though, I'm surprised Melaine allowed him to offload all of his viceroy duties onto her.

"You're the viceroy's clan master, aren't you, Melaine?"

"I am, but that doesn't mean he's forced to obey my commands. I have about as much control over him as a mother does over an unruly child."

"I'm afraid I can't relate to that analogy."

After Firnir and Melaine, all of the human viceroys started trickling in.

"Thank you for your assistance the other day, Sir Veight."

Shatina bowed politely to me as she walked through Ryunheit's gates. Though she looked a little haggard, her eyes still glimmered with determination.

“I hope you will continue assisting me in the future.”

“Of course...”

I could tell from the glint in her eyes that she planned on using me as a tactical weapon against her father’s murderers.

“Ahoy, Veight. I see you managed to win over that girly-boy to your side too!”

The pirate city Beluza’s captain, Garsh, arrived after Shatina. Forne walked up behind him and folded his arms menacingly.

“And just who are you calling a girly-boy? Despite how tough you act, I know you’re a sensitive soul deep down, so I’d prefer if you didn’t insult me like that.”

“I ain’t listening to a thing you say until you drop that creepy high-pitched voice!”

Petore walked over and broke the two of them up.

“Cut it out, ya morons! Yer ancestors would weep if they saw ya now, ya brats! Viceroys these days are too fond of acting, I tell ya. That’s not what it means to put on the mask of a leader, ya know!”

Shardier’s viceroy, Aram, waded into the fray and tried to calm everyone down.

“Both Sir Garsh and Sir Forne have been serving as viceroys for over a decade. They aren’t ‘brats.’”

Petore rounded on Aram.

“Yer the one I’m most worried about, kid. Ya tried to act like a schemer like yer grandfather and got yer arse handed to ya for it. If you’re gonna put on an act, at least pick an act you can do!”

“He has a point, Sir Aram. If you adopt a more feminine voice the way I have, you’ll be able to say what you wish without fear of reproach.”

“Moron. The last thing ya want is people underestimating you. If you wanna be heard, you’ve gotta act tough.”

Sighing, I guided the group of bickering viceroys to Airia’s manor.

“If you wanna coach him on how to act, do it when you’re in Shardier. Now

get inside.”

Our first order of business was to officially crown Shatina Zaria’s viceroy. Normally it would be the Senate that would perform the ceremony, but since Zaria had broken away from the Senate, that was no longer necessary. Instead, Airia, viceroy of the demon capital, did the honors.

Shatina stood nervously as Airia read out some of some old, ceremonial tome. Then, on behalf of all the southern cities viceroys, Petore then officially recognized Shatina as Zaria’s viceroy. All that was left was for someone to place Zaria’s diadem onto Shatina’s head. As I was watching the proceedings with disinterest, Forne turned to me and asked, “What are you waiting for? It’s your turn.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Demon Lord is the most important member of our alliance, so as her representative, it falls on you to perform the coronation.”

“Oh, I see.”

“The ceremony officially cements you as her guardian as well.”

“Wait, I didn’t hear about this.”

Shatina looked up at me, her cheeks red.

“S-Sir Veight!”

“Y-Yes!?”

Surprised, I looked down to see tears welling up in Shatina’s eyes.

“P-Please guide me!”

Why do I have to do this!? Seeing my reaction, Shatina desperately added, “It’s only thanks to you that I’m still alive! You protected me and Zaria, both! I don’t have the strength to protect Zaria on my own yet! So please, teach me how to be a viceroy capable of leading others!”

She bowed low, her head practically scraping the ground. *Well, when you put it like that, I can hardly refuse...* Sighing, I took the diadem from Airia.

“You certainly do need a mentor to guide you, Lady Shatina. And seeing as my

responsibilities are the lightest among the viceroys, I suppose I can fill that role."

"Th-Thank you so much, Sir Veight! No, Master Veight!"

"Could you please not call me that!?"

"But you'll be imparting your wisdom onto me! Great Master Veight!"

I was planning on doing everything I could for Shatina, but I really didn't want to be called "Master." As I was trying to get her to drop the title, Forne butt in.

"If you don't accept your new title, she's only going to come up with even crazier ones."

Shatina gave me a serious look and said, "A mentor is like a paternal figure. I-If you wish, I'm even willing to call you father. How does that sound... F-Father?"

Now things were just getting awkward.

"I'd feel as if I were doing your late father Sir Melgio a disservice if I let you call me father. I'm not ready to bear such a huge responsibility, so Master is fine."

"Wonderful! Thank you so much, Master!"

Forne grinned as he watched Shatina jump for joy.

"My, how splendid. Now that he's your master, you can be sure Sir Veight will never abandon Zaria."

"Yep! Thank you so much, Sir Forne! I promise I'll fulfill that request for you!"

"Umm, now's really not the time to be bringing that up, dear."

You son of a— You got me good, crossdresser. It seemed I'd been used by Forne as a bargaining chip to strengthen relations between Zaria and Veira. *This guy's a crafty one.* However, now wasn't the time to complain. Shatina bowed before me and said, "Master, I look forward to your continued guidance!"

"Alright, alright, settle down so I can put this diadem on you."



I turned around and saw Firnir staring at me.

“Hmm. Master, huh?”

I don’t like the sound of that one bit. I better stop her before she gets any funny ideas.

“We’re both fellow disciples, so I can’t be your master.”

“You’re right! Good point, Vaito!”

Why’re you so happy about that!? Shatina turned to Firnir and said, “That may be true, but *I* am Master Veight’s first disciple, Lady Firnir.”

“Gwah!? Damn, that does sound nice...”

“You are more than welcome to become his second, of course.”

“Oh, that’s not a bad idea.”

Please stop making yourself into my disciple. Shatina and Firnir’s strange rivalry was ruining the solemnity of the ceremony. The other viceroys were all grinning now too. This felt more like a gathering of friends than a dignified ritual. *I guess it’s up to me to discipline our problem children.*

“You two children stop bickering and get along now.”

Firnir and Shatina turned to me and said simultaneously, “We’re not children!”

Riiiiight.

The ceremony concluded, and Zaria now had a new viceroy. With this, all eight southern cities had viceroys. Though two of them were demons. Finally, with all of the preliminary formalities were out of the way, Airia could make her proclamation.

“I hereby declare that our eight cities, along with the demon army, are now part of a new nation, the Meraldian Commonwealth!”

The eight viceroys all signed the document Airia presented. Once they were done, I signed as the demon army’s representative. With this, the southern half of the Meraldian continent had officially become its own nation. A nation where demons would be able to live in peace.

Airia then explained what kind of government this new nation would have. In order to fight the unified Senate, we needed to be just as unified.

“Henceforth, the viceroys of each city will also be councilors on the Meraldian Commonwealth’s governing council, and together we will decide this nation’s laws and policies. All motions will need Her Majesty the Demon Lord’s approval before they will be implemented, and similarly, the demon army’s policies will be reviewed by us before approval.”

What was most important was communication. Master’s policy was to make decisions only after consulting with her human counterparts. Incidentally, the one who’d come up with this model of government was the old Demon Lord. To be honest, Master wasn’t a very good politician, so this was probably for the best. However, there was just one thing about this new council that didn’t sit well with me.

“Lady Airia, why must I be on this council as well?”

“The council needs someone to represent the demons’ interests.”

Melaine and Firnir were representing the people of Bernheinen and Thuvan respectively. In other words, they couldn’t speak for demons as a whole. Their position demanded they put the interests of their citizens first, and I was planning on making sure they did. Though, of course, that meant the demons needed their own representative. Since Master was ostensibly the demon with the most authority in this new nation, it fell to her aide—me—to represent her and her interests in the commonwealth’s newly formed council.

That much I understood. However...

“Could you please stop giving me so many responsibilities? I want to remain a simple vice-commander.”

Airia grinned in response.

“Within the demon army, you will of course be nothing more than the Demon Lord’s vice-commander. But outside of the army, we would like you to be one of our councilors.”

“If you insist...”

Looks like there's no getting out of this one.

"All members of the council, regardless of whether they own land or not, shall be granted the title of Baron. Baron Veight, I hope you will work together with us to bring prosperity to Meraldia's southern cities."

"Fine..."

How did it come to this? I just wanted to live a quiet life with my friends. How come the harder I work, the more work I get?

Guardians of the Labyrinth The labyrinth city of Zaria had two labyrinths to its name, one upper one lower. At least, that's what most people thought. But in reality, there was one more. One only I, viceroy of Zaria, had been informed of.

"Whoa... this is awesome," the kentauros general, Firnir, muttered in awe. Her voice echoed through the underground chamber until eventually the darkness swallowed it up. This was Zaria's third labyrinth, the underground maze.

"Zaria was actually founded atop the ruins of an ancient city."

I lit a lamp to banish the darkness, and handed a second one to Firnir.

"Make sure you do not lose this. There are no other sources of light down here, so if we lose these two lamps, we'll be stranded in darkness."

"Gotcha. Wait, but then what am I gonna do about my spear and shield... Oh wait, I know."

Foolish girl, don't hang your lamp from your spearhead!

"What are you doing!? If you have to fight anyone with that spear, one thrust will shatter the lamp!"

Firnir turned back to me with a worried frown.

"Wait, there's enemies down here?"

"There might be."

To be honest, I wasn't sure myself.

Together with Firnir, I continued down the long stone pathway.

"Originally, there was just a permanent camp built near these ruins, but that

camp grew until it became the city of Zaria. In truth, my ancestors who built this town had wanted to settle further north, but they couldn't explore any further so they built here."

My father told me that before he died. I will never hear his kind voice or hold his gentle hands again. But I can't continue to dwell on that fact.

"The upper layers of the ruins are used by the residents as graveyards or warehouses. So we should be safe here at least."

While people didn't come here often, this floor was still technically developed land.

"The problem is we don't know what lies deeper in the ruins. No one has delved that far down before... Or if they have, they haven't returned."

"What the heck, that's terrifying!"

Firnir shrunk back a little. For how tough she looked, she sure scared easily.

"Sh-Shatina, don't you think we should bring some guards with us if it's this dangerous?"

"Master Veight showed me how powerful demons can be in enclosed spaces. Firnir, you're a demon as well, aren't you?"

Among the kentauros, Firnir was lauded as a Champion. I was certain she could handle any threat that might show up. But to my surprise, Firnir shook her head, her legs trembling.

"Please don't put me in the same category as Vaito! He's on a totally different level! He's the strongest demon in the demon army! And it's only werewolves who are good at fighting in enclosed spaces!"

"So where do you rank, Firnir?"

"W-Well... I'm a kentauros, so we like the open plains. But I'm pretty strong still, really!"

"Really?"

"If I can get a running start, I can trample anything. It's just a little hard to run in tight spaces like this."

She's surprisingly timid, considering how eager she was to explore when I told her about these ruins.

"You aren't having second thoughts, are you Firnir?"

"Of course not!"

In order to show just how not scared she was, Firnir raised her spear, the lamp still dangling from the tip.

"I'm one of the demon army's greatest generals, Firnir of the Swift Gale! The Champion who captured Thuvan and became its viceroy!"

"Didn't Master Veight do most of the work that battle?"

"Maybe so! But I was still the commander of the siege! I mean sure, Vaito might have blown open the gates and forced the garrison commander to surrender, but still!"

I tried to calm Firnir down, as she was starting to become hysterical.

"Shall we head back? I'm nowhere near as good with a blade as my soldiers are, and it seems like you're not confident you can handle this either."

Firnir turned to me, tears in her eyes.

"I'll be fine! I'm the Demon Lord's disciple, I won't lose my nerve that easily! Let's go!"

"Are you sure?"

I'm starting to think it might be better if we went back.

After talking it over, we decided to map out the first strata of the ruins, then head back. The upper floors should be safe. Besides, mapping out the top floor will come in handy when we eventually do explore the entire ruins.

"So why are we exploring this place anyway?"

"I told you when we came down here, remember? We need to investigate the ruins so we can figure out where to put walls and buildings. We can't build on top of hollow cavities, or the ground underneath will collapse."

Now that Zaria had declared independence from the Meraldian Federation, it was free to expand as it pleased. We could build new walls and houses

wherever we wished. But before we did, we had to make sure the ground was solid enough to build foundations on. Which was why I was inspecting these underground ruins beneath the city.

"Though, originally I had planned on hiring someone else to survey these ruins..."

Unfortunately, when I'd told Firnir, who'd come to visit, about my plans, she'd ended up convincing me to investigate them together with her. In secret, of course. *This girl really doesn't think before she acts, does she? Though I guess it* is *a little exciting to be exploring underground ruins with just the two of us.* We just had to finish exploring before our aides realized we were missing, and they would be none the wiser.

The ruins' buildings were all composed of very sturdy stone, so Zaria usually harvested its building materials from down here. There were no quarries in the region, so we could only use as much stone was down here. That was why most upper floors were made with brick, which was more common.

"How long does this passage go on for?" Firnir grumbled. To be honest, I was beginning to get annoyed by its length as well. We were measuring distance in footsteps, and were using a large piece of parchment to record the map, but these ruins were larger than I'd anticipated. Judging by the numerous branching corridors, these ruins spanned the entire length of the city.

"This is more than amateurs like us can handle," I sighed. Considering the scale of these ruins, I'd need to hire a full team of surveyors to map them out. "Let's head back, Firnir."

"Yeah, I'm getting tired of doing this anyway. Oh, by the way, you can just call me Fir."

"I'd rather not."

"Whyyy!?"

Though we both agreed to turn back, we continued walking forward. Eventually, we went so far that my charcoal pen reached the edge of the parchment, and I ran out of room to keep drawing. I turned to Firnir and asked, "By the way, where are we?"

“You don’t know?”

It seemed we were lost.

“Like I *said!*” Firnir poked the map. “The more tired you get, the smaller your steps become! That’s something every soldier knows!”

“Well, I’m not a soldier...”

It appeared marking distance in steps had led to a greater margin of error than I’d expected. Because of that, the map I’d made was inaccurate and we no longer knew which passages were where.

“Even if we only go off by a step every hundred steps, that’s still a pretty big gap.”

“I know.”

I nodded, ashamed of my mistake. Firnir sighed and added, “You realize we’ve probably walked more than ten thousand steps right?”

“I know.”

Meaning my most recent measurements were at least off by a hundred steps. And since we’d been getting more tired the further we went, the mismeasurements were probably worse for the more recent additions to the map.

“I see, so you can’t use footsteps as a unit of measurement for maps... I’m sorry.”

While I was sorry, there was something nagging at me.

“But why did you push all the mapmaking onto me in the first place, Firnir?”

“Cause I’m really bad at this kinda stuff.”

You can’t be serious.

“Important tasks like these are supposed to be checked over by multiple people to make sure no mistakes have been made!”

“I’m only your guard! I’m doing my job just fine!”

“What job!? There are no enemies down here!”

“Yes, there is!”

“No, there isn’t!”

“There definitely is!”

We continued walking as we argued. But after a few steps, I felt the ground crumble underneath me.

It seemed I’d momentarily blacked out from the fall.

“Owww...”

I heard Firnir groan through the darkness. Red and purple lights danced at the edge of my vision. *Thank goodness, it seems she’s safe too.*

“Oof...”

I struggled to my feet and examined my surroundings. A faint light shone underneath my feet, but aside from that, there was just darkness.

“What happened to our lamps?”

“They broke.”

Firnir’s voice came from right next to me. It seemed the light at my feet was the dying glow of our lamps. The oil that had spilled out from them was still burning.

“Oh no, the fire’s going out! We need something that can burn, now!”

“On it!”

Firnir pulled off her shirt and handed it to me.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Yeah, now hurry up!”

“A-Alright... if you say so.”

I suppose I am the only one who can see her. Impressed by her decisiveness, I dipped her cotton shirt into the puddle of oil. It caught fire immediately. *Thank goodness it’s cotton, my hemp clothes wouldn’t burn that easily.*

“But I can’t carry it like this.”

I wrapped the burning shirt around my scabbard, making a makeshift torch. It wouldn't last too long, but we needed to keep this fire burning or we'd be blind. I then collected the broken lamp's wick and transferred the flame onto it. Firnir glanced up and muttered, "We fell a long way..."

I raised the torch overhead, but its light wasn't able to reach the ceiling.

"I'm amazed I wasn't hurt worse from a fall like that."

As I muttered that, I realized something. I'd fallen a good story or more. If I'd actually landed on the stone floor, I should have broken a few bones at least. I looked over at Firnir, who smiled.

"Nice to see you're not hurt."

Did she save me? Firnir said nothing more and silently started gathering our scattered belongings.

"This is a pretty big room, so we might find something that could help us."

"Ah, hey!? If you move around too much—"

Firnir clopped off, and I hurriedly jogged after her.

There were two exits in the room we'd fallen into. Both were pitch dark, and I couldn't make out what lay beyond them. *Let's leave exploring for later.* While the room we were in had no staircase, there were plenty of wooden splinters and broken boards everywhere. From what I could tell, they'd originally been pieces of furniture. But now they were just dried out shattered chunks of wood. *Wait, did these break our fall?*

"These look like they'll burn."

"Wait, you want to set these on fire!?"

I hadn't even considered burning the things we found in the ruins. What if they were precious artifacts?

"What are we going to do if it turns out they were important relics? We might get cursed, or worse..."

Firnir gave me a reassuring smile and started gathering up broken pieces of wood.

“We can worry about that if it actually happens. Right, now we’ve gotta hurry, or the fire’s gonna go out.”

She had a point. Her shirt was close to burning up completely. After debating it for a few seconds, I came to a decision.

“Our safety takes top priority right now. Let’s burn this wood.”

“You got it.”

Firnir took out her hatchet and chopped the wood into cylinder-shaped pieces. She then stuck the ends of the cylinders together, creating a radial pattern that spiraled outward.

“What the heck’s with that shape? Don’t you think that’s a weird way to organize the wood?”

Firnir set fire to a stick in the center and said, “Just watch. This is how kentauros do things.”

Firnir’s fire started out tiny. Among the sticks she’d laid out, only the ones in the center caught fire.

“Hmm, I might have made it too strong.”

Firnir pulled out one of the few burning sticks. With a significant portion of its fuel gone, the fire grew even weaker. I was starting to grow a little irritated at how small she was keeping it, but Firnir just nodded in satisfaction. She beckoned to me and said, “This should be good. I’m kinda tired, so let’s rest for a bit.”

“A-Alright...”

The fire wasn’t too hot, but still large enough to light up our surroundings. Firnir continued adjusting the position of the sticks to regulate the fire.

“It’s not that cold down here, and we’re not cooking anything, so we don’t need to make the fire big yet. This is how kentauros make the most of the wood they have.”

“I see... I get it now.”

She had a point, we didn’t need a fire any stronger than this if we were just

going to rest. When I realized that, I felt a little embarrassed.

“You’re absolutely right, Firnir. There’s a limit to how much wood we have. I’m sorry for doubting you. I would have just wasted all of our precious light.”

As I’d been born the daughter of a viceroy, I’d never once had to worry about saving firewood. I’d never even realized other people would want to use it efficiently to make the most of what little they had. The firelight illuminated Firnir’s open smile, and I felt even worse for being so foolish.

“Firnir, did you collect your own firewood before you became viceroy?”

“Yep. I used to burn anything I could get my hands on actually! When you’re living on the plains, kindling’s hard to come by.”

Though she smiled so cheerfully, I could tell from that statement alone that she must have had a much harder life than me. In fact, compared to her, I was just a sheltered little girl who didn’t know anything. Feeling useless, I started digging through my pack. I fished out a crushed loaf of bread. It had actually been flat to begin with, so the fall hadn’t altered its shape much.

“You haven’t eaten anything since we came down here, right? Would you like some bread?”

“Yeah, thanks!”

“Hey wait, don’t eat it all! What kind of person even does that!?”

Firnir, who’d just taken a huge bite out of the bread and was about to take another, tilted her head quizzically.

“Thish washn’t jusht for me?”

“It was for the both of us, dummy! Give me half!”

I’d forgotten kentauros ate way more than people. I guess it made sense, since they were as big as horses. *Even if I have the right knowledge, unless I utilize it, I won’t be able to do everything perfectly like Master does...*

“I’m glad the air isn’t super musty or anything.”

After finishing her half of the bread, Firnir took a few small sips of our precious water supply and flashed me a smile. *I’m amazed she can smile in a*

situation like this.

"Should it be?"

"Yeah. Generally, air that's been trapped underground for ages smells musty. It's bad for your body, so it's better not to spend too much time in places like that, like caverns or mine shafts."

"I see..."

"In some places, the air's been stagnant for so long that a single breath can kill you. That's what my clan head told me."

I ate through half of my own portion of bread and wrapped the remainder up in a clean cloth before putting it in my bag.

"By clan head, do you mean your father?"

"Nope, I'm the clan priestess, so the head can't be my dad."

Firnir folded her legs underneath her and rearranged her pattern of sticks.

"I was born with more mana than usual. That's why I'm stronger and faster than the other kentauros. And it's why I'm our priestess."

"Priestess?"

I had heard that even though she was around my age, she was the leader of the kentauros race. *I guess in kentauros society, the priestess holds the most power.*

"So you worked your way up to the top by proving yourself. Unlike me, who just inherited her father's position."

"We're not actually that different, you know."

Firnir shook her head and pushed a few of the longer sticks together.

"I wasn't doing anything with my talent, so the clan head started getting annoyed. Then before I knew it, he'd started forcing me to learn martial arts, strategy, and everything in between. Then when I finished his training course from hell, he made me become the Great Sage Gomoviroa's disciple."

"Gomoviroa is... the Demon Lord, correct?"

I hadn’t met her myself, but apparently she was Master Veight’s master. He’d said that her powers were so great they rivaled the gods’. Firnir smiled bitterly.

“Yeah, but the problem is, I can’t use magic at all! I’m too dumb to master any of it!”

“Seriously?”

“Still, she taught me how to read and do numbers. Kentauros don’t have a written language, so I’m one of the few literate kentauros out there!”

“I-I see... It seems you went through quite a lot.”

Even if that didn’t sound impressive to me, it must have been hard for her to learn. As I thought that, I absentmindedly muttered, “You’re amazing, Firnir.”

“Huh? Wh-Where’d that come from!?”

“Oh... don’t worry about it.”

I took off my sword belt and laid down atop my cloak.

“I’m going to take a short nap.”

Sleeping would refresh my thoughts and help me think clearly. At least, Master Veight said sleep was good for that. Right now, it was important for me to regain my composure. And sleep would help with that.

“I won’t sleep for long, don’t worry. Once I get up we can start searching for a way out.”

“Sounds good. I’ll keep a lookout while you sleep.”

“There’s no one here, so I doubt that’s necessary.”

Despite my protests, Firnir didn’t put her spear down.

“It’s better to keep watch, just in case. Besides, it’s a habit of mine.”

“If you say so... In that case, I’ll sleep first and go on watch when I wake up so you can rest. Good night, Firnir.”

“Mhmm. Night, Shatina.”

＊ ＊ ＊ ＊

—Firnir’s Light—

After Shatina fell asleep, I moved some sticks to trim the fire. Firewood's a precious resource, after all. If we ran out of things to burn, we'd never make it out.

But you know, I'm amazed Shatina can sleep in a situation like this. I heard that Meraldia assassinated her dad and tried to kill her too, but she got away with Vaito's help. Seeing how calm she is, I can see how she managed that. I could never be so calm in a crisis like this.

Even though Shatina's not a good fighter, she knows a lot. Plus she's really diligent and has a strong sense of responsibility. She gets angry easily, but I think that's because of how much she cares about others. In a way, she kinda reminds me of Vaito. Meanwhile I still just rush in without thinking.

I'm pretty sure the floor crumbled because I was too heavy. While kentauros aren't as heavy as horses, they're still heavier than people. If I'd remembered that back then, could I have done something to prevent this predicament? Well, I guess it doesn't matter now.

At least I managed to catch Shatina when she fell. Thanks to that I hurt my leg, but... I'll probably be fine after a little rest. No wait, I can't just think baseless things like that. How do I become wiser, like Vaito? Maybe I should ask Shatina when she wakes up, she thinks before she acts. But first... I need to protect her until she does.

* * * *

"Shatina, get up!"

I'm roused from my slumber by Firnir's firm voice. While she was perhaps overly energetic at times, I knew she wasn't the type of person to wake someone for no reason. *This must be an emergency.*

"Wh-What's wrong!?"

I scrambled to my feet and belted on my sword. Meanwhile, Firnir gathered our things and explained, "We need to move. Something's closing in on us."

"What!? Who!?"

"I don't know."

Firnir's expression was grim. She didn't look anything like her usual, cheerful self. She picked up a makeshift torch she'd made by wrapping sticks together with a string made from the remnants of her shirt. She must have done that while I was asleep.

"Shatina, hold on to this for me."

"Understood."

I lit the torch using the campfire. In the distance, I heard a strange sound.

"Iite... Avec..."

It sounded like a voice, but not one belonging to a human. There was a chilling quality to it, like the sound of wind blowing through the trees at night.

"Firnir, what *is* that?"

"No clue. But I think it's best if we never find out."

Firnir slung our packs over her shoulder and beckoned to me.

"Let's get out of here before we run into whoever that voice belongs to. I think my leg's healed now, so we should be able to go fast."

"Healed? Does that mean it was hurt before?"

"Oops."

Firnir made a face that made it clear she hadn't intended to let that slip. But then she smiled awkwardly and said, "Kentauros' legs get hurt easily. I just landed badly when we fell. But I'm good now, it doesn't even hurt."

I felt a twinge of guilt as she smiled at me. As I was now, all I could do was sit there while Firnir protected me.

"I'm... sorry."

"Huh!? There's nothing you need to apologize for, Shatina! Come on, let's go!"

"A-Alright..."

Still feeling guilty, I nevertheless hurried after Firnir.

"Iite... Avec..."

I heard that same voice again, but this time from further away. Whatever it was, we were outpacing it.

“This is a weird place,” Firnir said. She was examining the walls around us as we jogged away from the voice. “Look, there’s all these carvings on the walls. They’re all really elaborate, too.”

“You’re right.”

I stopped for a moment and took a closer look at the walls.

“These look like they were made by the old dynasty. If they’re real, they must be centuries old.”

“Now I’m worried they might collapse...”

“I feel like we have more important things to be worrying about right now!” I shouted. Firnir cocked her head and asked, “What could be scarier than a cave-in?”

“The old dynasty was responsible for conducting all manner of strange magical experiments. I heard they even tried to give birth to a strange species that was a cross between man and beast.”

“You realize I’m half-human half-beast too, right?”

“Th-That’s not what I mean.”

Firnir didn’t seem to understand what I meant when I said “give birth to.” But as I opened my mouth to explain, I realized how embarrassing it would be to say that out loud and stopped myself.

“Umm... they also researched how to raise the dead, and how to curse lands with plague. They were very dangerous people.”

“Really?”

“You’re the disciple of the Great Sage, aren’t you!? Why don’t you know this!?”

“Huh, you’re right. Why don’t I know this?”

How would I know!?

“Regardless, we should hurry. If the creature emitting that strange sound is

one of the old dynasty's creations, it's likely dangerous."

"If you're saying that, it probably is. Got it, I'll be careful!"

Firnir flashed me a confident grin. Had it been Master Veight smiling at me, it likely would have assuaged my fears, but I couldn't say the same for Firnir. That being said, if it weren't for her I would likely have lost my wits long ago.

"Let's go. We may as well see how far this corridor goes."

After a long distance, the passageway turned to the right, and then again to the right after another long trek.

"These carvings are really smooth."

I hadn't noticed it before, but Firnir was right. The details of the carvings were fuzzy, the ridges and grooves smoothed out. Human faces especially had been eroded to the point of being indistinguishable from one another.

"It's like they took sandpaper to the carvings, but kept sanding them for too long."

I wasn't sure how that observation would help us in our current situation though. I tried to get a closer look to see if maybe there was some clue I'd missed, but stopped when I heard a faint voice in the distance.

"Iite... Avec..."

Whirling around, I saw only darkness behind me. It seemed the owner of the voice was still far away.

"L-Let's go, Firnir."

"Yeah."

After a while, the passage once again turned to the right. Worried, I muttered, "Was that turn at a right angle?"

"What's a right angle?"

"Uhh... actually, never mind, it's fine."

I should have known better than to ask Firnir. When it came to architecture and geometry, I knew far more than her. I was, after all, the viceroy of the labyrinth city. By my estimation, all three turns had been right angles. And this

passage seemed to go straight.

“Firnir, stop for a second.”

“What? Something wrong?”

Firnir came to a halt and turned around.

“Shouldn’t we hurry? Won’t it be bad if we stop here?”

“I know, but hold on a moment. We just turned right three times, didn’t we? Meaning...”

I pulled out the parchment I’d been using to draw a map and pointed to its corners. Firnir gave me a puzzled look, but after I’d pointed to the third corner, realization dawned on her.

“We’re going in a circle!?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

I folded up the map and glanced back. We hadn’t heard the voice in a while.

“Of course, it’s also possible this is a square-shaped spiral if the distance between each turn isn’t uniform. In that case, we wouldn’t really be going in circles, but I have no way of measuring the distance.”

“Umm, so what should we do?”

Firnir was being surprisingly hesitant. Unfortunately, I didn’t know what to do either. If this really was a square, then we’d just be retracing our steps over and over. But in that case, there was no point in turning back either. However, if this was a spiral, then we’d eventually end up *somewhere.* After saying as much to Firnir, I pointed forward.

“Either way, we have no choice but to hope this is a spiral and keep going.”

“I see.”

Firnir nodded, then grinned again.

“If it’s not a spiral, then I’ll fight whatever’s chasing us. Don’t worry, I know I look unreliable but I am still Firnir the Swift Gale, General of the demon army.”

Though our situation was still precarious, her words reassured me. I had no

one else to rely on, of course, but even so, she seemed dazzlingly dependable. Firnir readied her spear and peered into the darkness.

“Alright, be ready to fight at any time! Both flanks, be wary of ambushes from the sides!”

“We don’t have any flanks...”

“Think of yourself as a one-person army. That’s how I see myself too.”

“Very well.”

But even so, I don’t think it’s possible for us to be ambushed from the sides. Since there are only walls on either side of us.

We continued down the straight path, the walls occasionally glinting in the torchlight.

“You can’t hear the voice anymore either, right?”

Firnir turned around and strained her ears. I wiped a bead of sweat off my brow and nodded.

“No, I can’t. At the very least, it doesn’t seem like it’s catching up to us.”

All of the patterns on the wall looked unfamiliar. I couldn’t be certain, but it didn’t seem like we were going in a circle. Feeling somewhat relieved, I stopped to study the carvings some more.

“It looks like this stretch of wall depicts an army of undead sieging a castle.”

“Whoa, you’re right. Those skeletons look just like the ones Master summons.”

“By master, you mean the Demon Lord?”

Something about that statement nagged at me, but I was too focused on the wall to give it much thought. The undead appeared to be led by a warrior wearing a crown. He held aloft a massive claymore in one hand, and in the other a shield with an engraving of a tower on it. Behind his army lay the smoldering ruins of numerous towns and castles. To be honest, the scene wasn’t very pleasant. But as the story progressed along the wall, a great number of magicians appeared and sealed the undead army underground. They

then burned the warrior who summoned them alive, and finally the last part of the mural depicted his grave.

“I guess that’s the story of how a tyrant met his end?”

Firnir nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, I think so. Do you think maybe that voice belongs to the tyrant they killed?”

“It just might.”

Since he’d been leading an army of undead, I assumed he’d been a necromancer. And I’d heard that powerful necromancers oftentimes turned immortal.

“Maybe they couldn’t actually kill him, and instead just sealed him here.”

“If that’s true, he’s not someone we can handle.”

It would be nice if the owner of the voice wasn’t hostile toward us, but considering the story the mural told, I didn’t have much hope.

“These carvings might give us some clues as to what we’re up against. Let’s see if we can find anything... Huh?”

The corridor came to an abrupt end, leading into a spacious room.

“Isn’t this room...” Firnir trailed off. I didn’t like the look of this one bit. The center of the room was covered in scorch marks, traces of a recent campfire.

“Oh no...”

Firnir and I both groaned in despair.

“It was one big square...”

As I’d feared, it was a loop. There was no exit. We’d been trapped inside this floor. Together with some strange creature.

“Iite... Avec...”

This time, the voice came from close by.

“Fir!”

“On it!”

I transferred the torch to my left hand and drew my sword with my right. Firnir moved protectively in front of me and lowered her spear.

“I am a General of the demon army, Firnir of Swift Gale! Whoever you are, if you have even a shred of honor, I demand you name yourself!”

Her sharp voice cut through the darkness like a knife. I never knew she was this brave. A harsh scraping sound, like that of rusted iron grinding against itself, reached my ears.

“Iite... Avec...”

When the creature ambled into the torchlight, I nearly screamed. It was wearing rusted brown armor, and carrying a shattered sword. In its free hand, it held a chipped shield with a tower pattern engraved on it. And on its head was a broken crown. But most terrifying of all, its face was nothing but bones.

“Eek!” I nearly dropped the torch, but caught it at the last second. “F-Fir!”

“This looks like an undead soldier, but the fact that it can speak means it’s not normal!” Firnir shouted as she kept the skeleton at bay with her spear.

“Who are you!? If you possess intelligence, then speak! If you refuse to name yourself, I will strike you down!”

The skeleton warrior fell silent. After a moment it raised its shattered sword and said, “Vaw Moona Yuni Dei!”

“Wh-What? Is that your name?”

Firnir faltered, so I screamed from behind her, “Idiot, it’s obviously angry!”

“Huh!? Oh, s-sorry!”

“What point is there in apologizing to a corpse!?”

The fact that the skeleton could speak, but not in words that either of us could understand, seemed to have left Firnir at a loss. Heedless of our confusion, the skeleton warrior raised its shield and yelled, “EEMAGENCE!”

The skeleton’s rotted shield emitted a strange noise. *What’s it trying to do?* Firnir was the first to realize what was happening.

“Shatina, we’ve got twenty more enemies coming from the front!”

A group of skeleton soldiers, these only equipped with weapons, appeared from behind the one with the crown. These were smaller than the first, so I assumed that one was special. The skeleton soldiers pointed their swords and spears at us.

“Dieeee!”

Firnir’s spear shot out. Normally spears were ineffective against the undead, but her thrusts hit as hard as a warhammer. Her thrust shattered the skull of the skeleton closest to her.

“I’ll kill you allllll!”

Firnir swept her spear to the side, mowing down an entire row of skeletons. *She’s strong. Really strong.* I’d heard that undead warriors were about as skilled as the average living soldier, but Firnir was sweeping them aside like they were nothing. But no matter how many she defeated, the enemy’s number continued to grow.

“Fir, fall back to the hallway! At this rate, you’ll be surrounded!”

“G-Good point!”

Firnir cut down the skeletons closest to her, then wheeled around and galloped for the corridor. I hurriedly ran after her. The passageway was just wide enough for an adult to lie down. The ceiling was low as well, making it difficult to swing a spear around.

“Fir, can you fight here?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not a spearman, I’m a warrior!”

Firnir smiled and patted the hatchet strapped to her waist.

“Though I guess I’m best with a spear!”

“Sorry.”

I worried I might have led her to a more disadvantageous spot. Still, at least she wouldn’t have to worry as much about protecting me. They wouldn’t be able to circle around her in such an enclosed space.

Wait, circle around? I turned, looking at the dark passage behind me. The

corridor was an enclosed square, with a single room at this spot.

“Fir!”

“What is it this time!?” Fir shouted, smashing the shields and skulls of any skeletons that got too close. She didn’t have the leeway to turn around.

“Let’s run to the corner! This is a closed loop, meaning the two passageways leading out of this room are connected!”

“Oh yeah!”

Firnir wheeled around and held her hand out to me.

“Climb on!”

“On where!?”

“Onto my back!”

I assumed she meant the horse part of her back. It was small, but still large enough to accommodate a single rider. *It feels wrong to ride on a friend’s back, but I suppose now’s not the time to be worrying about whether it’s disrespectful or not.*

“Very well! And sorry!”

I’d been trained in horseback riding, so I had no trouble jumping onto Firnir’s back. There was no saddle, or stirrups, or reins though, so it was hard to keep my balance.

“U-Umm, Fir...”

“I’ll carry the torch, you just hang on tight.”

Firnir took the torch from me and I sheathed my sword. I then wrapped both arms around her stomach.

“Hyaah!? That tickles!”

“S-Sorry!”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Hang on, I’m gonna dash!”

Firnir sped up and galloped down the corridor. Unable to keep up, the skeleton soldiers soon disappeared from sight. I breathed a sigh of relief, glad

we finally had some time to regroup.

“Let’s set up a defensive formation at the corner. Even if the enemy has ranged weapons, they won’t be able to hit us if we duck behind the wall. And if they try to circle around us, they’ll hit us from the flank instead of from behind, so they’ll be easier to deal with.”

“Makes sense. I knew I could count on you, Shatina.”

I didn’t really feel like I deserved Firnir’s praise, since I was just following Master Veight’s advice. He was the one who’d taught me, “Always try to bring the fight into terrain that’s advantageous for you.” According to him, location alone could change the outcome of a battle. *Since I’m bad at fighting, I should at least do the strategizing for us.* I wanted to protect Firnir the same way she was protecting me. I wanted to be able to prove to her that I wasn’t dead weight.

Once we reached the corner, we could finally rest for a bit. I got off Firnir’s back, took the torch from her, and drew my sword.

“If they come around from the side, I’ll let you know.”

“Gotcha. I’ll focus on fighting... and try to whittle down their numbers.”

Though she gave me a smile, I knew why Firnir had hesitated to say that second part. Were their numbers something we could whittle down in the first place? The enemy was clearly a mage, and they seemed capable of summoning as many undead as they wanted. No matter how strong Firnir was, her stamina wasn’t bottomless. She couldn’t last against an endless wave of skeletons. However, there was no time to think of a different strategy. This was the only option left to us.

The skeletons finally appeared, marching double-file through the corridor. They’d put their spearmen in front to guard the back line.

“Don’t think you can beat me in a spear fight!”

Firnir brandished her own spear, taking on four spearmen at once. *I know I keep saying this, but she really is strong!*

“RYAAAAAAH!”

Sparks danced through the dark corridor as Firnir smashed the skeletons around her. Not only was she effectively using a spear in this enclosed space, she was doing so without relying on her greatest asset—her speed. The terrain was against her, but Firnir continued burying the skeletons with ease. The mass of skeletons melted before her wrath.

“If you want to beat me, you’ll need to bring out a famous general! These foot soldiers can’t even scratch me!”

Despite her boasts, I could tell that Firnir was slowly growing tired. The skeletons’ assault was endless. *Is she going to be okay fighting for this long?* Worried, I squinted down the corridor, trying to see how many skeletons were left. They were more stubborn than I thought.

If they’d sent a force to circle around it would still take quite some time for it to arrive, but I didn’t think we’d be able to annihilate the army coming from the front in that time. And because of how big Firnir was, it took time for her to turn. Exhausted as she was, I doubted she’d be able to fight on two fronts.

In that case, should I scout out our rear? No, we only have one torch, I can’t leave on my own. Calm down. Think. There has to be a better strategy than this. Remember Master Veight’s teachings.

First of all, it’s obvious this battle will be drawn out. If we keep fighting here, we’ll likely be pincered soon. In which case, it would be better if we moved before that happens. But where to? The only direction we can go is behind us. And if there are enemies waiting for us to our rear, then... We’d be dead for sure from the impending pincer from staying put. I can’t think of a perfect strategy for this situation, so we’re just going to have to take a gamble.

“Fir!”

Making up my mind, I called out to my friend.

“At this rate, we’ll be caught in a pincer attack! We have to retreat!”

“That’s fine, but what if there’s enemies behind us too!?”

“Then we’ll run right through them! You can handle that, right Fir!?”

I knew how unfair it was of me to ask this much of Firnir, but I did anyway. I

had no other choice.

“We’ll barrel right through all these foot soldiers and head back to the room we started in! I’m guessing that skeleton general didn’t leave too many guards to protect himself! If we hit him with a surprise attack, we might be able to defeat him!”

If we defeated the skeletons’ general, hopefully the foot soldiers would vanish. Firnir pushed back the skeletons’ spears and shouted, “Climb on!”

“Okay!”

I once again straddled Firnir’s back, and she galloped into the darkness. As I’d feared, the enemies’ flanking force had gotten quite close. We ran into them after only a few minutes of dashing. Fortunately, they hadn’t raised their weapons yet.

“Fir!”

“Leave it to me! I’ll show you what I can do when I gallop full speed!”

Firnir tucked her spear under her armpit and send up.

“Swift Gale!”

Firnir accelerated so fast I nearly fell off.

Firnir was no ordinary kentauros. She had a special power known as Swift Gale. All it did was make her faster than any other kentauros. However, because she wrapped herself in a veil of mana to accelerate to herself to such speeds, no one could stop her once she started charging. Her entire body became a weapon, and anything she hit got blown apart. It was for this reason she was known as Firnir the Swift Gale.

“F-Fir, how long can you keep this up?”

Firnir responded without slowing down in the slightest.

“No clue!”

“You don’t know?”

“Don’t worry, I know I can keep it up long enough to do a full lap at least! Hang on tight, I’m about to round the corner!”

Unlike the skeletons we'd been fighting before, these didn't raise their weapons. It seemed they could only follow simple commands and lacked the ability to adapt to changes in their situation. Furthermore, the flanking unit was smaller than the main one, and it didn't take us long to dash through all of them. I was worried this plan wouldn't work, but it seemed we managed to break through the ambush squad without incident. All we had to do now was follow this corridor back to the room, and kill the skeleton general.

"Alright, let's do thiiiiiis!"

Firnir charged into the room we'd started in. It was empty save for the skeleton warrior with the busted crown. *Perfect, everything's going according to plan.* I leapt off Firnir's back, took the torch from her, and drew my sword.

"Fir, be careful! He's calling his skeletons back!"

"I know!"

Firnir raised her spear and charged toward the skeleton king.

"Take this!"

She swung her spear down. The skeleton king casually raised his broken sword and parried. Sparks flew as the two weapons clashed. Despite the force behind Firnir's blow, the king's sword didn't budge an inch.

"Whoa, this guy's tough..."

I could barely follow that last exchange, but it seemed Firnir had been able to grasp the extent of her enemy's strength during it.

"Shatina, this guy's a skilled fighter! Don't get close to him!"

"U-Understood!"

Firnir rained down a flurry of fierce blows, but the skeleton king easily blocked them all with his sword and shield. On the other hand, when he counterattacked, Firnir was forced to back up.

"Wha!? Damn you!"

Firnir met the skeleton king's sword with her spear, and the two struggled back and forth. As their battle continued, I started to hear sounds in the

distance. Looking around, I saw that the skeleton foot soldiers were starting to pouring through the room's two entrances.

"Fir, they're here!"

"N-No way! Alright, get over here!"

Still trading blows with the skeleton king, Firnir slowly moved to one corner of the room. I hurried after her and hid behind her back. In seconds, the room was nearly full of undead soldiers. And that wasn't all. Every time the skeleton king raised his shield, he summoned another undead warrior from the darkness.

"Fir, he keeps summoning more!"

"I know, but what do you want me to do about it!?"

It was taking everything she had just to fend him off.

"Shatina, what should I do? How do I get us out of this!?"

"U-Umm..."

How could we turn this situation around?

"I can't think of anything..."

Firnir was the only one of us who could fight. And even her full strength wasn't enough to defeat the skeleton king. Now that we'd been surrounded by his soldiers, we couldn't run either. My own strength wasn't sufficient to break through the encirclement.

"Ngh!"

One of the skeleton king's blows finally connected, and Firnir staggered backward. His rusted sword didn't look too strong, but it was apparently powerful enough to drive Firnir to her knees.

"Wh-What the... It's absorbing my power... I can't..."

"Fir!"

Still desperately swinging her spear, Firnir turned to me and smiled.

"Run..."

"Idiot!"

I dropped into a stance and covered Firnir. I knew what I was doing was pointless. We were both dead. But if I was going to die anyway, I at least wanted to die protecting my friend. There was nothing more shameful than dying cowering behind someone. I swung my sword wildly and shouted, “My name is Shatina Yewm Stahl, Viceroy of Zaria! If you want to kill my friend, you’ll have to get through me first!”

A second later, something unbelievable happened.

“AWOOOOOOO!”

A bestial roar shook the air and sent the skeletons flying. A werewolf blacker than night shot out of the darkness and punched the skeleton king.

“Outta my way!”

With just that one blow, he crushed the skeleton king’s armor and shattered its bones. Its broken pieces of rusted armor flew through the air and slammed into the wall. Ignoring the rest of the skeletons, the werewolf turned to us and sighed.

“Don’t worry me so much.”

“Master!” I shouted in joy. But a second later I stiffened up. “Why’re you here!?”

Veight eyed the skeleton soldiers, which hadn’t disappeared with their king’s death, and said, “I’ll explain later. First, let’s get rid of these skeletons. Master, where are you?”

“I’m right here, boy. Don’t rush me.”

A young girl floated down from the ceiling. She swung her staff and chanted, “Rest, lifeless bones. The banquet has ended, and the peace of the afterlife beckons. Still thy bloodlust and sleep forevermore.”

The skeleton warriors filling the room vanished. *Is that what necromancy looks like?* The girl turned to me and smiled.

“I am the Demon Lord Gomoviroa. Thank you for taking care of my disciple, Veight.”

She’s the Demon Lord!? Next to me, Master Veight grumbled, “I’m the one

taking care of her, Master.”

Afterward, the Demon Lord created a number of floating lights and healed Firnir.

“Your mana has been drained. Any normal demon would have lost their life after being hit by that cursed sword. You did well to survive.”

Firnir blushed and said, “I was so focused on protecting Shatina that I didn’t even notice!”

“Indeed, friendship is a wonderful thing.”

Master Veight muttered, “That doesn’t sound nearly as impressive coming from an antisocial loner like you, Master.”

“Must you be so cantankerous?”

The Demon Lord began to sulk. Master Veight awkwardly scratched his head and turned to me.

“We got a message that you two had gone missing, so I asked the Demon Lord to bring us to you.”

“But even if the messenger had gone by horse, they shouldn’t have reached Ryunheit so fast...”

Master smiled ruefully at me.

“It’s easy to lose track of time when you’re underground. You might not have realized this, but it’s been three days since you disappeared.”

“Three days!?” Firnir shouted.

“I thought it’d only been half a day at most.”

“That’s the scary thing about being underground.”

Master manipulated one of the lights the Demon Lord had created and had it follow him as he walked into the corridor.

“It looks like this place is exactly what you predicted it to be, Master... Master?”

“Surely you have no need of an antisocial loner such as myself.”

The Demon Lord pouted, looking more like a little girl than a ruler. I'd heard she'd lived for hundreds of years, so I was surprised to see that she was this immature.

"Master, stop sulking. You're the only one qualified to explain this."

Sighing, the Demon Lord began to talk. Despite her outward reluctance, she seemed happy to explain.

"These ruins are likely the resting place of the undead lord, Ugsfortis. During the last days of the old dynasty, he traveled to the faraway land of Ezakenow and defeated the double-headed tyrants Epero and Viata..."

"You know what, maybe I'll explain after all."

Master hurriedly butt in and said, "Basically, this is the grave of a necromancer tyrant who lived long ago. He was a pitiful man who failed to become either a Hero or a Demon Lord."

Master picked up one of the skeleton king's gauntlets.

"He was famous for his ability to expertly command vast hordes of undead, but in the end, he wasn't able to achieve much. Not only did he fail to unlock the final mysteries of necromancy, but his brutal ways earned him the hatred of his people."

"I almost feel sorry for him."

He'd had talent, but no one had recognized it. However, Master shook his head.

"You reap what you sow. He grew conceited, oppressed his own people, and suffered for it. You would do well to learn from his story, Shatina."

"Me?"

"Yep. I understand you're in a hurry to prove yourself, but if you keep overextending yourself, you might end up like him."

Master examined the carvings on the walls, then told me more about the necromancer king. Apparently this tomb had been built as a monument to his life. The carvings on the walls were his biography. The reason the corridor had been built as one big loop was to seal his soul here for all eternity. It seemed

the people of his time had truly hated him.

“After Ugsfortis was buried alive down here, he used necromancy on himself to transform into an immortal demon. But the magic he used cursed him to be bound to this place forever, and he wandered the looping corridor for eons, tracing the events of his life over and over. He was likely clinging to the memories of his past.”

Master showed me the skeleton king’s gauntlet. The metal around the fingers and palm had been completely worn away. *So the reason the carvings are so smooth is because he dragged his hand across the walls for centuries?* The words he’d repeated over and over “Iite Avec” meant “My will has not yet faded” in the sorcerers’ language. With his soul trapped in his rotted body, he’d had no choice but to keep repeating those words, or he would have lost his mind completely.

He’d spent centuries here in the darkness, all alone. The thought sent a shiver down my spine.

“I’ll be careful not to end up like him.”

“Great, that’s what I want to hear.”

Master smiled and patted my head. While he wasn’t my father, it still felt nice to be patted by him.

Still smiling, Master heaved a weary sigh.

“I’ll let you off the hook this time since it turned out to be a valuable lesson, but don’t do anything reckless like this again.”

“I-I won’t. I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“As long as you understand. A viceroy has many responsibilities. You cannot just go off on your own... and...”

Master trailed off, and turned back to the Demon Lord.

“Umm, Master? Is there something you want to say to me?”

“I wonder, is there?” The Demon Lord giggled, then cleared her throat. “At any rate, let us return. This entire incident only occurred because these ruins were secured with unnecessary safety devices. Fear not. Despite what my

foolish disciple might say, this was not your fault, Shatina."

Master nodded and pointed to the hole in the ceiling.

"The people who sealed the skeleton king away feared he might reawaken, and so set a pitfall trap on the floor above. It's set to only activate when someone with large quantities of mana steps on it."

"Wait, doesn't that mean it's my fault!? If I hadn't tagged along, none of this would have happened!?"

"Well... I suppose not."

I hurriedly came to Firnir's defense.

"B-But if Fir hadn't been with me, I wouldn't have survived down here! Besides, thanks to that I learned about what lies underneath Zaria and she helped eliminate a potential threat! You don't have to feel bad, Fir! As viceroy, I guarantee that you did the right thing!"

"Uhh, i-if you say so." Firnir looked surprised, but her shock quickly gave way to joy. "Thank you, Shatina. Also, it looks like you're calling me Fir after all!"

"H-Huh?"

Wait, she's right. When did I start doing that? Master Veight and the Demon Lord exchanged glances.

"It's nice to see demons and humans getting along."

"That it is. Scenes like this give me hope for future generations." The Demon Lord grinned and raised her staff. "Now then, let us return to the surface and have some tea. These old bones are tired after rushing here so quickly."

"Ah, yes! I promise I'll serve you the best tea Zaria has to offer!"

Zaria's pride is on the line here!

"Let's go home, Fir."

"Okay!"

I squeezed Fir's hand, and the Demon Lord teleported us to the surface.



Afterword

Hello everyone, it's Hyougetsu. It's quite a relief to meet you again this volume. It's thanks to you readers that the southern independence arc was able to be published. The demon army's conquest is progressing quite smoothly, I'd say.

Volume three's a bit of a slow volume, but I felt like Veight and the others needed a break after all the nonstop action of the previous volumes. Though I guess it wasn't much of a break since Veight still got into a bunch of fights, but for him, it's all in a day's work. Compared to fighting the Hero, assassins and sea monsters are nothing. Incidentally, the Island Kraken was based off the winged argonaut, which is a species of octopus that actually exists. Of course, real winged argonauts are nowhere near as big.

Now then, I that's suppose enough explaining of this volume's events. After all, they're explained much better in the volume itself. Instead, I think I'll talk about things I had to watch out for during the writing process, since that's something you won't read about in the volume.

Most of the creatures and culture I've introduced so far are based on real-world creatures and cultures, but have been modified slightly to fit the setting. For example, everyone in Meraldia uses the base ten system, but that's because like humans on earth, humans here have ten fingers and ten toes. I imagine so long as that's true, base ten would be the natural choice for humans.

Creatures function in a similar manner. Their weight, size, and other traits are restricted by their ecology and the availability of food, just like on earth. As a result, you get a lot of creatures similar to ones you'd find on earth. On the other hand, I spent a very long time thinking about kentauros anatomy. After all, if they're half-human half-horse, then where do their stomachs lie? If any of my readers happen to be kentauros, please tell me about your anatomy.

Moving on, this volume got published a lot faster than the second one did. But because of how fast I'm updating the web version, we haven't gotten any closer to catching up. I'm hoping to keep up the pace when it comes to updating the web novel, so I imagine the published version won't catch up for a

while. If I put out a volume a month maybe we'll get closer, but I'm pretty sure doing so would work my poor editor Lord Fusanon to death. I like him alive, so I think I'll stick to this slower release pace.

Besides, as always, my editor has been a huge help. Thank you so much for everything. The fact that I can publish even this fast is all thanks to him. I'd also like to thank Nishi(E)da-sensei for his wonderful drawings. He does a great job at drawing the girls, but more importantly, he does a wonderful job of drawing the guys as well. He can do everything from handsome pretty boys to burly pirates, and it never ceases to amaze me. Also, there's a manga version of Der Werwolf now, drawn by Terada Isaza-sensei. I'd like to thank him and everyone else at the manga department for all their hard work. Incidentally, you can read the manga for free on the Earth Star Comics site. To be honest, I look forward to the updates every month on the 26th, too. I'm a little nervous that my work's gotten this popular but I'll keep doing my best for all you readers out there. I hope you'll continue to support Veight through his many struggles. May we meet again in volume four.





Movi-chan didn't get too many images this volume so I drew her a bunch here.

Nishi(E)da



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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 3

by Hyougetsu

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Edited by Meiru

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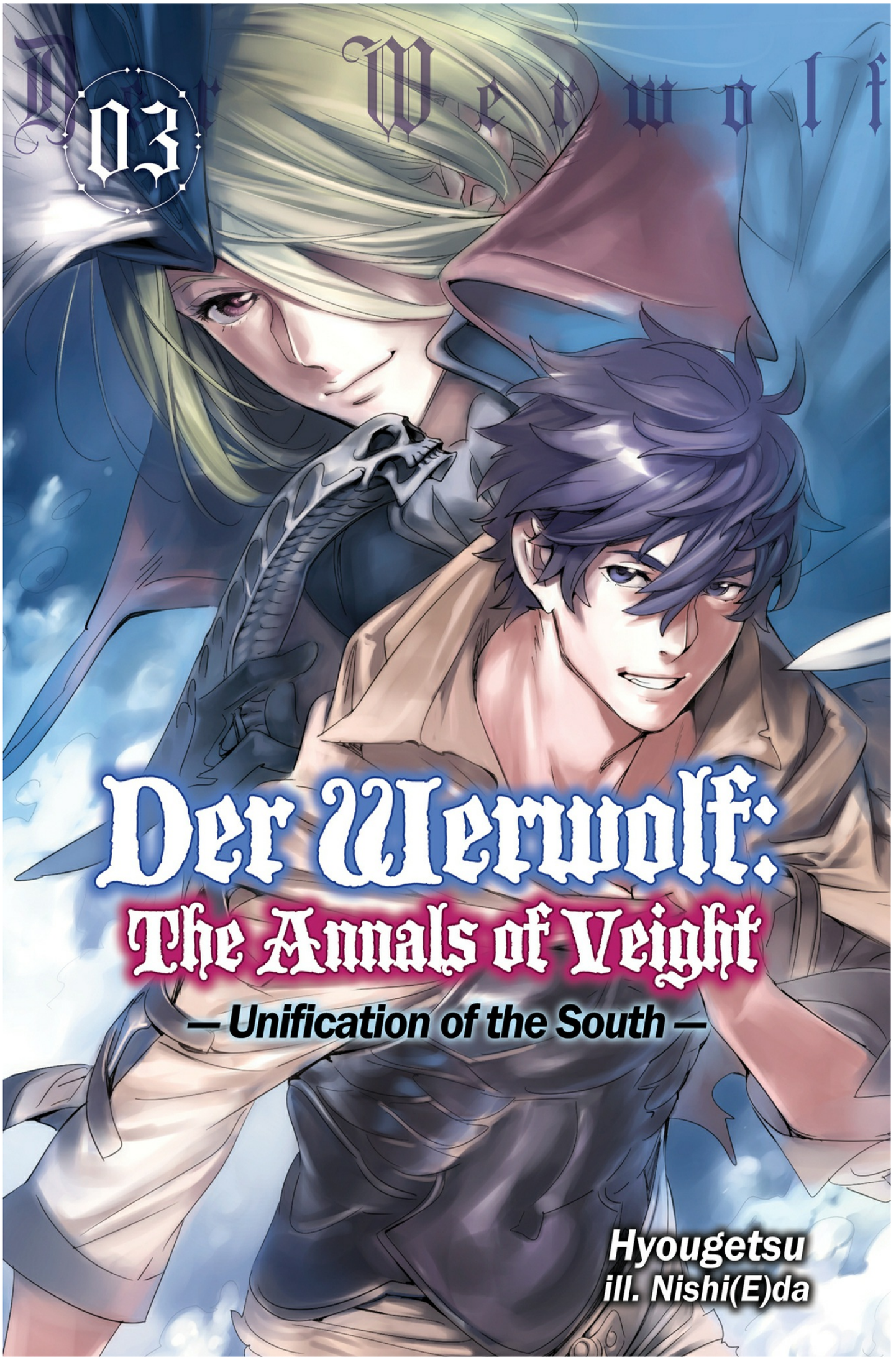
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