
Der Werwolf
04
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The Annals of Veight
— The Princess of War —
Hyougetsu
ill. Nishi(E)da

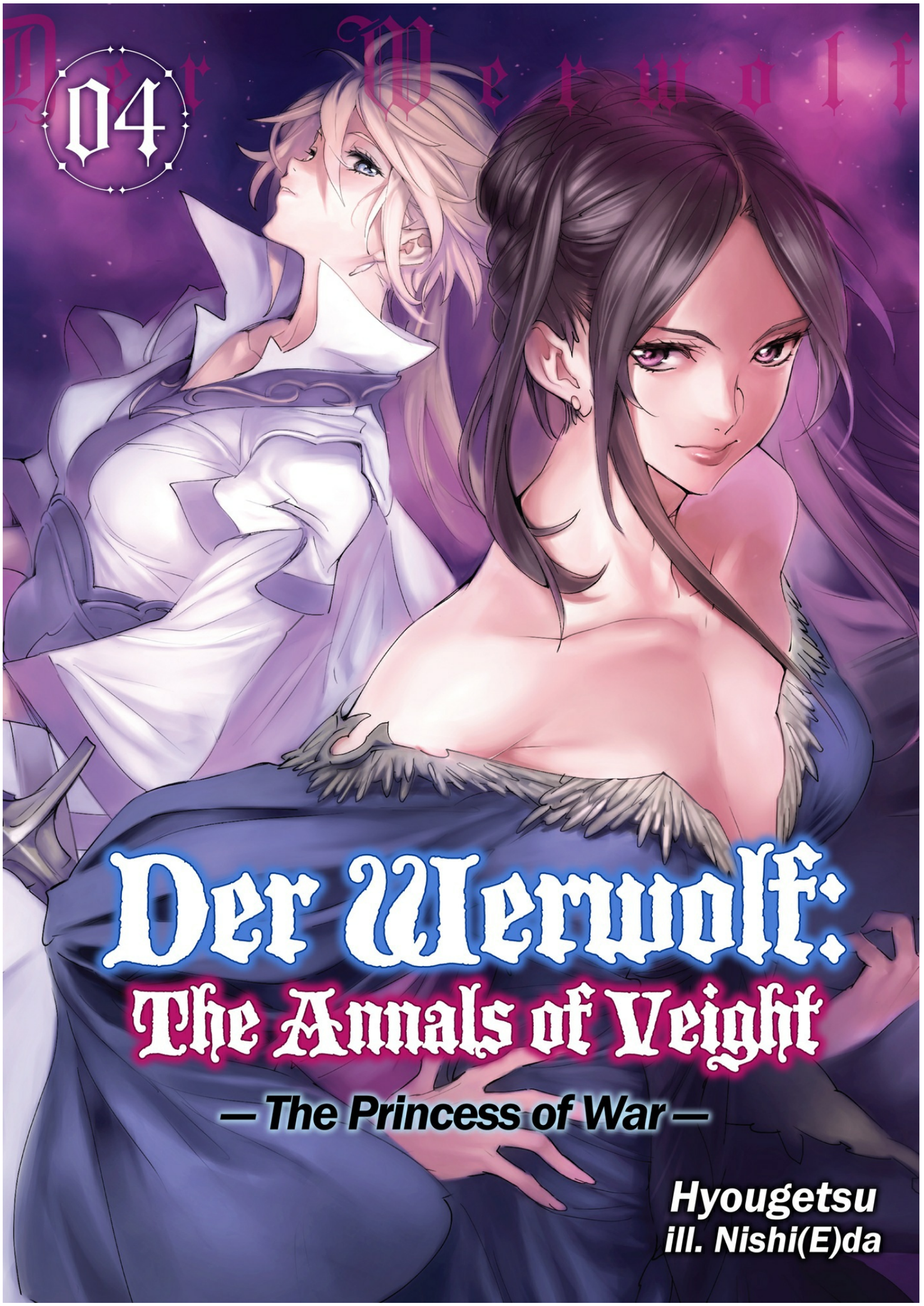
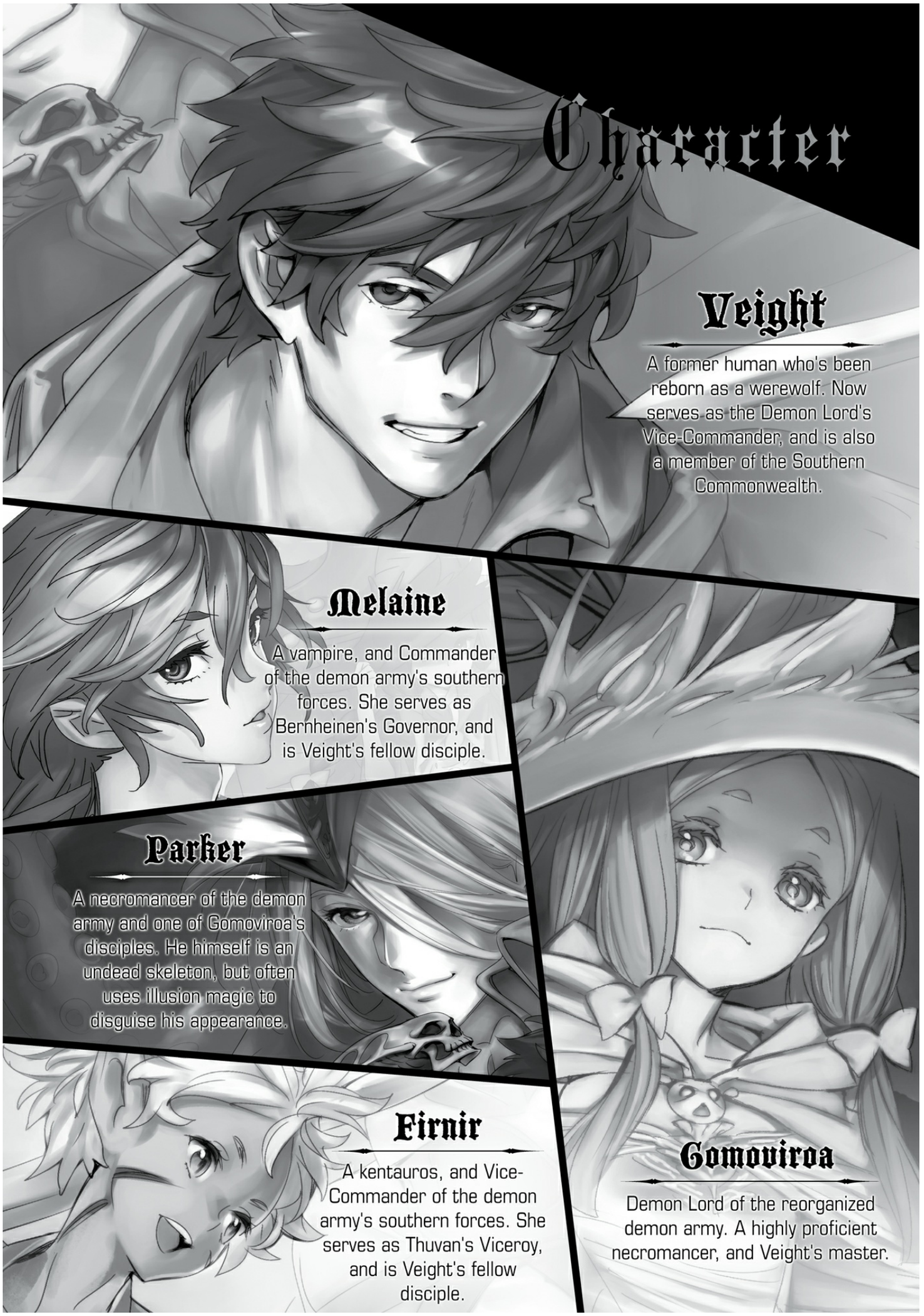

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Character



Veight

A former human who's been reborn as a werewolf. Now serves as the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, and is also a member of the Southern Commonwealth.

Melaine

A vampire, and Commander of the demon army's southern forces. She serves as Bernheinen's Governor, and is Veight's fellow disciple.

Parker

A necromancer of the demon army and one of Gomoviroa's disciples. He himself is an undead skeleton, but often uses illusion magic to disguise his appearance.

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.

Gomoviroa

Demon Lord of the reorganized demon army. A highly proficient necromancer, and Veight's master.


Airia Lutte Aindorf
Viceroy of the trading city of Ryunheit, and a Meraldian Commonwealth Councilor. Despite her stunning looks, she prefers to dress in men's clothing.
Garsh
Viceroy of the pirate city, Beluza.
Petore
Viceroy of the fishing city, Lotz.
Aram
Viceroy of the trading city, Shardier.
Other members of the Meraldian Commonwealth
Shatina
Viceroy of the labyrinth city, Zaria.
Forne
Viceroy of the city of craftsmen, Veira.


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

The story so far

In accordance with the will of the late Demon Lord Friedensrichter, the demon army crowns Gomoviroa as their new Demon Lord. In the wake of the coronation, the demon army pulls out of northern Meraldia, and focuses its efforts on strengthening the south's defenses and trade relations.

Having recovered from his battle with the Hero, Veight returns to his duties as the Demon Lord's Vice Commander. He quickly wins the support of the maritime cities of Beluza and Lotz, and sets his sights on turning Zaria into an ally. But on his way to meet with Zaria's viceroy, he learns that the viceroy has been assassinated—a ploy instigated by the true perpetrators, the Senate, in an attempt to frame the crimes on him.

However, Veight overturns their plot and wins the trust of the daughter of Zaria's viceroy, Shatina. Sensing their defeat, the assassins attempt to kill Shatina and seize control of the city, but are ultimately thwarted by Veight. In retaliation, the Senate sends a force to conquer Zaria, only to be repulsed by Veight as well.

Having earned the trust of all eight of Meraldia's southern cities, Veight brings them together and they announce their secession from the Meraldian Federation. They form the new Meraldian Commonwealth, intertwining their futures with the demon army.

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Chapter 4

With the founding of the Meraldian Commonwealth, I was saddled with yet another two titles and all of the troublesome duties that came with them. Still, the alliance brought with it a measure of stability. The disparate viceroys all agreed to sit on the council and work together as a united nation. Naturally, the demon army agreed to join as well. And I was chosen as the demon army's representative on the council. It was a heavy responsibility.

That being said, for the moment, I was able to enjoy a short respite in Ryunheit. *If I ever have to run around the country to drum up support again, I hope by that time we have railroads at least.* I spread open a map, contemplating what our next move should be.

"Oh?"

This map depicted the entirety of Meraldia's southern region. However, there shouldn't have been any accurate large-scale maps in any of the cities. It was possible the Senate had a few, but most of Meraldia's cities only had maps that covered their immediate surroundings. And for strategic reasons, most viceroys were reluctant to show those maps to their peers.

As a result, the distances between cities were known only in vague terms like "Three days eastward by foot" or "A full day's ride on a fast horse." No one even knew if the trade routes between cities were optimized to be as short as possible. They were just the routes people had been using since antiquity. Yet this map, while perhaps not measured with perfect accuracy, was quite comprehensive. It even estimated the distance between cities.

Meraldia was bordered on the north by a tall mountain range colloquially referred to as the Northern Peaks, and on the south by the great body of water known as the Sea of Solitude. Supposedly there were other continents beyond the mountain range and far south past the sea. However, Meraldia had almost no contact with either. The Northern Peaks were impassable in winter, and to cross them in summer still required gear and mountaineering skills, so people

rarely made the trek. On the other hand, the Sea of Solitude had many more viable sea lanes that ran east to west than those that ran north to south, so ships rarely undertook the journey.

To the west, Meraldia was bordered by the Demon Forest—called such because it was where most demons lived—and to the east it was bordered by the Windswept Dunes, a vast desert. Neither was easily traversed. The seventeen cities that lay in the region known as Meraldia were relatively isolated from the rest of the continent. And of those seventeen, eight were now allied with the demon army. At any rate, this map outlined a few new trade routes which looked to be shorter than the ones currently in use.

"Huh, Zaria's closer than I thought it'd be."

I hadn't realized it before, but the current road to Zaria detoured more than necessary. The map also showed a more direct route to Beluza as well. *This should come in handy.*

The question was though, who made this map?

"Oh, hello there, Veight. I see you've stumbled upon my masterpiece."

Master floated into my room.

"Master, you made this map?"

She nodded.

"With the help of the dragonkin engineers, yes. Did you not say before you wished to have an accurate map of the region?"

"I mean, yeah, but..."

I didn't think the Demon Lord herself would go out of her way to make one.

"Is that why you were wandering all over the continent, Master?"

I gave Master a pointed look over the map and she awkwardly averted her gaze.

"But you see, I have the power to fly. It would be a waste not to make use of it to map the land's geography, would it not?"

“You’re not wrong, but...”

I guess even if her motivations weren’t the most noble, she was still a great help. While I was glad our new Demon Lord was enthusiastic about helping out, I wished she wouldn’t leave all the cumbersome menial tasks to me while went traipsing off.

“Oh, by the way, you organized the council the way you did just because you didn’t want to have to deal with it, didn’t you?”

Master once again averted her gaze. Master had authorized the council to make their own decisions, and all she had to do was ratify their motions. Moreover, it was my job to explain the council’s motions to her, so her only contact with them was through me. On top of that, I served on the council as her representative. Meaning I was the one actually doing all the work. *This isn’t right.*

“I feel like you should be exercising your authority as Demon Lord more, Master.”

“The previous Demon Lord said that our nation should aim to eventually become a ‘constitutional monarchy...’ from what I understand, in such a system the monarch does not govern.”

You don’t actually get what a constitutional monarchy is, do you? Master was extremely perceptive when it came to science and magic, but her understanding of people and social systems was sadly lacking. *No offense, but it might be better if we leave governing to the viceroys instead of Master.* While it was too early to convince people to adopt a constitution, we were at least at a point where a legislative council and a monarch could coexist in a governing system.

Since she wasn’t doing her actual job, I figured I should keep Master busy with other work.

“Whenever you have time, Master, could you make around twelve thousand skeleton soldiers for me?”

“T-Twelve thousand!?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll send Melaine’s vampire necromancers over to help.”

“What do you plan to do with such a massive force?”

Of the southern cities, Bernheinen, Thuvan, Zaria, and Veira all bordered the Senate’s Federation. Looking at the map had reminded me of just how close they were to Federation territory.

“I want to dispatch three thousand undead to each of these four cities.”

“Why three thousand specifically?”

“The Meraldian Federation can field at most a few thousand soldiers right now. They only sent two thousand against Zaria, meaning at most they could round up five, maybe six thousand.”

Excluding militia, anyway. However, militia wouldn’t count for much. They lacked skill and stamina, making them ineffective for use in offensive campaigns or sieges.

I pointed to square that represented Bernheinen, around which I’d placed thirty small coins. Each represented a hundred soldiers.

“In order to repel a sieging army of six thousand, you need at least two thousand troops defending. However, skeletons aren’t as easy to maneuver as people, so I’d like to up that number to three thousand per city.”

“It would take me four months to summon such a vast number of undead. Would twenty-five hundred per city not suffice?”

“Hmm...”

I removed five coins from the square. Tactically it’d still be enough, but since skeletons didn’t cost any upkeep, I’d prefer to have as many as possible.

“How about you create two thousand per city for now, then add the final thousand to each city when time permits?”

Master sighed in response.

“Would a truly loyal vice-commander work his master so hard?”

“Would a truly considerate Demon Lord push all of her diplomatic duties onto her vice-commander?”

Master and I exchanged glances and grinned.

“Well, if you insist. I suppose we did swear to protect Friedensrichter’s dream.”

“Exactly. So get to it.”

Airia arrived a few minutes later, and the three of us decided to take a short break and catch up on recent events.

“By the way, Councilor Airia, what do you know about the Fetid Wastes?”

I pointed to a stretch of land that separated the northern half of Meraldia from the southern. According to what Master had seen during her survey expedition, the wastes were no wasteland, but rather a stretch of fertile plains and lush woods. Airia’s expression clouded over.

“The Fetid Wastes is formally known as the Wasteland of Harmony. It is a stretch of land the Senate set aside to prevent a civil war.”

Apparently, the area was officially referred to as a wasteland to deter people from considering moving there to start farms or communities. And according to Airia, it functioned as a sort of demilitarized zone.

“But now that the south has declared independence, the first to conquer the area will be able to claim possession of it.”

“I see. Well, I don’t know how the north is going to move, but...”

The demon army had no interest in invading the north, at least not now. Because of how vicious the second regiment had been during their invasion, the residents of the north despised us. Trying to occupy their cities would just make our lives miserable. And if the occupied residents waged a guerilla warfare campaign against us we wouldn’t be able to hold them. That being said, there was a possibility the north would want to invade us.

“Alright, how about this? We set up a forward base on the wastes to keep an eye on things. We can say it’s only there to protect our trade interests or something. From there we can start building a few small-scale fortresses and station a standing army there. The fortresses will also be able to serve as relay

points for our scouts.”

“Let us bring the motion up at the next council meeting and see what the other viceroys say. It will take a great deal of money and personnel to implement such a plan, after all.”

Airia was right that it would cost a lot to build and maintain fortresses, but if we stayed holed up in our cities we wouldn’t be able to gather intel.

The north hadn’t made a move in recent weeks so we’d had a brief respite, but there was still plenty that needed to be done, and the number of tasks only continued to grow. Not only was I busy mediating between members of the council, but I also had to deal with Ryunheit’s internal problems.

“Hey guys, what’s with the delicious smell coming out of the barracks?”

I popped my head into the barracks’ Beluza’s raiding party had been assigned to and saw a bunch of guys with mohawks cooking in aprons. Their captain, Grizz, was tenderizing a slab of meat with his massive cudgel. He looked up from his work and said, “Isn’t it obvious? We’re cooking.”

“I thought you guys were soldiers.”

The men all replied simultaneously, “Well, we wanna eat Beluzan food!”

“I miss seafood!”

“Surely yer not gonna begrudge us this, right, boss!?”

Why’re you all yelling? I understood their frustration though. There wasn’t much seafood to be had in Ryunheit. After all, it was hard to get fresh fish in a landlocked city. The Beluzan troops had improvised by taking local meat and cooking it in the Beluzan fashion. That was all well and good.

“Why the hell have you guys converted your barracks into a food stall, though?”

They’d turned a section of their barracks into an (unauthorized) open-air restaurant, and most surprisingly of all, Ryunheit’s residents seemed to be loving it.

Grizz smiled.

“Can’t help it, boss. Everyone loves our cooking!”

“That’s just how awesome our sauces are, boss!”

“We were able to get tomatoes growing here so we thought we may as well do something with all the extra we grew!”

“Spices too!”

“Oi, you lot! I want tomato-glazed chicken breast for four! It’s for the Lafore trading company in the old district, and we need it as soon as possible!”

“You got it, customer!”

That really doesn’t answer my question. And stop taking orders in the middle of our conversation. I couldn’t believe they’d even opened a delivery service. It bothered me that they were doing as they pleased, but seeing as they seemed to have integrated themselves so well into the city, I didn’t see any real reason to shut down their side business.

“Well, whatever. Can I get a roast duck set for three?”

“We’ve got an order from the boss! Snap to it, you louts!”

After finishing my lunch I headed over to the old district where another troublesome task awaited me. There was a meeting of the Commonwealth council today. According to the viceroys’ reports, each city was doing fine. Shardier had managed to win over the local nomads as allies, and a few had even begun living in the city. Of the new migrants, some had expressed an interest in joining the city garrison. As for Veira, a few northern nobles had ordered high-quality furniture from the city. But according to Forne, the order was just a front; what the nobles really wanted was to build connections with our council. It seemed each viceroy was using their unique talents to assist the Commonwealth in growing and expanding. Unfortunately, that didn’t mean the cities were all getting along.

“Can you believe it, Veight!?”

Beluza’s viceroy, Garsh, leaned forward and I took a hesitant step backwards.

“What’s wrong?”

“Lotz’s fishermen have set up shop in *our* waters. Every time I chase them off, they just come back. I’m in my rights to sink the next fishing boat I see, aren’t I!?”

Lotz’s viceroy, Petore, folded his arms and said, “Hmph, I’m sure it was the tide that carried them there. They weren’t trying to infringe on yer rights.”

“Liar! They’re showing up every goddamn day!”

“Brat, if ya think those are yer waters why don’t you draw a line to show me where that border is?”

“If I could I wouldn’t have to deal with yer stupid fishermen!”

How come I’m always the one that has to mediate these disputes?

“Can’t you two just talk it out like you have before?”

Both viceroys shook their head.

“I’d rather have the council decide things once and for all than keep negotiating with this geezer.”

“Now there’s something we can agree on. Course we all know the council’s gonna side with Lotz.”

I see you’ve come prepared, old man. I glanced over at Aram, viceroy of Shardier, and he bashfully averted his gaze. Now I was sure he’d bribed the members of the council beforehand. Forne, viceroy of Veira, grinned. Shatina, viceroy of Zaria, got to her feet and opened her mouth to add her opinion as well, but Forne grabbed her by the collar and shut her up. It seemed Petore had made a deal with the viceroys of the eastern cities in order to win over their support.

However, he hadn’t attempted to win the demon viceroys’ favor, and Firnir and Melaine were going over each other’s notes as they tried to decide what side they would take. Airia, on the other hand, was just watching me with a faint smile. It seemed she was the only one Garsh had tried to win over. As things stood, it looked like there were four guaranteed votes for Lotz, and only two guaranteed votes for Beluza. Garsh was at a disadvantage here. But it was his fishing waters that were being plundered, so I felt kind of bad for him. While

I didn't want to appear biased, I decided I'd side with Beluza this time. Especially since it seemed Petore was trying to see how far he could push things before the council actually reprimanded him. I cleared my throat and said in my most solemn voice, "If you mean to claim that borders cannot be drawn on the water, Viceroy Petore, then would Beluza's warships not also be in their right to plunder Lotz's fisheries?"

I'd heard that Lotz had begun creating shellfish fisheries with the demon army's help. While they were still in the prototype phase, I was certain they'd be a huge source of revenue before long. Hearing my words, Garsh smiled.

"Ooh, that's a good point! Our warships are way bigger than Lotz's! I guess if you're going to steal our fish, we'll just steal yours!"

Petore grimaced, shot me a quick glance, then sighed.

"I see ya got the most important vote on your side. Fine. I'll tell those uppity youngsters to stay in line."

Garsh gave Petore a confused look.

"Huh? How come you're backing off so easily, geezer?"

Petore shot Garsh a smile.

"No need to look so suspicious, brat. I just realized we were in the wrong, that's all."

"Oi, what's with that smile!? You're planning something, aren't you!?"

If I sided with Beluza, there was a good chance Melaine and Firnir would too. Meaning three more votes would go to Beluza. Lotz only had four, but this would give Beluza five. In other words, a majority. The council's votes had legal authority over all members of the Commonwealth, and all votes were publicly recorded. Losing a vote he initiated would harm Petore's reputation. Which was why he'd decided to back off and leave the matter officially undecided. *What a shrewd old man.*

All of the human viceroys knew each other well, and would gladly come to each other's aid in the event of an actual crisis. Though they had their domestic

disputes, they were completely willing to cooperate militarily. However, they couldn't forget that they were also representatives of their people. It was their responsibility to ensure that their citizens lived as peaceful and prosperous lives as possible. Which was why they were always bickering when it came to issues of economics or land rights, since those directly impacted their people's prosperity. *I can't believe I have to babysit a bunch of humans even after being reincarnated as a werewolf.*

As always, once the formal meeting was over, the viceroys returned to being friendly with each other.

"Alright, let's have dinner in one of Ryunheit's restaurants tonight!"

I shook my head in response to Garsh's suggestion.

"It's a huge security risk for all of us viceroys to eat in the city."

Garsh grinned.

"Hahaha, no need to be so worried, Veight! The restaurant I've got in mind is the safest one there is. Since it's run by five hundred of my best fighters!"

Oh, I see now. He then turned to the other viceroys and added, "Don't you all want to see what a fusion of Beluzan and Ryunheit cuisine tastes like? Dinner's on me, friends!"

I should have guessed he'd want to visit that restaurant. Everyone but me and Airia seemed excited to try it.

"Ya sure cook up some interesting ideas, brat. I never thought to use cooking to expand my influence. Maybe Lotz should send some chefs to the demon capital too."

"My, if you wish to have a cultural exchange session, you can hardly afford to leave Veira out of it."

"Vaito, this place sounds neat!"

But I just had lunch there...

—Garsh and His Merry Pirates' Feast—

“Wahahaha!”

Grinning, I take a hearty swig of my tankard. I managed to solve the problem of Lotz’s fishermen, so I can go back to Beluza with my head held high. I sweep my gaze over my men’s restaurant, then turn back to the table.

“Whaddaya think, Veight!? Is Beluza’s food tasty or what!?”

“Yeah, it is.”

That’s all he says as he quietly wolfs down his roast duck. The duck comes with a heaping plate of Beluza’s famous vegetable stew. It’s chock full of delicious sun-dried tomatoes and sweet onions. In fact, no Beluzan dish is complete without those two. And now my boys have started mixing in Ryunheit’s food into their dishes to make them even more delicious. They’re making Beluzan-style food with Ryunheit’s fresh mushrooms, potatoes, chicken, beef, duck, and deer.

“Is it tasty or what!?”

“I just said it is. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Man, does nothing get this guy excited? Or could it be this guy’s such a connoisseur that even food like this doesn’t get his blood boiling? Come to think of it, the first time he ever visited Beluza, he already knew what sauce would go great with our food. I can never underestimate this guy. I used to think all demons were barbaric monsters, but I’ve already learned this guy’s a hero. I can’t let myself be biased. But I swear, Veight, one day I’m gonna show you food that knocks your socks off.

After making that promise to myself, I glare at the old geezer Petore.

“Oi, you like the food, don’t you!?”

“Hmph, it’s alright I guess.”

The old geezer frowns and pokes at his pasta. It’s got mushrooms and tomato sauce in it. Lotz is known as the gourmet capital of Meraldia, so getting him to even call it alright is a huge achievement. Any place he doesn’t straight up hate is bound to be a huge hit with normal people. I knew it, this place is awesome. I grin, and Petore glances up at me.

“Dried tomatoes may be a powerful ingredient, but yer overusing ‘em. Every one of yer goddamn dishes has tomato something in it.”

“Look, geezer, it’s hard to bring Beluzan goods all the way to Ryunheit. My chefs are working with limited ingredients here.”

This was originally just a kitchen my men made to cook for themselves. When I heard they were pining for Beluzan food, I sent them as many ingredients as I could. But it looks like old man Petore’s not satisfied with that.

“If yer serving Ryunheit’s people here, there’s no need to get so hung up on making everything Beluzan. Tell yer lunkheads they need to make better use of the local ingredients. If they don’t innovate, they’ll go out of style.”

“Ugh...you’ve got a point.”

Ryunheit’s a trading city so the residents are used to exotic foods. They’ll get tired of Beluzan cuisine in no time. Shit, I can’t believe I was so careless.

“Think about it for a second, brat. Yer customers don’t care one whit about what yer boys wanna eat, they wanna eat what they wanna eat.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Dammit, I got lectured again. Just you wait, geezer, I’ll show you up one of these days.

After calming down a little, I turn to Shatina and Firnir to see how they’re liking the food. Firnir’s gotten tomato sauce all over her face, and Shatina’s helping her wipe it off.

“Hey, Shatina, this tastes great! What’s it called?”

“This is a dish made by covering flatbread with cheese and tomato sauce. I believe its name was... wait, isn’t this dish from Lotz?”

I stole that recipe myself. My ancestors were pirates. It’s in my blood to steal what I want. Anyway, I better give these brats some orange juice so they stop thinking about Lotz.

“Oi, you brats. Have some Beluzan orange juice! It’s got rose honey in it!”

“Wow! That sounds awesome!”

Firnir stamps her hooves on the ground in anticipation. She may be a demon, but she acts just like any other girl. You know, I think I'm starting to like her. Oh yeah, that reminds me, how's the other demon liking my men's cooking? The noble vampire Melaine.

"Hey there, pretty boy, are you inviting me to suck your blood? I can't imagine any other reason you'd leave your neck uncovered."

It seems our "noble vampire" is dead drunk and trying to hit on Forne. He doesn't seem the least bit interested in her advances though. All he cares about is the store's cutlery.

"Sorry, honey, but I'm afraid blood doesn't run through these cold veins of mine, so there's nothing for you to drink— Oh my, what a wonderful plate. If I'm not mistaken, this is from Veira's Magiella Workshop. I would recognize such elegant use of sapphire enamel anywhere. No wonder it seemed quality."

He never misses an opportunity to advertise his city's craftsmen, huh? Guess I can't blame him, Veira produces some of the best-looking silverware. It's even functional to boot. Their stuff doesn't break even when handled roughly, so I could see why Veight got it for these guys, even if it is expensive. It burns to admit it, but Beluza can't make ceramics anywhere near as good. When these guys used to work with our tools, they'd go through ten sets of tableware a day.

But it's weird. I'd heard when the demon army first invaded Ryunheit, they ruled it with an iron fist. I dunno what happened, but it definitely doesn't seem like that's the case. In fact, the city's gotten even bigger. I bet it's all thanks to Veight and his weird charisma. The kid's an interesting fellow.

"Oi, Veight, is this tasty or what!?"

"Is that the only thing you're going to say all night!?"

Recently, I was busy not only with my duties as the Demon Lord's vice-commander, but also my responsibilities as a member of the Commonwealth council. On top of that, I also had to mentor Shatina on how to be a good viceroy. Granted, the only thing I was qualified to teach was how to negotiate diplomatically. However, my biggest job was still keeping an eye on the Meraldian Federation.

Incidentally, now that we'd declared independence and started calling ourselves the Meraldian Commonwealth, people had started referring to the Federation as the Northern Federation. Whereas we'd colloquially become the Southern Commonwealth. After all, it was hard to tell who was who if we just used the terms Federation and Commonwealth. They practically meant the same thing. However, the fact that this distinction needed to be made meant that the Meraldian Commonwealth was large enough that the north needed to take us seriously. This was less a secession, and more a reclamation of independence. I had little doubt the Senate was treating this as an emergency situation.

Despite that, they hadn't made a single move since the invasion of Zaria. Or at the very least, they hadn't taken any military action. Unfortunately, we had too little information to go off of. The Meraldian Senate had forbidden the north from trading with us. As a result, our merchants could no longer bring us information. And since the demon army had no human spies, we had no one we could send to the north.

As I was agonizing over how to proceed, Bishop Yuhit offered to have his Sonnenlicht Order help gather information for us.

"Most of the people living in the north follow the Sonnenlicht Order. Furthermore, there are many among our followers who are critical of the Senate. I can ask some members of my congregation to make a pilgrimage north and learn what they can from such dissidents."

I'm surprised he can say those kinds of things with a smile. Then again, I guess this is the same guy who incited 400 Thuvan residents to rise up. Of course I knew Yuhit wasn't offering to help merely out of goodwill. Before he asked for a reward, I decided to offer him one of my choosing.

"In order to ensure these pilgrims can travel safely, I'll need to guarantee their protection. If you're willing to do this for us, I'll see to it that citadels are built along the trade routes in the Commonwealth. If any pilgrims feel themselves in danger, they can barricade themselves there."

"Thank you for your generosity. If possible, I would also like to secure the

right for all religious pilgrims to be able to move freely within the Meraldian Commonwealth's borders."

Though he acted meekly, this bishop drove a hard bargain. I didn't have much of a choice but to accept. I needed information badly enough that I'd swallow most demands.

"I believe that can be arranged, at least for citizens of the Commonwealth. Though I'll need to discuss it with the council first."

Yuhit nodded amicably and added, "Oh yes, I almost forgot. I have one other request."

There's more? Yuhit smiled.

"Would it be possible to extend these same rights and protections to members of the Mondstrahl Church as well? I believe those who are pious should receive the Sun's blessing, regardless of their faith."

He sure has changed. I smiled and replied, "Of course. So long as they don't pose a threat to public safety or national intelligence, all pilgrims, regardless of their faith, will be free to use the citadels and move freely within our borders."

As I'd expected, the council saw no problem with granting Yuhit's request. Thanks to that, both the Sonnenlicht Order and the Mondstrahl Church made me one of their patron saints. I realized the title was more a courtesy than anything, but I was glad to finally get one title that wasn't about how bloodthirsty I was. Though it was a little embarrassing to be called a saint.

While trade between the north and the south had officially been forbidden by the Senate, not all cities were willing to cut off trade. Doing so would cause too huge a hit to their tax revenue and the quality of life of their citizens. Though a few trade routes had become unusable, some level of trade still continued between the two. Which was probably why Mao came to visit me next.

"There's something strange going on in the mining city of Krauhen to the northeast. Though they continue to mine rock salt at the same rate as before, their merchants aren't selling nearly as much of it."

"So what're they doing with all the extra salt?"

Mao shook his head.

“That’s what’s strange. As far as I can tell, it’s not being used by the residents either. The only explanation I can think of is that they’re storing it all.”

That certainly was strange. I decided to have Mao investigate in secret.

“Keep me updated on everything that’s happening in Krauhen. If there’s trouble brewing in the north, I want to take advantage of it.”

“Very well. But in return, I would like it if...”

“Go on.”

“Salt from Lotz has grown too expensive. Could you convince Beluza to create its own saltpans?”

So he wants the two cities to start a price war and reap the benefits? Man, why is everyone around me such a scoundrel?

However, Mao’s proposal was beneficial to us as well. Salt was a valuable resource, and since trade with Krauhen had become difficult, Lotz’s saltpans were our only reliable source of salt. If anything happened to them, we’d have a crisis on our hands. This was a good opportunity to ensure ourselves against that situation. Besides, Garsh would probably love to have his own saltpans. The problem was convincing Lotz to allow it. I’d likely have to give them something in return to get their agreement. Maybe some of the demon army’s technology would suffice.

“Alright, I’ll ask the council to consider it. If they vote me down, I’ll find some other way to repay you. Is that fine?”

“But of course.”

With this, the demon army now had a way to monitor Krauhen as well as gather less detailed information from the rest of the northern cities. I had no doubt the Senate was keeping an eye on our movements through similar means. Though it wasn’t much, I was doing my best to spread false intel to keep the Senate guessing. Sadly this was the first time I or any of the other viceroys had engaged in intelligence warfare on a national scale, so we were all amateurs.

After a few weeks, information started trickling in, both from Yuhit's pilgrims and Mao's traders. Slowly but surely, I was able to piece together what the north was up to. It seemed the north's eastern and western cities weren't as supportive of the Senate as I'd thought. Having failed in their invasion, the northeastern cities feared retaliation from Zaria. On the other hand, the northwestern cities were still recovering from the demon invasion, and were tired of fighting.

Krauhen, which was on Meraldia's northeastern tip, seemed especially dissatisfied with the Senate. Its viceroy had refused to appear before the Senate when summoned, causing friction between the two powers. However, I hadn't been able to find out why. I found it hard to believe a single letter Lacy had sent to her family would be enough to cause such a huge uproar. The Senate was only able to exert influence over the north because it controlled the cities' viceroys. If those viceroys started to rebel, the Senate would be in hot water. *I just hope they don't try to assassinate more viceroys.*

With such thoughts swirling around my mind, I headed to Zaria. I'd made a habit of visiting Zaria regularly, both to see how progress on the walls was going, and to give Shatina lessons on negotiating. She'd even prepared a personal office for me there, so it had become kind of like my forward operating base.

"Master, you're finally here! Zaria's doing just fine today too!"

"Ah, hey, Vaito! Shatina's doing a great job here!"

Why is it Firnir's always playing around here whenever I visit? Does she even care about governing her city properly? I guess since she's here, I'll give her a lecture on proper negotiation tactics, too.

"How come I have to sit here and listen too?"

"There'll be times where you'll have to settle things without resorting to your spear and hooves."

Today I made the lesson about how to handle a situation where a criminal

from Zaria escaped to Thuvan.

“Firnir, let’s suppose this criminal’s a heinous murderer, but he’s also a skilled engineer. He comes to Thuvan seeking asylum.”

Firnir gave me a confused look.

“But he’s a bad guy, right? So I should just kill him.”

“Not even gonna think about it?”

This is why it’s hard to teach demons. Before I could reply though, Shatina butt in.

“Wait, he’s Zaria’s criminal right? Then Zaria should be the one to deal with him! You should turn him over to us, Firnir!”

“Aww, come on, that sounds like a pain.”

“Fine, then if one of Thuvan’s criminals comes to Zaria we won’t hand them back to you either!”

“That’s fine with me. If they’ve left Thuvan, they’re not my problem anymore.” Firnir replied with a smile. Shatina was speechless. I grabbed Firnir’s head and growled, “It very much is your problem! Come with me for a second!”

I’d forgotten Firnir was an even bigger problem child than Shatina. As I dragged Firnir away Shatina looked up and muttered, “Master, I truly am inexperienced. If I cannot even negotiate the release of a single prisoner... then I have much to learn.”

“Now that’s the kind of attitude I want.”

I nodded in approval, and Firnir smiled at Shatina.

“Good luck, Shatina!”

“I’m not done with you, either. It’s high time you learned about human society.”

“Vaito, that hurts! Owww!”

I guess it’s still going to take some time before humans and demons can really understand each other.

Afterwards, I assigned Shatina and Firnir a new assignment. They were to try and convince each other to set today's dinner menu to their preference. Shatina wanted legumes, while Firnir wanted potatoes. Whoever presented a more compelling argument for their particular dish would be rewarded by their desired dinner. Of course, what I was actually hoping was that over the course of the argument, they'd learn how to compromise. *I just hope this works.*

Meanwhile, I'd decided to investigate something that had been on my mind for a while. Specifically, the spoils of war I'd won during Zaria's defense. I was curious about the properties of that enchanted sword. Magicked weapons were difficult to mass produce, and took a lot of time and money to maintain. While they were extremely powerful, they were too costly to be standard equipment for soldiers. There must have been an important reason for that knight to have been given that sword.

I wasn't exactly an expert on magical weapons, but I knew how to analyze one at least. The spell to renew the weapon's enchantment should be engraved somewhere on the sword, so I just had to cast that to see what it was. As expected, I found the spell carved into the sword's hilt.

I cast the spell, and a complex red pattern appeared on the sword's blade. The center of the pattern formed a string of letters in the language of magic. Those letters were the enchantment's function, while the rest of the pattern was the circuit by which the function was applied. While the circuit itself was too complicated for me to analyze, I could work out the general idea from the words.

"Cut... Change? No, Transform... And Wolf..."

Trying to read the pattern was like trying to read English, or ancient Japanese. I still had the dictionary Master had given me when I first became her disciple, and I used it to double-check my readings multiple times. It wasn't easy, but eventually I teased out the spell's meaning. This was a magic sword designed for slaying werewolves. It was no different from a normal sword when used against other demons, but against werewolves, it boasted strengthened cutting power. Even a normal human could inflict a mortal wound on a werewolf with this sword, so long as they managed to land a hit. The mere thought of being cut by this sent shivers down my spine.

However, werewolves possessed advanced kinetic vision. Most humans' movements seemed like they were happening in slow-motion to us. Regular people would never be able to hit us with that sword. That being said, the fact that the northern army had brought it to Zaria meant they'd been especially afraid of fighting werewolves. At the risk of sounding arrogant, it seemed the north was afraid of me. Even if they weren't scared of me specifically, they were clearly scared of werewolves in general.

What interested me even more than the words on the sword was the pattern surrounding them.

"Hmm, this is really skilled work."

The circuit had been connected with impeccable detail, so the amount of mana needed to activate the spell was small. Making such an efficient spell was no mean feat. I couldn't help but be impressed. To be honest, that was true whenever I saw a detailed piece of work, whether it was magic or craftsmanship. Entranced, I accidentally brushed the surface of the sword with my hands.

"Wah!?"

The moment I realized what I'd done I hurriedly pulled my hand back, worried the spell might hurt me. Fortunately, it didn't. However, my contact with the sword caused a big change within it. The pattern around the spot I'd touched crumbled. With a section of the circuit missing, the anti-werewolf spell was no longer functional.

"Uhh, this isn't my fault..."

Even though I was the only person in the room, I ended up muttering excuses for myself. Of course, it was obviously my fault. *Still, what kind of spell shatters just from being touched? I know this is its maintenance state, but even then.* If the spell itself was that fragile, it would be difficult to use the sword in combat without shattering it. Curious, I touched the blade again to confirm my touch alone was what caused it.

"Whoa..."

Once again, the pattern disappeared. *Interesting... Wait, now's not the time to be experimenting. Crap, I can't believe I ruined a perfectly good enchanted sword.* Well the sword itself was irrelevant, but there was a lot that could have been learned from that pattern.

"I'll just pretend nothing happened."

I stopped supplying mana to the maintenance spell, and the pattern faded out of view. I doubted this sword would be used against werewolves any time soon, so chances were good no one would find out the enchantment had been broken anyway. Still, I should have recorded the pattern before ruining it. What a waste.

I'll just avoid mentioning this incident to anyone. While I was lamenting my careless actions, I heard a knock on my door.

"Vaito, do you got a minute?"

"What do you need?"

I resheathed the sword and opened the door. Firnir strode in with a troubled look.

"A messenger from the Senate's come to see Shatina. But Shatina's..."

"Say no more."

I needed to hurry.

"How dare you! You... everyone from the Senate is my father's enemy!"

"P-Please wait! At least hear me out!"

Shatina's anger bounced off the walls of the audience chamber. Judging from her tone, she hadn't drawn her sword yet, at least. I entered the room to see her hoisting the Senate's messenger up by the collar of his black coat. I was honestly impressed she was able to lift up a man a good head and shoulders taller than her. *She's like a mad dog.* I realized that not much time had passed since her father's death, but this really wasn't how a viceroy should act.

"Shatina, leave it."

“But Master!”

I understood her rage, but as a viceroy, it was her duty to suppress her feelings and negotiate calmly.

“That messenger didn’t come to meet with the daughter of the man he killed. He came because he has business with the viceroy of Zaria. Don’t forget that.”

“O-Okay...”

I left consoling Shatina to Firnir, then turned to the messenger.

“You’re the Senate’s messenger, correct?”

The man hurriedly straightened his uniform and bowed to me.

“My apologies for showing you such an unseemly sight. I am the Senate’s court magician, Kite. Excuse me, but would you be Shatina’s tutor?”

It seemed this guy didn’t know me. I guess that made sense, it’s not like pictures existed in this world. I could name myself, but it seemed the Senate wasn’t very fond of werewolves. In retrospect, I *had* gotten in the way of every single one of the Senate’s plans. If he found out who I was it’d be harder to negotiate, so I decided to give him a fake identity.

“That’s right, I’m Viceroy Shatina’s diplomacy instructor. As you can see she’s rather emotional at the moment, so I’ll hear you out in her stead.”

After debating whether or not to negotiate with me, Kite finally said, “About the earlier battle to liberate Zaria...”

Now that was something I couldn’t let slide. I knew it was impolite, but I interrupted Kite anyway.

“A moment, please. You claim that battle was to liberate Zaria. Pray tell, who exactly were you trying to liberate Zaria from?”

Kite stiffened, sensing the hostility behind my words.

“N-Naturally, the Senate wished to liberate Zaria from the demon army...”

Kite’s voice gradually grew smaller. Even he knew how bald-faced a lie that was. After watching him writhe for an appropriate amount of time I smiled ruefully and said, “Surely you realize that Zaria was not in actual need of

liberation?”

“I know. I understand this is just a pretense crafted by the Senate.”

He’s surprisingly honest. Since he’d admitted his employer was at fault, I saw no need to press the issue further.

“Regardless of the motivations behind the battle, it is an indisputable fact that the demon army clashed with the Senate. But what of it?”

“The truth is, the Senate was hoping you would be willing to return their catapults to them.”

Kite’s timid voice made it clear even he thought it was an unreasonable request. I replied kindly, “Do you really think the demon army will want to return them?”

“I suppose not...”

“If we were to return those catapults, they would undoubtedly be used against the Commonwealth. Besides, even if we did wish to return them, their return is not something Zaria can authorize on its own.”

Kite’s expression clouded over.

“Th-Then, could you at least at least return Sir Volsaav’s sword to the Senate? We would like to return his legacy to his family.”

Not good. This is not good at all. After all, I’d just ruined that sword moments ago. I scrunched up my face to look as threatening and possible and said in a stern voice, “You don’t want it back to return it to his family. That sword’s sole purpose is to cut down werewolves. That’s the real reason you want it back, isn’t it?”

Kite rose to his feet in surprise.

“What!?”

Going by the smell of his sweat, he wasn’t feigning it either. It seemed he really didn’t know that sword had been enchanted against werewolves. *I can’t believe they sent some chump who doesn’t even know the whole story to negotiate.*

“Regardless of whether or not you were informed of the truth, the demon army’s investigated that sword and it is most definitely enchanted against werewolves.”

Our investigation happened to accidentally destroy its enchantment, too. Though it wasn’t on purpose. *Sorry, Volsaav’s family.*

Kite hung his head, desperately trying to find another argument to use. He must have known the demon army wouldn’t return those catapults. Meaning that request had just been an opener, and his real goal was to get that sword back. That was a classic negotiating trick. It was the same strategy that television ads had used to sell things to people. “Normally this knife set’s twenty thousand yen, but for a limited time you can buy it for ten thousand!” It was basically a way of saying “Oh, twenty thousand’s too much? Fine, how about ten thousand?” After having us refuse an outrageous request he was hoping we would be amenable to granting his more reasonable one.

Unfortunately, right now I was more likely to return eight catapults than I was that one sword. Considering how detailed the enchantment on the sword was, it was likely a cherished family heirloom. If word got out that I’d destroyed its magic, it could turn into a diplomatic incident.

After thinking in silence for a few minutes, Kite finally looked up at me.

“If your words are true, then I must return to the Senate before making any further demands. I shall shelve the issue for now.”

So he’s going to regroup before trying to negotiate again? This guy’s pretty cautious.

“Very well. Let us meet again at another time.”

Once the messenger left, Firnir clopped over to me.

“Vaito, dinner’s ready.”

“That reminds me. What did you two decide on for dinner?”

Firnir grinned happily.

“Legume and potato stew! That way we both clear our assignment, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m glad you two noticed.”

“Ehehe, we realized when we were talking to each other that there was a way for both of us to win.”

“And that is exactly what makes negotiating so much fun. Now then, let’s eat.”

“Yeah!”

There had been no need for them to pick just one or the other. This might have been a bit too simple and obvious a compromise, but I’m still glad they noticed. That aside, that Senate messenger was still on my mind. I decided to stay in Zaria a little longer so I could close out negotiations with him.

A few days after I started staying in Zaria, the Senate’s messenger, Kite, returned.

“My deepest apologies for my actions the other day.” He bowed deeply to me and explained, “As you said, Sir Volsaav’s sword is indeed enchanted against werewolves. Knowing this, I cannot in good faith ask for its return.”

“Thank you for your understanding.”

No really, thank you. However, Kite wasn’t done yet.

“I have brought with me today an official letter from the Senate, addressed to Zaria.”

If this was meant for Zaria specifically, then I needed to call Shatina over. This was her letter to read, not mine. But as I stood up to call her over, Kite hurriedly waved his hand to stop me and said, “E-Excuse me, but considering the nature of the letter, it might be best if...”

Oh, so the letter’s going to make her mad. This poor guy sure has his work cut out for him. I smiled ruefully and accepted the letter.

“Very well, as Viceroy Shatina’s tutor, I shall peruse it in her stead.”

“Thank you. If possible, could you convince her to consider our proposal as well?”

“I will try my best.”

With that, I unsealed the letter and read it over. Sadly, the Senate’s request was beyond ridiculous. The gist of it was “Demons can’t be trusted, so return to Meraldia, which is ruled by humans.” It would be one thing if this was propaganda for the masses, but this was a letter addressed to a viceroy.

The viceroys of the various cities within Meraldia put their citizens’ needs above everything else. This was perhaps a crude way to put it, but they didn’t give a damn what happened to Meraldia as a whole. You could talk about lofty ideals like humans versus demons or justice all you wanted, but viceroys were only interested in improving life for their people. Which was why they’d been willing to join forces with even demons, so long as it brought prosperity and stability to their cities.

I folded up the letter and smiled sadly.

“Mister Kite, are you aware of the contents of this letter?”

“Yes. I am its messenger after all.”

A nervous bead of sweat formed on his forehead. *Poor guy.* I said, as kindly as I could, “There are two fundamental problems with your request. First, you offer no possible benefits for Zaria to switch sides, and only emphasize obligation and duty.”

For nations, ideological causes were nothing more than pretenses to hide their true motivations. Furthermore, claims of justice alone could not sway armies or leaders. They needed more practical incentives to switch sides.

“Second, the obligations you call upon in this letter do not exist.”

The Commonwealth was fast becoming a nation where demons and humans coexisted peacefully. Every one of the southern cities had slowly begun accepting demon immigrants. The expansion restrictions the Senate had placed on them were gone, so they could afford to build new districts and house more people. As a result, the populations and economies of all the cities were growing at a steady rate. Plus, because most of the new immigrants were canines and dragonkin, they were getting along with humans just fine. Even without the demon army’s guiding hand, humans and demons had grown

familiar enough with each other that prejudice was on its way out.

“The Meraldian Commonwealth’s primary goal is coexistence between humans and demons. Demons are neither barbaric nor brutal, so we have no obligation to drive them out.”

Kite argued back, “Yet when the demons occupied the cities of Bahen, Schverm, and Aryoug, they wreaked havoc upon the citizenry.”

It was definitely true the second regiment had rampaged across the north. I felt bad about throwing them under the bus here, but I decided to pretend they had nothing to do with us. Sadly, I hadn’t had the strength to stop them when they’d gone on a slaughtering spree.

“I’m afraid I have no idea what may have happened in the north, but the demons we interact with here have been perfectly civil.”

It seemed Kite had expected that response though, and countered with, “However, the werewolves that appeared in Zaria are undoubtedly dangerous. You realize their leader killed four hundred men single-handedly, don’t you?”

That’s me you’re talking about here. I was starting to feel like I should have revealed my identity when I had the chance. But whenever I told people who I was, they got unnecessarily scared of me, so I didn’t want to.

“The butcher of four hundred, huh...”

Even now I questioned whether there might not have been a more peaceful way to resolve that conflict. Kite misinterpreted my inner turmoil as shock, and decided to press his case.

“That’s right. He’s a heartless, merciless monster. Not only did he slaughter the Hero and his party, he turned them into zombies to make an example of them. Such atrocities cannot go unpunished.”

Actually, it was the current Demon Lord who did that, and she did that out of kindness. I was unsure how to respond for a few seconds, but then finally decided on my counterargument.

“You speak as though you saw it all firsthand, Mister Kite.”

Kite puffed his chest out proudly.

“As a court mage, I am capable of summoning forth images of past events.”

“Oho, so you’re an epoch mage?”

Epoch magic allowed its user to infer and read into past events using various techniques. It was very similar to foresight magic, which predicted future events. Out of all magic, epoch magic was the branch humans were most versed in. It made sense, considering humans valued history more than all other races.

This meant that Kite wasn’t a diplomat, but rather an investigator. Which explained why he was so bad at negotiating. I also now understood why the Senate had sent him of all people to be an ambassador to Zaria. Unaware that he’d leaked something vital, Kite continued explaining his job.

“Under the Senate’s orders, I’ve been touring the lands, investigating the extent of the demon army’s savagery. I can guarantee you that demons cannot possibly coexist with humans.”

Since Kite was from the north, I could see how he’d end up with a perspective like that. Neither I nor any other member of the demon army had done a single good thing up there. That being said, I didn’t want a negative image of us to spread too far, so I decided to argue back.

“At least the demon army doesn’t assassinate people like the Senate. By that metric, wouldn’t you say they’re more trustworthy?”

Kite furrowed his brows and frowned.

“The Senate would never assassinate anyone. They’re the ones who appoint viceroys, why would they assassinate their own appointments?”

His confusion was genuine. The Senate really hadn’t told him anything. He was just a clueless messenger. *Guess it’s my job to enlighten you.*

“Even if the Senate had dismissed Zaria’s old viceroy from his post, they wouldn’t have been able to stop the city from declaring independence. So they’d had him assassinated instead. I even have proof.”

“You do?”

“The poison used for the assassination was one that could only be harvested from the northern mountains. Those who live in the south don’t even know

how to use it.”

I presented Kite the knife one of the assassins had used. I’d killed its owner during the initial scuffle in the viceroy’s office.

“Since you’re versed in epoch magic, you are of course free to use your talents to confirm the details for yourself.”

Kite looked down at the knife and nodded.

“I shall take you up on that offer, then.”

In order to discern the past, an epoch mage needed to know how to use magic that altered their own sense of time, magic that sharpened their senses, along with a few others. Furthermore, in order to draw any meaningful conclusions from the glimmers epoch magic showed mages, they needed to be extremely knowledgeable in a variety of subjects. For example, you needed extensive geographical knowledge to know where a scene was taking place. This was why only those who’d studied for years were capable of being epoch mages. It was also why I couldn’t be one.

The whole time I was thinking, Kite kept his gaze firmly glued onto the knife. Epoch magic required a great deal of time and concentration to use.

“I see the theopolis of Ioro Lange... a mercenary group known as Schude... purple osier poison... All of these signs certainly do point to the north.”

After mumbling like that for a few minutes, Kite suddenly shouted, “Lord Ryukaitos!?”

Oho, so the mastermind is a man called Ryukaitos? I’ll keep that in mind. Kite looked worriedly up at me and wiped a bead of sweat off his brow.

“I-I saw this knife’s history. A member of the Senate was undoubtedly involved, but... this simply cannot be!”

“If you’re a mage, then you know it’s impossible to fabricate the past. What you saw is all true. Isn’t the epoch mage motto ‘The past may be unclear, but it never lies.’?”

Kite nervously responded, “Wait, why do you know that? Just who are you!?”

Finally thought to ask, huh? Now was my chance to introduce myself. I flashed

Kite a reassuring smile and said, “My name is Veight. I am Viceroy Shatina’s guardian and a member of the Meraldian Commonwealth Council. I also happen to be the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander.”

Since this guy seemed like the doubting type, I transformed to prove it to him. When he saw me turn into a werewolf, Kite paled.

“Y-You’re... Lord Veight!?”

The knife fell from his fingers and clattered to the floor.

—Investigator Kite’s Inner Turmoil—

This can’t be. This has to be a nightmare. The legendary werewolf, the scourge of the north, is standing before me. He’s the one person I didn’t want to run into. I can’t believe this. As an epoch mage, my primary duties are reconstructing the past. Which in turn means I often handle sensitive information for the Senate. Naturally, I’ve also learned what secrets not to poke my nose into. I know what happens to overly inquisitive epoch mages.

Unfortunately, my willful ignorance has backfired on me. I originally thought Viceroy Shatina’s tutor was a calm, rational, and quiet man. I assumed he was just an aide, and failed to realize what kind of monster he was. It wasn’t until he grinned and transformed that I realized my folly.

If he was just some random werewolf, that wouldn’t be too bad. But no, this is the black-furred lord of Ryunheit. The one they call the Demon Lord’s spokesman, the most dangerous demon of them all. I’m a fool. An absolute fool. This evil demon no doubt enjoyed hearing me spill secrets I shouldn’t have.

The Senate’s plan to turn the demon army and the southern viceroys against each other has failed spectacularly. To be honest, I always thought such a simple-minded plan couldn’t ever work, and I wanted no part of it. But orders are orders. As a loyal servant of the Senate, I had no choice but to obey. But now the demons know everything about our plan. I’m a complete moron. Almost as much of a moron as my superiors.

I’m going to be killed, aren’t I? This monster supposedly caught stones thrown

by a catapult in midair. There's no way I can escape someone like him. My epoch magic was able to see what was going on around the knife up until the moment its owner died. He'd challenged Veight to a fight, and the next moment his head had gone flying. He hadn't even realized he'd been killed. A plain, untrained human like me won't even last a second.

Dammit, why does this always happen? Why do I always get betrayed by my choices? No matter how hard I try, no matter how much effort I put in, I never get rewarded for it. I kept my head down, let those Senate windbags belittle me, and worked hard at my job. But in the end, I was just used by those morons for years. And now I've failed in my mission and am about to be killed. Why is this happening to me?

The werewolf in front of me's baring his fangs, his jet-black fur looking like it was cut straight out of hell's own sky. His massive pool of mana is swirling around him. So this the King of Werewolves, the Sable Lord. His mere presence is so terrifying I'm getting dizzy. He single-handedly slaughtered an army of 400, defeated another numbering 2,000, and even killed the Hero. He's death incarnate. Now that I've seen him up close, I'm even willing to believe the rumors that he destroyed Thuvan's walls with a single punch.

It might be strange to say this, but I'm actually in awe. If he's this imposing, it's little wonder he's won every fight. He's a godlike tyrant, an invincible destroyer. And he's smiling. Smiling at me. That smile's telling me he can kill me whenever he wants, and there's nothing I can do about it. Fine, laugh all you want at me. I'm just a failure who deserves no better anyway. A chump who hates the Senate, but can't stop working for them. But there's one thing I can't stand. I don't want to die as a fool, as some pawn of the Senate. If I'm going to die here, I'm dying on my own terms. Fuck the Senate.

It was only when Kite paled and fell silent that I realized I might have overdone it a little. *Look, I know werewolves are scary, but surely you could tell from our earlier conversation that I'm not going to hurt you? I mean, I know the Senate views werewolves differently than the viceroys do, but I'm just sitting here despite the fact that you guys clearly hate me. If I was gonna attack, I would have.* However, Kite just glared at me and shouted, "If you're going to kill me, then get it over with! Stop grinning at me, you monster!"

It seemed I'd made him mad.

"Not like killing a small fry like me will achieve anything! I'm just a lowly dog of the Senate!"

What the heck's he on about? For some reason, he seemed to think I was going to kill him. Normally I would have hurried to correct the misunderstanding, but he was spilling a lot of useful intel, so I decided to let him finish his tirade first. It might have been mean of me, but I needed information badly.

"A lowly dog of the Senate, you say?"

"That's right! I'm a worthless mutt who willingly put on their collar for the meager scraps they see fit to give me!"

Kite's job seemed to be stressing him out quite a bit. Though I sympathized with his plight, I hardened my heart and continued acting the part of the merciless werewolf warlord.

"Hahaha! So you're just an obedient little puppy, is that it!?"

"Shut up! I'm tired of doing their bidding!"

"I thought dogs were supposed to be loyal? Must be some awful masters you have if you hate them that much."

"Oh, they're awful alright! But us mages have to bow down to them if we want to survive! Even though they're a bunch of conniving, backstabbing bastards!"

That reminds me, Lacy said she learned magic at a Senate-sponsored academy, didn't she? I'm pretty sure she also mentioned that unless you graduate from there, no one in the north will trust your abilities as a mage, so it's impossible to find work without attending. Because of how high the tuition is, most people who attend need to take out loans to pay for it. Then once they're in debt, they have to work for the Senate to pay them off. It was a predatory system, but it made sure the Senate had control of most of the skilled mages in the north. How crafty.

Since I wanted more information out of Kite, I decided to rile him up a little.

“You sure talk big for a mere errand boy. For all your complaints, you’re still nothing more than the Senate’s messenger.”

“Yeah, so what!? No matter how hard I try, no matter how many results I bring in, I’ll never be a Senator! I’m too much of a commoner! The best I can ever hope to reach is chief of the magic department!”

I’d heard Senate positions tended to be inherited, and Kite’s ramblings proved it.

“So even though you have no hope of advancement, you continue to cling to the Senate. But despite doing so of your own free will, you complain about your choice. Pathetic.”

“Screw you! If it wasn’t for my loans, I would have quit this shitty job years ago...” Kite trailed off. “Dammit!”

Quitting a government post took a lot of resolve for humans. Unlike us demons who lived on the spur of the moment, they were always fretting about the future. And while government posts had their fair share of problems, they were secure jobs. It seemed Kite’s anger had petered out, so I decided to change tack.

“If you lack the resolve to abandon your post, then you shouldn’t badmouth your employer so. They’re the ones who pay you, you know.”

“What of it!? Those bastards at the top treat us like replaceable pawns! And there’s always more chumps willing to sign up!”

My words worked him up again, and this time Kite didn’t stop.

“They’ll send us wherever, even if it’s a battlefield, or enemy territory! They don’t give a shit whether we live or die! And even the tasks they assign us are all pointless and inefficient! We’re risking our lives for nothing!” Kite slammed his palms down onto the table and hung his head. “Goddammit, at least give me work that matters... I just want to be treated like a human being...”

Kite’s words reminded me of my life before I was reincarnated. I was in a very similar situation. In fact, I remembered muttering the exact same things Kite was the night before I died. *What happened after that, though? I can’t*

remember. Without any recollection of how I'd died, I'd found myself in this world.

Now, I was facing someone going through the same hell I had. *I guess even in this world, people have the same troubles. It makes sense though, these guys are just as human.* While the finer details might be a little different, human society was the same in every world. In fact, I might have been fortunate to have been reborn as a werewolf instead.

I definitely sympathized with Kite's plight. Unfortunately, I was a member of the demon army, and he an employee of the Senate. We were enemies. Even if I sympathized with him, I couldn't lend him a helping hand. I had my responsibilities as vice-commander to consider. That being said, if helping him also served my interests, then there would be no conflict of interest. And I'd just come up with the perfect scheme.

In the most villainous voice I could muster, I said, "Do you despise the Senate?"

"Of course I do... I hate this life they've reduced me to... Every night I go to sleep dreading the next morning..."

Are you me? Sleeping meant waking up to another day of work. But staying up just made the next day even harder. *Alright, this evil werewolf will help make sure you never have another depressing morning again.*

"Then will you help me destroy them?"

Kite looked up at me in shock.

"Wh-What? You're not going to kill me?"

I grinned wickedly.

"What merit is there in killing you? Now stop asking foolish questions and answer me."

Still transformed, I bore down on Kite. He backed up a few steps, but the wall prevented him from retreating any further. I leaned down and asked again, "Tell me. Do you want to help me destroy them?"

Kite's face was pale. He was clearly conflicted. However, that's exactly what I was hoping for. If he was someone who'd turn traitor without a second thought, then I wouldn't be able to trust him either. *Still, I think one more push should do the trick.*

"You're supposed to be the Senate's loyal dog. I'm sure you realize how cowardly a betrayal it would be to turn to your enemy and bite the hand that feeds you."

My provocative words helped Kite make up his mind.

"Yeah... Yeah, you're right."

He smiled viciously. Of all the expressions I'd seen from him thus far, I liked this one the most. Sweat dripping down his forehead, Kite nodded.



“But I’ll do it. I’ll betray them all.”

“Know that you’re making a deal with the devil here. If you become my spy, I’ll work you to the bone. Are you prepared?”

Kite’s smile grew bigger.

“Oh yes. I’ll give you my life if I have to. But in return, lend me your strength. Help me break free from this worthless existence.”

I smelled no falsehood from his sweat. *Alright, I’ve got myself a spy.* Though he seemed a little mentally unstable, he’d definitely be a great help. I returned to my human form and declared, “Very well. As you wish, I’ll destroy the Senate. So tell me everything you know. And once the Senate is no more...”

Kite stiffened up nervously.

“You’ll... kill me?”

Why would I do that? I shook my head and tried to smile as reassuringly as possible.

“We’ll go out for dinner. My treat. There’s a restaurant that’s opened in Ryunheit recently that serves Beluzan cuisine. It’s a rather strange restaurant, but the food’s delicious.”

Kite looked at me blankly for a few seconds, then collapsed onto the ground and started sobbing.

“Oi, what’s wrong?”

“It’s... nothing... D-Don’t worry about it...”

Kite rubbed his eyes with his sleeve, but the tears didn’t stop. *This guy’s emotions are all kinda extreme.* He must have been holding in a lot of stress if the relief of quitting brought him to tears. I wonder who asked such an emotional man to be a diplomat. *Well, I guess I can ask him since he’s on our side now.*

Thanks to Kite, I was able to learn a lot more detailed information on the Senate.

“Wow, those guys really are awful...”

According to him, the first mission he’d been tasked with was recovering the sword of Sir Volsaav, who’d died in battle. And while he was at it, scope out the current state of Zaria. Meraldian custom dictated that warriors who died in single combat be afforded the highest honors. Which was why the Senate had thought there would be a good chance I’d return the sword to honor him.

Either way, his mission had been to get back the sword and to gather as much information about Zaria as he could. However, the mission had been a trap meant to get him killed.

The sword Volsaav had used was a family heirloom of Krauhen’s viceroy. The Senate had gone through great trouble to convince Krauhen to let them borrow it, and they would be in hot water if they couldn’t return it. So they’d panicked, and sent Kite over to get it back no matter the cost.

But some of the Senators had actually found the current situation fortuitous. The ones who’d argued against borrowing Krauhen’s sword saw this as an opportunity to increase their influence. Those Senators had told Kite, “It doesn’t matter if you get the sword back or not, but gather as much information as you can about Zaria’s situation.” This was just conjecture, but it seemed to me that those Senators were the part of the faction that had been against assassinating the viceroy.

There was also a third faction within the Senate. This faction wanted to dispatch another coalition army and destroy the demon army once and for all. And they were the ones who’d convinced the others to send Kite to negotiate instead of a trained diplomat. Their goal had been to get the negotiations to fall apart. As far as they were concerned, the return of a single sword wasn’t worth owing the Southern Commonwealth a debt. Furthermore, if I’d killed their messenger, they would have been able to showcase that incident as proof of my brutality and drum up popular support to raise another army.

So in the end, the plan had looked something like “Negotiate for the return of Volsaav’s sword and investigate the state of affairs in Zaria, but make sure not to send an actual diplomat to do so.” While that seemed like a rather odd plan, it was the one the Senate officially passed. I could see why the people working

for the Senate had little respect for it.

Negotiations with enemy powers required charisma, knowledge, and extensive diplomatic training. But since the Senate had decided not to use a diplomat, they couldn't send anyone meeting those criteria. So instead, they'd decided to send someone specializing in investigation. Magic required knowledge and intelligence to master, so the Senators had figured a mage would be the next best choice to send as their negotiator. Of the investigative mages working for the Senate, Kite had possessed the least number of connections, so he'd drawn the short straw. It hadn't helped that he was the most accomplished epoch mage of the bunch.

While a lot of those conclusions had been guesswork, the information Kite gave me, combined with the information coming in from religious pilgrims, seemed to support my hypotheses.

"I never knew the Senate was such a disorganized group," I said sardonically to Kite as he sipped some tea. He flopped onto the table and groaned, "Tell me about it. They only manage to survive because they have so much money and authority."

The system Meraldia's ancestors had come up with was built on solid foundations, so all their descendants needed to do was put in the bare minimum effort to keep the system running and their rule was secure. Of course, their laxness had caused the south no end of grief.

The state of the Senate wasn't the only interesting information Kite gave me. Because things like the internet and television didn't exist in this world, the Senate could control the flow of information quite well. So long as they put their official seal on any proclamation, people believed it regardless of whether it was true or not. The Senate could obfuscate the truth and spread lies with ease. And they seemed to be spreading all sorts of propaganda about how horrible the demon army was.

For example, this was how they'd rendered the incident with Lacy: "The crafty, vicious, Black Werewolf King Veight kidnapped the Holy Priestess Mildine and subjected her to unspeakable atrocities. As a result, the poor priestess

went mad and committed suicide.”

From the looks of it, I was the main focus of the Senate’s smear campaign. Though the nickname “Black Werewolf King” did sound rather cool. It’d be nice if I could make that my official title. After Kite finished telling me that story he asked hesitantly, “Miss Lacy is alright, isn’t she?”

“Of course she is. She’s alive and well, and currently studying under the Demon Lord Gomoviroa. She spends her days absorbed in her research. Her illusion magic has grown to a formidable level.”

“I wish I could do that...” Kite sighed, then added, “Though that woman always did get on my nerves a little.”

She did?

“At any rate, Kite, how much of your investigation have you reported back to the Senate?”

“All I’ve told them is that Zaria’s garrison seems to be keeping a close eye on the city, and that I haven’t been able to do much investigating. Mostly I’ve just corroborated the report the army gave the Senate a while back.”

Perfect, he didn’t send back anything important. Then this plan of mine might actually work.

“Kite, I want you to tell the Senate that the werewolf-slaying sword has been destroyed.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Tell them that the demon army recovered the sword after the battle, but it was too damaged to use so it was smelted down.”

This wasn’t just to cover up my little accident earlier.

“If you tell them that, they’ll give up on recovering the sword. And that’ll make Krauhen furious.”

“I see, you want to drive a rift between Krauhen and the Senate.”

“That’s part of the reason.”

But not all. The main reason was something else.

“Kite, can you travel freely to Krauhen?”

“Huh? I suppose I can. As an investigator I have to travel frequently, so once this job is over I could probably come up with an excuse to officially visit Krauhen.”

Ah, so your job’s the kind where you can make up fake business trips if you need to. The Senate must waste a lot of money if people can do that whenever. Man, I’m kinda jealous. Smiling, I said to Kite, “Then I have a request for you.”

“What is it, Veight?”

“I want you to guide to me to Krauhen in a few days.”

Kite spit out his tea.

“Bwuh!?”

“Hey, watch it!”

He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and shouted, “What on earth are you thinking!? You have a hundred twenty thousand silver coin bounty on your head, you know that!?”

Oh yeah, I totally forgot about that. Though, wasn’t my bounty only 70,000 last time I checked? I’m kinda happy it went up. Of course, having a bounty didn’t bother me.

“That’s why I’m asking for your help. I can pretend to be your guard or something on the way to Krauhen. Anyway, make all the necessary preparations.”

“Krauhen’s the northernmost city in Meraldia! What do you even plan to do there!?”

I took the broken werewolf-slayer out of my drawer and sighed.

“I’ll return this to Krauhen personally. And apologize for ruining it.”

“That’s it!? Are you insane!?”

I needed to apologize for my mistakes, and this seemed like a good opportunity to also win Krauhen’s viceroy over to our side. While it’d be geographically difficult to incorporate Krauhen into our Commonwealth, we

might still be able to make them an ally. There was also one other reason I wanted to go. Mao had brought me a lot of troubling reports on the city. Among them was a report that Krauhen was building a tunnel near its salt mines. Officially, they were just digging a new mine shaft, but according to Mao, there was something fishy going on. For one thing, access to the shaft was restricted. I'd also heard that Krauhen's viceroy was often leaving on secret trips out of the city, and no one knew where he went. Merchants weren't spies, so they couldn't tail him or anything like that. Nor could they sneak into the mine shaft to see where the tunnel really led. I knew something was going on in Krauhen, but I didn't have enough information to ascertain what. The only solution was to go there in person and find out. Fortunately, I had a skilled investigator as a guide.

Even though I thought my proposal was a great way to kill three birds with one stone, Kite held his head in dismay.

"Holy shit... I can't believe I made a deal with this guy... He's totally insane..."

Hey, that's rude. Though the way Kite put it certainly did make my plan sound insane. A lone high-ranking member of the demon army was attempting to head deep into enemy territory alone, and negotiate with a hostile viceroy. But the fact that it was insane meant that Krauhen's viceroy would be intrigued to see me at his doorstep. I know I would be if he'd come alone to Ryunheit. I turned to Kite and said decisively, "Kite, make up your mind. Are you going to guide me or not?"

Kite sighed and met my gaze. After a few seconds, he grinned.

"Fine. If that's what you want, Veight, let's do this."

"Glad to hear it."

Now then, the question is, how am I going to sneak out without anyone noticing?

A few days later, I finished up my backlog of work, tasked someone to take care of things in my absence, and left the city under the pretense of investigating the land to Zaria's north. Technically, I wasn't lying. However, I

was assigned a chaperone.

“Boss, please don’t do anything weird this time.”

Jerrick had elected to join me in place of his squad. When I’d told him of my plans, he’d firmly insisted that I take someone with me, even if it was just one person. I had no reason to forbid just one or two people from following me so I allowed Jerrick to come along. His squad could handle their task with just three people.

Jerrick gave me a knowing smile, so I said with a sigh, “Looks like you’ve already realized where we’re actually going.”

“Whenever you’re plotting something it always shows on your face, boss.”

“What, so you knew from the start?”

“Pretty much.”

I guess I should have expected that, since we’d been friends since we were kids. At least this saved me the trouble of explaining everything. *It’s nice to have such good friends.* Jerrick then asked lightly, “So how far north are we going? Up to Vongang?”

Vongang was the fortress city closest to Zaria. I shook my head and replied, “We’re going to Krauhen.”

Jerrick scrutinized my expression for a few seconds, then sighed with a bitter smile.

“Boss.”

“Yeah?”

“Nah, never mind. Let’s go.”

What was that all about?

“You really don’t hesitate to do the craziest things, huh?”

Kite, who’d come to rendezvous with us, muttered, “And you, aren’t you shocked at what Mister Veight’s trying to do?”

“Haha, not really. Boss’s been reckless since we were kids!”

Am I really that reckless? Seeing my expression Jerrick sighed again and said to Kite, “You know, there was a time he took down a monster attacking our village back when we were kids. In human form no less. And all by himself.”

“Without transforming into a werewolf? Why would you do that?”

Jerrick looked ready to spill the whole story so I hurriedly interjected, “Who cares about that old story!? That was more than a decade ago!”

Back then, that was the very first time Fahn had yelled at me.

“By the way, Mister Veight.”

“What?”

“I’d heard that the demon army had mages capable of using teleportation magic, so why are we going to Krauhen by foot?”

Oh, so you noticed? Considering the fact that I’d suddenly appeared in the north to take out the fake Hero, any mage worth their salt would at least have suspected we had means of teleportation. However, teleportation magic required precise coordinate calculation. If the caster didn’t have an accurate idea of their destination, there was no telling where they’d end up. If there was an elevation difference between the starting point and the destination it was even possible they’d end up hundreds of meters in the air, or hundreds of meters underground.

“Things would certainly be easier if we could teleport there, but we can only teleport to places we’ve visited before. Did you not learn about the limitations of teleportation magic in class?”

Kite grimaced.

“The Senate’s Magic Academy is as secretive with knowledge as they get. They don’t teach us anything about magic outside our field. My teachers told me not to share the secrets of epoch magic with other students too.”

That’s the opposite of Master. She’ll tell you about any subject, even ones you don’t care about.

Jerrick and I traveled under the guise of Kite’s bodyguards, which allowed the

three of us to enjoy an easy journey entirely financed by the Senate. The first city we stopped in was Vongang. It was a sturdy fortress city which served as the Senate's bulwark against the south. Since Jerrick and I were both werewolves, we'd be found out if the guards at the gate were inspecting visitors with magic. Fortunately, we had the court magician Kite with us.

"These two are my bodyguards. We're in a bit of a hurry so can you let us through?"

"Ah, o-of course! Good luck on your mission!"

We were waved through without so much as a cursory search. *Authority sure is great.* We stayed at a high-class inn that primarily catered to important members of the Senate. Naturally, it was the Senate that foot the bill for our stay. There was nothing more delicious than eating food paid for by your enemy. Apparently the north was famous for its cheese fondue, and the recipe varied slightly from city to city, so I decided to try all versions of it that I could. Vongang's cheese was white, didn't have too strong a scent, and was easy on the palate. I could eat it forever. Kite watched me eat with a sigh.

"Mister Veight, just how brazen can you get?"

"Don't worry. Even if our identities get exposed, it's no big deal. Ah, Jerrick, pass me that bread."

"Here you go, boss."

If we transformed, we'd be able to flee the city with ease. And Kite was light enough that we could carry him with us. However, Kite seemed to have misinterpreted our words. He nodded solemnly to himself and said, "You're right. If you felt like it, you could probably raze this city in half a day."

Like hell I could. Afterwards, we made full use of Kite's authority to scout out the northern cities. Once we were finished with Vongang, we moved on to the northeastern agricultural city of Welheim. All of the northern cities were massive, with large populations. Part of the reason for that was many people had immigrated northwards from the cramped southern cities. The Senate had restricted the south from expanding partly for this reason.

"So a lot of northerners are originally from the south..."

Jerrick peered into my face.

“Boss, you’re scheming something again, aren’t you?”

“I guess.”

This definitely was information I might be able to use later.

On the way to the city, we had a run-in with Welheim’s soldiers. Fortunately, we had Kite’s authority to get us out of this sticky situation. We’d accidentally run into one of their patrols which had been out looking for bandits.

“Do you have identification papers for those two men with you?”

Recognizing Kite’s uniform, the lead soldier kept his tone as respectful as possible. Kite stuck his hand in his pocket and said, “These two are mercenaries hired by the Senate. Would you like to see the letters confirming their appointments?”

“O-Oh, no, we trust you.”

While garrison troops had no authority over members of the Senate, they still seemed a little suspicious. I didn’t blame them. The only thing separating a mercenary from a bandit was a contract. While the head guard was talking to Kite, Jerrick walked over to another one of the soldiers.

“H-Hey! Don’t move!”

The soldier leveled his spear. However, Jerrick seemed unconcerned and pointed at the spear’s tip.

“That spear won’t be able to stab anything. The head’s warped. I recommend you get it repaired by a smith.”

“What?”

The soldier gave Jerrick a confused look. Jerrick continued politely, “You have a habit of twisting the spear when you pull back from a stab, don’t you? If you do that too often against hard objects, the spearhead’ll warp. You’ve been putting too much pressure on the weakest part of your weapon and the metal can’t handle it.”

“What are you...”

The soldier looked suspiciously down at his weapon. To be honest, I couldn’t tell if it was warped or not. However, Kite ran his finger down the length of the spearhead, then nodded.

“He’s right. Your spearhead has suffered too much metal fatigue. It’s starting to crack. If you don’t get it repaired soon, it’ll break.”

If an official Senate investigator agreed with Jerrick’s assessment it suddenly had more weight. The soldiers turned to Jerrick in surprise.

“You’ve got a sharp eye...”

“Yeah, I doubt he’s part of the bandit crew we’re looking for.”

Apparently that had cleared Jerrick of all suspicion. I guess that meant if I showed off my magic, they’d trust me too. *In that case, I should give them a taste of my strengthening magic.* Like Jerrick, I casually walked up to one of the soldiers.

“Hm? What do you want?”

The soldier’s reaction was slow. *You gotta act more nervous so this looks cooler.* I gave him a confident smile and said, “I’m a mage. Allow me to show you what I can do.”

With exaggerated movements, I cast one of my most-used spells, muscle strengthening, on him. The spell was potent enough that even an average soldier could take down a master veteran under its effects. The soldier’s stance changed immediately.

“Wow... my hips don’t hurt.”

“Huh?”

I was confused for a moment, but then I realized strengthening someone’s core muscles would probably relieve the strain on their back. So there actually wasn’t anything strange about his reaction. Still, it wasn’t the reaction I was going for. However, the soldier seemed overjoyed.

“Everyone, he healed my hips!”

“Wait, I’ve only strengthened your muscles temporarily, your back isn’t permanently...”

Before I could finish, all the other soldiers started crowding around me.

“I hurt my shoulder doing training, can you fix that too?”

“I busted my knee a few years back and now it hurts every winter.”

“One of my back teeth really hurt.”

“I think I’m coming down with a fever.”

Hold up, I’m no healer. That being said, strengthening magic and healing magic shared a lot of similarities. While I was no match for a true healer, I could use some healing magic. *Fine, I guess this is part of strengthening human-demon relations too.*

“Everyone line up. I’ll start with those of you with the most severe injuries.”

I figured I should triage these guys. If I ran out of mana, I wouldn’t be able to heal, so it was best that I fixed the most serious injuries first.

“Your knee joint’s been worn down. I cast restoration magic on your bones, so see if you feel better after a month or so. If it still hurts, I recommend seeing a healing mage specializing in bones.”

“You tore a muscle, but it looks like it’s mostly healed on its own. Try not to strain it too much for a while and you’ll be back to normal soon.”

“As for you, your tooth’s starting to rot. At this point, the only cure is to pull it out. I’ll deaden the pain for you, but make sure you see a dentist when you get back to the city.”

I had no formal medical training, but as a disciple of the Great Sage Gomoviroa, I had extensive knowledge of human anatomy. It was easy for me to tell what parts were damaged. *Man, this brings me back to the zombies and skeletons Master made me study.* At times, Master’s thirst for knowledge led her to do some truly morose things. *Anyway, I wanted to show off how powerful a mage I was, so how come I’m playing doctor now?*

On the way to Krauhen I sampled all the different varieties of cheese fondue that I could. Unfortunately, we only passed through two cities, so I couldn't really say I'd tried them all.

"What's the name of that orange cheese they use in Welheim? It was pretty good."

"It was tasty, but I thought it was a bit too thick. I prefer lighter, whiter cheeses myself. Like the stuff we had in Vongang. Simpler cheeses go better with bread."

"You sound like an old man. Everyone knows cheese goes best with meat. Especially beef."

"You sure love meat, Veight."

"All werewolves do."

Over the past few days, Kite and I had grown a lot closer. At the very least, he seemed to see me as a friendly superior than a strict boss. I was honestly a little surprised he could be so casual with a general of an enemy army that was using him as a spy. I didn't mind, but he really needed to be more careful.

"You know, don't you think you should be a little more cautious?"

"Huh? You're the last person I want to hear that from, Veight."

"He's got a point, boss."

What's with these two?

The mining city of Krauhen was located on Meraldia's northeastern tip. It was also one of Meraldia's oldest cities, and Lacy's hometown. It lay on the foothills of the Northern Peaks and mined all manner of minerals and metals, but its biggest export was rock salt. Rock salt with certain impurities in it had a different color than pure sea salt, and a different taste to match. Krauhen had been famous for its salt long before Meraldia had been unified into a single nation. As a result, the Defourd family, which had served as Krauhen's viceroys for generations, had a large amount of clout. The founder of the Defourd family had been a hero who'd slain multiple werewolves, and his descendants had all

inherited that warrior spirit.

“The Senate has always had trouble dealing with Krauhen.” Kite pulled on a spare jacket as he talked. “They’re the only producers of salt in the north, so the city’s rich beyond measure. Furthermore, Krauhen has a more esteemed history than the Senate.”

Since the Senate had no historical basis for its seat of power, I could see how dealing with Krauhen would be difficult for them. As I nodded in response, something suddenly occurred to me.

“But I take it the biggest reason the Senate has problems with them is because they suffered practically no damage during the unification war, right?”

“Yeah, that’s definitely a big reason, too.”

It was the same reason the Senate couldn’t handle Beluza or Lotz. The only disadvantage Krauhen had was that it was in the frigid reaches of the north, but depending on how you looked at it, that could be an asset as well. There was no worry of being invaded in winter. Either way, that explained why Krauhen had so much political influence within Meraldia. It paid for a great deal of the Senate’s budget and was the only supplier of salt in the north, so the Senate couldn’t afford to offend Krauhen. Which made me wonder what convinced them to requisition Krauhen’s treasured heirloom.

“How many troops does the city have?”

“About three hundred garrisoned troops, and a vigilante corps of around six hundred. The corps is mostly composed of ex-soldiers and huntsmen. They also have a lot of connections and can raise a larger, but less organized, militia on short notice.”

“Sounds like a tough nut to crack.”

“They are in the mountains after all. With how isolated the city is, they need the troops to survive on their own.”

Lacy’s homeland was a harsher place than I thought it’d be. Considering the Senate’s relationship with Krauhen, Kite’s authority wouldn’t be much help

getting us in.

“Truth is, my superiors actually forbade me from entering Krauhen. They said that with the way the political climate is, all I should do is a cursory outer inspection then return home.”

Guess we can’t enjoy ourselves on enemy funds anymore. Hopefully the demon army’s reputation preceded him even here.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be able to get through the gates. I’ll use strengthening magic to temporarily alter your facial features so no one recognizes you.”

“Huh, but how are you going to convince them to let you pass, still? You’re not planning on announcing you’re from the Southern Commonwealth, are you?”

I definitely wasn’t going to do anything that foolish. For one thing, there was no telling how many Senate spies were in Krauhen. For another, I didn’t want anyone other than the viceroy to know I was here. I’d already made preparations though.

Standing at the side of the road heading to the city’s gates was the crafty Ryunheit merchant, Mao. He gave me an annoyed look and said, “You’re late. I’ve been waiting here for you since yesterday.”

“You didn’t have to wait personally, you know.”

I knew he had plenty of servants he could have sent. After all, he was the president of his trading company. Mao shrugged his shoulders in response and replied, “If you’re coming here personally, it means you’re planning on shaking things up. I had to see this for myself.”

I gave Mao a wry smile.

“You can delegate *some* things to other people you know.”

“That doesn’t sound very convincing, coming from you,” Mao replied with a sigh. Jerrick nodded in agreement.

“He’s right.”

Why is everyone against me here? Kite observed Mao’s face for a few

seconds, then quietly said, “You’re that scheming smuggler from back then...”

Mao tilted his head quizzically. A moment later, realization dawned.

“You’re the Senate’s second-rate investigator, aren’t you?”

“Who’re you calling second-rate!?”

“Any official who won’t accept bribes is second-rate.”

I think you’ve got it backwards here.

“Oh, you two know each other?”

Kite and Mao glared at each other the way only bitter enemies would.

“Veight, you can’t trust this snake! He bought up all the stone and lumber in the north, claiming he was going to help with the reconstruction effort.”

Ah, that was from back when we were upgrading Ryunheit’s walls. I should have known he used dirty methods to get all those building materials. Mao retorted with a straight face, “I said I was going to use it to help the north so why did you try to investigate me so thoroughly? I gave you more than enough bribe money.”

“So what!? No investigator worth their salt would ever accept a bribe!”

Mao countered, “Well your boss seemed more than happy to.”

“What!?”

“It was thanks to him that I had no trouble buying everything up.”

“You corrupt merchant!”

“I can respect your adherence to integrity, but just know that a single honest person won’t be able to achieve anything in a corrupt system.”

Wow, Mao really is a crook.

I’d explained the plan to Mao beforehand and he’d already set everything up to let us enter Krauhen as members of his caravan. We made it through the gates without incident, and started looking for an inn.

“Remember, you three are officially members of my caravan, so please don’t

cause any trouble," Mao impressed onto us.

"I don't plan to, but I can't make any promises."

"I expected you would say that. You had better give me those Beluzan saltpans you promised."

Kite shot Mao a dirty look and interjected, "Oi, Mao, what are you scheming this time!?"

"I would prefer it if Senate employees such as yourselves kept your noses out of the Commonwealth's business."

Can you two please just stop fighting? We sure made for an odd group as we walked through Krauhen's streets. Two werewolves, a traitor to the Senate, and a corrupt merchant.

The northern edge of Krauhen had no walls. Instead, towering mountains protected it from invaders. Those natural fortifications were more sturdy than any man-made wall. Dotting the mountain slopes were multiple mineshafts, many no longer in use. These above-ground tunnels were remnants from a time when the city was much smaller. Nowadays, most of the city's active mines were located outside its borders.

"What do people use those abandoned tunnels for now?"

Kite and Mao responded simultaneously.

"Apparently they've been converted to storehouses."

"They're storehouses."

"You shut up," Kite hissed. Mao smiled at him and said, "You haven't seen them in person, have you? Meanwhile I've been inside the abandoned tunnels owned by Krauhen's merchant guild."

"I haven't been inside because they know if they let me, I'll have proof of all the illegal activity they've been up to."

"See what I mean? Honesty earns you only enmity."

"It's not my fault that's what my job is!"

I didn't want the two of them bickering this whole trip, so I decided to

mediate a little.

“I’m begging you two, please just stop arguing.”

Kite and Mao nodded right away.

“If that’s what you want Veight, sure.”

“I will gladly comply if you so desire, Sir Veight.”

However, they then returned to glaring at each other. Jerrick folded his arms behind his head and spoke up for the first time since entering the city.

“Humans sure are a handful...”

You can say that again.

That night, Jerrick and I headed to the mountains under the cover of darkness. Halfway up the slope we found entrances to multiple abandoned mine shafts. Each and every one was for mining rock salt.

“They sure dug deep, boss.”

“Supposedly, they’ve been at it for three hundred years, so it makes sense. See what you can sniff out about the tunnels that haven’t been converted to something else.”

“You got it.”

There were so many tunnels that we wouldn’t be able to investigate them all in one night. However by using our superior sense of smell, we’d at least be able to sniff out what each one was being used for, roughly. Which was why we were here at night, when no one else should be around. Of the abandoned tunnels, some of the ones closer to ground level had been turned into stores. There were a few others that had been converted into bars or breweries as well. But most were warehouses. However, some of those further up the mountainside were still abandoned. They were too difficult to reach to bother repurposing.

“Here it looks like... Oh?”

I caught a thick whiff of dairy. It seemed this was a cheese cellar. I couldn’t

detect any other scents from the tunnel. *Guess this one's a bust. How about here?*

"Ulp!?"

The stench of fermenting vegetables assailed my nostrils, causing me to groan. Judging by how nostalgic the scent was, this was probably where they picked root vegetables like taro. Supposedly Krauhen was famous for pickling its produce in salt. Their preserved foods were known in other cities as Mine Pickles. *Oh yeah, Lacy said that some foods take years to pickle so they leave them in tunnels far from the city. I guess this is what she meant.* As I was sniffing the area, Jerrick called out to me.

"Come over here, boss. I smell people."

I ran up the narrow pathway connecting the various tunnels and poked my head into the one Jerrick pointed out. Even with my superior werewolf night vision, I couldn't see a thing. However, the fresh scent of humans was unmistakable. In fact, I could even faintly make out the sounds of people talking. Quite a few of them too. Dozens, at least. Based on the echoes, this tunnel ran pretty deep into the mountains. Jerrick glanced at his surroundings before leaning in to whisper, "What do you wanna do, Boss? Get a closer look?"

"Nah, if it's a one-way tunnel we'll be in trouble."

If someone started heading outside while we were in the middle of investigating, we'd need somewhere to hide. But if it was a single linear shaft, there wouldn't be any such places. I examined the footprints near the entrance. There seemed to be a lot of people coming and going through here.

"This isn't like, a prison or a house or anything, is it?"

I looked around, but I couldn't find anything hinting at the purpose of this tunnel.

"Maybe it's a bandit hideout?"

I shook my head at Jerrick's guess.

"If any soldiers found this place, the bandits would be trapped. And according to Mao, soldiers regularly patrol the abandoned mines."

“Meaning whoever’s here is here with the viceroy’s permission.”

“Exactly.”

The viceroy here was plotting something. *I want to see what’s going on at the active mines too. I guess we should be able to get through them tonight too.* Most of the mine shafts within the city had gone so deep they were in danger of collapsing if they were mined any further, so the majority of mining operations were conducted in the shafts outside of the city now. I’d heard Krauhen’s soldiers kept watch on the mine shafts since they were a valuable source of revenue, but it was still worth seeing how far we could get.

We crossed the mountain slopes and headed out of the city.

The fact that Krauhen relied on natural topography to defend itself was convenient for us werewolves. While a few guards had been posted to watch the slopes, we slipped past them with ease.

“Over there.”

I spotted a smattering of salt mines in a small valley between mountain slopes. While there were no walls protecting them, there was a sturdy fence and a guardhouse to keep intruders out. Light spilled from the guardhouse’s entrance. Jerrick looked down at the valley and asked, “Which one?”

Of the mines I could see, there was one which was clearly separate from the others. I pointed to it.

“That one.”

That mine shaft was the only one with guards at its entrance. Still in his werewolf form, Jerrick growled, “It’ll be hard to get close...”

Unlike the abandoned shafts, these mine shafts were lit by torches at night. Plus they were guarded.

“Look, Boss. They’re still digging even in the middle of the night.”

Jerrick was right. Quite a few people were still hard at work. What really caught my interest though was the fact that most of the wheelbarrows being rolled out of the mine shafts weren’t filled with salt. In fact, they weren’t filled

precious materials at all, since each wheelbarrow was dumped unceremoniously outside.

“Doesn’t look like they’re mining to me, boss. Seems more like they’re digging a tunnel.”

“Yeah.”

I looked up at the mountain looming over the mine. With this world’s technology, it would be exceedingly difficult to dig a tunnel through the entire mountain. However, the tunnels I’d already seen proved that Krauhen’s engineers were skilled.

“A tunnel connecting to the other side of the mountain range...”

Unfortunately, I had almost no knowledge of what lay beyond the Northern Peaks. All I knew was some ancient empire had existed there. If I recalled correctly, it’s name was Rolmund. Since I’d heard no rumors of that empire collapsing, I assumed it still existed. That was the extent of my knowledge on the north. Jerrick leaned closer and whispered, “Boss. The soldiers guarding that tunnel are wearing different equipment than all the others.”

“Really?”

“Look at their armor. The parts around their necks are padded in furs and leather to keep the metal from directly touching their skin.”

“I’m surprised you could tell that from this far away.”

“Weapons and armor are my forte, remember?”

Now that I knew what to look for, I realized those soldiers were wearing more insulation against the cold than the other Krauhen guards. Some sort of leather or wool cloth stuck out from underneath their necks, and their capes were much thicker. They looked dressed for mountaineering. Jerrick cocked his head.

“All that extra clothing definitely helps against the cold, but it’s not really that cold right now, is it?”

“I don’t think that’s why. Seems to me like they needed those clothes to survive.”

“Survive...?”

“I mean they must have come from somewhere where it’s actually that cold.”

Krauhen certainly did get cold during the winters, but the entire Meraldian region had a relatively temperate climate. However, in places where temperatures truly plummeted, wearing bare metal could spell one’s death. If sub-zero temperature metal touched skin that was even slightly damp, it’d freeze and stick.

I looked up at the mountain in front of me once more. Its peak was covered in clouds, so I couldn’t see how high up it went. While I didn’t know much about the Northern Peaks, I guessed most of its mountains were at least a few thousand meters tall. My only mountain climbing experience was climbing Mt. Fuji once, but I distinctly remember the mountain’s peak being relatively cold, even during a midsummer day. As I was musing, someone walked out of the mine shaft. It was a burly middle-aged man. I could more or less guess who he was based on the reactions of the workers and guards around him. His appearance matched the description I’d been given too.

“He’s this city’s viceroy. Belken Zest Defourd.”

“Oho. He must be really enthusiastic about mining if he’s all the way out here at night,” Jerrick muttered.

The viceroy shouted some manner of order, and the guards around him vacated the mine. *I think that’s enough information gathering for now. All that’s left is to meet with this viceroy. Looks like we’ve got a lot more to talk about than just his werewolf-slaying sword.*

I thought the viceroy would return to his manor, but he ended up going in an unexpected direction.

“Boss, he’s going deeper into the mountains. Where could he be going?”

I took out the rough map of Krauhen’s surroundings that Mao had procured for me and looked up his destination.

“The viceroy’s mountain villa is near here. That’s probably where he’s going.”

“Humans make no sense... Why would you put a mansion here in the middle of nowhere?”

Jerrick couldn't fathom why anyone would want to live outside the safety of their city's walls. He probably felt strongly about this because of what had happened to our village once before.

"Officially, it's where he goes to hunt."

"And what's it actually for?"

"It's a convenient location for meeting people he wouldn't want to bring into the city, but still wants to negotiate with."

"I see. I'm surprised you knew all that, boss."

After watching the news in Japan, I could more or less guess what rich and powerful people actually used their retreats for. At any rate, while I'd come here to return the werewolf-slaying sword, I wasn't actually carrying it on me at the moment.

"Jerrick, grab the Werewolf Slayer for me. Also, tell Kite and the others to flee the city."

Jerrick nodded, then asked in a nervous voice, "Boss, are you planning something crazy again?"

"No, this is just in case. There's something fishy going on in this city, so I want to be prepared for the worst."

As I replied, I suddenly realized something. *Wait a second, what do you mean "again?"* While Jerrick ran back to get the sword, I kept an eye on the viceroy's movements. His mountain retreat was a wooden, two-story building nestled in a small crook up the mountain's slope. It was camouflaged by the nearby trees and situated such that it couldn't be seen from Krauhen. Fortunately, all those precautions meant it was easy for me to sneak up on it.

Three soldiers in Krauhen uniforms guarded the villa's entrance. But there was no guarantee they were actually Krauhen soldiers. Furthermore, I could smell a large number of people inside the villa. Approaching carelessly would be dangerous.

"Boss, I'm back. This is the one, right?"

"Yeah, thanks."

I took the sword from Jerrick.

“Have Mao and the others left the city?”

“Yep. They’re waiting outside the gates.”

“Alright, Jerrick, you keep an eye on this villa.”

“You got it.”

Now then, where’d that viceroy get off to? Werewolves had evolved to hunt humans, so our ability to tell people apart by their smell was quite potent. If we knew a person’s scent, we could track them as well as a police dog. In fact, I had an easier time remembering people by their smell than by their face. Nobles tended to wear expensive perfumes, so it was easy to tell them apart from others.

Following the viceroy’s scent, I snuck into one of the villa’s second-story windows. His manor in the city likely had more security, but this place was lightly guarded. The room I’d snuck into had no people in it, and it looked to be a conference room of sorts. A long table sat in its center, and a recently stoked fire was burning in the hearth. Seeing as the fire had just been started, chances were someone was planning on using this room soon.

The room had two doors, one leading to the outside corridor and another leading to a room further in. The room had a person in it. From the faint sounds and scents I could pick up, there was a single armed man inside. *That’s gotta be Belken.* Through the door, I heard him speak.

“O shimmering lord who sits in the vast sky, lend me your dazzling guidance and sweep aside this darkness. Bequeath unto me your warmth...”

He was saying a Sonnenlicht prayer. *It’s probably better not to disturb him right now.* Since all the guards were downstairs, I decided to leisurely wait in the conference room. I debated transforming back into my human form, but since I was sneaking in here uninvited, I figured I should stay as a werewolf up until the viceroy walked in.

From the looks of it, Belken was negotiating in secret with the Rolmund Empire. I needed to sound like I’d already learned everything if I wanted to

pressure him into negotiating favorable terms with me. The secret to successful negotiating was coming on strong, then backing down and showing you could be reasoned with.

This was also a good opportunity to find out what Rolmund thought of the Southern Commonwealth. I walked over to the head of the table, sat down in the chair closest to the hearth, and laid the Werewolf Slayer in front of me. Of course, once he finished his prayers, I planned to move to a different seat.

The heat of the fire and the sound of crackling wood felt quite pleasant. Judging by the sound, it was likely chestnut wood that was being used as firewood. I'd heard that chestnut produced the most soothing sounds when burned. I listened quietly as Belken finished his prayers with a solemn hymn. Just as I was starting to get fidgety, the door opened.

"Wha—!?" Belken exclaimed in surprise. He had a solid physique and a stern face. At a glance, I could tell he was a skilled warrior. *Crap. I wanted to greet him first, but he opened the door too quickly.* As a result, he saw me lounging in the conference room like I owned the place. Moreover, I was still in my werewolf form.

Like many of the veteran viceroys I'd met, Belken quickly got over his surprise. Though he was still nervous, he didn't try to attack me, or scream for help. Not only did he have a lot of self-control, he was good at assessing the situation. Meanwhile, I was regretting my carelessness. *God, I wish I could just crawl into a hole right now.* Belken's dignified reaction just made my rudeness seem worse. *Oh well, guess I'll have to stick to the act.*

"Greetings, Sir Viceroy. I am a Councilor of the Meraldian Commonwealth, Veight."

I know I'm the one who decided to come here, but in retrospect, it really makes no sense for a member of the Southern Commonwealth to be here. Belken must have been thinking the same thing. Cold sweat poured down his forehead and he muttered, "Veight... you mean the Black Werewolf King!? You came here in person!?"

"Indeed. I despise how slow things proceed when I use messengers."

I already gave off a bad first impression, so I figured I might as well stick with

the evil villain act for now. I gestured to the Werewolf Slayer laying on the table.

“Recently, I found this sword on the outskirts of Zaria. I have heard that this Werewolf Slayer is an heirloom of the Defourd family. And so, I have come here to return it to you.”

I’ll apologize for breaking it later. Belken steadied his breathing and replied, “You mean to kill me?”

“If I wished to kill you, I would have sent you to meet your maker while you were still praying. No, your death is not what I desire. I came here to return this sword to you, and to discover what it is you are plotting.”

Warily, Belken stepped into the room.

“That Werewolf Slayer was taken from us by force. We didn’t send a single soldier to help the Senate’s invasion.”

“I am aware. I am also aware that your actions have created a rift between you and the Senate. Which has led you to strengthen your ties with the Rolmund Empire.”

Half of that was just conjecture, but if I was wrong I could just bluff my way out of it. Belken placed his hands on the back of a nearby chair, but it seemed he lacked the courage to sit in my presence.

“I should have expected as much from the Black Werewolf King. So you know everything... But then what is it you’ve come to discuss?”

“Why, it’s simple. I wish to know how your alliance with Rolmund will affect the Commonwealth.”

I really was just curious. The Commonwealth had no intention of expanding into the north, so its affairs weren’t any of our business. As long as their designs didn’t involve invading us, we could strike a mutually beneficial deal. Belken grimaced and replied, “Well... unfortunately, I don’t know the answer to that myself.”

What? Unbelievably, he didn’t seem to be lying either. Just then, I heard footsteps. Whoever was approaching was trying to be stealthy, but I could

make out the noises clear as day. I didn't know who it was, but they were highly trained and armed.

"By the way, Sir Belken. It seems someone is approaching us."

The moment I said that, the door creaked open.

A young girl wearing a warrior's garb walked into the room. She seemed to be around the same age as Airia. She had long black hair, pale skin, and a sagacious look in her eyes. Though she was wearing armor, she carried no sword. In fact, she was unarmed. But she was carrying a thick book under her arm. My guess was she was some kind of civil servant. The crest engraved on her breastplate was one I didn't recognize. I had more or less memorized the crests of the 17 cities, so I knew it didn't belong to any of them. *I guess this is a Rolmund crest?* Upon seeing me the girl said, "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Black Werewolf King Veight. I suppose you need an introduction?"

That's a lot of confidence. I had no clue who she was so I nodded and replied, "If you would be so kind."

The girl puffed her chest out and declared proudly, "I am the sixth auxiliary imperial princess of the Holy Empire of Rolmund, Eleora Kastoniev Originia Rolmund. It's a long name to remember, so just call me Eleora."

Ah, she's a princess. Would a princess really be visiting foreign countries like this, though? Is she telling the truth? As if reading my thoughts, Eleora smiled and added, "To think a princess of Rolmund and the most important member of the Southern Commonwealth would be meeting here, in a city of the Meraldian Federation. Don't you find that strange, Lord Veight?"

"Fufu... I guess so."

She's taking control of the conversation. I wasn't very good at dealing with pushy women like her. Probably because they reminded me of someone. *I suddenly feel like going home.* If Rolmund's princess was here in person, it'd be hard to get any information on their plans out of Belken. Panicking, the viceroy said, "Princess Eleora, it's too dangerous for you to be here!"

Eleora grinned sardonically and said, "Is there anywhere it's safe for a

princess? Don’t worry, there’s plenty of replacements for me.”

You’d think princesses would be irreplaceable, but she did say she was the sixth. I guess there’s a lot of them. Unperturbed by my presence, Eleora walked over to the conference table.

“So this is the famed Defourd family heirloom, the Werewolf Slayer.” She looked at Belken, then back at me. “May I examine it?”

That was implicitly asking me whether it was okay to hold a weapon in my presence, and asking Belken whether it was permissible to handle his heirloom. Of course, it no longer posed a threat to werewolves, so I didn’t mind. I nodded, and Belken did as well. *Though, I still haven’t apologized for breaking the enchantment. Please don’t find out until I do.* Eleora unsheathed the massive sword from its scabbard and looked it over.

“If I could just examine the magic formula imbued into the sword our smiths would be able to replicate this weapon, but...”

Crap. Please don’t look at it. Eleora gave Belken an innocent smile.

“But examining a sworn ally’s heirloom without permission would be quite rude of me.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, and Eleora turned her scrutinizing gaze onto me.

“I must say, you’re quite brave, Lord Veight. Legends of this blade’s strength have reached even Rolmund, yet you seem wholly unafraid of it.”



Before I'd destroyed its enchantment, the blade had enough magical power to cut through a werewolf like a chainsaw. Even a little girl could deal a fatal blow to a werewolf with it. But now that I'd destroyed the enchantment, it was like a chainsaw with a broken motor. Hardly something to be afraid of. But the flow of the conversation was making it harder and harder to apologize for breaking it. I smiled, and in an attempt to change the subject, said, "Sworn ally, you say?"

"Indeed."

Eleora resheathed the blade and proffered it to Belken.

"How much do you know about the relationship between Rolmund and the Meraldian Federation, Lord Veight?"

I knew pretty much nothing. There was no benefit to lying, so I answered honestly.

"Unfortunately, I am but a poor country bumpkin. I know nothing of the two nations' history."

Eleora grinned.

"I see... so you plan to play the fool until the very end."

No, seriously, I don't know a damn thing. Please enlighten me. Eleora stroked the spine of the book she was holding and walked closer to me.

"I never imagined the slaves who fled through the mountains three hundred years ago would be capable of building such a vast nation."

Slaves, huh? Now I see. The residents of northern Meraldia were descendants of slaves who'd escaped from Rolmund. Meaning even the members of the Senate were descended from slaves. Pretending as though I understood the whole situation, I replied, "I imagine you must have found it rather humorous that they created their own Senate."

Eleora sneered.

"Most certainly. To think those lowly slaves would try to imitate the government of their betters. When I heard they had a Senate I burst out laughing."

I see, so Rolmund works under a similar system. However, Eleora added, “Rolmund hasn’t even had a Senate in centuries. As befitting of an empire, we now have a monarchy. No doubt this country’s Senate will share a similar fate to ours.”

This girl’s scary. The things she was saying were scary enough, but on top of that, she was looking for an opening to attack me. I could tell from the smell of her sweat. Though I had no idea what she planned to attack me with, since I couldn’t see any weapons on her. As I was thinking that, Eleora adjusted the thick book in her hands. Between the tops of the pages, I caught a glimpse of something I recognized very well. A gun muzzle. *So that’s what your weapon is.* The moment she pointed the muzzle at me I got to my feet.

“Don’t. Unless you want to die here and now.”

Eleora’s hand froze and her lips curled up into a grin.

“I can’t believe you saw through my Blast Grimoire. You truly are a monster.”

I knew it was a weapon. Though I smelled no gunpowder from the book, I’d sensed the flow of mana around it change. *I guess it’s some kind of mana-powered gun... hidden inside a book. Damn, this girl really is scary.* Eleora put her Blast Grimoire down on the table and raised her hands to show she was unarmed.

“I just wanted to see if you knew about this weapon or not. And it seems I have my answer.”

Sure, and if I hadn’t, you would have shot me. Maybe I should put some pressure on her.

“I would not recommend testing me. I’m known for having a short temper.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Despite my threats, Eleora was unfazed. I didn’t want to be in the same room as this woman a minute longer. It was time to go home.

“Sir Belken. I apologize for dropping in uninvited.”

“Oh, I don’t mind. I owe you a great debt for returning the Werewolf Slayer to me.”

He bowed to me, and I suddenly felt very guilty. However, his next words made me a little relieved.

“To be honest, I would have been glad to get even a piece of the hilt back. But thanks to you, I will be able to enshrine the sword in my family mausoleum once more.”

Good. As long as you don’t try to slay any werewolves with it. Because then you’ll discover it’s broken. Alright, time to make my exit.

“I have fulfilled my objective, and so will be taking my leave for the night. Just know that the Commonwealth has no desire to interfere with Rolmund’s policies. In fact, we would like to establish trading relations in the near future.”

Eleora nodded in response.

“Understood. The Rolmund Empire will stay out of the Commonwealth’s affairs.”

I could tell she was lying, but pretending to believe her was the best choice for now.

“That is most reassuring, Princess. Let us meet again at a more fitting venue.”

“Of course.”

Careful not to get shot from behind, I leapt out of the window and into the night. *What on earth is with that girl?*

—Viceroy Belken’s Regrets—

By the time I ran to the window, the werewolf was already running down the mountain slope. In seconds he’d melted away into the dark night. His leg strength was unbelievable. *So that’s the legendary werewolf.* I turned around and saw Princess Eleora touching her earring and muttering something.

“Have squad two search the city. Someone as powerful as the Black Werewolf King would not have come here alone. I suspect his men are somewhere in the city. Check the inns, the merchant guilds, the Sonnenlicht churches, and any other public locations that might be suspicious. But don’t lay a hand on any of his men if you find them. Have squad three split up and investigate everywhere

within a five bowlength radius of the city.”

That earring was also likely a magical invention of Rolmund’s. Noticing my gaze, Eleora looked up at me and smiled.

“So that was the rumored Black Werewolf King. His sense of smell is quite impressive.”

The reports I’d received claimed that Ryunheit’s Black Werewolf King was a peerless warrior and a master strategist. In fact, there were rumors that he was the true Demon Lord. The theory certainly did seem likely. Evidence suggested that he was the one who’d slain Arshes, the man who’d actually been a Hero. Just thinking about what would have happened had he truly felt inclined to fight Eleora sent shivers down my spine.

“Princess Eleora, you are aware of his strength, aren’t you?”

“I know. That was careless of me.”

Surprisingly, Princess Eleora admitted her mistake. She looked down and picked up her magical grimoire. There was a faint metallic clink and the black hole that had been visible through the book’s pages retracted.

“But I can’t believe he knew about even the Blast Grimoire. Now my hands truly are tied.”

“The man is a genius strategist as well as a warrior. When the Senate assassinated Zaria’s viceroy and tried to frame him for the crime, he exposed their plot and convinced Zaria to join him.”

Upon hearing of the Senate’s foolish scheme, Eleora laughed.

“Hah. I suppose that means he knows all about my mage corps as well.”

“Are you referring to your personal bodyguards?”

“I was keeping their existence secret because they’re my biggest trump card, but it appears even they won’t be enough.” Eleora lapsed into thought for a few seconds. “I don’t feel safe with just my bodyguards and your troops, but winter is nearly upon us. How goes progress on the tunnel?”

“My engineers are working as fast as they can. Any faster, and there’s a risk of the tunnel collapsing. There aren’t any other men I can recruit that I would trust

to keep this secret, either."

"Alas. I had hoped to stockpile munitions and men during the winter, but..."

Eleora's expression grew serious.

"I did prepare for the possibility that the Senate or the Commonwealth would catch wind of our plan before preparations were complete. It's time we switched to our backup plan. Are negotiations with Draulight going well?"

"For now they're willing to cooperate. They're as close to the mountains as we are, and my wife is from there. I doubt they'll betray us."

Draulight, the city of peaks, sat on the northernmost tip of Meraldia. Like us, they were also negotiating with Rolmund. And like us, they were preparing to house Rolmund's army when it finally arrived. Eleora nodded, but then said, "That is good to hear. But you shouldn't be so trusting of your relatives. In fact, you should mistrust those closest to you most of all."

She's said things like that before, too. I guess Rolmund's internal situation must be complicated. Of course, I didn't trust Eleora completely either. But if I remained with the Federation, Krauhen would fall along with the incompetent Senate. If I wanted my city to survive, I had only one option. Ally myself with Rolmund to the north, and destroy the Federation. And eventually, the Commonwealth.

Looking up, I realized that Eleora had been watching me. Her usual sardonic grin was gone, replaced by a look of genuine concern.

"Are you worried, Sir Belken?"

Of course I am. The path I had chosen was a supremely risky one. Even now I wondered if there hadn't been a better way of protecting my citizens. But no matter how hard I wracked my brains, I could think of no other option, so naturally there was only reply I could give.

"Perish the thought. I have you, a princess of the Holy Rolmund Empire on my side. Feel free to use Krauhen as the vanguard for your invasion."

I had no choice. *Please let this be enough to satisfy you, Princess Eleora.* Eleora's expression grew troubled.

“...Of course.” For just a moment she looked almost remorseful. But that vulnerable expression disappeared an instant later and she declared, “Send messengers to Bahen, Schverm, and Aryoug in my name. Tell them the continent’s strongest empire, Rolmund, will protect them from both the greedy Senate and the demon army. Make sure you sound convincing.”

“As you wish.”

The people of Krauhen had a saying. “Salt in a pan can’t be recovered.”

I had put the large chunk of salt known as Krauhen into the massive pan that was this witch. And now I could no longer reverse that decision. No matter what dish came of it, I would have to eat it all. *I need to prepare myself.*

※Bowlength is a Rolmund unit of measurement. One bowlength is roughly the effective range of a Rolmund longbow, which happens to be about 100 meters.

I sat on the villa’s rooftop, listening in on Eleora and Belken’s conversation. The person Belken had seen from the window had been Jerrick, not me. *How do you like my ninja werewolf substitution technique?* I was from a country of ninjas, so simple tricks like this were child’s play for me. Though it was Jerrick who was actually doing the work. The only problem now was that there was so much movement within the villa that it wouldn’t be easy to slip out unnoticed. *What a chore. Guess I’ll wait for things to settle down a little then use magic to escape.*

Regardless, it seemed as though Rolmund would pose quite a threat in the near future. If I killed Eleora here, I might be able to delay the invasion somewhat. But that would cause its own problems. Killing her would mean throwing away any chance of a diplomatic resolution. I wanted to leave as many options open as possible for now. Plus she’d mentioned a few worrying points in her introduction, such as the fact that she was the sixth princess, and an “auxiliary” one, whatever that meant. And she’d even said there were plenty of replacements for her. She hadn’t sounded like she was lying, so there were probably plenty of replacement commanders for someone of Eleora’s status.

Man, what a scary country.

I waited in the chilly night air until I was sure there was no one nearby, then absconded from the villa. Though this trip had given me a lot of valuable information, I kind of wish I hadn't had to sit out in the cold so much. *If only I'd brought a blanket with me...*

"Boss, over here."

I met up with Jerrick at the designated rendezvous point. Mao and Kite were there as well. It looked like everyone had escaped safely.

"There's been a bunch of shady people moving around. Let's get outta here."

"Yeah, sounds good. There's a lot I need to tell the council."

Hearing that, Mao sighed, "Allow me to hazard a guess. I will no longer be able to purchase salt from this city, will I?"

Good guess. Don't worry, I promise I'll get you your Beluzan saltpans.

We trekked south through the night, stopping only when we reached the relative safety of Welheim. However, even then, we didn't enter the city. Instead, we waited on the road while Mao went ahead and met up with the other members of his caravan. Fortunately, they were able to provide us with a covered wagon and fresh blankets.

"Mao, did you prepare all of this stuff beforehand?"

"Unlike you werewolves, us humans can't run all the way from Krauhen to Zaria in a single night. There's jerky and bread as well if you're hungry."

We piled into the wagon and finally were able to rest for a short while. However—

"Hey Mao, scoot over."

"You realize who provided this wagon for you, don't you, Jerrick? If you're feeling cramped, I suggest stretching your legs toward Kite."

"Wait, then I won't have any room! Why's this wagon so tiny anyway!?"

“Because I used the larger ones to store as much salt as I could.”

“You goddamn greedy merchant!”

These guys’ arguing was making it hard to sleep. *Try to get along you guys, I’m too tired for this...*

Thankfully, Rolmund’s soldiers didn’t pursue us, and we were safely able to return to Zaria, and from there to Ryunheit. I called an emergency council meeting the moment I returned and told the Commonwealth’s viceroys what I’d learned.

“Rolmund, eh? All I know about ‘em is what I read in some old records,” Petore, the oldest human viceroy, said with a frown. Veira’s viceroy, Forne nodded in response.

“Even the information we’ve gathered from the north has little to say on Rolmund. And I have most certainly expended all of my resources in gathering information.”

Everyone pooled together what little they knew about Rolmund. After patching together all the information we had, we were able to get an overall picture of the state of the empire. Three hundred years ago, Rolmund had been a republic ruled by a Senate. Slavery had also been legal, and the citizens of northern Meraldia were descendants of Rolmund’s slaves. Unfortunately, we had little to no information detailing how it turned into the empire it is now. Melaine sat at the edge of the table, thinking quietly. *Oh yeah, Melaine used to live in the north back when she was human, didn’t she?*

“When I was a child, people often talked about how travelers had stopped crossing the mountains. It seems there used to be at least some contact between the empire and Meraldia until then.”

“How long ago was— Owww!”

Firnir attempted to ask a somewhat rude question, and was met with a noogie before she could finish. *You reap what you sow.* After she finished punishing Firnir, Melaine muttered, “Even among vampires, there aren’t many people who’ve lived longer than a century. F-For the record, I haven’t either.”

Since all the other vampires are your familiars, isn't it practically a guarantee that you're the oldest? In the end, we still had almost no information, so our first priority was gathering intel.

"I've got spies in Krauhen, Draulight, and the three cities ya demons conquered. I'll scrounge up a few more trustworthy lads and send them to the other cities."

Thanks to Lotz's financial prowess, Petore could afford to keep an entire retinue of spies on payroll. Garsh nodded and added, "I've got a few boys scoping out the north too, so hopefully I'll get some useful info soon."

That was reassuring to hear, but there was one other thing we couldn't forget.

"The girl who called herself Eleora said she had no intention to interfere with the Commonwealth, but she definitely shouldn't be trusted."

It'd be best if we strengthened each city's defenses.

"I'd like to focus on especially bolstering the defenses of the four cities that border the north. Would the four southern cities be willing to provide military aid to them?"

"Of course. Shardier will send all the supplies and troops it can spare."

Aram, who'd lost a great deal of weight recently, eagerly agreed to my proposal. The viceroys of the three other cities nodded as well. While we were discussing particulars, Shatina cocked her head and asked, "But Master, won't the north be entering the snowy season soon? I don't know too much about snow, but isn't it difficult to move troops through?"

Good question.

"Places like Krauhen get enough snow to bury a man whole during winter. So you're right, moving troops in winter is no mean feat. However, Rolmund's army has numerous magical tools at their disposal. It's possible they might be able to swiftly traverse snow, so we can't let our guard down."

Until we had a better idea of Rolmund's technological capabilities, we couldn't assume snow would protect us.

“Plus, the further south you go, the less snow there is. Rolmund’s army is used to fighting in snow, so the paltry amounts they get near Vongang and the like probably aren’t even an obstacle to them.”

“You have a point there. We should assume they’re highly familiar with snow warfare.”

Airia nodded, then added, “We cannot impact Rolmund’s forces directly at this juncture, but we should build up our forces and prepare for war. I recommend every city improve their walls and prepare for a siege.”

Garsh nodded in agreement.

“You got it. We should set up a relay system so we can send emergency aid. I’ll give Ryunheit a few more soldiers, so make use of them.”

Are we about to get another influx of mohawk dudes?

—Mao’s Expectations—

Let us rewind time and go back to the point where Veight was investigating Krauhen’s abandoned mine shafts. Mao and Kite, who had remained behind at the inn, were glaring at each other.

“Oi, what’re your lackeys up to? I don’t see them anywhere.”

The Senate’s investigator, Kite, gives me a suspicious look. It’s a personal rule of mine to tell the truth when lying doesn’t benefit me, so I see no reason to deceive him.

“When you arrived, I had my men return to the south. It’s no longer safe here, and I lack the leverage to protect them.”

Since Veight has come here in person I have no doubt he’s about to cause an uproar. Kite seems taken aback at my response.

“You evacuated them? What a surprise.”

“And what exactly is surprising about that?”

“I just figured knowing you, you’d have no qualms about abandoning your

subordinates...”

How rude.

“There’s nothing I despise more than cowards who abandon their employees.”

“Yeah, this really is a surprise...”

You really need to learn some manners. I don’t really want to have one of my allies misunderstanding who I am, especially not one who used to work for the Senate. I believe an explanation is in order.

“In my youth, I was treated as a disposable pawn by one of my employers and eventually cast aside.”

“You were?”

Please stop doubting everything I say. I wasn’t born a crafty merchant, you know.

“Did you never find it strange that my name is Mao?”

“Hm? Oh yeah, I guess Mao’s not a Ryunheit name. Were you born in Shardier?”

I smile sadly in response.

“No, I’m not from Meraldia. I was born in a different nation. One that lies far to the east of the Windswept Dunes.”

At that, Kite’s gaze grows suspicious again.

“So you stirred up trouble in your homeland and had to flee to Meraldia?”

“You could say that. I was unwittingly roped into a drug smuggling operation without my knowledge. Had I been caught in my homeland I would have been executed, so I fled all the way to Ryunheit.”

Ever since then, I’ve been meticulously thorough in ensuring no supplier tries to sneak in contraband among my merchandise. Experience has taught me that white powder inside a salt jar may not necessarily be salt. Not even when that salt jar has been handed to me by my employer. At least I learned a valuable lesson that day. Though I paid quite a high price to learn it.

“My old employer was a wealthy merchant who made his fortune smuggling drugs. Publicly, he was revered as an ally of the common man, and a merchant with impeccable business acumen. But I know he’s an unfeeling monster who’ll throw away his men without a second thought.”

“I... see.”

Kite’s words sound quite somber. I’ve heard that he suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Senate. Considering how corrupt they’ve become, I can easily see how a man of integrity like him could be a liability.

“Because of that, I made a vow that I would never treat my own men like pawns. I’ll be the one to take on truly dangerous missions such as these.”

“You’re a corrupt merchant aren’t you, why do you care so much about them?”

“Even corrupt merchants have their pride.”

This is one thing I will never back down on. If I break this vow, I’ll be no better than the disgusting merchants I despise. Kite nods in admiration and says, “Then how about you stop bribing people and become an honest merchant?”

I sigh.

“You truly are a naive little man.”

“Hey, that’s uncalled for! And I finally started respecting you a little.”

“You will never understand.”

This is why I prefer making deals with our esteemed werewolf general. He possesses unparalleled strength and authority, knows when to be cautious and when to be bold, and most of all, is a truly kind man at his core. The perfect balance of attributes needed to be an effective leader.

“Fufu...”

“Oi, what’re you laughing at?”

“Oh, nothing. Now then, I suppose we should get ready to depart.”

Kite cocks his head as I start packing my belongings.

“But Veight and his friend haven’t returned yet.”

This man really doesn't understand a thing. I sigh again.

"Seeing as he's come here in person, it's clear as day there's going to be a huge uproar. You need to be more perceptive, or you'll die an early death."

"R-Really?"

"Yes, really."

Veight is one hell of a werewolf. It doesn't matter if he's up against the Senate, a viceroy, or the Hero himself, he'll beat down anyone in his way and get what he wants. As a merchant, his reckless ways cause me no end of trouble, but there's also a part of me that wants to see how far he'll go.

"He is Ryunheit's Black Werewolf King, and the Demon Lord's representative after all. Though he is quite a handful."

"If he's that much of pain to deal with, why're you grinning like that?"

"I am not. Now get dressed. If you go out like that you'll freeze to death. I have a spare mountain hare hide coat, so wear that. Not only is it warm, but it will also help you blend into the darkness."

"O-Oh, thanks."

Seeing Kite's hesitation as he picks up the luxurious coat makes me want to tease him a little.

"That'll be a hundred seventy silver coins, please."

"O-One hundred and seventy!? Wait, you're charging me for this!? I thought we were allies!?"

"I don't recall allying with a straight-laced inspector such as yourself, but I suppose if you're willing to *ally* yourself with me I can provide it for free."

"You just want me to take your bribes!"

Now then, what ridiculous antics will our esteemed werewolf general show me next?

This year, like every other year, winter came to Meraldia. One day, Mao came into my office with an exasperated look on his face.

"The Senate has banned the sale of sea salt within the north. They claim they

don’t want to let their enemies profit off them.”

“Are you serious? But Krauhen’s not providing them rock salt either. How are the citizens going to get their salt?”

Mao shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ve heard rumors, but I’m sure our Senate informant knows the full story.”

Kite sat off to one side, blowing hard on his cup of green tea. *Guess he’s got a sensitive tongue.* Though he’d secretly betrayed his employers, it seemed the Senate regarded him highly as “the only man capable of negotiating on even terms with the Black Werewolf King.” It was funny how little they knew. Kite took a sip of his tea and replied, “Krauhen softened their stance. They said they would be willing to forget about the Werewolf Slayer incident. But in return, they demanded control over the salt trade.”

“So that’s why the north’s banned importing salt and is buying only rock salt from Krauhen.”

The north didn’t actually import much salt, so the gesture was more a formality acknowledging Krauhen’s authority than anything. However, the fact that Krauhen was in league with Rolmund changed everything. Mao munched on a cookie and said in a grave voice, “Since the Senate is no longer importing salt from the south, they’re beholden to Krauhen. If Krauhen betrayed the Senate right now...”

Meraldia’s northern cities would have no salt. The amount of salt showing up in various northern marketplaces was already beginning to decrease. Chances were they didn’t have much salt stockpiled. I was worried about how that would impact the lives of civilians, but there wasn’t much I could do from here.

“Furthermore, Bahen and Aryoug are the granaries of the north. If they betray the Senate along with Krauhen, the Meraldian Federation is all but finished.”

“Especially since the majority of the Senate’s army is situated in Schverm. I have no idea what Schverm’s plans are, but if they capitulate to Rolmund as well...” Kite trailed off.

“Dividing cities based on function ended up backfiring on the Senate,” Mao replied with a sardonic smile. He clearly wanted the Senate to fall. I smiled to

Kite and said, “So, honorable inspector who fears for the fate of the north, why have you come here today?”

“The Senate wanted me to give you this letter. It’s proof of their desire for friendship, or so they say.”

They probably just want to flatter me into isolating myself from my allies. Kite unfolded the letter and summarized its contents.

“Looks like they want to give you a palace in Ioro Lange to use as an embassy for diplomatic relations. Supposedly it’s staffed by twenty beautiful women.”

“No thanks.”

I’d much rather take a one-room apartment with internet access and an air conditioner over a palace. Mao shrugged his shoulders.

“They just want you to accept so they can start spreading rumors that you’re secretly colluding with the north. Am I right?”

“Yeah,” Kite replied sulkily. It seemed he was fed up by how juvenile the Senate’s attempts were.

“Of course the Senate thinks their plan to drive wedges between the Southern Commonwealth is progressing smoothly. Since that’s what I’m reporting to them.”

“Thanks. You’re doing a good job.”

I actually felt a little bad for making Kite turn traitor, considering how much integrity he had.

At this time of year, Krauhen was buried in snow. We were only in trouble if they’d already finished their tunnel to Rolmund, but I didn’t have enough information to know for sure whether they had or not.

“The Senate doesn’t suspect anything?”

“They do, but nobody wants to be the first to admit they’ve overlooked something.”

The first person to officially bring up the possibility that Krauhen was up to

something shady would likely be tasked with the unenviable responsibility of figuring out what. It was for that reason that members of the Senate tended to purposely ignore subtle hints that something was wrong. As a result, most people working for the Senators were yes-men who rarely ever spoke their own opinions. The company I'd worked for back in Japan had been similar, so I could understand Kite's disgust. Even if I tried to tip the Senate off about Rolmund's impending invasion, my message would likely never reach any of the Senators.

On the other hand, the Commonwealth made as many preparations as it could during the winter. Naturally, training more soldiers was part of those preparations, but we also tried to raise as many talented leaders as possible. Today I was teaching Shatina about the state of affairs within Meraldia.

"Within the Northern Federation, Bahen, Schverm and Aryoug have likely switched sides and joined Rolmund."

Shatina raised her hand to ask a question.

"Master, how come Rolmund only negotiated with those three cities? Wouldn't it have been easier for them to convince all the cities to join them?"

"I imagine they didn't have enough people. From the looks of it, Princess Eleora only brought a few subordinates with her. Of which, even fewer are diplomats."

Shatina nodded in understanding, and I added, "Besides, if they try to sway every city, the chances of their plot being exposed to the Senate rise exponentially. So they limited their targets to those cities they thought could be convinced."

I pointed to three cities on the map.

"These three cities were once occupied by the demon army, so they feel they can't trust the Senate to protect them. They also know that demons are a bigger threat than they anticipated. Furthermore, they're still in the middle of repairing their walls, so they're in no shape to fight."

"So the last thing they would want is negotiations to break down and get invaded by Rolmund while they're vulnerable?"

“Correct. No one wants to suffer two invasions in quick succession.”

Whether they’d actually turned or not depended on Eleora’s diplomatic prowess, but it was best to prepare for the worst, and assume all three cities had been converted as well. Shatina looked down at the map and nodded.

“In that case, Rolmund controls five cities, the Northern Federation four, and us eight. Wouldn’t that make us the strongest power in the region?”

“No, not necessarily.” I shook my head. “Thanks to the Federation’s policies, the north has more population than the south. Our cities are much smaller than theirs. That, plus the fact that they have a more experienced army means there isn’t much difference between us.”

In fact, we were at a disadvantage since we had so much more land we needed to protect than the other two factions. We had to cover the most territory with the least amount of troops. Our two biggest cities, Beluza and Lotz, focused more on their navy than their army, so the demon army would have to make up the difference somehow. If it really came to war, we’d be in a tight spot.

After Shatina’s lesson, I returned to Ryunheit and sought an audience with Master. I gave her a sharp salute, then explained the situation to her.

“Which is why I humbly request that you continue adding to our troop count.”

Exhausted, Master sat in the corner of her workshop and munched on the snacks I’d brought her. She gave me a reproachful look and said, “Is this any way to treat your Demon Lord?”

Surely a mere 12,000 skeletons is a piece of cake for the almighty Demon Lord Gomoviroa. After finishing her snacks, Master flopped down on a pile of cushions she used as a makeshift bed and grumbled, “So this is what being a leader is like...”

“That’s right.”

That wasn’t exactly true, but seeing as she’d pushed all of the bureaucratic duties of government onto us, she had to earn her keep somehow.

“By the way, Master, do you know what a Blast Grimoire is?”

Crawling even deeper into the cushions, where no one could bother her, Master replied, “I’m afraid not.”

“From what I can tell, it’s some kind of shooting weapon that uses magic.”

As I discussed Eleora’s weapon with Master, I heard Jerrick’s panicked voice in the distance.

“Hold on, Monza, I just went along as boss’s guard!”

“Hah, you’re supposed to stop him when he gets like that. Alright, you’re coming with me to see Fahn.”

“If you’re going to lecture someone, lecture him, not me!”

“Yeah, the problem is he doesn’t listen to any of us.”

I wanted to argue back, but I didn’t have the courage to go outside and get roped into Fahn’s lecture as well. I already had to listen to one when I got back, I don’t want to go through another. Master poked her head out of the mountain of cushions and replied, “I am a necromancer first and foremost, so my knowledge of magical artifacts extends only to those related to necromancy. Moreover, I cannot analyze this weapon for you unless I have it in front of me.”

“Do you think Ryucco would be able to figure something out?”

Ryucco wasn’t part of the demon army, but he was another one of Master’s disciples. His specialty was creating magical tools. Master shook her head and replied, “Unfortunately, even Ryucco would need to see it at least... Though I do plan to call him over to Ryunheit in the near future, so if you’re still curious, ask him yourselves.”

“Gotcha.”

None of the spies the various viceroys sent out had been able to discover anything about Blast Grimoires or Eleora’s mage corps either. I had more or less figured out it was a gun of some sort, but I really wanted to know the specifics of its functionality.

—Fahn’s Lecture—

“Jerrick.”

“Yes?”

Jerrick’s sitting meekly in front of me.

“Do you know why I called you here?”

“Yeah... I mean, yes.” He looks resigned to his fate. “But I just did my job and guarded the boss. How come I’m the one you’re yelling at...”

“See, you don’t know why I called you here after all!”

I slam my hands down on the table. Even though I hold back, the sturdy wood creaks.

“Veight’s one of the most important people in the demon army. You realize that, right?”

“I know. His life’s way more important than mine.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to get at here.”

Jerrick might worship Veight a little too much. Though I can get where he’s coming from. Jerrick was like the odd one out in our village, but Veight respected him anyway so now he has total faith in him. But you know, even I think it’s weird for a werewolf to be a blacksmith. Like, what’s the point in any of us having swords? Anyway, that’s not important right now.

“Veight is the Demon Lord Gomoviroa’s Vice-Commander. Not only that, he’s a councilor on the Commonwealth Council. Do you get what that means?”

“He’s important?”

“Exactly. Which is why we need to keep him in a safe place where he can give orders to other people.”

Even werewolves like us don’t send our leaders out onto the frontlines. Their job is to direct the pack and make sure the hunt succeeds. Except Veight never acts like that.

“Veight needs to realize how important he’s become already...”

He’s a smart man, so I’m sure he knows that in his head. But on some level, he probably just doesn’t want to accept it. At least, that’s what it feels like to

me. Jerrick observes my face for a few seconds, then finally says, “But you know, Fahn. It’s because boss takes on all the most dangerous jobs that none of us have died yet.”

“Well...”

He has a point. All 56 of us werewolves have participated in numerous fierce battles since joining the demon army. Veight’s cautious enough that we’ve never found ourselves in a truly desperate fight. But still, you would think after these many months we’d have lost a werewolf or two. But all 56 of us are still alive and well. Not a single one of us has died. And the reason for that is exactly as Jerrick says. Veight handles all of the most dangerous fighting so none of us have to. He’s stronger and smarter than the rest of us, a true werewolf Champion. But that’s exactly what the problem is. The things Veight’s thinking about are way too complicated for me to understand. At this point I kind of get that humans have a very complex society with a bunch of rules. Both conquering Ryunheit and convincing all those other viceroys to join us would have been impossible if Veight hadn’t been with us, fighting on the frontlines. Which makes me wonder, is trying to take Veight off the front lines truly the right thing to do? I’m not sure anymore. Seeing me go silent, Jerrick looks up and says, “Hey, can I leave now?”

Sorry, but I’m not done with you yet.

Afterwards, Lacy came into my office to complain as well.

“If you were going to Krauhen you should have taken me with you! It’s my hometown!”

“It was too dangerous to take you.”

You seem to have forgotten, but you’re wanted by the Senate, you know. Lacy’s illusion magic was potent, but if her disguise was seen through, she’d been finished. I doubt she’d have been noticed too easily, but it was a long trip. I tried to explain that to her, but she wouldn’t budge. Eventually, she started talking about the fond memories she had of the city.

“You have a point, but still... Oh, Lord Belken was the one who wrote my recommendation letter for the magic academy.”

Apparently Belken had valued Lacy's skills as a sorcerer highly, and had been the one who pushed her to go to the magic academy in Ioro Lange. It seemed Lacy had been quite the honor student back home. As I was listening to her berate me for not bringing her, Parker walked into my office.

"Hello there, Lacy. Master Gomoviroa is in need of an assistant, and I have come to take your place in the break room."

Master was shy, but she also got lonely easily, which was why she preferred always having at least one disciple by her side. Which was why Parker, who had no real duties to speak of, was often on talking to Master duty. I was in the middle of a mountain of paperwork, so I impatiently tried to shoo him out of my office.

"Why is everyone coming *here* to take their break? I'm busy, so get out."

Parker shrugged his shoulders and sighed, feigning umbrage.

"You realize humans often need breaks to empty their heads and relax, right?"

"You're neither human nor get tired, so get out before I blow a hole into that empty head of yours."

Parker smiled and gleefully said, "Nice retort!"

God this guy annoys me.

Chances were that scary princess from Rolmund was plotting something in Krauhen right now. There was no doubt she'd move once spring came, but it was possible she'd also try something during the winter. We needed to strengthen the defenses of the four cities bordering the north, and build up a larger army. Furthermore, we needed to keep an eye on the Senate's movements. There was so much work to be done. I would have liked Eleora to stay put until spring at least, but she moved as fast as I'd anticipated.

"The mining city of Krauhen, the city of peaks, Draulight, the fortress city Schverm, and the agricultural cities of Aryoug and Bahen have all announced their independence from the Meraldian Federation."

Airia's report one day confirmed that the enemy had begun to move. The entire northern and western sections of Meraldia had left the Senate. However, the details of their secession were different than I'd expected.

"These five cities have announced the formation of the Meraldian Liberation Army. And the Princess Eleora you mentioned before has officially declared herself its sponsor."

"They're not announcing an alliance with Rolmund's military?"

Airia shook her head, her expression pensive.

"Correct. Their official position is that this is a Meraldian rebellion, with Rolmund only providing support and nothing more."

It appeared Eleora had a rather crafty plan for her invasion of Meraldia. According to the information the Sonnenlicht pilgrims had brought us, Rolmund's army was only officially there to provide logistic and non-military support.

"Meraldia's citizens were originally subjects of the Rolmund Empire. Rolmund's only objective as Meraldia's patron empire is to let the independent people of Meraldia live under a just, merciful, and moral system of government. The sixth auxiliary princess of the Holy Rolmund Empire, Eleora Kastoniev Originia Rolmund hereby declares that she will strike down the corrupt Meraldian Senate and bring peace and prosperity to the region."

One of the pilgrims who could read and write had recorded Eleora's proclamation for us, which was what Airia read aloud. It was wonderful propaganda. I had to applaud her attempts to sway the northern populace to her side. I really admired how she'd just casually added in the "independent" bit. Unfortunately, speeches like this tended to be effective. Airia sighed and said, "Bahen, Schverm, and Aryoug hold a deep grudge against both the Senate and the demon army. They'll be willing to support a leader from a third party, especially one who has the endorsement of the viceroys."

"That princess doesn't look like the kind of person you'd want to cross, either."

Curious, Airia looked over at me.

“Did she seem that imposing?”

“Like I said before, if you drop your guard around her for even a second, there’s no telling what she’ll try. But I imagine for her allies, she’s a reliable leader to have around.”

She had the charisma and force of personality to revamp the entire political and military structure of those cities within a few months. Airia smiled bitterly and said, “You seem quite interested in her, Councilor Veight.”

“Well, she seems like a tough enemy.”

I didn’t really want to meet her on the battlefield, but I wasn’t sure I could beat her in a diplomatic battle either. Airia’s expression grew even more dissatisfied.

“Perhaps I should grow stronger, then...”

“Trust me, you’re already strong enough.”

Airia appeared docile, but I would be willing to bet she was the most decisive and determined viceroy in Meraldia. She had been the first to declare independence from the Senate after all.

“Believe me, I am eternally grateful that we are allies and not enemies, Demon Ambassador Airia.”

“Fufu, I’m honored you think so.” Grinning, Airia plopped a stack of documents onto my desk. “Then I’m sure you won’t mind helping this strong Demon Ambassador with something.”

“What do you have in mind?”

Airia pointed to the stack of documents and said, “I think we should stop exporting food to the north. I consulted with the merchant guilds and they are willing to assist us in this. I plan to bring the motion up during the next council meeting.”

“Hold on a second.”

While that certainly would hurt the north, it would also affect our profits, and the people in the agriculture industry down here. However, Airia didn’t budge.

“We will need food to feed our expanding armies, so I was thinking of buying the surplus produce with the money in the council’s joint treasury. Grain and preserved foods will last us years, so there’s no harm in procuring extra.”

“Food reserves certainly are essential in wartime.”

Perishable goods went bad too quickly to trade, so most merchants dealt in grains and dried or preserved foods. Both of which were perfect for an army. *With how close war is, it probably would be better to stop giving food to the enemy.* I looked down at the map. Since the northern half of Meraldia didn’t border any large bodies of water, they had a harder time obtaining food. It was for that reason that they kept their breadbasket cities Bahen, Aryoug, and Welheim, well-protected and well-maintained. But now that two of the three northern cities had defected to Rolmund, the Northern Federation had only Welheim to rely on. If we stopped providing food to them, they’d likely be unable to feed their populace, breeding resentment toward the Senate within the cities. But if we did this, we’d harm not just the Senate, but also innocent civilians. It was for that reason that I’d been hesitant to adopt such a strategy. However, Airia had no such misgivings. *She really is decisive.* Seeing my hesitation, Airia added, “Naturally, I am not proposing we starve the citizens of the north. I intend to bring this conflict to a close before that can happen.”

It was this combination of decisiveness and kindness that made her such an alluring leader. I looked up at Airia with renewed respect.

“You truly are a powerful woman, Lady Airia.”

“Thank you very much, Sir Veight.”

Airia smiled happily.

Eleora and the Meraldian Liberation Army moved rapidly. A few days later, Airia brought me a report from one of the Commonwealth’s spies.

“The religious capital of Meraldia, Ioro Lange is under siege by the Meraldian Liberation Army.”

Not even ten days had passed since the Meraldian Liberation Army’s founding.

“They’re fast... What are their chances of success?”

Airia flipped through the report.

“The majority of the liberation army’s troops are militia, but they also have members of the regular army who were stationed in Schverm. They’re posing quite a threat.”

Ioro Lange was a holy city for members of the Sonnenlicht Order, and quite possibly the most important city in Meraldia. Honestly, this came as a bit of a surprise to me. I’d thought with their salt maneuvers in Krauhen, they’d been planning for a long-term diplomatic and economic war.

The next day, as we were discussing the implications of this invasion with the other viceroys, another report came in.

“Ioro Lange has surrendered to the Meraldian Liberation Army! They managed to achieve a bloodless victory!”

The moment the messenger, who’d arrived here by fast horse, said that, the entire meeting room fell into an uproar.

“M-Master!? How do we beat an opponent this strong!?” Shatina shouted, shaken.

Oh the other hand, Garsh stroked his beard and shook his head.

“Nah, this is all an act. Ain’t that right, Petore?”

Petore nodded, a sour look on his face.

“Indeed. Those liberation guys must’ve made a deal with Ioro Lange beforehand. They just want their enemies to think they’re so powerful the mere threat of invasion causes cities to surrender. Lemme guess, those two-faced bastards probably said something about how they didn’t want to kill their own countrymen so the city should surrender, am I right?”

Surprised, the messenger nodded in affirmation.

“Th-That’s right, sir. I believe their proclamation went: We do not condone spilling the blood of our fellow brothers in the holy land of Ioro Lange. As members of the same Sonnenlicht Order, Rolmund beseeches the city to open their gates and welcome their liberators.”

Aram nodded in understanding.

“Just as the viceroys of the southern cities are all acquainted, there are strong ties between the viceroys of the northern cities.”

If all the northern viceroys really were of one mind, it would be difficult to stop this invasion through diplomacy. Forne sighed and said, “Furthermore, so long as Rolmund’s ire is directed toward the Senate, the remaining cities of the north have no reason to fight and endanger their citizens. A viceroy’s duty is first and foremost to their people.”

While the Senate held a great deal of power, it left governing the cities entirely to the viceroys. Meaning if one could win them over, the Senate had no chance.

“Princess Eleora understands that if she destroys the Senate, she can make the north hers. She’s done a good job of uniting people against the right enemy.”

Forne turned to me and glared.

“How can you sound so carefree? At this rate, our Commonwealth will be next. Rolmund’s dogs seem to know how to win the populace over.”

To be honest, I was pretty worried too.

“Well first, let me start by explaining what I believe Eleora’s intentions are.”

I passed out the reports I’d written up last night to each of the viceroys.

Since the founding of the Meraldian Liberation Army, Eleora had officially taken the stance of a supportive bystander. On paper, the viceroys leading the coalition held all the authority, but in truth, they were beholden to Eleora. And she had managed to make the northern cities hers with ease. I got to my feet and explained what was most dangerous about Eleora.

“The biggest factor to Eleora’s success is that both Rolmund and northern Meraldia are primarily filled with Sonnenlicht believers. From what the pilgrims tell me, she’s already begun expanding churches and temples for the devout.”

If she could win over the Sonnenlicht priests and bishops, she’d have most of

the citizens in her pocket. And since her army wasn't obstructing the people's daily lives, they had no reason to oppose it. Especially since most of them hated the Senate. But there was one other important factor.

"On top of that, the princess herself is quite popular with the residents of the north."

Having talked with her once before, I could easily see how that had happened.

"They think of her as the beautiful northern princess who's come to save Meraldia. On top of that, she's well-spoken, decisive, and beloved by the viceroys."

Airia looked up and muttered grimly, "Then we need to deal with her soon."

"Yes... that's absolutely right, Lady Airia."

Aram looked rather pale as he said that. I then moved on to explain our plan for dealing with her.

"I suspect Eleora will try and use religion to drive a wedge into the south as well. Make sure you maintain good relations with the Sonnenlicht bishops inside your cities."

Among the southern cities, the four that bordered the north had an exceptional amount of Sonnenlicht adherents. Yuhit had already proven that they could be mobilized for a holy crusade as well. Once I was done explaining things to the viceroys, I called a meeting with Baltze and the other demon army generals to decide on a defense plan for the north. I kept the two meetings separate because I knew demons would have a hard time grasping the intricacies of human society.

Finally, I was free to return to my office. Upon doing so, I found Kite lounging around on my sofa.

"That must have been an exhausting meeting, Veight."

"Oh, you made it. How're things on your end?"

Kite sighed.

“The Senators are panicking. Some of them were stationed in Ioro Lange, and now they’ve been imprisoned.”

“Serves them right.”

If you treat your people and viceroys like pawns, you only have yourself to blame when they turn on you. Kite nodded, then brought out today’s letter.

“Here’s the letter they want me to deliver this time.”

“If they keep sending me so many, I’ll start running out of room to store them.”

“Well, I imagine they’ll be stopping soon,” Kite said with a sardonic smile. I took the letter from him and skimmed its contents.

“So they want to form an alliance and create a united front against Rolmund, huh?”

Now that’s shameless. I dumped the letter into a filing cabinet and turned to Kite.

“Want a drink?”

“Some lukewarm green tea, if you have it.”

“Oh yeah, I also have some rock salt cookies Lacy baked. Feel free to try some.”

“No thanks.”

Kite refused adamantly, but I shook my head.

“Sorry, but everyone who visits my office is required to eat at least three.”

“You tyrant!”

They don’t call me the Black Werewolf King for nothing. I picked up the large plate of Lacy’s cookies and thrust them out toward Kite.

“Go on.”

“How many do you have!?”

“You only have to eat three.”

“Why don’t you eat some too, Veight?”

“I already finished my quota of three.”

“And there’s still this many left!? Is that girl a moron!?”

Who cares, just eat them already. Hurry up. Kite timidly reached out for a rock salt cookie. He stared at the salt-like crystals on the surface of the cookie before casting epoch magic, just in case.

“It’s a normal cookie... as far as ingredients go.”

“Yep, it is.”

You don’t have to be that *wary.* Kite hesitated for a minute, then steeled his resolve. He took the coarse lump and popped it into his mouth. A moment later — “Wait, this is actually good.”

“Did I ever say it was bad?”

Her cookies were in fact delicious. I’d known he wouldn’t believe me if I’d just told him Lacy’s cookies were good, so I had to do things this way. The light application of salt really brought out the wheat flour’s flavor. And there was enough sugar that they still had a hint of sweetness. I was actually quite a fan of this taste.

“The only problem is the quantity.”

Sighing, I turned to a nearby cupboard.

“Just so you know, there’s about as many cookies in here as there are on the plate.”

Kite, who was reaching for his second cookie, muttered, “What is she, some kind of rural grandma?”

“That’s what I thought.”

For quite some time after, I had no shortage of salty-sweet snacks.

After conquering Ioro Lange, the Meraldian Liberation Army continued their advance. They controlled the entire northwest, so now they were extending their influence to the southeast. A few days later Airia came into my office to give me another report.

“The former capital, Vest, has joined the liberation army.”

“That’s bad, isn’t it?”

Vest was the southernmost city in the north, and until the unification war started, had been Meraldia’s capital. After the war, it was too close to remain as the Senate’s capital, but it was still an important city. Airia frowned.

“When Ioro Lange had been surrounded, the Senate didn’t send them any aid. That sent a message to the other viceroys. ‘The Senate won’t protect your people.’”

“Makes sense...”

The Senate was probably banking on their strongest defense, the fortress city of Vongang. A city that had been built solely for the purpose of suppressing a rebellion in the south, were one to occur. But despite all the troops stationed in Vongang, they hadn’t sent any aid to Ioro Lange. It stood to reason that the viceroys of the remaining cities decided they were better off throwing their lot in with Rolmund. Airia mused, “Could this have been the reason why the liberation army made such a show of surrounding Ioro Lange, despite having no intention to attack?”

“To show other cities how incompetent the Senate is?”

“Yes. If Princess Eleora really is the kind of person you claim she is, Sir Veight, then it seems quite likely.”

I was actually thinking the same thing.

“Agreed. She’s no simple soldier, that’s for sure. She’s a crafty politician who knows how to use war as a diplomatic tool. Her first battle was a dramatic bloodless victory, and she’s using the fame from that to expand her influence.”

She thought three steps ahead before making any military maneuvers. But on the flip side, as long as her plans were proceeding smoothly, her moves became predictable. Completely unlike the unpredictable and volatile Senate. Though I was a little jealous of how smoothly things were going for Rolmund.

Normally moving armies required a lot of planning, mapping out supply trains, and all sorts of other logistical nightmares. But Eleora didn’t need to worry

about any of that. The viceroys, the people, and the clergy were all on her side so she could go wherever she pleased, and be welcome. And since she was far from her homeland, she didn't have to worry about any bureaucracy back home slowing her down. She was able to move her army with as much ease as someone playing a strategy game.

"At this point, I'd really like to avoid a head-on confrontation with her..."

I sipped the black tea Airia brewed for me and considered my options.

"The majority of the Meraldian Liberation Army is made up of Meraldians. If we actually fight them, it'll just turn into a repeat of the unification war."

"Indeed, no matter how we achieve victory, it will leave lasting grudges."

"Yeah, exactly..."

Besides, no matter how many thousands of Meraldians we killed, we wouldn't actually do any damage to Eleora herself. Of course, she couldn't lose so many troops she lost the support of the north, but that was all.

"Lady Airia, do you have any other information?"

"Let me see... Hmm..."

Airia started sifting through the documents in her hand until she found something that caught her interest.

"Sir Forne has received a secret missive from Welheim."

Welheim sat south of Krauhen, and wasn't too far from Veira or Zaria. The formation of the Meraldian Liberation Army had trapped it between two powerful organizations, so it had likely been thinking deeply on its next course of action since the war began. Welheim had a deep relationship with Veira, and they'd been exchanging information since before the formation of the Southern Commonwealth.

"Have they decided to defect to our side?"

"Yes. The Senate has only Vongang and Welheim in its possession now. Rather than trust the unreliable Senate to defend them, Welheim has decided to turn to us, who have a track record of protecting our member cities."

“Hahaha, I guess they’re referring to Zaria.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. All the werewolves had berated me going to help Zaria, but that decision was paying dividends now.

“I’ll leave the situation to Sir Forne. Knowing him, he’ll negotiate well if it means his city won’t be the one first in line to be attacked.”

Were Welheim to join our Commonwealth, Forne’s city of craftsmen, Veira, would no longer be directly bordering the liberation army. I had no doubt he’d do his utmost to make sure Welheim joined us.

“All that leaves now is Vongang. All the remaining Senators are hiding there, aren’t they?”

“Indeed, but that city was designed to withstand prolonged sieges...”

As I was discussing the situation with Airia over a pot of tea, Kite came to visit once more. He looked from me to Airia, then said hesitantly, “The Senate’s sent another request for aid, but it’s not a big deal so I can come back later if you want.”

It was strange to hear that a request for aid “wasn’t a big deal,” but then again Kite probably knew we wouldn’t help the Senate anyway. Airia smiled invitingly and beckoned Kite into the room.

“No need. I’ve just finished my report. I shall see you some other time, Sir Veight.”

“Yeah, sorry about this. I’ll be free by dinner.”

After seeing Airia off, I turned to Kite. The situation had gotten pretty dire for the Senate, and it’d be dangerous to keep using Kite as a spy for much longer.

“Kite, where do you usually go to report to the Senate?”

“Recently I’ve been going to Vongang. Ever since the liberation army began its invasion, most of the Senators fled there.”

Being the descendants of runaway slaves had taught the Senate useful skills. They were always wary of pursuers, and had set up multiple backup bases, just in case. Though, now that they’d lost Ioro Lange and Vest, the only city they

could turn to was Vongang. I stared at Kite's face as I thought of what Eleora's next move would be.

"Kite."

"Yeah?"

"Don't go back to the Senate. Stay here in Ryunheit."

"Ah, okay. Works for me."

I was honestly a little surprised at how easily he agreed. I'd been expecting him to be more shaken. If Welheim defected and Vongang capitulated, the Meraldian Federation would be done for. Chances were Eleora had predicted Welheim's defection, and was likely massing her forces to take Vongang. If Kite went back to Vongang, he might get caught up in the fighting. Worse, if he was captured, he'd meet the same end as the rest of the Senate.

"Your hometown's Vest, right? Is your family safe?"

"Yeah, they should be. The liberation army hasn't pillaged any of the cities they captured."

Perfect. Then even if he openly betrays the Senate, there won't be any repercussions to his family. I had already prepared a house for him in Ryunheit, so it was high time I stopped putting him in danger. Stripping off his Senate uniform, Kite turned to me with a refreshed smile.

"So, what's my job gonna be now?"

Fufufu, you really want to know? All traitors are fated to meet a grisly end. I grinned and said, "You're going to be my vice-commander."

"What!?"

"I've been looking for a skilled investigator for some time now. Don't think you'll get to escape me that easily."

"U-Understood! I'll perform this job to the best of my ability, Veight!"

From today onward, you're the vice-commander of the Demon Lord's vice-commander. You better be ready to earn your keep.

—Eleora's War Records: Part 1—

Clad in Rolmund's royal cape and armor, Princess Eleora sets up her headquarters on a hill overlooking the battlefield. Camped below her are the few thousand members of the Meraldian Liberation Army. They're currently surrounding the fortress city of Vongang.

"I suppose this is acceptable progress."

"All they're doing is brandishing their spears and standing there."

Her adjutant, a middle-aged man, smiles ruefully at her. Eleora smiles back. The liberation army is a hodgepodge of amateurs who'd only trained in Rolmund military discipline for a few days.

"You sound dissatisfied, Borsche."

"It's far too cruel to send them out into the battlefield with such little training."

"You're a kind man," Eleora says as she turns toward Vongang's walls. "It's not a bad fortress."

Borsche nods.

"Yes, Your Highness. I believe this city will be a fitting reward for your services."

"I would have preferred the real Ioro Lange, but I guess you can't have everything."

Borsche grimaces.

"Your Highness, if your family ever learned you spoke such words, you would be court-martialed."

To citizens of Rolmund, the "real" Ioro Lange is the land directly controlled by the emperor. Though her words are borderline treason, Eleora smiles sardonically. Hefting her Blast Grimoire, she turns back to her adjutant.

"But just imagine what that disgustingly ornate palace would look like if it were my flag flying above it instead of his."

"The thought certainly does excite me."

“See?”

Just then, a Meraldian knight runs up to the command tent.

“Princess Eleora! My apologies for the unannounced visit, but the Senate is asking for a truce!”

Eleora responds in a cold voice, “Tell them I have no intention of accepting anything other than unconditional surrender. If any messengers come bearing other terms, chase them away!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

The knight salutes, then canters away. Eleora sighs, “Do those fools truly believe they still have any leverage to negotiate?”

Another one of her officers, a woman, grins.

“It’s because they’re this foolish that they let the situation get this bad for them, Princess.”

“True that.”

Eleora turns back to the rest of her officers. They all stand at attention and salute her. She says, “Know that in this battle, the liberation army is both our main force, but also nothing more than a crowd of spectators. The true actors are us, the mage corps. Am I understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!” The officers respond in unison. They were considered Rolmund’s elite forces, thus they could not afford to fail. They need to show to Meraldia that despite being foreigners, they have the valor and drive to fight for a cause not their own.

“You may be my elites, but remember there are only a hundred and twelve of you. And here, there are no replacements to replenish our ranks.”

Casualties will of course be inevitable, but Eleora wants to keep as many of her precious men alive as possible. For one thing, Eleora knows that they won’t betray her, no matter what. For another, they’re far more skilled than any member of the liberation army. But Eleora doesn’t want it to seem as though she’s only making the Meraldians fight. So while she would prefer not having her mage corps fight at all, she can’t afford to hold them back forever.

“As I mentioned before, from today onward the Blast Canes are no longer a grade 1 classified military secret. Go wild with them!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The officers salute again, but this time they’re grinning like children who’re about to play an especially naughty prank. Inwardly praying for their safety, Eleora then adds, “We need to show these lowly mongrels the strength of Rolmund’s army. But don’t feel the need to go overboard and get yourself killed. Just fight like you always have, that will be enough. The last thing I want to do is have to tell your family ‘My deepest condolences. Lady Natalia died in a reckless attempt to show off how amazing she was.’”

The woman who spoke earlier blushes bright red.

“Wh-Why’re you singling me out!?”

“Because you’re the most likely to do something brash, Warrant Officer Natalia.”

The other officers chuckle.

“I like those expressions, gentlemen. I’m expecting great things from you.”

No matter how fierce the fighting, these men have never betrayed Eleora’s expectations. And she’s confident this time will be no different. Thus, she orders, “29th Imperial Mage Corps, move out!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Eleora’s men click their boots together and give Eleora the crispest salute yet.

“Oooh, it’s finally started.”

I leisurely watched the battle unfold from the safety of a forest near Vongang. I had a nice vantage point from where I was, nestled in the branches of a large tree.

“It’s hard to spot us here, so it’s nice and safe.”

“Safe my ass! Why’d you have to bring me up here too!?”

My newly minted vice-commander desperately clung to me. Seeing his reaction, the other werewolves serving as my guards guffawed.

“Don’t worry, we’ll catch you if you fall,” Monza said playfully. Kite shrieked and said, “Stop shaking the branch! I’m gonna fall!”

“Like I said, we’ll catch you even if you do.”

“Well I don’t want to fall even if you will, so stop!”

Sorry dear vice-commander, but that’s only going to make Monza want to bully you more. Monza enjoyed toying with her prey, and that part of her personality bled into her interactions with everyone. Terrified, Kite turned to me and said something truly befitting of a vice-commander.

“You know, normally vice-commanders aren’t supposed to scout out battlefields personally!”

“*Normally* they aren’t.”

You’re in for a rude awakening if you think the demon army is a mere normal army. Since Monza was keeping an eye on Kite, I didn’t have to worry about him falling. I trained my telescope on the battlefield and shifted my focus there. The majority of the encirclement was made up by volunteer soldiers, which matched the information I’d received. They were all wearing cheap breastplates over their civilian clothes, and were armed only with spears.

“Looks to me like they’re all just there to make up numbers,” Vodd muttered as he looked through his own telescope. Among us, he was the one with the most battlefield experience.

“Don’t look like they’re gonna participate in this battle at all. If the army’s recruiting people to just stand there, I shoulda signed up.”

“So Eleora’s not planning on using her militia as disposable pawns to batter down the city?”

I cocked my head and Vodd replied happily, “Nah, no way. Just look at those cowards’ faces. If the city sent out even a single cavalry sortie the whole formation would break.”

Meaning Eleora had some other plan in mind to take the city. I turned back to Hamaam’s squad.

“Get as close to the battlefield as you can without being spotted, and gather

all the intel you can. If possible, try and talk to some of the troops."

"Understood, Vice-Commander."

Hamaam nodded and adjusted his rucksack. Inside it were some salves and a Sonnenlicht charm.

"I'd say I'm as good as you at impersonating traders, Vice-Commander."

Wow, it's rare to see Hamaam cracking jokes. However, Hamaam then added, "I often ambushed caravans that way..."

"It doesn't matter what you did in the past. Right now just focus on the mission before you."

"Roger, Vice-Commander."

Hamaam may have done underhanded things before coming to our village, but that doesn't matter. Right now he was a diligent, loyal member of my troop.

Kite, who was using wide-area detection magic all around us, suddenly shouted, "Veight, I just sensed a bunch of mana shockwaves near Vongang's main gate! But whatever this is, it's not magic I've seen!"

I had an idea of what they might be, and instantly trained my telescope in the direction Kite was pointing. A second later, there were a series of white flashes.

"Wh-What the—!?"

The other werewolves all looked that way as well. Through my telescope, I could see a row of soldiers carrying long staves. One end of the staves were curved, and they looked just like medieval arquebuses. The way the soldiers were holding the staves was just like how you'd hold a gun too. I guessed these were the larger versions of the Blast Grimoires.

"Kite, were you able to analyze those mana shockwaves?"

"Y-Yeah. It was some form of destruction magic. The closest thing I can think of is the light blast spell."

Put simply, light blast fired a beam of pure mana. The reason it was called light blast was because mana looked like sunlight in the visible spectrum. It

wasn’t a very useful spell, though, since it took a ridiculous amount of time to aim. On top of that, it wasn’t even powerful enough to pierce armor. Furthermore, if you tried to pre-load the spell, even the slightest misstep would cause it to backfire onto you.

“Umm, but... they just fired twenty of them at once. They must have trained a lot to be this in sync.”

I shook my head.

“They wouldn’t have been able to do that through normal incantations. I’m guessing this is one of Rolmund’s new weapons. Look, the power of their spells is abnormal.”

The bursts of light had managed to melt Vongang’s prized metal-coated gates and ignite the wood underneath. That level of heat wasn’t normal. The power of their spells was on Master’s level. Monza whistled appreciatively, then looked up at me.

“Boss, that was a weapon and not magic, right? Does that mean I can use it too?”

“Maybe. But even if you could, it doesn’t shoot as far as a bow, so I wouldn’t recommend it.”

The unit who’d fired those magic guns had needed to be protected by a row of shield-bearers. Arrows were still finding their way through the gaps though, and there were already a few casualties. Vodd nodded thoughtfully.

“Still, those things are powerful. Look, they’ll be through the gate soon.”

“Meanwhile, the militia still haven’t made a move.”

The Meraldian Liberation Army was staying well out of bowshot. All they were doing was cheering Eleora’s troops on. A moment later, a group of knights charged out from the back line. But they weren’t riding horses. They were mounted on these huge birds that looked like ostriches.

“Oi, boss, what the heck are those?”

Jerrick looked to me for answers, but this was the first time I’d seen them too.

“No clue. Master’s books didn’t mention anything that looked like those. They

remind me of the wyverns the dragonkin ride, though."

Dinosaurs and birds were pretty close evolution-wise, so I suppose it made sense that dragons and birds were too. *I guess Rolmund's domesticated these bird monsters.* We watched as the mounted knights raised their own gun-staves and took aim. There was about 40-50 of them. With help from their allies, they charged right through the burning city gates.

"So those are Eleora's mage corps? They've got a lot of interesting equipment."

"This isn't the time to be impressed, Veight. I'm sensing huge mana tremors inside the city."

It sounded like they were going all out in there. The walls blocked my view of what was going on, but the scent of blood was thick in the air. Now that the gates had fallen, the Senate stood no chance. Even if by some miracle they managed to rout the mage corps, Eleora still had her intact liberation army.

After a few minutes, Hamaam's squad returned.

"Vice-Commander, the unit that broke into the city are known as Eleora's imperial mage corps. The soldiers were all talking about them."

I knew it.

"Did you find anything out about their size or equipment?"

"There's somewhere between a hundred to two hundred members total. Unfortunately, that was all the information I could discover."

That number caught my interest. For humans, units 100 men in size usually held special significance. Back on Earth, I'd read that humans had usually formed packs of 100 during the stone age. That was when human society first started to evolve, so it got cemented that a pack of 100 was a single unit which had a shared fate and goals. Supposedly, according to what I'd read, 100 was the optimal group size. I had no idea if evolution had occurred in a similar fashion here, but seeing as human society wasn't too different from human society on earth, it was safe to assume it had.

So, psychologically speaking, it was significant that Eleora's elite battalion was around 100-200 in size. You could even consider it her personal pack. Naturally, troops she'd personally brought with her from Rolmund were important not only because of her familiarity with their abilities, but also because they couldn't easily be replenished here if lost. The fact that Eleora was willing to invest her trump card here against Vongang meant that either she was determined to crush the Senate beyond any hope of recovery, or she was actually stretched so thin that she had no other choice. In order to prepare for the upcoming war, I needed to know which. If things went well, I might even be able to use that knowledge as a bargaining chip.

"Does Eleora have any other Rolmund battalions?"

"None of the soldiers have seen any aside from the mage corps, at least."

The battle was still raging on within the city, but once it ended we were likely to be spotted. Regretful as it was, it was time to retreat.

"Good work, Hamaam. Let's get out of here before they see us."

At my command, the werewolves nodded and dropped from the trees.

"Uwaaaaah!"

I picked up Kite, who was screaming in terror.

"Kite, you recorded everything you analyzed about their staves right?"

"O-Of course I—WAAAAAAH!"

I leapt off the tree with Kite still in my arms. The soft ground cushioned my fall, and we dashed out of the forest, kicking up dead leaves in our wake.

"Hold up, Veight! You're going too fast! Waaaah! Shiiiiiit!"

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

We were going to keep this speed up all the way back, after all.

—Eleora's War Records: Part 2—

"Report! The west gate has been breached! Enemy cavalry are pouring into the city!"

“What are those incompetent lackwits doing!? Hurry up and repel them!”

“Report! The Saint Koshpza knight order has been annihilated! Knight Commander Micchen died in battle!”

“The Saint Theodoro knight order has suffered heavy losses and surrendered to the enemy!”

“The Saint Oceamos knight order has surrendered as well! The regular army has been routed!”

The Senate possessed many orders of knights ordained in the name of saints. Most of those “saints” were in fact old Senators who’d simply wanted their names and deeds to live on forever. Those Senators had created knight orders in their names, then appointed their own personal soldiers to lead those orders, thus giving them a permanent foothold in the military. However, each order had a limited number of knights allowed to be part of it, forcing them to split every time they grew too large. That muddled the chain of command, and made the knight orders highly inefficient.

“D-Don’t falter, you fools! We expected this might happen! All of the city entrances are still blockaded! What are those damned mercenaries doing!?”

“The Tiego Group surrendered to the enemy. Molks’s mercenaries fled through the east gate.”

“We have a request for reinforcements from the east gate! The doors are still open there!”

“Report! The Tiego Group didn’t surrender, but rather defected to the enemy!”

“The Meniel mercenaries have betrayed us as well! The inner western gate has fallen!”

Around the same time, at the Meraldian Liberation Army headquarters. Warrant Officer Natalia had returned to the command tent after completing her mission to blow open the gates, and was now talking to Adjutant Borsche.

“Are there really mercenaries out there who’ll turn sides that easily?”

Borsche gave her a sad smile.

“Not normally, no. But the Senate has been cutting the mercenaries’ pay year after year, claiming that since they pay for year-long contracts, they deserve discounts.”

“Wow, that’s awful! They’re treating them like slaves!”

Smiling, Eleora turned to the two of them.

“No, they’re treating them worse than slaves. At least a proper slave owner would feed their slaves.”

“No wonder they betrayed their employer so easily,” Natalia sighed, and Eleora nodded in agreement.

“That’s right. Even though it should have been obvious, those who wield power often forget the most obvious of things. I should take care not to make the same mistake.”

Borsche’s expression grew grim, and he turned to Eleora.

“But Your Highness, do you truly plan to employ them?”

“They’re not loyal in the slightest, but if you pay them they’ll work for you. Meaning as long as we pay them fairly for it, we can work them to the bone.” Eleora grinned and ordered, “Have the mercenaries make up the vanguard of our assault. Tell them ‘The princess wants to see just how strong Meraldia’s mercenaries really are.’”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The Senate fell even deeper into chaos.

“Now that it’s come to this, we have no choice. Arm our staff!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, they’re civil servants, not soldiers. All we’d be doing is dragging our names through the mud.”

“Then what do we do!? This all happened because *you* ordered the assassination of Zaria’s viceroy!”

“This from the man who drove Krauhen to defect!?”

“Stop arguing, you two! Our only hope now is to escape with the refugees!”

But before the Senators could flee, the door to their conference room was kicked open by a squad of Rolmund troops.

“This is squad four. We’ve captured the Senators. Our squad has four wounded and no dead.”

Eleora smirked as she heard the report through her earring.

“Well done, Lenkov. Secure the perimeter. I’ll be right over.”

After speaking into her earring, Eleora turned to her men.

“Follow me, everyone. It’s time to pay a visit to those fools still living in the past.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Once the squads three and four of the mage corps made it into the city, they had destroyed everything. Both the guardhouse of the Senate’s royal guard and the city’s inner walls had been reduced to rubble.

“Your men certainly made a flashy entrance,” Borsche said with a rueful grin.

“That’s what I asked them to do, after all. With this, the Meraldians finally understand our strength.”

The streets were filled with mercenaries who’d defected to Rolmund’s side. Eleora gave the mercenaries a small salute, then walked into the Senate’s headquarters.

“Oho, so you’re the leaders of Meraldia’s north.”

Roughly 30 men awaited her inside the audience chamber. They were trembling inside their old-fashioned robes. Most were wizened and old. The moment Eleora walked in they started either cursing her out or begging for their lives.

“Surrender unconditionally. I’ll decide what to do with you after that. Those who don’t surrender will be killed here and now. What will it be, surrender or death?”

It took less than ten seconds for all Senators to surrender.

Once the last pockets of resistance had laid down their arms, Eleora invited the liberation army into the city. There, they saw the Federation's Senators tied up in the city square.

"Gentlemen, I present to you the rulers of Meraldia."

Behind Eleora, members of the liberation army wheeled out cartfuls of gold and jewels; all assets the Senate had stockpiled by taxing the cities. In truth, most was money needed to maintain the operation of the Senate, but to the members of the liberation army, it looked like nothing more than ill-got wealth. Eleora started passing out a single silver coin along with a wooden card to each member of her army.

"I wish to give you, the citizens of Meraldia, the right to judge the fate of your former rulers. Meraldians should be judged by Meraldians."

A ripple ran through the liberation army. They had expected Eleora to be the one to decide the Senators' fate. Sensing the growing tide of surprise, Eleora continued.

"They shall be judged through Rolmund's traditional system, the Wooden Slate Exile. The votes of you soldiers shall determine these Senators destiny."

The soldiers started chattering to each other. None of them had expected a development like this. Eleora raised the silver coin in her hand.

"A silver coin is a vote of mercy. Those who wish to give the Senators clemency, place the coin you were given at their feet."

She then held up the wooden card. Normally such cards were used as chips or symbols in common games soldiers played, but all of these had been branded with the crest of the liberation army.

"A wooden slate is a vote of condemnation. Those who believe the Senators guilty, place the board you were given at their feet."

Finally, Eleora added, "You must vote for one choice or the other. The object you choose not to vote with is yours to keep. You may take it home as a

commemoration of the trial.”

Upon hearing that, the Senators gasped. It was obvious how the vote would go now. A silver coin was enough to pay for a night at a luxurious inn, along with a hearty dinner. There was likely not a single commoner willing to throw that away just to let the Senate keep their power. Of course, the Senators knew that as well.

“Wait, that’s not—”

Lenkov shoved his Blast Cane into the back of the Senator trying to argue and growled, “You surrendered unconditionally. If you try asking for conditions now, I’ll shoot you.”

The Senator paled, and all of the liberation soldiers and mercenaries started walking forward. Almost all of them were looking down at the wooden cards they held, their expressions twisted in hatred. A few people threw their coins in, but the vast majority voted with the cards.

Finally, all the votes were in, and silence descended on the square. The mountain of cards piled before the Senators made it clear which way the vote had gone. Eleora threw her cape back and said in a loud, carrying voice, “The people of Meraldia have found the Senators guilty! They will now be punished in accordance with the laws of the Wooden Slate Exile!”

The soldiers cheered. Eleora’s subordinates hauled the Senators away. The poor old men were on the verge of fainting. Once the Senators were gone, members of the mage corps wheeled over huge barrels of liquor. They then turned to the gathered liberation army and shouted, “Her Highness Princess Eleora has decreed this liquor be brought out for the liberation army to celebrate our victory!”

“Those who surrendered are free to drink with us! We won’t punish you for fighting under the Senate!”

“Now come, drink! We can clean up the city tomorrow, but tonight we celebrate the end of a pointless battle between fellow Meraldians!”

The soldiers cheered, the dethroned Senators all but forgotten.

Eleora listened to the cheers outside as she gazed down at the captive Senators.

“Now then. The people of Meraldia found you guilty. Do you have anything to say in your defense?”

“You—”

One of the Senators tried to get to his feet, but was forced back down by the barrel of a Blast Cane. Eleora smiled mercifully and said, “The fair and merciful trial of the Wooden Slate Exile has deemed you guilty. Thus, you are banished from Meraldia.”

The Senators breathed a collective sigh of relief. Exile was humiliating, to be sure, but at least they wouldn’t be executed. Granted exile from all Meraldian cities meant in all practicality they’d likely die anyway, but at least not tonight. And as long as they survived, there was a chance they could regain their position. However, Eleora’s next words dashed their hopes.

“In Rolmund, exile takes many forms, but the most common one is to throw the banished criminal out into the night with only a soaked shirt on their back. In summer they occasionally survive a few days, but in winter they freeze to death before they can make it even a hundred steps.”

“Wha!?”

Eleora wasn’t done yet, either.

“Furthermore, there’s no rule on what the shirt must be soaked with. Out of respect to you Senators, I’ll soak your shirts with high-grade alcohol.”

Alcohol sapped heat from the human body even faster than water did. While Vongang sat in the center of Meraldia, it was still midwinter. At night, temperatures dropped below freezing. If they were thrown out into the wilderness with only alcohol-soaked shirts on their backs, it was obvious what would happen to them. Panicking, the Senators started begging for their lives.

“Wait! Please wait! We’ll pay you whatever you want! Just spare our lives!”

“If you kill us, you won’t be able to control this country!”

“Th-That’s right! Without us, the Meraldian Federation will fall apart!”

Eleora snickered.

“The only reason you managed to rule this country is because you had talented staff members working underneath you. Don’t worry, I’ll still keep *them* around. But you, I have no need for.”

Most of the Senate employees in Ioro Lange and Vest had immediately sworn loyalty to Eleora the moment she’d taken the cities over. Their work was the same as before, but now they were paid much better, and given more breaks. There was no reason for them not to be loyal to their new employer.

“You had plenty of opportunities to avoid such an ignoble end. But you chose to make the wrong choice at every turn. Give it up, you’ve lost.”

There wasn’t the least bit of animosity or hatred in Eleora’s voice. These soon-to-be-dead Senators didn’t even deserve that much from her. Realizing their fate was sealed, one of the Senators muttered, “Then... please just kill us here.”

“I’m afraid I can’t. Wooden Slate Exile’s only punishment is exile. Were we to do anything else, those who voted would feel guilty about their decision,” Eleora whispered that last sentence quietly, then turned her back to the Senators. A chilly breeze blew through the open window.

“The least you can do is walk to your demise of your own free will.”

As the sun set, Eleora’s long shadow covered the cowering Senators. Outside, soldiers cheered and celebrated long into the night.

I was at an utter loss for what to do with the agricultural city of Welheim, the last remaining member of the Northern Federation. Its viceroy, Kurst, was a gentle man and a skilled administrator. It had strong ties with the southern city of Veira as well, so negotiations should have progressed smoothly.

“I can’t believe the Senate would fall this quickly,” Forne muttered, a languorous sigh escaping his lips. Honestly, I’d underestimated Eleora’s speed as well. My guess was she’d been spreading her influence throughout the north long before we’d realized it. I took a sip of my tea, then cradled my head in my hands. Forne and I were currently in Kurst’s parlor. The viceroy himself was currently speaking with a messenger from the Meraldian Liberation Army in the next room over. The day after Vongang had fallen, the liberation army had

started sending Kurst messengers. They'd been coming every day, and Kurst, unsure of what to do, had called us over.

"I'd been planning on joining the Southern Commonwealth, but now I no longer know what to do."

Seeing his pained expression, I'd honestly felt sorry for him. When he'd first met me he'd been terrified, so he was probably worried I'd eat him or something if he didn't join us.

"The Senate was even more worthless than I thought. Maybe we could have taken over the north ourselves, instead of Eleora."

"No, that would be impossible. You underestimate just how afraid of the demon army citizens of the north are. They would never agree to negotiate with you."

If all we'd wanted to do was crush the Senate and the troops under their direct control, the demon army had more than enough strength to do so. The problem was what would come after. The people of the north wouldn't accept us as legitimate rulers. Thanks to the second regiment's massacre, cities like Bahen still despised the demon army. Many of the surviving residents had lost friends and family, and grudges like that didn't disappear easily. Forne seemed to know that as well, as he finished his umpteenth cup of tea and muttered, "True... We can hardly afford to raze the north to the ground, then move our citizens into the area."

He sure could say some terrible things with a straight face. Besides, I'd never even once considered that an option. *I guess this is the difference between nobles and commoners...*

As I was internally reeling at Forne's callousness, there was a knock on the door and Kurst came back inside.

"My apologies for making you wait."

"Oh no, I'm the one sorry for putting you in such a difficult position."

Forne and Kurst were longtime acquaintances. So I decided to apologize as well in order to not harm relations between the two of them.

“I had the best of intentions when I asked to form an alliance with you, but in the end, I backed you into a difficult choice. I’m terribly sorry.”

“N-Not at all! P-Please, there’s nothing to apologize for...”

Why’s he still so scared of me? Kurst showed us the letter the most recent messenger had brought him, and I instantly saw why he felt so pressured.

“We the Meraldian Liberation Army do not desire unnecessary bloodshed. Further fighting between Meraldian cities will only harm the region as a whole. If Welheim is of the same opinion, then we beseech the city to join forces with us. We intend to give you ample time to consider your decision.”

That was more or less what the letter said. At a glance, it seemed the liberation army was being generous, but upon closer inspection, it became clear they would not allow Welheim to join the Southern Commonwealth; it was their way or the highway. Kurst’s only options were either capitulate to Eleora, or wage war. There was no third way.

However, I did find it interesting that the liberation army was willing to give him “ample time.” Until now, Eleora had advanced at a blitzkrieg pace, but now she was suddenly slowing things down? With the forces at the liberation army’s disposal, they should be easily capable of capturing the practically undefended Welheim. Thinking about it logically, the longer negotiations took, the more upkeep Eleora would have to pay on her army.

Militia would gladly defend their homeland for free, but if you asked them to go on a campaign, it was a different story. They’d want enough money to survive, at the very least. If each soldier was making a conservative estimate of two silver coins a day, that meant Eleora’s army of 5,000 ate up 10,000 silver coins a day. Since she wasn’t pillaging any of the cities she captured, all that money was coming out of her pocket. Meanwhile, the cities where these soldiers came from were suffering from lower productivity because a significant chunk of their population had gone to war. So tax revenue was lower as well. It seemed the viceroys were paying the wages of the soldiers coming from their respective cities, but once tax revenue started drying up, that wouldn’t continue. If Eleora wanted to do much more with her army, she’d need to do it soon. Forne seemed to be thinking the same thing, and he smiled wryly at me.

“Could it be that the liberation army can’t mobilize all of its forces anymore?”

“Yeah, it’s possible all the militia went back home. If Eleora had kept all of them in Vongang, she’d be coming on a lot stronger right now.”

Kurst sighed and nodded.

“Though it shames me to admit it, Welheim lacks the troops to fend off even a moderate-sized army. The liberation army could take this city even without its thousands of militia.”

Considering the current situation, it was unthinkable that Welheim wouldn’t surrender. There was absolutely no merit in continuing to resist. Which was why Eleora wasn’t even bothering keeping the militia around. The mercenaries and knights who’d surrendered to her were enough. She could send the militia back home, and they’d naturally serve her cause by spreading tales of her spectacular victories. War stories were crowd favorites in any bar, and now there was a huge army with new ones to tell. Most of the soldiers under the Senate’s direct control had capitulated to her, so she had enough troops as it was.

Now that I knew Eleora’s intentions, I had to reassess my options. Asking Welheim to join our Commonwealth now was like asking them to commit suicide. Even if we wanted to send them aid, our troops wouldn’t be able to cross the Fetid Wastes in time. They were too big a buffer zone. But I couldn’t afford to station a garrison in Welheim permanently either. There were too many cities we needed to protect, and not enough troops. No matter how I sliced it, we wouldn’t be able to protect Welheim. And trying to spread my reach past what was in my means to protect was dangerous. If anything, letting Welheim go here would make it easier to reclaim when the time was right.

“Sir Kurst, is the liberation army messenger still here?”

“Y-Yes. He said he won’t leave until he gets a reply to his letter.”

That settles it.

“Sir Kurst.”

“Yes?”

“Surrender to the liberation army.”

“Huh!?”

I added in the most sincere voice possible, “The Southern Commonwealth sees Welheim as a sworn ally. But as things stand, it would be difficult for us to protect Welheim were the liberation army to attack.”

Kurst understood that as well. He nodded silently. But I still had more to say.

“The cities currently occupied by the liberation army see Welheim as an ally as well. If you acquiesce to their demands, they’ll treat you well.”

“You’re right, of course... but won’t that make things difficult for the Commonwealth?”

Of course. But I’ll get back at that scary princess soon enough, don’t you worry. I smiled bitterly and said, “I’m not so brazen as to claim Welheim as an ally and then expose my ally to danger I can’t protect them from. In the end, I’m just a coward.”

That wasn’t wrong. If I were bolder, things would be a lot easier. Unsure of how to interpret my words, Kurst looked away, his eyes darting about. *He doesn’t think I’m being ironic or joking or something, does he?* Fortunately, Forne was here to back me up.

“They call Lord Veight the Black Werewolf King, but in truth, he’s more human than any of us. Those words were from the heart. I would be willing to swear by it.”

“I see...”

Kurst nodded to Forne then turned back to me.

“Lord Veight.”

“What is it?”

“It appears I misjudged you... No, misjudged the entire demon army.”

He smiled gently and wiped the corners of his eyes. *He sure cries easily.*

“Welheim will surrender to the liberation army, but we will never forget the magnanimity you showed us when we were pressed to make such a difficult

choice. I swear that I, Viceroy Kurst Vaan Hornenbaum will one day repay your kindness."

Kurst bowed deeply as he said that. *Thanks. Good luck with the liberation army.*

Forne and I left Welheim and returned to Zaria. It was only upon arriving in the city of labyrinths that I discovered just how frightening Eleora truly was.

"Ah, Master!"

Shatina had finally started growing into a capable viceroy, but the moment she saw me she ran over like an overexcited puppy. *That part of her still hasn't changed, I guess.*

"You can't just start running like that. People will get worried if they see their viceroy acting so excitable."

Shatina ignored my rebuke though, and shouted in an enthusiastic voice, "Great news, Master! The Meraldian Liberation Army has sent us a letter from Eleora!"

Uh oh.

"What does it say?"

Shatina handed me the letter and said, "Apparently Princess Eleora got revenge for my father! She exiled the Federation's Senators, and executed the men who carried out his assassination!"

So that's your next move. I skimmed over the contents of the letter, then asked Shatina, "You're sure this is who she claims is the culprit?"

"Yes, the Senator behind the assassinations was Morteus! So the rumors were true, Princess Eleora is a good person after all! She's virtuous and honest!"

Smiling ruefully, I patted Shatina's head.

"Virtuous and honest people don't lie. The real culprit wasn't Morteus, but the Senator Ryukaitos. My vice-commander Kite already analyzed the assassin's dagger."

Eleora had no way of knowing who the true ringleader was, so she'd just picked a Senator at random. *How sloppy.* Shatina gave me a blank look.

"Though I'm sure Ryukaitos is dead too... Still, it's not wise to believe everything someone tells you, especially when they're not an ally of ours. If you do, you'll just end up exploited by people with ignoble intentions. And if you, the viceroy, is exploited, then your people will suffer," I admonished.

"O-Okay..."

Shatina seemed to shrink before me. She hung her head, and tears welled up in her eyes.

"I was rash... I'm sorry, Master."

If she's this contrite I feel bad for scolding her. Smiling wryly, I patted my cute disciple's head.

"Hey now, don't cry. It's my fault for not telling you the ringleader's name sooner. I was worried you'd do something crazy if I did. Forgive me."

"Y-You don't need to apologize! I..."

Forne, who'd been watching us silently until now, nodded and said, "You two sure are taking it easy..."

"Where'd that come from?"

I'm in the middle of an important lesson here, don't interrupt. For the sake of the late Melgio as well, I wanted to raise Shatina into a fine viceroy. Forne doggedly continued.

"You realize what this means, don't you?"

"I believe I do..."

"No you don't! Eleora's trying to drive a wedge between the members of the Commonwealth!"

"I know."

It certainly wasn't an enviable situation. The demon army might be able to handle a military invasion, but an attempt to win over the human viceroys was far more terrifying. Without the backing of the southern viceroys, the rest of

the citizens wouldn't follow us. Sighing, Forne rolled his eyes theatrically.

"The demon army may have integrated itself into the southern cities, but the people are still a little wary of demons. Human hearts waver easily."

"Yeah, I know."

"How is it a werewolf like yourself knows... No, I suppose it's not that strange considering it's you."

I was once human after all. Forne slapped his hand against Eleora's letter to emphasize his point.

"This woman is dangerous. I've heard the rumors coming from the north. She's unbelievably popular with the citizenry. They're calling her names like the Liberator Princess and the Sonnenlicht Goddess."

"So I've heard."

Eleora was the foreign princess who'd destroyed the old, decaying rule of the corrupt Senate. And publicly, she claimed to support the autonomy of Meraldia's residents. Forne rolled up the letter and smacked Shatina on the head with it. Sighing, he added, "At this rate, even our people will start supporting Eleora. Look, she's already managed to win over one viceroy here."

"Ugh... I'm sorry."

I was starting to feel a little sorry for Shatina. Turning back to Forne, I changed the subject.

"Since you're complaining so much, I take it you have a plan to deal with this?"

The only time Forne complained was when he had some sort of countermeasure in mind. As expected, Forne grinned and said, "Our people need a symbol to rally behind. If Rolmund has a banner, then it's time the demon army had a banner of their own."

Looks like you're up to something big.

"Just leave the preparations to me. I'll show you what I have in mind during the next council meeting."

“Lady Airia, I would love nothing more than to share my fate with you. However...”

“What’s the matter, Lord Veight?”

“Forgive me, Lady Airia. But a life of battle is the only life for me.”

“Don’t go, Lord Veight! You have no reason to fight for humans!”

“I know, but I wish to protect Ryunheit. This city is your home.”

I watched soap-opera-cum-play unfold on the stage below. Obviously, it was about me and Airia. They hadn’t even bothered to change our names. The actor playing me looked much like I did in my human form, but he was at least three times more attractive. His title in the play was the same as my real one, the Demon Lord’s loyal and wise vice-commander, and leader of the werewolves. In the play, he falls in love with Airia after capturing Ryunheit. But then, after bringing peace to the southern half of Meraldia, the Hero Herbert appears.

“So you’re the Black Werewolf King! Draw your sword!”

“Lay down your weapons, o’ mighty Hero. What reason is there for us to fight?”

“Even if this battle is meaningless, I must defeat you. For those are my orders.”

“Who gave you such orders, Hero?”

“The Senate!”

Apparently the Hero’s lover was taken hostage by the Senate, which is why he has no choice but to fight. After a fierce battle, I slay him. I then lament that such a valiant man had to die for no reason, but have little time to grieve since the Senate sends an army of 100,000 against me.

“What is that rumbling? Impossible, is that the footsteps of the army marching on Ryunheit!?”

Finally, I go out to face the approaching army all on my own.

“My name is Veight, Ryunheit’s Black Werewolf King!”

A hopeless battle of one man against 100,000 begins.

The curtains closed over the stage. I gave the actors a vigorous round of applause, then turned to Forne and grumbled, “What the hell is this?”

“Isn’t it obvious? A dramatic retelling of your story. I put Veira’s best actors, screenwriters, and musicians on this production. It’s the ultimate play. Oh, and part two is currently in production.”

“So what’s the point of having Veira’s best make a play like this?”

Forne sighed, “You’re the most famous person in the demon army. Not only do you have good looks, but also you’re a capable commander. We might as well put those qualities of yours to use to spread the demon army’s fame.”

“Am I really all that?”

“Are you truly not aware of it?”

I mean I figured people knew my name since I was the one personally handling most of the diplomacy, but it never really felt like I was famous. *I don’t really like standing out anyway.* Beside me, Airia was clapping with surprising enthusiasm.

“That was a wonderful play.”

“Doesn’t it bother you that they paired you with me, Lady Airia?”

I couldn’t imagine she was happy being shipped with a werewolf. However, Airia’s response was unexpected.

“Not at all. This is for the sake of the Southern Commonwealth. In fact, I consider it an honor.”

“You certainly are broad-minded...”

“You flatter me. Fufufu.”

I’m just glad she didn’t hate it. To be honest, I broke out in a cold sweat when I first saw that development. But that aside, it was a little embarrassing to watch a play like this. It exaggerated my feats so much to the point where it made me out to be some kind of demigod. *Don’t you think this is overdoing it a little?* I didn’t have any problem worshiping others, but I didn’t want to be

worshiped myself. I wasn't really worthy of it. The thought that this play was being shown throughout the Commonwealth made me want to go back to my village and hide forever.

"Hey Forne, don't you think you should tone down my achievements a little..."

"The purpose of this play is to sell you as a person, toning down your achievements would run counter to that purpose."

"I get that, but..."

This is just so awkward.

"I'll have you know I already toned it down quite a bit out of consideration for you."

"You did?"

I had no idea if a mere play like this would be able to improve the demon army's image, but in retrospect, there wasn't any television or internet here. The people of this world had basically no exposure to marketing. Besides, watching coverage of past presidential elections back on earth had made it clear marketing worked. Furthermore, I'd asked Forne to make sure no names of actually deceased people showed up in the play. Which was why Ranhart and Arshes had been turned into a different, fictional Hero. Profiting off of slandering the dead was the one thing I wouldn't abide. Perhaps that was soft of me, but my decision there was final.

"But do you really think this'll work?"

Forne grinned in response.

"I will make it work. Consider it my way of making up for failing to bring Welheim over to our side."

"Well, I'm counting on you then."

"I've also prepared a play starring Firnir as well, so please let her know later to come watch. Incidentally, I have a few more starring you that I wish for you to see."

Seriously?

"It's a shame our corps lost five men in the previous battle."

Eleora traced the names of the dead on the report with her finger.

"Menchev's horrible coin tricks never worked, but it pains me that we'll never be able to see them again."

"Even if he never got them right, they were entertaining to watch."

Borsche smiled sadly. Eleora closed her eyes, clasped her arms together, and offered a Sonnenlicht prayer for her departed subordinate, "Those who gave their lives for my cause, watch over me. I swear I won't fail."

"That's the princess I know and love."

"Don't keep treating me like a child, Borsche. I won't cry anymore."

Eleora gave Borsche a wan smile, then stroked the Blast Grimoire in her hands. Borsche pointed to the next page of the report.

"Your Highness, allotting two medics to each platoon proved to be a wise choice. Lieutenant Schwarz and eleven other men were saved because they received immediate treatment."

"All members of the mage corps can use healing magic to some degree, but there's a lot of injuries that require a dedicated healer."

Eleora nodded to herself.

"Incidentally, did you recover all of the Blast Canes lost by the mage corps?"

"But of course. After the funeral, I returned the extras to the quartermaster. Everyone's equipment is accounted for."

"Good work. We absolutely do not want *him* to get his hands on these."

Borsche cocked his head.

"Who do you mean by 'him'?"

"Ryunheit's Black Werewolf King. Chances are he learned too much already from our siege of Vongang. He's the type of commander to take to the front

lines himself.”

Borsche grinned again.

“He’s like you, Your Highness. Always causing trouble for his men.”

Eleora pouted a little.

“And just who was it that declined the teaching post at the magic academy that I set up for him and disobeyed my orders to join the front lines with me, Borsche?”

“Hahaha. The Norlinskar family motto is ‘Work hard while you’re still young,’ remember?”

“You’re far from young. Aren’t you already forty-two?”

“You mean only forty-two, Your Highness.”

The light banter brought Eleora some peace of mind. Grateful to Borsche for easing her grief, Eleora said, “Annoying officers like yourself should just retire already. But I suppose if I want you to have time to actually enjoy your retirement I should finish this campaign quickly. How did the Rabbits fare?”

“Interestingly enough, most headed west. Though a few stayed where they were and froze to death.”

Eleora looked down at her map.

“I suppose they’re heading toward the Boltz Mine. I’d heard the demon army destroyed it during their invasion, and it’s only just now been rebuilt.”

“Mining operations have resumed, but it’s a simple iron mine, Your Highness.”

After thinking for a few seconds, Eleora nodded.

“That can’t be all there is to it. Those who’ve lost everything will flock to the place that seems most reliable. Have platoon five investigate the Boltz Mine.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

There was a knock on the door, and one of Eleora’s officers, Warrant Officer Natalia, walked into the room.

“Princess, the citizens have sent us a petition.”

“For what, Natalia?”

“Vongang’s Mondstrahl Church is requesting that we let them freely practice their religion.”

“Here too?” Eleora sighed. “Our Holy Rolmund Empire has united thousands of people under the single banner of the great Sonnenlicht Order. While we may call ourselves a liberation army, remember that we are invaders. You understand, right Natalia?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am. But...”

Natalia seemed to pity the Mondstrahl adherents. Eleora furrowed her brows and picked her words carefully.

“Keep in mind, the majority of the northern residents are Sonnenlicht believers. For the sake of maintaining order, it would be best to convert the few heretics that exist.”

“Yet...”

“Are you dissatisfied, Natalia? For a daughter of a Sonnenlicht Order bishop, you sure are kind.”

Natalia timidly nodded.

“Yes, ma’am. My father always said the true teachings of Sonnenlicht tell us to be tolerant of heretics.”

Eleora closed her eyes and reminisced for a moment.

“As a result of what your father preached, he was banished by the inquisitors. Within Rolmund, the Sonnenlicht Order is a tool of the government, a religion far removed from ideals such as virtue and truth.”

It was for this reason Eleora hesitated to do anything the government back home would be displeased with.

“In order to turn Meraldia into empire territory, we have no choice but to snuff out the Mondstrahl Church.”

“Yes, ma’am...”

Seeing how dispirited Natalia looked, Eleora smiled gently.

“However, forcing them to convert will not be easy. For now, let us simply impose a tax on those who do not follow Sonnenlicht. Those who cannot afford the tax may make up the difference through volunteer labor.”

Natalia’s expression cleared up in an instant.

“Wha? Are you sure!?”

Eleora opened up the missive containing her orders from the homeland, and read through it again, “According to my orders, I am not allowed to give heretics treatment equal to that of faithful Sonnenlicht believers. But if I tax the heretics, their treatment is no longer equal, correct?”

Of course, Eleora knew the Mondstrahl members would not be happy about this. But she had no other choice.

“I am just as worried as you are that if we force the heretics to convert and start executing them to make examples of those who don’t, that the people will revolt. We should take our time and use less coercive methods once our grasp on Meraldia is secure.”

Beaming, Natalia gave Eleora a crisp salute.

“Th-Thank you very much, Princess! I love you!”

“No, thank you, Warrant Officer Natalia. As a nonbeliever, I often forget just how serious these matters can become.”

Just then, another messenger came in with a new report.

“Your Highness, Welheim has surrendered to the liberation army.”

“They made the right choice.” Eleora nodded in satisfaction. “It looks like I win the first skirmish with the Black Werewolf King. Though if I lost here, I’d have no chance of beating him.”

Borsche turned to Eleora and said, “I think it would be best to put Welheim under surveillance. Who knows if the Black Werewolf King left any presents for us in that town.”

“You think so as well?”

“No general would hand over a city to the enemy for free. Even if they’re forced to retreat without a fight, they’ll at least poison the wells. Of course, I mean that as a figure of speech.”

“That’s a very military-minded figure of speech, Captain Borsche.”

Eleora grinned viciously.

“Keep an eye on Viceroy Kurst, lest he poisons our wine. Take members from platoons one through four and create a surveillance team. I’ll leave deciding the individual members to you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Eleora looked back down at the map and muttered, “Incidentally the messenger I sent to Zaria has failed to sway the city’s viceroy.”

“While Zaria’s viceroy might be a child, she has perceptive guardians to guide her. Simply claiming we got revenge for her father won’t be enough...”

“Veira’s viceroy is too shrewd to swindle, and Thuvan and Bernheinen have demon viceroys. None of them will be swayed. I suppose we have no choice but to resort to military might.”

Eleora massaged her temples.

“But all of the catapults that belonged to Vongang were stolen by the south during the siege of Zaria. This throws a wrench into our plans.”

“With the help of the various cities’ viceroys, we’ve begun gathering the members of the old engineering corps that was disbanded when the catapults were stolen.”

“We owe them an even greater debt now, though. There’s nothing more expensive than free aid.”

One way or another, Eleora knew she’d need to repay that debt. Chances were, the viceroys would ask for more authority over their cities.

“If we want to build new catapults, we’ll need to order special materials. Those materials can be easily traced, so it’ll become obvious we’re stockpiling

catapults. And catapults are used for one thing and one thing alone, sieging cities. Our war preparations will become known to the south, and that will affect future diplomacy. Do not start building new catapults until we've exhausted all other options."

"Yes, ma'am."

Borsche saluted, and Natalia tilted her head quizzically.

"But Princess, do we really need catapults? Our sniper squad is more than capable of breaking through city gates..."

Eleora shook her head.

"I want to avoid sacrificing any more of my men. Blast Canes have impressive firepower, but both their range and their fire rate are inferior to bows. If we utilized them for future sieges, we'd lose men."

Of the five casualties Eleora had suffered during Vongang's siege, three had come from the sniper squad. Another had died during the initial charge into the city. Meaning that four of the five deaths had occurred during the breach.

"Besides, the south is nothing like the north. We can't afford to underestimate the demon army. There are armies of undead soldiers protecting all of the Commonwealth's frontier cities."

"Waaah!"

Natalia hugged her shoulders, terrified. Borsche raised an eyebrow.

"To think Meraldia would use the forbidden black magic of necromancy for war. Now this is troubling."

Grimacing, Eleora signed the papers on her desk.

"Why do you think a soldier like me is trying to win through diplomacy first? It's laughable, isn't it? I'm trying to win enemies over instead of crushing them."

"Not at all, Your Highness. It makes me glad to see you grow so."

Eleora glared at Borsche.

"Mark my words, I'll make you into a military instructor one of these days."

"Please be merciful, Your Highness."

Smiling, Eleora handed Borsche the stack of documents.

“Then you better work so hard I don’t feel like getting rid of you. While we’re trying to undermine the south’s solidarity, we need to also focus on solidifying our power base. Summon the viceroys!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

While Forne was busy drumming up popular support in his own weird way, I decided to organize our forces. At the end of the day, when diplomacy failed it was down to armies. I gathered all of the demon army’s chief officers and held a strategy meeting. Everyone from knight commander Baltze to the captain of one of the canine squads came. Anyone in a leadership position, no matter how small, was required to attend.

“There are only a few members of Rolmund’s regular army here, but they’re all the elite of the elite. Eleora’s also absorbed the mercenary groups and knight orders that used to work for the Senate.”

The militia and city garrisons had other tasks so they couldn’t always be part of expedition forces, but mercenaries and knights were career soldiers. They could be called upon at any time. Kite, the sole human in a meeting of demons, pointed to the documents he’d pinned to the wall.

“Even the largest mercenary groups have no more than a few dozen members at most. The same goes for the knight orders that used to serve the Senate. The smallest of the orders, the Saint Nicht Knight Order, has only five knights.”

Five, huh?

“They’re an offshoot of the Saint Morteus Knight Order, which grew too large. Of course, each knight has a retinue of squires and archers under them, so in truth the knight order has about twenty fighters.”

Hearing that, Baltze sighed. Such inefficient organization offended dragonkin on a personal level. I was relatively certain Eleora had already reorganized the knight orders using the Rolmund military system.

“But now both the mercenaries and the knights have been reorganized into hundred-man units. We don’t know the full scope of Eleora’s army, but she has at least three thousand troops stationed in Vongang.”

And since all of them were professionals, they were quite a threat. They didn't need to be babied during every step of a battle, they could make independent decisions based on the situation. Kite then pointed to a different document. This one had a drawing of something that looked similar to a gun—a rendition of Rolmund's Blast Cane.

"This is the weapon Eleora's elite mage corps use. According to our information, it's called a Blast Cane."

There was a lot we didn't know about Blast Canes still, but I at least had a good grasp on their effective range. They couldn't shoot as far as bows, and if they could, the bullets lost most of their power by that point. Otherwise, Eleora would have had her men shoot through the gates from a safer distance. Finally, I opened my mouth.

"We have a good idea of how powerful they are, and they're quite a threat. If the conditions are right, they can even kill a giant with a single shot."

The demon stirred. A weapon that powerful meant they'd need to reevaluate their strategies.

"Ideally we'll be able to get our hands on one and analyze how they're made. It's likely a magic tool of some kind, so I've called the most knowledgeable expert I know. Unfortunately, that's all I can tell you about them now."

Shure, commander of the Crimson Scales, raised her hand.

"Sir Veight, has Rolmund made any diplomatic overtures as of yet?"

"Sadly not, Lady Shure."

To be honest, that was bothering me too. I had expected them to try and negotiate something after conquering the nine northern cities. The fact that Eleora hadn't bothered sending an official delegation of any kind meant she wasn't satisfied with just the north. Since if she did send a delegation now, it was possible they'd unintentionally reveal her true intentions.

"I've only met with Eleora once, but she strikes me as a highly ambitious person. We can't afford to let our guard down around her."

Shure nodded in understanding. She was considered the most beautiful

dragonkin alive, but I didn't really understand dragonkin aesthetic sense.

"Understood. In that case, I shall dispatch my Crimson Scales to the frontlines if necessary. Call me if you have need for me."

"Thank you very much."

Afterwards, we discussed what each division needed and how many troops they could field. Once everything was tallied, I returned to my office. Since I had to oversee both council meetings and demon army meetings, I was extremely busy. I'd hoped that vice-commander would be an unimportant job where I could take things easy, yet now I was the one doing all the work. I decided to take a short break and have a cup of tea before getting to my council duties. As I was steeping my tea, Airia walked in.

"Princess Eleora has asked to meet with the council. 'As Rolmund's representative in Meraldia, I wish to speak with the Commonwealth on what direction we should take this region in.' Those were her words."

"Finally. Alright, let's make preparations to receive her."

I no longer had the free time to even enjoy a cup of tea, but at least things were moving now. It was decided that we'd hold the meeting in the old capital of Vest, which was the city most centrally situated. Though it was under the north's sphere of influence. The fact that Eleora hadn't called us to Vongang, where she'd stationed her army, meant that there was something there she absolutely didn't want us to see. Since there was no guarantee this wasn't a trap, I decided to take only Airia with me. Along with a retinue of werewolf guards.

Vest looked much like one of those old European cities that travel agencies always put pictures of on their front pages. It was, in essence, the tropical paradise that the slaves who escaped from Rolmund had built for themselves. They had really gone all-out on its construction, and impressive architecture awaited visitors on every corner. Sculptures, fountains, and various other fixtures adorned the streets.

"This is a splendid city, don't you think, Lord Veight?"

“Yeah. Hopefully we can make Ryunheit’s newer residential districts look like this.”

The meeting would be held in Vest’s viceroy’s manor. It would be my first time speaking face-to-face with Eleora since that incident in Krauhen.

Today, Eleora was wearing a dress. It was a regal gown, and it made her look like an actual princess. Though it didn’t make her seem any less terrifying. Next to me, Airia stiffened up slightly. Though her expression was as gentle as always, she was clearly nervous. Even to Airia’s eyes, Eleora was a dangerous individual.

With a regal bow, she pointed us toward two chairs by the window. In Rolmund, where it was perpetually cold, it was always the guest of honor who was seated next to the sunlight. But that wasn’t why she offered those seats to us. Perking my ears, I picked up on the faint noises of armed men shuffling about in the distance. They were probably just Eleora’s guards, but it was entirely possible her guards were also assassins. The windows were dangerous.

“We may be nobles, but you outrank us by far, Princess Eleora. These seats will suffice for us.”

I picked a seat impossible to snipe from the windows, and sat Airia down in it.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Airia, Lord Veight. I’m deeply grateful that you were willing to answer my summons.”

“We in turn are grateful for the invitation, Princess Eleora.”

Officially, this was our first meeting. It was taking a lot of effort for me to stay calm, but Eleora looked like she wasn’t nervous in the slightest. *Royalty really are made of sterner stuff than the rest of us.*

Once the pleasantries were over, we got down to business. My inner commoner was terrified of dealing with a princess, but I suppressed my fear and kept a straight face.

“What manner of relationship does the Meraldian Liberation Army wish to build with the Southern Commonwealth?” I asked warily, and Eleora smiled.

“I am simply an advisor to the liberation army, so I’m afraid I don’t have the authority to answer that. But as an envoy of Rolmund, I believe cooperation between our two nations would be best.”

So she plans on using her unique position as a shield to avoid making any binding promises. Damn fox. Fine, if that’s how you want to play then I’ve got a few tricks of my own.

“Then speaking as an envoy of Rolmund, what kind of relationship does the Rolmund Empire wish to build with the Commonwealth?”

“Rolmund is currently focused on affairs in the north. We have no reason to request that the south swear fealty to us. And so we would prefer to build a friendly relationship with the Commonwealth.”

“Splendid.”

I nodded with a smile. Of course, I didn’t believe her one bit. Airia turned to Eleora and casually said, “The Commonwealth currently has a sizable demon population. What does Rolmund make of that?”

Oh yeah. I totally forgot about that. I’m the demon representative here, and I completely forgot. Still smiling, Eleora replied, “Naturally we intend to treat them as citizens of the Commonwealth, as we would your human residents. They are free to travel to and from the cities under the liberation army’s control.”

The people living in the north hated us demons though, so of course travel wouldn’t be that simple. Eleora knew that, which was why she could make a promise like that so easily. We poked her with a few other contentious questions, but she sidestepped them all with diplomatic replies. The things she knew she could guarantee without any detriment to herself she guaranteed with ease, and that which she couldn’t she simply used the excuse of “I’m nothing more than an advisor, so I cannot speak for the liberation army.” At the same time, she casually let slip leading questions to try and gauge our own intentions.

An amateur negotiator like myself couldn’t hope to navigate this thorny maze, so I just sipped my tea and let Airia handle things. Though they both spoke civilly, they were engaged in a furious bout of verbal sparring. It wasn’t easy to

tell from their tone, but my superior sense of smell picked up the heightened state of alertness both of them were in. This really was a battle of life and death, just with words. I watched their duel from the sidelines, doing my best to remain expressionless. *Holy crap, this is scary.*



In the end, the negotiations finished with the Rolmund Empire and Meraldian Commonwealth forming an alliance, with a verbal promise that Eleora would advise the liberation army to remain on friendly terms with us as well. Treaties were signed, and—for the present—a peace was formed. In order to ease tensions, both sides agreed to not send any more troops to the cities on the north-south border. Though of course I already had a bunch of undead soldiers in the frontier cities, and Eleora had her entire army in Vongang. If either side felt like it, they could invade at any time. As we walked out of the viceroy's manor, Airia sighed.

"Princess Eleora was as impressive as I feared."

"Yes, she refused to divulge any valuable information, and avoided ceding any unfavorable conditions. But thanks to your wit, we were able to avoid ceding any unfavorable conditions ourselves. Thank you."

I wasn't a politician, so a feat like that would have been impossible for me. During the negotiations, I'd just given a few noncommittal replies, and left everything to Airia. My reply seemed to help ease Airia's nerves, and she smiled at me.

"I'm honored that my poor negotiation skills managed to be of use to you. Let us see this to the end together."

"Of course. Though it looks like it will be a long battle. I'll be counting on you, Lady Airia."

Both the military and the diplomatic departments of the Commonwealth would be busy for some time, it seemed.

—Eleora's War Records: Part 4—

Eleora plucked a beautiful flower from a nearby vase and started toying with it. She'd returned to her room, but was still in her dress. The meeting had exhausted her. There was a knock on her door, and Natalia walked in.

"Good work, ma'am. Would you like some tea?"

"Thank you, Natalia."

Natalia kept shooting Eleora covert glances as she prepared a cup of black tea.

“Mmm, what is it?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just, you look so wonderful that I can’t help but stare.”

Natalia held up the tea tray to hide her face, and Eleora chuckled.

“I don’t like dresses. This would look much better on you, I’m sure.”

“I-I could never pull a dress like that off! By the way, how did the meeting go?”

Eleora sighed, “I was on the defensive the entire time. The Demon Ambassador is a fearsome foe.”

“What about the Black Werewolf King?”

“He left the talking to Lady Airia. He must have enjoyed watching me squirm dealing with her alone.”

Eleora rolled back her sleeves and gulped down her tea.

“Your tea really is my favorite, Natalia. The Meraldians prefer brews that are far too mild.”

“You flatter me, ma’am.”

Eleora only truly felt at peace here when she was conversing with her men. Both the citizens of Meraldia and the demons to the south were people she needed to be wary of.

Around the same time, in the city of Vongang. Kurst, the viceroy of Welheim, had come to the city in order to negotiate wheat prices. Though there was still some time before the harvest, he needed to know how much Vongang would ask for this year. As Vongang’s population fluctuated drastically based on how many troops were stationed there at any given time, the city’s demand for food was variable.

Vongang’s viceroy, Dunieva, was an old acquaintance of Kurst’s. He was a cheery man in his mid-forties. The two exchanged small talk for a while before

moving on to business matters.

“They’ve decided to redo the city rankings.”

Kurst glanced out the window. He recognized a few familiar faces in the hustle and bustle of the street below. They were the same people who’d tailed him since he left Welheim. Kurst was known as a mild-mannered leader, but while he was gentle, he was no fool. He understood the dangers of his position, and was always alert for assassination or spying attempts. Trying his best not to make it look like he was staring, Kurst picked out as many details as he could. Though the differences were slight, the men didn’t have the stature and complexion of Meraldians. On top of that, they seemed uncomfortable in their uniforms. Chances were they were Rolmund soldiers. Meaning they were watchdogs Eleora had sent to keep an eye on him. *I see she doesn’t trust me.* Noticing the change in Kurst’s expression, Dunieva smiled sympathetically and said, “Princess Eleora possesses some zealous subordinates.”

“Indeed. Though it irks me how careless they’re being... Do they truly think I haven’t noticed? They’re underestimating me.”

Kurst frowned. Dunieva decided not to say anything more on the matter and brought the subject back to the city rankings.

“They’re ranking cities based not on importance, but on their contributions to the Rolmund Empire. Thanks to the Senate’s futile resistance, we lost our main gate and were demoted to eighth place.”

While Dunieva had enough in his treasury to repair the gates, repairing the damage that had been done to the city streets would cost a lot more. Kurst pulled his gaze away from the window and sat across Dunieva.

“And Welheim is in last place, ninth. Despite providing most of the food in the northeast, I suppose my city isn’t very necessary.”

“Not at all. Without Welheim, Vongang would starve. As far as I’m concerned, Welheim is the most important city in the north. And of course, Vongang’s sworn ally.”

While wars between viceroys had been prohibited under the Senate’s rule, they’d been free to form alliances as they pleased. As a result, most neighboring

viceroys had grown close over the years. Kurst smiled gently and bowed to Dunieva.

“Welheim feels the same about Vongang. Your knights are the shield that keeps our granaries safe. You’ve protected us from numerous threats since our great-grandfathers’ time.”

Dunieva shrugged his shoulders and replied, “Speaking of knights, our esteemed knight orders are not very happy.”

“What happened?”

“The princess reorganized the structures of all of them. Many of the smaller ones were merged together, so plenty of knight commanders lost their posts.”

“Ah... I see.”

Unlike mercenaries who fought for money, knights fought for honor. To them, their honor was a tangible asset they could pass down to their heirs for generations. It stood to reason that they’d be mad now that their honor had been stripped from them. Sighing, Dunieva shook his head.

“If only she’d offer them some compensation, the demoted knight commanders would settle down. But she refused.”

Their titles were just for show to begin with. A few Rolmund medals of honor would have been enough make up for their loss. But Eleora hadn’t compensated the knights for their demotions. She’d claimed that awarding honors to those who’d done nothing to earn them would be an insult to those who’d laid their lives on the line to do so. Since the Senate had surrendered unconditionally to Eleora, the knights had no right to dispute her decision. Dunieva frowned and took a sip of the tea Kurst had brought for him. Dunieva was a fan of the strong tea leaves that grew in Welheim, so Kurst had brought some as a gift.

“That princess is always doing things the proper way. I suppose I should praise her for being so fair. Hahaha.”

Dunieva’s expression was cheerful, but his tone was darker than the tea in his cup. Sensing his anger, Kurst said, “However, the princess has won the hearts of the people. So long as our citizens support her, we have no choice but to

endure.”

“Indeed. But only until the honeymoon phase passes.”

Kurst studied Dunieva’s face for a long time, then finally said, “Sir Dunieva, what do you know of the Southern Commonwealth’s Lord Veight?”

“I’ve heard he’s a werewolf strong enough to throw catapulted stones back at the machines that launched them. From what my men tell me, he’s a terrifying monster.”

Kurst smiled sadly and shook his head.

“You’re wrong. He’s a surprisingly understanding fellow. In fact, he was the one who suggested I surrender to the liberation army when I was stuck between two hard choices.”

“Oho...”

A fire kindled within Dunieva’s eyes. He no longer looked like a good-natured old man, but rather the viceroy of a fortress city.

“Tell me more.”

Dunieva called forth a servant and asked for more tea.

It seemed that so long as negotiations with Eleora were in progress, the liberation army wouldn’t try to invade us. Of course, she was still trying to instigate members of our council to turn on us, so I couldn’t lower my guard. Though perhaps I needn’t have worried.

“Oi, look at this, Veight. She sent me another letter!”

Garsh, viceroy of Beluza, held out a letter with a grin. It was from Princess Eleora.

“She said ‘if there’s anything you find worrying about the council, you can always come to me.’ Can you believe that?”

Naturally she tried to sound as neutral as possible, but basically she was saying “if you’ve got problems with the Commonwealth, I can help get rid of them, for a price.” Shardier’s viceroy, Aram, smiled ruefully and said, “I received a letter as well. Though it contains nothing more than a greeting.”

“Ah, as did I,” Veira’s viceroy, Forne, raised his hand. It seemed she was trying to sink her claws in wherever she could. But considering everyone’s reactions to her letters, I could afford to wait and see for a while longer.

“I haven’t received one.”

“Me either.”

Melaine and Firnir both looked dissatisfied. As I suspected, Eleora had no idea how to try and negotiate with demons. And though she was pouring all her efforts into winning over the Commonwealth’s human members, they were just laughing her attempts off. That was hardly a surprise, the Senate had been attempting similar strategies when they were around too.

“That northern princess doesn’t seem ta know the first thing about negotiating, eh?”

Petore, viceroy of Lotz, muttered as he skimmed through his letter.

“She seems to know how to use the stick, but if ya don’t dangle enough carrots in front of us, none of us are gonna give ya the time of day, lass.”

The residents of the south, including the viceroys, were all descendants of the adventurous men and women who’d crossed the Sea of Solitude. Stubborn and independent to a fault, they preferred deciding their own course in life. It was because they hated being told what to do that the Senate had such a hard time dealing with them.

Once everyone had a good laugh over Eleora’s letters, Melaine brought up a new topic.

“Incidentally, a great number of Mondstrahl adherents have been streaming in from the north and asking for permission to live in Bernheinen. Should I let them in?”

“Oh yeah, I’ve been getting a bunch of those too. They were saying they were being pressured to convert or something.”

Bernheinen, which Melaine governed, and Thuvan, which Firnir governed, were both cities that bordered the north. Most of Eleora’s new policies had been practical and fair, but for some reason, she was being especially harsh

when it came to religion. Her treatment of those not from the Sonnenlicht Order was quite cold. Shatina, viceroy of Zaria, folded her arms and muttered, “Zaria has received an influx of Mondstrahl followers as well. Princess Eleora must clearly be up to something. But she’s being so obvious about it... Maybe she’s not as smart as we think?”

Shatina had really grown recently as a viceroy. But while I agreed with the first half of her conclusion, it seemed to me that the reason she was going for such an obvious ploy wasn’t because she was incompetent, but because something or someone was forcing her hand. Fortunately, that meant we had a number of responses we could take.

“Personally, I think she’s doing this because she has no choice. It’s possible the emperor told her not to accept any citizens who aren’t members of the Sonnenlicht Order.”

“Ah, that makes more sense. I see now.”

Shatina nodded in understanding. Forne smiled playfully and said, “We’ve been getting a lot of famous people coming to us instead of pilgrims. The composer Donaut, the world-renowned artist Musel, and the sculptor Schteiden. They were all in the personal employ of various northern viceroys, but now they all want to come to us. Ah! I’m so happy I could sing. Schteiden’s disciples Bafel and Zeon came with him, too...”

Forne kept going on like that for a few minutes, but the point was that famous artists and musicians were coming to us. Part of the reason I’d been so welcoming of the Mondstrahl Church, which was a minority in Ryunheit, was because so many scientists and art masters were part of it. Their works were what moved the hearts of people, and brought in the wealth of nobles. Of course, they were no substitute for soldiers and fortifications, but they too were an important part of war, and not to be underestimated.

Forne clapped his hands together and said, “Thanks to that, our series of werewolf plays have become even more polished. I highly encourage every one of you to come see them. They are the culmination of all Meraldia’s artistic talent.”

He sounded like a child unwrapping his first birthday present. Apparently, the

next installment of the series was about Firnir and Melaine, though, so I was a little interested in seeing it.

Oh, how foolish I had been.

“I must choose. Do we wither away slowly, or fight to the bitter end? Yet this choice is too heavy for me to make.”

“Firnir, if such a choice is beyond you, then let me bear it.”

“I know that voice! Is that you, Lord Veight!? Have you finally returned from the front lines?”

“My mission ended sooner than I expected. I hoped to ease my weariness by gazing upon your beautiful smile, but alas it seems something troubles you.”

The absolute heck is this? Firnir, who was supposed to be the star of this play, was currently torn over whether or not to fight. If she chose to go to war with the humans, much blood would be spilled on both sides. But if she didn’t, her race would be pushed out. As she was agonizing over what to do, the Black Werewolf King Veight showed up. He encouraged Firnir, and showed her a way to win this war while keeping the fighting to a minimum. Then together the two of them went to the front lines to fight the only battle they couldn’t avoid.

“Men, we have finally conquered Thuvan! This marks a new chapter in the history of the kentauros race!”

“YEEEEEEEEEAH!”

“My name is Firnir! Firnir the Swift Gale!”

After a few seconds of cheering, Firnir suddenly looked around.

“Where is he... Where is Lord Veight?”

The Black Werewolf King was nowhere to be seen. For the man who’d brought about this glorious victory had already moved on to other battlefields.

“Once again, I was unable to convey my feelings to him...”

Amidst the cheers of her soldiers, Firnir looked down forlornly.

The curtains closed, marking the end of the second installment of the werewolf series, *The Maiden of the Gale*. The actors walked up and bowed to the audience. The people who'd played the kentauros were all muscular, handsome men. The play itself had been full of vigor and heart. But for some reason, the actress playing Firnir had been a small, dainty girl. And she'd been played up as some kind of damsel in distress. Also because of how difficult it had been to make the actors look half-horse, they'd just settled for affixing a large amount of tassels to the actors' waists. *I guess they're supposed to be horse tails or something?* Furthermore, all the kentauros actors had worn helmets with horsehair manes on them, and their shields had horse head designs. It was definitely enough to make it obvious they were representing kentauros.

Meanwhile, the actors playing werewolves all wore wolf head helmets and put on thick black fur capes every time they "transformed" into their werewolf forms. They took them back off when they returned to looking human. Keeping the costume designs simple and symbolic rather than trying to make them accurate had been a smart decision in my opinion. Famous plays back on Earth had used props in similar ways. Firnir seemed to have really enjoyed the play, and she gave it a standing ovation once it ended.

"Whoa, I looked so cool! But Vaito looked even cooler! Hey, can you say those lines to me sometime!?"

"Give me a break."

I wouldn't be able to sound cool saying them anyway. In an attempt to escape Firnir's pleading gaze, I turned to Forne, who was grinning proudly.

"I thought I was just supposed to be a side character in this part?"

"And you were."

"Didn't I stand out a bit too much for a side character?"

"Well... encouraging Firnir, watching over her growth, and then departing mysteriously are perhaps more the actions of a main character. But they were all things that needed to be done by someone, so what else was I meant to do?"

You totally did this on purpose. I knew arguing wouldn't get me anywhere

though, so I just sighed and applauded the play. This time, instead of being the protagonist, I'd become the side character who did all the important things while the main characters just watched. Come to think of it, one of my friends in my old life had sold me on the awesomeness of prominent side characters. Not only did they get to be cool, they could throw all the truly hard things onto the main characters. In retrospect, that might have been the reason I was so attached to my position as vice-commander too.

Next up was the play starring Melaine, *The Queen of the Crescent Moon*.

"Up north, the demons are ignoring the Demon Lord's orders and have begun razing the cities. But a lowly vampire like me cannot hope to stop them..."

"Lady Melaine, what seems to be the problem?"

"Ah, Veight. As a former human myself, I cannot bear to watch fellow demons needlessly spill the blood of other humans."

In this play, I was aide to Melaine, the vampire queen. Play me respected Melaine like an older sister, and did everything he could to help her, including often putting himself in danger for her.

"Like us werewolves, vampires are denizens of the night. I will not allow you to insult Lady Melaine's honor any further! Leave this place at once!"

"Hah! Demons only follow the strong! If you want me to bow my head to you, you better chop it off my neck!"

"Then that is what I shall do. Apologize to Lady Melaine in hell!"

Afterwards, I dueled with Dolf, the commander of the demons' ogres. His underlings tried to use underhanded sneak attacks to kill me, but I beat them all back. Then, after a fierce clash of swords, I defeated Dolf.

With that, we thought peace would finally be brought to the north. Unfortunately, my intervention came too late, and the humans of northern Meraldia began a counteroffensive against the demon army. The demons stationed in the area were caught off-guard, and overwhelmed. Melaine, who'd only come to the north as a messenger, was swept up in the fighting as well. But then I charged into enemy lines all alone to rescue her.

“Where are you, Lady Melaine!? Your fellow disciple Veight has come to save you!”

“Aaah, Veight... You came...”

“Of course I did. Now come, we must escape this battlefield.”

“But all of my vampire subjects were killed in this battle. I lack the forces to escape this encirclement.”

Play me comforted Melaine.

“Fear not, your black werewolf knight is here. So long as I am by your side, not even a thousand men will be able to stop you.”

After some more fierce fighting, I escape the battlefield together with Melaine. At the end of the play, she swears she’ll rebuild the vampire race.

Melaine seemed to have enjoyed the play a lot.

“How wonderful. Back when I was a human I never imagined I would ever have a play chronicling my life. Ah, thank goodness I became a vampire...”

“The way they portrayed you is way too exaggerated, Melaine.”

“Oh, shut up. I’m busy watching play you, so you just sit there and watch.”

Now that’s harsh. Once again, I couldn’t help but take issue with my role in the play.

“Oi, Forne.”

“Yes?”

“Why am I standing out so much in this play too?”

“It’s not such a big deal, is it? As long as the performance is interesting, that’s all that matters. Besides, it is true that you have racked up a number of impressive military accomplishments.”

Yeah, but this isn’t accurate at all. Forne held up two fingers and explained, “What’s important is to use these plays to showcase two things. First, that the demon race only invaded because they were backed into a corner, and second, the demon army was originally split into two factions. This play is a simplified

explanation of the events that led to your pacifist faction taking control of the demon army."

It was an undeniable fact that the previous Demon Lord had only raised the banners of war because the survival of the demon race depended on it. It was also true that neither I nor Melaine had anything to do with the massacre in the north. But would such simple reasoning really convince playgoers? I was still skeptical, but Forne seemed confident.

"Well, just sit back and watch what a city of artists is capable of. Veira is just getting started. These are just preliminary preparations."

Can I really trust this guy to take care of things?

To my surprise, Forne's plays diffused through the north at lightning speed. Demons always had a bad reputation with humans. Werewolves and vampires were feared across countries as monsters in disguise, wanting nothing more than to eat people. Kentauros and giants were seen as rivals competing for the same farmlands and pastures. Kentauros of ages past had considered the fields humans had cultivated as the land's natural blessings, and took it upon themselves to make sure the humans "shared." In the past, demons had certainly been the indisputable enemies of mankind.

But things were different now. Werewolves in this day and age didn't eat humans. Even we felt an instinctive distaste for eating creatures that looked like us. Besides, any meat that hadn't had its blood drained prior tasted terrible. Vampires had also come to realize that if they sucked too much blood, they'd run out of prey to feed on. In recent times they'd kept their bloodsucking to a low enough level that they didn't convert their victims. The majority of Bernheinen's citizens didn't mind getting trace amounts of their blood drawn at regular intervals. Especially since Melaine paid them for their blood. It was the easiest money most of them made.

Kentauros, on the other hand, had learned the basics of agriculture, and now tilled their own fields rather than stealing those of others. Because of these recent shifts in demon societies, Forne's plays were able to catch on much better than I expected. Their popularity grew at an alarming rate, and soon

people came to think of demons not as monsters, but as powerful, rational creatures who possessed the same feelings and emotions humans did. Of course, demons and humans possessed different values and morals, but they could still come to understand each other well enough to live in peace together.

On a side note, bloodsucking creatures such as mosquitoes, leeches, and ticks were known within Meraldia as “Pirs.” And “Vam” was a derogatory term for people. Which was why even in Meraldia they were known as vampires, though the etymology was different than back on Earth. If you were to translate the word vampire literally in the Meraldian tongue, it would mean something like “tick-bastard.” Not a very nice term. Fortunately, Forne’s play helped spread the idea that vampires were actually beautiful, stylish demons. His tactics reminded me of political campaigns back on Earth. But thanks to him, Melaine was a lot happier these days.

“Forne’s plays are wonderful. I really must thank him somehow for improving the image of vampires so.”

She’s been putting a lot more time and effort into her viceroy duties recently. Firnir was the same way. But I knew the truth. Forne was already making a killing with how popular his plays were, he didn’t need any extra thanks.

“What do you think of this armor? I call it the Black Werewolf Plate.”

Forne brought out an embroidered and decorated suit of armor. The sleek black helmet was shaped like a wolf’s head. The cape trailing from the pauldrons was made of luxurious black fur. The armor resembled the werewolf costume used in the plays, and was clearly meant for nobles with too much money.

“Because of the plays’ popularity, I’ve started selling these suits of armor to nobles. I’ve been telling everyone they give you the strength and valor of a werewolf.”

What, like a Power Rangers outfit?

“The kentauros and vampire helmets are quite popular as well, but the fan favorite is definitely the werewolf one. We can’t manufacture them fast enough, it’s quite the predicament.”

Predicament my ass. You're loving this, aren't you? I'd seen this marketing strategy plenty of times back on Earth. Considering how much money Forne had spent on these plays, it was obvious what he was up to.

"Sir Forne, you crafted all these plays so you could sell your wares, didn't you?"

"Oh, you noticed? My you're eerily perceptive, Black Werewolf King."

"You don't care if the play's more expensive to produce than the money it brings in. Even if it's popular, you spent so much on recruiting talented screenwriters and actors that it's probably losing you money, isn't it? I don't blame you for wanting to make a return on your investment somehow."

Forne chuckled, then nodded with a serious expression.

"Yes, you're absolutely right. But I chose this strategy because of your personal character."

"What do you mean by that?"

"People would much prefer a werewolf who understands them than a human who doesn't. I'll put the money you earned me to good use, don't worry. Ah yes, I've received a few orders from northern viceroys as well, so I'll be going to make some personal deliveries."

"Got it, thanks."

It was only after Forne left that I realized.

"I should have asked for a royalty fee for using my face..."

Ah well. He's doing good work for the Commonwealth, so he can keep his profits.

While Forne's propaganda was doing its work, I began hearing unsettling rumors coming from the Sonnenlicht pilgrims touring the north. Apparently the Sonnenlicht residents were growing unhappy with Eleora's rule. *Now that's a surprise.* The Rolmund Empire forbade the practice of any religion other than Sonnenlicht. But on the other hand, that meant they were very welcoming to Sonnenlicht followers. However, according to what the pilgrims told me,

Rolmund's brand of Sonnenlicht was different from the one they were used to practicing.

For example, Rolmund's version of Sonnenlicht had a practice known as "Sunbasking." Every week, Sonnenlicht followers had to recite holy scripture while standing under the sun. There was no officially set time they needed to do this for, but in general, the ritual lasted about an hour. However, Meraldia's style of Sonnenlicht had no such ritual.

If I had to guess, the reason Rolmund had a precept like that was to maintain the health of its people. Humans needed to spend at least some time in the sun, or their health would deteriorate. Sunlight was needed to synthesize vitamin D, but that wasn't all. That was the reason why sunbathing had become such a popular custom in northern medieval Europe, where sunlight was scarce. Even if they hadn't had the science to back it up, they'd known instinctively that sun was good.

Since Rolmund was a cold place, I imagined most people wouldn't bother going outside if it wasn't a religious requirement. But Meraldia was a paradise filled with sunlight, unlike the harsh land of Rolmund. There was no need for mandatory sunbathing. Which was why the custom of Sunbasking likely died out. All it did was waste time for no discernible benefit. I could see why the Sonnenlicht believers in Meraldia didn't like their Rolmund overlords bringing the practice back.

Though the differences between the two sects of Sonnenlicht may have been slight, those slight things would eventually pile up into one big rift. Besides, there was already a very big difference in the way Meraldian and Rolmund Sonnenlicht followers treated heretics. In Rolmund, heretics were enemies of the state who'd turned their backs on God. Whereas in Meraldia, they were simply misguided believers who lived nearby. If anything, they felt more pity for heretics than hatred.

In the south, other religions had become so prevalent that followers of religions other than Sonnenlicht weren't even considered heretics. There were even reformed bishops like Yuhit who'd come to see that other religions in fact had valuable lessons they could teach followers of Sonnenlicht. He really had changed a lot since when I first met him.

Regardless, considering how much discontent the revival of a single practice was causing among Meraldian Sonnenlicht followers, it was easy to see why they were quickly growing disillusioned with Eleora. Of course, she hadn't asked them to worship her, so it was their own fault for placing all those expectations on her in the first place. Humans truly were a demanding race. Then again, their livelihoods depended on their rulers, so I could see why they would be. Everyone had their own needs and responsibilities, and acted accordingly. Including me.

"I guess this is one of my responsibilities too..." I muttered from within my armor, my voice sounding distinctly villainish. A flowing black cape hung from my shoulders. Spiked silver chains looped around the collar of the cape, making me look even more menacing.

"General Veight, you look spectacular!"

Canines were hovering all around me, chattering excitedly. They were the ones who'd made the silver accessories for my outfit.

"I'm glad you think so," I said with a sigh. Forne's werewolf series had become so popular in the north that people were now clamoring to see the real Black Werewolf King in the flesh. The people of the north had no idea what Eleora was really after. So they honestly believed that Meraldia was now at peace for good. As a result, they no longer feared the butcher of 400. Many of the northern viceroys, including Vongang's, had sent me official dinner invitations so I'd decided to do a short tour of the north. But while this was official business, did I really have to wear an outfit this gaudy? Of course, this was all Forne's doing.

"Vaito, you look cool! Like degenerate cool!"

Firnir had come to see me off as well. *You realize "degenerate cool" is not actual slang, right?* Melaine and Airia nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, that outfit looks surprisingly good on you."

"You look very handsome, Lord Veight."

"However..."

I wasn't really one for fashion. No matter what I wore, it'd get ripped up when I transformed anyway. Like most werewolves, I saw no point in wasting time with fancy clothes. Most of what I owned was cheap sets of clothes I'd bought at bargain sales. Clothes were expensive in this world, so I figured I was just being prudent, but when Airia had first seen the state of my wardrobe she'd nearly fainted. Everyone complained that I needed to look more stately when I was on official business at least, so I'd upgraded my wardrobe. But if I ruined these clothes by transforming I was certain everyone would complain anyway. I guess that was just more proof fancy cosplay clothes like these didn't really suit me. *Oh yeah, there's a perfect word to describe what I look like right now, isn't there?*

"I look like a clown."

"Huh, what do you mean? You look good, Veight. The spitting image of the prince of evil."

Melaine cocked her head quizzically, and Airia and Firnir hurried to back her up.

"Indeed, you give off the appearance of a well-mannered villain. I can guarantee you that look will be popular with the ladies."

"Oh yeah, totally! You're like that evil hero who's only nice to the heroine!"

These guys don't get it at all. Then again, that made sense. It's not like they had any idea what kind of Earth clowns I was referencing here. Still, their responses didn't make me feel any better. *Whatever, I guess this is part of the propaganda campaign too.*

—Eleora's War Record: Part 5—

Somewhere within the fortress city of Vongang.

"You hear about Ryunheit's Black Werewolf King?"

"Yeah, my wife loves that play. She makes me go see it with her every damn week."

"I'm not talking about the play, I mean the guy himself! I went and saw him

the other day. Got invited to a banquet with him and the viceroy. They invited all the traders in the city."

"Oh, yeah, that. So how was it? Did he bite you or anything?"

"Hahaha, of course not. But that man has one really intimidating aura, you know."

"Is he really that impressive?"

"Oh yeah. He's like a living legend. I got goosebumps just sitting in the same room as him. But, you know..."

"Hm?"

"Since I was there and all, I thought I'd ask the man for a handshake."

"Holy shit, you've got nerves of steel!"

"Nah, he's a surprisingly polite guy. He just smiled and shook my hand when I asked. It was like being in the presence of a king."

"You're really singing this guy's praises, huh?"

A pair of men were sitting at a bar in Vongang and discussing the Black Werewolf King. Meanwhile, Eleora had returned to the mining city of Krauhen to receive a report from her homeland.

"This isn't good..." she muttered. Her adjutant immediately walked over and asked, "What seems to be the matter?"

"My dear uncle's meddling. We won't receive any reinforcements until fall."

"But then..."

Eleora folded up the letter and tossed it onto her desk.

"He's even worried about someone as far removed from the succession as me. What a cautious man. But this is posing quite a problem for us."

"Even if he cannot spare any troops, he could at least send over a few priests and civil officers."

"Civil and religious matters aren't under my jurisdiction. There's nothing I can do, Borsche."

Rolmund and Meraldia had several differences not only in their religion, but also in their code of laws. Reorganizing Meraldia's religions and judicial institutions was something that could only be done by specialists in their respective fields. Eleora stroked the spine of her Blast Grimoire and sighed.

"I worked so hard to lay the groundwork for a stable rule here. But while I may be the empire's huntswoman, I'm not its chef. Preparing the dish I've caught is the job of our civil officers. It'll be difficult for me to fulfill that role without any prior training."

"But you cannot disobey an imperial command, Your Highness."

Borsche narrowed his eyebrows, and Eleora shook her head.

"This is just proof that the emperor's power is waning, and those around him are starting to assert control. I imagine his health must have taken another turn for the worse. It's possible his disease is progressing faster than the healers anticipated."

"Then, with all due respect..."

"Yes, he's probably not long for this world. It's imperative I make the right choices before he departs."

Do I take risks to solidify my rule over Meraldia and become its de facto ruler? Or do I accept that this is beyond my ability alone, and contend myself with asking for aid from the homeland? If I make the wrong choice here, my future will be sealed. As Eleora is contemplating what to do, Natalia entered her room.

"Princess, I have a report to... Oh, should I return later?"

Natalia looked from Eleora to Borsche, then timidly started backing away. But Eleora just smiled and said, "Don't worry, we were just chatting. Feel free to make your report."

Natalia nodded, then saluted.

"Our healers say that there have been more outbreaks of food poisoning among our mage corps. At least a few men from each platoon are bedridden."

"It seems our empire is full of sick people."

"Huh? Oh, yes. It's as you say."

Eleora was of course referring to the emperor's condition, but that was something Natalia was unaware of. Eleora took the report from Natalia and perused the names of the sick men.

"You've been keeping a close eye on our food stores?"

"Yes, exactly as you ordered. Our rations come directly from the viceroys themselves, so they shouldn't be contaminated. We've also been performing our own checks, as per military regulations. However..."

Natalia trailed off and glanced over at Eleora.

"Everyone is treating their rations the same way they would were they in Rolmund, so they're getting spoiled without anyone noticing."

The temperatures in Rolmund were low enough that people didn't have to worry about food preservation much. Only in midsummer did it get warm enough for perishable food to spoil. But even the northern reaches of Meraldia had climates mild enough that food needed to be taken care of. If left alone, it would rot in no time. The differences in climate had caused more than a few sicknesses on their own too, and the mage corps was chronically understaffed. Eleora nodded, her expression sympathetic.

"All foreign expeditions bring with them the risk of disease. Tell those who are ill to rest and recover. Reorganize the remaining tasks to be accomplished by priority, and put off the lowest priority missions to compensate for the lack of personnel."

Eleora was running short on time, but she didn't want to push her men past their limits. She thought back to the secret plan concocted by her homeland to conquer Meraldia. The idea had been to win over the northern viceroys through diplomacy, then conquer the southern cities by force. Eventually, they would conquer enough territory that the Commonwealth would be forced to surrender. Some autonomy would be returned to the alliance, but they would become a Rolmund territory. Then, over time, officials from Rolmund would start slowly stripping away the viceroys' power, until Meraldia was well and truly assimilated into the empire.

If Eleora was successful in her mission to conquer the south, it wouldn't matter who became the next emperor. She'd have too much clout to be exiled.

After that, she just needed to weaponize her accomplishments successfully in order to survive in the den of vipers that was the royal palace. Her goal was to survive long enough to let her subordinates retire happily as lords with their own plots of land. She'd sworn she wouldn't rest until they were rewarded for the loyalty they'd shown her. Unfortunately, her Meraldian campaign had ground to a halt. If a new emperor was coronated before she completed her mission, she would be in a precarious position. All because the current emperor had rushed the invasion of Meraldia once he'd learned about his ailment. Smiling sardonically, Eleora grumbled, "This is such a messy campaign. I bet you future historians will laugh at our foolhardy invasion."

"Your Highness."

Sensing her dissatisfaction, Borsche cut her off before she could say anything that might incriminate her. Eleora smiled self-deprecatingly and raised her hand in acknowledgment.

"I know. But really, it's pathetic. He's desperate to leave his name in history now that he knows his days are numbered. However, he waited until his mortality caught up with him, and now it's too late. That's a lesson I would do well to remember."

Natalia was worried others might overhear Eleora's near-treasonous words as well and hurriedly said, "Princess, you must be tired. Why not watch a play or something to relax?"

"A play, huh? How very like you to suggest that, Natalia."

Rolmund's government strictly controlled what kind of productions were allowed to be put on in theaters. All plays were inspected by a censorship committee to make sure they didn't insult the emperor or his government. As a result, most plays ended up being religious in nature. They were either anecdotes from scripture, or reenactments of the lives of various saints. And of course, Natalia was the daughter of a Sonnenlicht bishop.

However, Eleora was unaware that things were different in Meraldia. There was no censorship committee, and all manner of plays could be put on without fear of reprisal. Had Eleora been aware a play extolling the virtues of Ryunheit's Black Werewolf King existed, she would have prepared countermeasures

immediately.

“Ah no, that’s not why I’m recommending you watch one, Princess. You see...”

But before Natalia could finish her sentence, another messenger burst into the room.

“Your Highness, Krauhen’s viceroy is requesting an audience. He claims he has urgent news.”

“Very well, I’ll be there at once.”

Eleora rose to her feet and strode toward the door, patting Natalia on the head as she passed.

“I’m afraid the play will have to wait for another day, Natalia. Take care of the wounded soldiers for me.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

It was much later that Eleora finally learned of Viceroy Forne’s ploy.

The moment I returned to Ryunheit, I went up to my office and dove into my bed. *I’m so done. I’m never wearing an outfit like that again.* The citizens of the north had loved my getup, but I hated it. Everyone from young boys to old ladies had begged for my handshake. That had been so exhausting I never wanted to do it again. At least not for another week.

While I was running around playing at being a celebrity, the other councilors had been hard at work. There were some cultural differences between the north and the south, but the viceroys of all the Meraldian cities were relatively close. My capable vice-commander, Kite, tidied up a stack of documents as he caught me up to speed.

“The four northern cities closest to the southern border are all sympathetic to the Commonwealth.”

Specifically, those four cities were the theopolis Ioro Lange, the fortress city of Vongang, the old capital Vest, and the agricultural city Welheim. Each of them were ancient cities with long and storied histories, as well as key strongholds that served vital functions within Meraldia. But they’d all been

ranked low within Eleora's new city hierarchy. As a result, they weren't very satisfied with her.

"Excuse me, Lord Veight. But I've brought the results of the test run of the portable crossbows you developed for the canines."

Kurtz the dragonkin engineer walked into my office and laid a sheaf of papers on my desk. Kite got up to brew us all a cup of tea, and I started pondering Eleora's latest move. She'd probably introduced this ranking system in order to incentivize the various cities to compete with each other over who contributed the most to Rolmund. But instead of spurring the lower-ranked cities to try harder, she'd just sown the seeds of rebellion. Something essential to her plan was missing, but I had no idea what it was. As I was wondering what she'd originally planned to use to control the cities even under the ranking system, Parker walked into my room.

"Veight, have you seen Master? Once she finished raising the last of her skeleton warriors she muttered 'I do not wish to lay eyes on another bone for a long time...' and wandered off somewhere."

"You realize you're nothing but bones right? If you found her you'd just make her more depressed."

"Unlike her skeleton warriors, I'm at least still technically part of the living. We really can't have the Demon Lord going missing right now. If she doesn't come back, how about you take over for fifty years or so, Veight?"

"The title of Demon Lord isn't something you can pass around that easily, you know. Especially not for fifty years."

Halfway through my conversation with Parker, Garsh burst into my office.

"Yo, Veight. I came to check up on the mates I lent you, so I thought I'd drop by your place too. They've been pining for some seafood, so I brought some dried fish for everyone."

"Don't just leave it all here, you're going to stink up my room!"

Why are there so many people flooding in? The worst part was, no one seemed like they wanted to leave, even after they concluded their business with me.

Upon spotting Garsh, Kurtz got to his feet.

“Sir Garsh, as you requested, I’ve drawn up blueprints for an improved drainage pump.”

“Ohh, thanks. Do you have a prototype I can test?”

“I do indeed. We have yet to do a proper stress test, but theoretically it should be capable of handling seawater as well.”

Now they were even discussing business that had nothing to do with me in *my* office. Before I could start complaining, Fahn strode in as well. For some reason, she was carrying Master on her back.

“Veight, the Demon Lord fell asleep while she was playing around with us so I brought her back here, but...”

So that’s where she’d gone. Parker got to his feet, elated.

“I knew Master would wind up here eventually!”

“Hey, stop shouting, Parker. You’ll wake her up.”

But it was too late. Rubbing her eyes, Master drowsily raised her head.

“Mmmm... What... is it?”

She must have been really tired if she was still half out of it. Parker bounded up to her like a loyal dog and started jabbering excitedly.

“Master, if you wish to rest, please do so on the bed! I’ll sing you the lullaby I came up with to ward off evil spirits. Come, let me serenade you!”

Barely conscious, Master looked up at Parker.

“Mmmm? Hrm?”

She leaned closer, but when she realized she was staring at a skeleton’s face, her lips twisted into a grimace.

“Begone.”

She jabbed a finger toward him and unleashed a flurry of ethereal blades in his direction. Her spell harmed only the undead, and passed through all other

creatures.

“Waaaah!?”

Parker hurriedly broke apart into individual bones and fell to the ground to avoid being sliced to ribbons. Lying on the floor, he shouted, “Master, it’s me! Your disciple Parker! I may be undead, but I’m not an evil spirit!”

“No, you definitely are.”

“Be quiet, Veight!”

It was rare that I was the one poking fun at Parker and not the other way around. I brewed Master a cup of strong black tea to help her wake up, then sighed.

“How am I going to get any work done if you guys are all hanging around in my office?”

My office had already become a de facto break room for the members of the demon army, but now humans had started using it like one too. It was starting to get too crowded.



Thanks to that, I couldn't get any work done at all. And since six people apparently wasn't enough, Lacy also walked into my room. She glanced around the perimeter until finally she spotted Kite sweeping up Parker off the floor with a broom.

"Mister Kite, I found the grimoire you were searching for. Oh no, actually this isn't the right one..."

"You got the wrong one again!? Wait, isn't that a cookbook!? How on earth did you mistake a cookbook for a grimoire, Lacy!?"

Just as I thought my office couldn't possibly fit any more people, Airia walked in.

"Wonderful, everyone's already here. Master Mao was kind enough to bring us all a bribe, so why don't we enjoy his gift with some tea?"

By bribe, do you mean that ridiculously huge pound cake you're holding? Mao walked in behind Airia, sulking.

"Thanks to a certain someone, my business has been suffering. I brought this bribe to convince you to fix things. But your viceroy here brushed me off."

Who could that certain someone possibly be? I have no clue. Well, I guess it is at least partly my fault Mao's business is hurting.

"Mao, since Garsh is already here, how about you take up the saltpan issue with him? Now that they've got the foundations set, they should be able to increase production to meet demand."

Mao's eyebrows twitched and he smiled sardonically.

"Oh, you don't mind me negotiating directly?"

"Seeing as you know everything about my administration I'd rather keep you happy than have you betray me. But if you try and unfairly monopolize profits, I'll bite your head off."

Mao shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated fashion.

"You really are a tyrant, o' Black Werewolf King."

And don't you forget it. Mao then suddenly grew serious and said, "I reported

this to Lady Airia already, but there are rumors that Princess Eleora has begun mobilizing the troops stationed in Vongang."

"Are you sure?"

Eleora didn't strike me as the kind of fool who'd rush headlong into war like this. As far as I could tell, she had very few Rolmund troops with her. And there was no telling if her Meraldian proxy army would be willing to fight fellow Meraldians. Mobilizing her army this early struck me as a foolhardy move. However, Mao didn't look like he was joking.

"She's bought up large stores of food and salt. That's all I was able to investigate, so if you wish for further proof, you'll need to perform your own reconnaissance."

Most generals in this world seemed not to have a good grasp on military logistics, but Eleora was different. As a result, though, it was easy to predict her movements by watching the flow of goods within her domain.

"Understood, I've met with Vongang's viceroy before. I'll ask Dunieva for more details."

I looked around and saw a hodgepodge of humans and demons mingling together in my cramped office, eating snacks. In one corner a skeleton mage and a human mage were discussing magic. In another, a dragonkin engineer and a human viceroy were making plans for new facilities within the city. When I first crashed through the window of this room so many months ago, I never even dreamed a day like this would come. While the crowd was making it hard for me to get my own work done, at least everyone else was able to exchange information and make plans. Fortunately, this meant the southern cities would continue developing and advancing even while I went on another trip to the north. Thinking about it that way, I was glad my office was getting use.

"Vice-Commander Veight, leave the planning for later and come eat with us!"

A canine soldier tugged at my sleeve, bringing me back to the present.

"Oh, yeah. That sounds like a good idea."

"Here, have some cake!"

“Thanks.”

It was only after I took the plate from him that I realized they hadn’t been here a minute ago. *How many more people is this room going to get?*

—Eleora’s War Record: Part 6—

Eleora sat in her room in Krauhen and listened to her adjutant’s report. Once Borsche finished, she nodded.

“Sorry, Borsche. You always hated these kinds of missions, didn’t you?”

Borsche smiled sadly, then gave her a salute.

“I believe I was the one who always lectured you not to be picky with your missions or your food. So I’m afraid I have no right to complain, Your Highness.”

“Don’t try to distract me with old childhood stories,” Eleora replied with a smile. Borsche’s expression grew serious.

“But Your Highness, are you sure this will suffice?”

“If we move too overtly, that werewolf will sniff out our true intentions.”

She stashed the stack of documents detailing the provisions she’d ordered in a box and grinned wolfishly.

“Knowing him, he’s probably taken note of even this. After all, if he understands how the Rolmund army normally handles logistics, the movement of goods should have made it obvious.”

“You seem to hold that man in high esteem.”

“He’s likely the most accomplished general Meraldia has. Even the slightest of hints are enough for him to read our moves and plan a counter-strategy.”

Borsche nodded in agreement.

“We certainly cannot afford to let our guard down around him. Furthermore, from what we’ve learned, the demon army is as modernized as Rolmund’s.”

“Exactly. They’re nothing like the Senate’s pathetic knights,” Eleora replied, her smile turned self-deprecating. “Unfortunately, I lack the men to scout out the enemy. But even without reconnaissance, it’s obvious our position is

precarious.”

Because most of the mage corps had fallen ill, Eleora couldn’t send them out to keep an eye on the northern viceroys. They weren’t especially skilled in spying to begin with either, so dispatching them in their condition would be pushing it.

“By the way, you’re sure no one has discovered the spare battalion we’re training?”

“Fear not, we’re proceeding with the utmost secrecy. We’ve taken great care to ensure their new equipment arrived disguised so that no one noticed.”

“Let’s just hope that’s enough.”

Eleora glanced outside the window. Summer would soon be arriving in Meraldia.

“This is going to be the hardest season for us, Borsche.”

“Indeed. The heat might be bearable in loose clothing, but we can hardly have our troops march unarmored.”

The increasing temperature had brought with it an increase in the number of Rolmund soldiers who were falling ill. Not only did they have to deal with unfamiliar weather, but they were under constant stress. It was little wonder they were exhausted. Eleora also had to deal with one other problem which was even more dangerous than the weather.

“The difference in our diplomatic abilities is quickly becoming clear. While the north is ostensibly under our control, it would be wise to assume none of the northern viceroys are our allies.”

“The Commonwealth’s council has won them over then?”

“Yes. At this rate, the north might openly revolt soon.”

Eleora knew she had no time left.

Around the same time, in Ioro Lange, a holy city for Meraldia’s Sonnenlicht followers, a new edict was about to be put into place. And that edict was going to have a big impact on the city. Within Ioro Lange’s cathedral, Yuhit bowed to

an assembled council of bishops.

“Thank you for granting me this audience.”

The other bishops clapped enthusiastically. Over the past few hours, there had been a fierce theological debate between the bishops and cardinals of the faith. In the end, it had been Yuhit’s fervent speech that had swayed the others to accept his point of view. High Cardinal Obenius, the highest-ranking member of the Sonnenlicht church in Meraldia, nodded solemnly.

“Your speech has moved me, Father Yuhit. I apologize for my impolite words earlier.”

Obenius then placed two scriptures on the long rectangular table in front of him. The thick one was Rolmund’s holy text, while the thin one was Meraldia’s holy text. When the slaves had escaped from Rolmund, they had only brought a few of their home country’s holy texts with them.

“I have read the scripture given to us by Princess Eleora many times, yet not once has it struck me as divine. How are we to preach this text to others when we ourselves do not believe in it?”

After fleeing Rolmund, the slaves had needed to band together to survive in the harsh and unfamiliar land of Meraldia. Both demons and nature had been their enemies. If they’d started fighting amongst themselves too, they wouldn’t have survived. As a result, Meraldia’s sect of Sonnenlicht evolved into one that valued equality and bonds between fellow members more than anything. On the other hand, Rolmund’s version of Sonnenlicht had evolved into a tool used by the government to suppress revolt. So it valued obedience and authority above all else. These differences became obvious when one read the two scriptures side-by-side. High Cardinal Obenius smiled.

“Father Yuhit, your speech has resonated with me. You spoke from the heart, and I could sense both your devotion to Sonnenlicht, and the people of Meraldia.”

“Thank you for your kind words.”

Despite the glowing praise, Yuhit remained humble. The other bishops and cardinals smiled as well. They shared a moment of comfortable silence, glad

that they had come to an agreement as fellow philosophers and theologians. Obenius took Meraldia's scripture in one hand, then placed the other over his breast.

"I, Obenius Ioro Yupiteum the third, hereby proclaim that Bishop Yuhit's interpretations of Sonnenlicht scripture are true and canon. In deference to his contributions to the Sonnenlicht Order, and to his vast religious knowledge, I hereby nominate him to the position of cardinal. If there are any who object, stand now or forever hold your peace."

No one got to their feet. Everyone unanimously approved of Yuhit's promotion. Few bishops living outside Ioro Lange were ever promoted to the position of cardinal. And Yuhit was the first to ever become cardinal while presiding over a southern city. Cardinal Yuhit bowed reverently and said, "Truly, you flatter me. I do not believe a sinful, powerless man such as myself is worthy of this lofty title, but nevertheless, I shall endeavor to bring light and salvation to as many as I can."

Smiling, Obenius removed his cap and robe.

"I am expecting great things from you, Father Yuhit."

After a few seconds, his smile faded a little and his tone became more pragmatic.

"That was a rousing debate, gentlemen, but let us put matters of doctrine to the side now. We must still decide who will be our messenger to the Commonwealth Council. Father Yuhit, would you be willing to accept this duty?"

"With pleasure."

Yuhit bowed, accepting the orders of Ioro Lange's viceroy, Obenius.

Back in Krauhen, Eleora had gathered her mage corps.

"As I said before, the situation's serious. We don't have much time."

Eleora's men remained expressionless, but she could sense they were tense.

"From a military standpoint, our actions are the height of folly. Honestly, we

should wait for reinforcements before doing anything. But our reinforcements won't arrive until fall."

Eleora's troops nodded. Furrowing her brow, she continued, "But from a political standpoint, this plan is necessary. If the emperor passes away before we complete our conquest of Meraldia, our position will become tenuous."

"Uhh, what exactly is going to happen if he does die?" Natalia asked, timidly raising her hand into the air.

"We have yet to complete our mission. Were the emperor to pass away before we do, it is highly likely that we will be recalled to the homeland."

"And then we'll be punished for our failure?"

"Correct. There will likely be a tribunal."

Even if she survived the tribunal, Eleora's reputation would be ruined, and her privileges stripped. After all, it would be in the next emperor's best interests to discredit any potential contestants for the throne.

Eleora pointed to the map of Meraldia she'd laid out in front of her. It wasn't as accurate as the ones in Ryunheit, but it was the best her men had been able to procure.

"The plan is as I explained to you before. If it fails, I want all of you to immediately retreat to Vongang. From there, we'll regroup with the main army and head to Krauhen. If the main army isn't there, then head for Krauhen immediately."

Eleora then turned to Borsche.

"We have ninety-eight men who are still completely fit and healthy, correct, Borsche?"

"I'm afraid that number has dropped to ninety-seven. Snietz broke out in a fever last night."

"So that brings the number of sick up to ten. We'll need someone to look after the ill."

Eleora weighed her options.

“Alright, we’ll leave two people behind in Krauhen. Sergeant Eskaya, Zetol, you two take care of everyone here and make sure the viceroy prepares somewhere for them to rest.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Eleora’s officers saluted her. Eleora nodded back to them, then addressed her rank and file troops.

“The remaining ninety-five of you, along with the new battalion we’ve trained, will rendezvous with the main army in Vongang. Prepare to depart at once!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The rest of Eleora’s troops saluted her as well.

I grabbed the Garney brothers by the scruff of their necks and started giving them a scolding. These two were a real handful. The moment you took your eyes off them, they ended up doing something stupid. Today they’d started a bonfire in the city’s old residential district because they’d wanted to make some smoked chicken.

“What’s the problem with starting a fire!?”

I put the older Garney brother in a headlock and shouted, “Open fires are banned in the old district!”

The younger Garney brother, who was currently pinned under my ass, gave me a confused look and said, “I thought it was okay now?”

“Yeah, it’s okay in the newer districts, not here!”

Thanks to the dragonkin engineers, the city’s newer districts had been constructed with fire-resistant materials, and had nearby cisterns that could be used in case of a fire. The roads had been widened as well, making it hard for fires to spread. Just as I was about to hit the older Garney brother with a magic-enhanced German suplex, Monza came over.

“Hah, that looks like fun. Can I join in?”

“Sure, but didn’t you come here because you have business with me?”

Monza beat up the older Garney brother for a few seconds before turning and saying, “Oh yeah. Airia’s looking for you. She said something about Rolmund.”

“You should have said that sooner!”

“Rolmund’s army has departed Vongang and is advancing southward. According to our intelligence, they’ve split into four squads.”

Kite pointed to the map on the wall. I’d gathered everyone I could find for an emergency meeting. Airia immediately asked, “The first rule of military strategy is to keep your forces together. So why would they split them?”

Sieging a fortified city required an overwhelming advantage in numbers. It would have been one thing if Eleora had so many troops she could afford to siege multiple cities simultaneously, but she barely had 200 men under her direct command. I turned to Kite and asked, “How many troops has she mustered?”

“Schverm and Vongang had seven thousand troops stationed between them. Most of which were knights or mercenaries. It’s safe to assume that’s the entirety of the north’s forces.”

Seven thousand men would be enough to overrun one of the south’s smaller cities, so why did she split her forces in four? Kite continued his report, “Also, this is unconfirmed, but there are reports that Eleora is traveling with a mage corps five hundred men strong.”

“Five hundred, huh? She sure built her squad up fast.”

I guess that means the tunnel’s complete, and she got reinforcements from Rolmund? The mage corps were dangerous because of how easily they could breach castle walls. Even if she’d split her forces in four, if each army had over a hundred mage corps backing it up, it was theoretically possible for her to take four cities in one fell swoop. After all, close to 2,000 men per army was only small if there was a wall separating you from them. Some southern cities barely had populations that large.

However, the cities on the border—Bernheinen, Thuvan, Zaria, and Veira—each had 3,000 skeleton warriors to reinforce them as well. If we included each

city's garrison, the demon army divisions I'd sent to them, and the city's militias, we easily outnumbered any of Eleora's individual armies. Plus we still had walls. There was no way Eleora wasn't aware of that. Which was why I'd expected her to concentrate her 7,000 troops on a single city.

Master seemed to be thinking the same thing, as she cocked her head quizzically.

"I am untrained in military matters, but this strikes me as a reckless operation... Veight, what do you presume our enemy hopes to achieve?"

"You're right, this plan does seem reckless. But maybe Eleora's trying to manipulate us into thinking this way."

No sane commander started a battle they were sure they'd lose. Meaning Eleora definitely had something up her sleeve. Baltze folded his arms and stared at the map.

"So long as we haven't fully grasped the capabilities of the enemy's new weapon, we cannot underestimate any force, no matter how small. Every city needs to prepare for any eventuality."

Kite flipped through his stack of papers and replied, "I've informed the four border cities already. Bernheinen's vampires, Thuvan's kentauros, and Veira's honor guard are ready for action."

"What about Zaria, Sir Kite?"

"Ah, yes. Shardier has dispatched reinforcements to Zaria."

Nice teamwork. Parker's expression turned uncharacteristically serious and he turned to me.

"The undead warriors are powerful, but do not rely on them too much. If our opponents are mages, it's possible some of them may have found ways to neutralize them."

"What do you mean?"

"Skilled necromancers can forcibly return summoned spirits to the underworld. Though banishing a force as large as three thousand wouldn't be easy."

This is exactly what I was worried about. I guess strategies requiring magic aren't too reliable... Airia gave me a thoughtful look.

"We should send reinforcements from Ryunheit as well. We have those troops Beluza lent us, after all."

"Good point. Bernheinen's walls are weak and Zaria's lacking in troops, so I want to reinforce those cities first, but..."

I scrutinized the map. Something seemed off about this. Eleora was a cautious general. Even when she could have pushed her way to victory through force alone, she'd surrounded cities and waited for them to surrender. Both in order to preserve her troops, and to strengthen her eventual rule. Like me, she always planned for the future. Which was why her actions made no sense.

Was it possible someone other than Eleora had taken charge of the troops? I didn't have enough information to be sure. Since there were any number of possible explanations, I decided to assume the worst and go from there. Eleora was alive and well, and she had a trump card of some sort hidden up her sleeve. In order to make that trump card work, she'd needed to split her forces into four. That was the hypothesis I decided to work under.

"What effects would the enemy's actions have on us..."

As I muttered that, Baltze suddenly pointed to a spot on the map, as if he just noticed something.

"By assaulting four cities at once, our enemy has put us in a situation where those cities can't send aid to each other. As a result of that..."

I realized where Baltze was going with this.

"We've been pinned down, Sir Baltze."

"Precisely. Looking at it that way, Eleora's actions make sense. It's possible one of the four forces is comprised entirely of elites, and is the spearhead of her real assault."

Eleora might have 7,000 troops, but their relative abilities, levels of experience, and morale differed greatly. The best way to make use of a hodgepodge army like that was to have the less skilled troops function only as

diversions, and have the best fighters strike decisive blows elsewhere. At least, that was how Baltze explained it. But it made sense. The demon army functioned the same way. Because of how different each race was in terms of power and ability, units were split by race.

The watchtower I'd had built in the Fetid Wastes proved useful here, as the scouts stationed there were able to report on the Rolmund army's movements. Supposedly, each of the four armies had a detachment of the mage corps with them. That made it difficult to tell which was the real force. If we sent reinforcements to cities that were only going to be attacked by diversion units, we'd be wasting our troops. *What a headache.* But making us hesitant to commit what reinforcements we had was also surely part of Eleora's plan. *Looks like I've got no other choice. I'll need Master to scout for us.*

"Master, could you teleport to Bernheinen for me?"

"Hrmm, that would be for the best, yes. I can discern whether the force attacking Bernheinen is the enemy's main force or not. If it isn't, I shall head to Thuvan next. Then Zaria, and lastly Veira."

Master wasn't a master of spatial magic yet, so she couldn't teleport in quick succession. It would take her some time to check all of the cities. Still, she could get messages across faster than anyone else. *But should we really be sending our most important member to the front lines?* As I was brooding over that, Airia turned to me and said, "We should send messengers to Beluza and Lotz to tell them to have their forces on standby to move at any time. Once we discovered where Princess Eleora's main force is, they can reinforce the right city at once."

I nodded in agreement.

"Got it, I'll leave keeping them informed to you. We should make sure the members of the demon army stationed in Ryunheit are ready to move at any time as well. Can I count on you to make the necessary preparations, Sir Baltze?"

"Of course."

"I guess now all we can do is wait until we get more intel..."

No wait, if I use magic to strengthen my legs, I should be able to scout out the four cities as well. Just as I thought that, everyone grabbed onto my shoulders.

“Hold on, Sir Veight.”

“You’re not going anywhere, Veight.”

“You better stay right here!”

“I see this bad habit of yours hasn’t changed...”

Why’s everyone so worried? Seeing my expression, Airia smiled and said, “If you refuse to stay put, Lord Veight, I’ll have to ask the council to formally forbid you from fighting.”

“O-Okay...”

I’ll be good.

—Eleora’s War Record: Part 7—

Eleora brushed a strand of her black hair out of her face and nodded.

“It looks like things went well.”

Borsche saluted and replied, “The mage corps are in good health. None of our mercenaries have deserted either.”

Eleora asked, “Do you think our knights will serve as good scarecrows?”

“We promised them medals for simply forming up and making it seem as though they’ll attack, so I imagine they’ll obey orders... but you can never be sure.”

In Rolmund, soldiers who earned medals were granted lifelong pensions proportional to the merit of the medal. For that reason, they weren’t given out as often as they were in Meraldia, where medals were generally accompanied by a one-time cash reward. However, right now Eleora needed men more than money.

“Because of my mismanagement, the morale of Meraldia’s knights is low. At this point, they’ll be more useful restricting the enemy movements than actually fighting. Besides, it gives me an excuse to award them all medals.”

Borsche furrowed his brows.

“However, don’t you think granting them the Medal of the Holy Cavalry is going too far? If those who earned that medal back in the homeland learn of this, they’ll resent you.”

Among the medals Eleora was authorized to award, the Medal of the Holy Cavalry was the most prestigious. She smiled wryly and said, “This is an investment toward the future. Besides, if they refuse to perform their mission, this southern campaign is doomed. Their cooperation is necessary for our success. I won’t let anyone from the homeland question my decision.”

Eleora squeezed her Blast Grimoire and grinned fearlessly.

“At first glance, the Southern Commonwealth might seem like a united monolith, but it’s actually a monolith composed of two strata, humans and demons. And the Black Werewolf King is the glue holding those strata together.”

“You mean to say that if he dies, the Commonwealth will shatter?”

Eleora nodded in response, “Eventually, yes. The people of the south are united through their leaders. If they lose even one, their alliance will inevitably crack. And if that leader happens to be the Black Werewolf King, it’ll shatter entirely.”

“But surely the enemy is aware of that as well. The demon capital’s defenses are likely stronger than that of any other city.”

Eleora chuckled and shook her head.

“Think about it, Borsche. Do you truly believe humans will risk their lives to protect a demon?”

“Now that you mention it, that has never once happened in the history of either Rolmund or Meraldia.”

“The demons of Meraldia have put their lives on the line to protect humans. That is something that both impressed and surprised me. But even so, the humans of Meraldia have never once risked themselves to protect their fellow demons.”

Before beginning her invasion of Meraldia, Eleora had studied their history and found that there was no precedent for humans fighting for demons.

Captain Lenkov dashed into Eleora's headquarters and ran over to her.

"Assault preparations are complete, ma'am. I left my communicator with Saban, so I've come here to report in person."

"Good work. It's quite inconvenient to do anything without a communicator, isn't it?"

"Tell me about it. I'll be returning to my post then."

Despite being in the middle of an extremely dangerous mission, Lenkov ran off with a smile. Eleora touched her earring and began issuing orders.

"Saban, can you hear me? It's me."

"Loud and clear, ma'am!"

"How well do the camouflage cloaks and night vision spectacles work?"

"Perfectly, ma'am."

Saban's voice was calm and collected. Relieved that her subordinates hadn't gotten themselves in danger, Eleora sternly reminded him, "The camouflage cloaks simply mimic the surrounding scenery. They don't make you invisible. Nor do they protect you against a werewolf's acute hearing or sense of smell. Don't rely on them too much."

"Yes ma'am, we'll be careful."

"Good."

Eleora nodded in satisfaction, then added, "We've also modified the Blast Canes so they won't misfire unless you load more than twice the usual amount of blastpowder. You know that, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I know I'm repeating myself, but since we won't need to fire them more than once, feel free to load even three times as much into them. But make sure to keep them level at all times. If you tilt them even slightly, the magic crests will

come into contact with the blastpowder and they'll ignite."

"We'll be careful, ma'am."

Eleora had briefed everyone on all this in the meeting before the operation, so she knew she was being a bit overprotective. But she absolutely did not want to lose one of her precious men over something as ridiculous as a weapon misfiring. Borsche had been listening in on Eleora's conversation, and he grinned impishly.

"I never imagined you, the inventor of the Blast Canes and the founder of the mage corps would be willing to destroy the very weapons you designed in order to blow up the gates."

Eleora sighed.

"That just goes to show I've been backed into a corner. Don't write this down in the official records. I don't want historians discovering such a pathetic plan."

"As you wish, Your Highness."

From atop a small hill, Eleora looked down at the flickering lights of Ryunheit. She then touched her earring communicator again and said, "All units, our objective is to assassinate the most important general of the demon army, the Black Werewolf King Veight. Make sure you do your best not to attack the humans in the city."

This was the first time in her military career that Eleora was attempting such a risky strategy. But right now, this was the only plan she had.

"Everything is proceeding as planned. Begin the operation."

That night, a group of canine soldiers were patrolling the walls near Ryunheit's west gate.

"I'm hungry," muttered the canine whose face resembled a Shiba Inu. Next to him, a beagle-faced canine took his cap off. The canines' hats resembled the shakos worn by soldiers in industrial-era Europe. The short canines preferred it because it made them look taller.

"I think I can fix that." The second canine rummaged through his hat and

pulled out some thin strips of dried potato. “Want some?”

He started munching on one himself while he proffered the other to his comrade.

“Where on earth did you stash that?”

“My hat.”

“That was a rhetorical question.”

The canine with the Shiba Inu face sighed. His partner cocked his head, still munching on his snack.

“You don’t like dried potatoes?”

“I don’t have a problem with the potatoes. But you can’t just put food in your military hat. Sir Veight’s going to yell at you if he finds out.”

“No way. When Sir Veight first saw this, he...”

The beagle-faced canine trailed off and stashed his snacks back into his hat. Now it was the other canine’s turn to cock his head.

“What’s wrong?”

The beagle-faced canine suddenly started sniffing the air.

“Something smells weird. Is it a bird?”

“Hm? Now that you mention it... I don’t recognize that scent.”

The canine with the Shiba Inu face looked around. Like werewolves, canines had excellent night vision. Their ability to discern colors suffered in return, but even this dim midnight light was as bright as midday to them. However, the canine was unable to spot anything out of the ordinary. Just for a moment though, he thought he saw something strange near the edge of the castle walls. It looked as if the scenery was moving, or shifting.

“Hey, did you see that over there?”

“See what?”

“That over there. It’s like a thingy... no, more like a feeling-ish?”

But when he looked back there, the phenomenon was gone. The two canines

exchanged glances, then cocked their heads.

“Something weird?”

“Definitely something weird!”

They nodded to each other.

“Sound the alarm!”

“Okay!”

The canine with the Shiba Inu face put his mouth to the dog whistle hanging around his neck. But before he could blow on it, the gates exploded. The explosion rocked the walls, and the two canines reflexively squatted down.

“Uwaaah!?”

“What just happened!?”

“B-Blow the whistle! Now!”

The two of them blew on their whistles as hard as they could. They then shouted, “The west gate is under attack!”

“Enemy raid!”

Immediately, members of Beluza’s landing forces and canine guardsmen started running toward the gates. At the same time, everyone heard a muffled explosion come from the direction of the east gate.

“There too!?”

Around the same time, at the werewolf barracks in Ryunheit.

“Whistles were blown at both the east and west gates! We’ve confirmed there were two explosions as well!” Fahn shouted to the dragonkin engineer on duty. He nodded and said, “Understood, I’ll launch the emergency signal flare.”

The engineer ran outside and sent up the signal flare. It burst high in the sky, lighting up the night.

Baltze grabbed his twin swords and dashed outside. The moment he saw the

smoking gates he realized what was going on.

“All units, assemble! Strengthen the inner gates’ defenses and protect Lady Airia and Lord Veight at all costs! Azure Knights, follow me to the east gate!”

In the distance, Baltze could make out intermittent flashes of light. He guessed they were from Rolmund’s new weapon. As he was running eastward, Grizz—captain of Beluza’s landing forces—sprinted over to him. He was wearing a garish outfit that was clearly visible even in the dark, and carrying a massive spiked mace.

“Yo, Baltze! The eastern and western gates have already been breached!”

“So it seems. Can I count on you to reinforce our men there?”

“Yeah, my men are duking it out on the west side. But the enemy’s already made it into the new residential district.”

Baltze saddled his wyvern and leapt onto it.

“They must not have brought many troops if they were able to conceal their approach. Use our superior numbers to push back the ones who’ve made it inside.”

“You got it, boss! Don’t die out there!”

“May the fortunes of war be with you, Sir Grizz!”

The two captains saluted to each other, then ran back to their respective squads. Ryunheit’s night sky was filled with intermittent flashes of light.

After hearing that we were under attack, Airia and I began reorganizing the city’s defenses. According to the canine messenger’s report, Ryunheit’s eastern and western outer walls had been breached.

“There’s thirty men approaching from the east! Old man Vodd said they look like mercenaries!”

So the attack on the west side is a diversion. Or so you want me to think, right, Eleora? Well, you won’t fool me again. Eleora’s lack of troops meant she’d often used bluffs to win her battles. But if the attack on the western wall truly was a bluff, then she would have waited until the east gate had been breached to blow it up. I knew she had some kind of magical radio, so coordinating her

attacks should have been easy. The fact that she'd blown up both gates at once meant that she didn't want too many troops gathering at the west gate either. It was obvious the real diversion would end up being at the east gate. Airia stooped down and asked the canine messenger, "Is it only mercenaries they've sent to the east gate?"

"Yes, ma'am! There's no knights or... mage whatever corps! That's what Vodd said!"

He stumbled over his words a little, but the messenger got all the pertinent information across. Airia put on the breastplate and cape one of her attendants brought her and turned to me.

"I doubt the mercenaries are her main force."

"I agree completely, Lady Airia."

Meraldia's mercenaries weren't all that strong. The region hadn't seen war in decades, so most of their battles had been against bandits, or wild monsters. In large-scale battles, they were even more useless than foot soldiers.

"The real assault will come from the west. Tell my werewolves to head there."

I'd spent a lot of time studying Eleora's strategies. She preferred launching multiple feints, then landing a decisive blow once the enemy was in disarray.

West of Ryunheit was a forest that residents often harvested firewood from. It was also where I'd concealed my bone spears long ago. Since they were no longer stationed there, it could easily be used to hide a small force. Right now, my highest priority was protecting Airia. Master was off being our scout, so she was the only important person left in the city.

"Sir Wengen, have the city garrison protect the old district. I need your men to protect the citizens and Lady Airia."

Wengen got to his feet and saluted.

"As you command, Lord Veight."

I then howled to the werewolves in the city and had them gather at my position.

"The enemy will be aiming for the old district. If you clump together you'll just

make yourselves targets for their special weapons, so move in your squads of four, and ambush anyone you see. Just do as we trained!”

Everyone nodded. Fahn, Jerrick, Monza, the Garney brothers, Hamaam, and Vodd were all accounted for. *Actually, wait, where’s Vodd?* Just as I thought that, Vodd shambled over, still in his werewolf form.

“Sorry I’m late. I wanted to keep an eye on the east gate, just in case.”

“As long as you’re safe, that’s all that matters. I was worried you might have been killed.”

Vodd may have been a retired mercenary with more experience than any of us, but he was still getting old. He grinned, his white fur bristling.

“What’s wrong, Vodd?”

“Oh, I’m just happy we finally get to hunt again.”

The other werewolves grinned as well. I had forgotten how much they loved fighting. That was the only side of them I couldn’t understand. It reminded me that I was the only one among us who was actually human on the inside. But right now, their love for battle was going to prove an asset. I cast a new spell on the werewolves, one I’d just learned from Master a few days ago. It was a slightly altered version of the arrow warding spell I’d used in Zaria. This one deflected magic instead of arrows.

“Listen up, this spell will block one magical attack of any kind, no matter what.”

“How does a spell that blocks spells work, bro?”

“You know, it like, makes the two magics neutralize or something...”

The Garney brothers were struggling to grasp the implications, so I simplified my explanation.

“The enemy can shoot magic arrows at you, and my spell will block a single one of them. If you get hit once, retreat immediately. Am I understood?”

“Yeah!”

“Holy crap, cast it on us five more times then!”

No matter how many times I cast it, it'll only work once.

Once I was done casting protective magic on everyone, we sprinted toward the new district where the breach had occurred.

"Oh yeah, who's on Veight duty today?" Jerrick asked.

"My squad," Monza replied, raising her hand with a smile. *To be honest, I want to confront Eleora alone, but I guess a single squad should be fine.*

"Alright, Monza's squad, follow me! Everyone else, disperse!"

At my command, the 13 remaining squads scattered, leaving only Monza's with me. The western half of the town had become my werewolves' hunting ground.

The new district of Ryunheit was a place that had been built to let humans and demons live together, but it was also a bulwark that protected the old district. I'd made sure that watchtowers and ambush points had been built all along the road toward the old district. If Eleora's men wanted to get to Airia, they'd have to get through a pack of bloodthirsty werewolves and an army of Garsh's mohawked marines.

Already, Beluza's landing force had engaged the enemy at various points in order to halt their advance. While Eleora's mage corps had the advantage when it came to firepower, Grizz had 500 men under his command. Furthermore, his strategy of gradually retreating to lure enemies into ambush points was working perfectly.

Together with Monza's squad, I detoured around the main battlefield and headed for the west gate. My guess was Eleora had hidden somewhere in the forest. As I was rounding a corner, I suddenly ran into a group of enemies.

"Ah!?"

The soldiers yelped in surprise when they spotted us. It seemed they'd been thinking the same thing as me, and had tried to detour around the battlefield to get to the old district. We'd sensed them coming before they'd spotted us, but there was still a bit of distance separating us.

“Chaaaarge!” Monza shouted. She was willing to take a hit in order to wipe out the enemy. I dashed forward as well to support her, and the soldiers took aim with their pseudo-guns. They fired a wide-area volley to make sure we didn’t avoid the shots. As expected, despite our best efforts to slip through the volley both Monza and I—the two leading the charge—took a hit. We couldn’t afford to take another.

Blast Canes were like medieval muskets. They could only fire in the direction they were pointing. The enemy had split into two rows, with the back row standing and the front row squatting. It was the back row who’d shot just now. They were currently recharging their weapons’ mana. The front row still hadn’t fired, but at this distance, they couldn’t keep up with my magic-enhanced movements. I zigzagged my way toward them in an unpredictable path, staying out of their guns’ line of fire. However, the moment they realized they couldn’t catch me, half the soldiers in the front row changed targets to Monza. *Shit. She’s not as fast as me.* The magic warding spell I’d cast on her had already worn off. I could see the mana gathering in the Blast Canes’ barrels. If one of those hit Monza, she’d die. I wouldn’t reach the enemy line in time, and there wasn’t enough time to cast magic either.

“Monza!”

With a yell, I threw myself in front of her.

“Hyaah!?”

Monza yelped and came to a halt just as the enemy fired. I couldn’t dodge, so I took the bullets head-on. *This is going to hurt.* But I was constantly casting high-level regenerative magic on myself. As long as I didn’t die instantly, I’d be fine. I needn’t have worried though, since it appeared I was completely unhurt.

“Huh?”

I scooped up Monza, who’d transformed back to her human form from the shock, and turned back toward the soldiers. *Did their guns misfire?* I didn’t have time to ponder the cause, since the back line had finished reloading, and unleashed their next volley. Bullets made of light moved too fast for me to dodge once they’d been fired, so there was nothing I could do.

But for some reason, I came out of this barrage unhurt as well. In fact, I felt

more invigorated than before, and my mana had been replenished. Casting protective spells on 56 people had taken quite a bit out of me, but now I was overflowing with mana. I had no idea why, but there was one thing I was sure of. I was absorbing the mana the Blast Canes fired.

"Get back, all of you! I'll handle this!"

I left Monza in the hands of her squad. For demons, an order from someone stronger than them was absolute. Though they looked worried about me, they reluctantly backed off. After making sure they were a safe distance away, I turned and glared at the enemy. There were five men squatting in the front row, and five standing in the back.

"Captain, our Blast Canes don't work on him!"

"Don't falter! If he's a living creature, then there's a way to kill him! Keep shooting!"

An idle thought hit me as I heard their exchange. I had felt something similar when I'd touched the Werewolf Slayer and destroyed the enchantment on it. *Could it be that I can absorb mana just like Master? That ritual when she crossed the final threshold might have affected me too. Interesting...* Once this battle was over, I decided I would try a few experiments and report my findings to Master. While I was lost in thought, the soldiers unleashed another volley.

"Fire!"

Bullets of light slammed into me one after another. *Yep, they're definitely restoring my mana. That really hit the spot. Not in the way you guys were hoping though.* Not only did the enemy's powerful Blast Canes not work on me, they helped restore my mana instead. Feeling like an idiot for ever being afraid of them, I started laughing. I advanced slowly, knowing Rolmund's soldiers were no longer a threat.

"C-Captain! He's—"

"Back row, continue firing! Front row, draw your swords!"

Hey, time out! Magic attacks were ineffective against me, but physical ones still hurt as much as always. I sped up and closed the gap between us in an instant. Playtime was over.

“Y-You monster!”

“Uwaaaaaaah!”

The members of the mage corps were clearly unused to using their short swords. Their swordsmanship was nothing like the lightning fast strokes Wengen’s soldiers could unleash. To my enhanced kinetic vision, it looked like they were swinging their swords through molasses. I hit the five frontline soldiers with weak jabs, making sure not to kill them. They dropped to the ground, unconscious. I then dispatched the back row, basking in the bullets they showered me with. I might have accidentally broken a few of their bones, but I could patch that up later once the battle was over.

“I’m finished. Tie them up.”

Monza and the others hurried back over.

“Whoa... Boss, you’re insane. I can’t believe you did that.”

“To be honest, neither can I?”

“Haha, really?”

Laughing, Monza skillfully bound the soldiers with rope. Once she was done, she looked up at me and said bashfully, “Thanks for protecting me, boss. And sorry for slowing you down.”

“What’re you apologizing for? Of course I’d protect you.”

“Ehehe, really?”

She’d already managed to calm down, despite having been this close to death seconds ago. *What a strong girl.*

“Looks like you’re doing just fine. Mind if I leave these guys to you?”

“Huh? I can’t leave you, boss! Fahn’ll scold my ears off if I do...”

I just waved my hand dismissively and said, “Those guys are valuable negotiation tools. Plus we can get a lot of information out of them. Don’t kill them.”

Without waiting for a reply, I ran off. *Perfect, now I can move freely.*

—The Rolmund Army’s Miscalculation—

The Rolmund soldiers who had infiltrated Ryunheit's western districts were currently experiencing hell.

"Shukein's squad was eliminated! Lekoi, support the survivors!"

"Dammit, more werewolves!?"

"Our Blast Canes don't affect them! And we're running out of mana!"

Sheltering inside a half-built building was the Rolmund Army 209th mage corps' sniper battalion. Of the 20 elites that made up the battalion, half were dead or wounded. Warrant Officer Natalia, who'd been keeping an eye on the rear window, turned to the battalion sergeant and shouted, "Human soldiers approaching! Their numbers are unknown!"

"Move our snipers to that side! Have them use wide-volley fire to—"

The sergeant cut off halfway. There was a dull thud, and his body fell to the ground Looking up, the remaining soldiers realized two werewolves had snuck in through the roof. They hurriedly trained their Blast Canes upward.

"Too slow."

"Bro, there's another one over there."

The soldiers were too panicked to register the fact that the werewolves were speaking in human tongue.

"Waaaaaaaaaaah!"

"This plan's doomed, run!"

How many of us were defeated? How many of us escaped? Natalia thought to herself. Her thoughts were a mess. She shouldered her Blast Cane and pounded down the main street, back toward the gates.

"Woohooo, it's a girl!"

"Oi, don't kill her! Capture her alive!"

"Watch out for that weapon of hers! Be careful chasing her down!"

A group of rough-looking men started chasing after her.

“Bastards!” Natalia whirled in the direction of the voices and took aim with her Blast Cane. But just then, two werewolves popped out from the ruins of a crumbling house. Their fur was bright red, and they were covered in blood. “Eeek!”

Natalia turned her back to the werewolves and ran.

“Haah, haah, haah, haaah...”

It hurt to breathe. She was beginning to regret slacking on her physical training. She’d been appointed to the sniper battalion because of her large mana reserves and excellent focus, but her stamina was sorely lacking. *When I get back, I’m going to do some serious training! If I get back, that is...*

The streets of Ryunheit were deathly quiet. Occasionally, a werewolf’s howl pierced the silence, but there were no sounds of combat. Natalia had been so focused on running that she hadn’t realized she’d escaped the battlefield. She knew she’d likely be reprimanded for leaving her post. But right now she didn’t care. She was just glad to still be alive. Stopping to catch her breath, she leaned on her elongated, sniper-use Blast Cane as if it were an actual cane. Misuse of her weapon was also grounds for punishment.

My battalion’s been decimated. Are the other battalions doing alright? The rings that served as communicators were only given to battalion sergeants, so Natalia had no way to contact anyone else. Once she’d calmed down a little bit, Natalia squatted down in pain.

“Ugh... Owwww...”

She’d bumped into quite a few things during her frantic escape, and her shoulders and legs ached. Plus, because of how often she’d fired her Blast Cane, she was drained of both stamina and mana. Just as she was about to sit down to rest, a young man appeared from a nearby alleyway. Judging by his clothes and demeanor, he was a civilian. He turned to her with a smile and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Feeling a little embarrassed, Natalia replied, “Sorry, but I seem to have suffered a few injuries during the fighting. Is there anywhere I could rest for...”

Natalia trailed off, suddenly realizing something. *This isn't right. If he's a civilian, shouldn't he have evacuated?* Natalia pointed her Blast Cane at him and shouted, "S-Stop right there! Are you really human!?"

"Nope."

With that, the man transformed into a large black werewolf.

"KYAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" Natalia shrieked. She fired, and the werewolf didn't even try to dodge her bullet of light. It hit him square in the chest, but he didn't fall. In fact, he looked completely unhurt.

"H-Huh!? Waaaaaah!"

She fired another round. And another. And another. Natalia's Blast Cane had been loaded with plenty of mana in case it too had been needed in destroying the gate. Her shots weren't lacking in power, yet the werewolf refused to go down.

Finally, her Blast Cane ran out of mana. Natalia herself was completely drained as well. The black werewolf casually strolled forward and asked again, "What's wrong?"

His tone was as gentle as before, but it was what caused Natalia to finally snap.

"UWAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

She gripped her Blast Cane in both hands and swung it at the werewolf like a staff. He easily blocked her desperate swing and grinned at her, baring his fangs. *It's over. I can't beat him.* Following the rules of the Rolmund Army, Natalia unsheathed the dagger at her waist and attempted to cut her throat with it. The werewolf then shouted in a panicked voice, "Whoa!? Wait, stop, you idiot!"

Natalia felt something grab onto her shoulders, and suddenly she couldn't move. Her legs no longer capable of supporting her, she crumpled to the ground. By the time she realized the werewolf had cast a spell on her, all the muscles in her body relaxed of their own volition.

"Princess... Save... me..."

She tried to shout, but her consciousness faded away too fast. The last thing she heard before slipping into the darkness was the werewolf's chuckle.

"Fufu, don't worry. You'll get to meet your precious princess soon enough."

Despairing, Natalia lost consciousness.

Around the same time, the mercenaries assaulting Ryunheit's east gate had slowed their advance. Not only was their mission this time exceedingly dangerous, but they'd been forbidden from pillaging the city. It was hardly worth it. Still, they'd been paid for this job, so they knew they had to do it, otherwise potential employers wouldn't trust them. One of the younger mercenaries rested his sword in his hands and sighed.

"I'm scared of attacking the demon capital..."

Next to him, a veteran mercenary loaded his crossbow and laughed.

"Don't be, kid. We just gotta do the job we were paid for, nothing more. Better this than being a bandit, right?"

"I guess you're right, but..."

If he'd stayed a bandit, he would have been hanged if he was caught. So in that sense, working as a mercenary was definitely the better option. But if he'd known one of his jobs involved invading the Black Werewolf King's base, he would have stayed a bandit. At least, that's how he saw it. The senior mercenary, on the other hand, patted him on the back and said, "Keep it together. If that princess wins, we'll be rich as kings."

"And if she loses?"

"Then we just gotta win our next battle. There might not be a next time for her if she loses, but there's always a next time for us."

The older mercenary had been walking at a brisk pace until now, but he suddenly stopped and cocked his head. The young mercenary stopped too, as did all the others. The senior mercenary muttered, "I heard something."

Everyone present strained their ears, and in the distance they heard the beating of drums.

“Oi, isn’t that...”

“No doubt about it, it’s those bastards from Lotz.”

The mercenaries sheathed their swords, stowed their shields, and slung their bows. They were preparing to retreat.

“They’re already here, huh... And here I thought our job would be easy.”

“Oi, which one of you louts snitched to that old fart Petore?”

“No clue, but if I had to guess, it was probably Diego again.”

“It wasn’t me!”

The young mercenary looked around, confused.

“We’re going back? Lotz is that port city to the south right? What does that have to do with anything?”

The old mercenary placed a fatherly hand on the young mercenary’s shoulder and said, “Listen, kid. If you want to survive as a mercenary, there’s one rule you gotta remember. *Never* make an enemy out of Lotz.”

“But why!?”

The other mercenaries standing nearby replied, “If you tick that geezer off, you’re fucked. He knows how to hold a grudge, and he’ll chase you to the ends of the earth.”

“He doesn’t give a shit about our contracts. If we fight him even once, he’ll call his army on us until we’re wiped out.”

“But those guys from Lotz sure treat us nice when they’re the ones hiring us.”

“The Senate and the princess are done for, so how about we try hitting them up for work next?”

“Sounds good to me. Work as a warehouse guard’s pretty quiet.”

Still confused, the young mercenary asked, “But Lotz’s army is still outside the city, right? So if we invade Ryunheit, we’ll end up not fighting them. Shouldn’t we honor our contract?”

The veteran mercenary sighed.

“If Lotz’s forces decide to enter the city, we’ll be pincered. Besides...” He pointed to Ryunheit’s outer wall. “What do you see up there?”

“Huh... Oh, uhh, a flag? It looks red... and really tattered.”

A tattered red flag flew above Ryunheit’s walls. It looked as though an animal had raked its claws through it.

“Kid, burn that flag into your memory. That’s Vodd the Claw’s flag.”

“Vodd the Claw?”

The veteran mercenary said almost wistfully, “He was a legendary mercenary back in my day. He was a master of using hidden weapons. Even though he looked unarmed, he’d always pull out something or the other on you and cut you up with it. I can’t believe he’s still alive.”

A few of the other mercenaries scrutinized the flag.

“He had a few other nicknames too. Vodd the Ripper. Bloodthirsty Vodd. You know, stuff like that.”

“I heard his fighting style was so bloody he didn’t even want his allies to see it. So he always carried out his orders in secret, like an assassin.”

“And he always killed his enemies, so no one lived to tell what weapons he used, or where he hid them.”

Upon hearing the litany of terrifying legends surroundings this Vodd, the young mercenary timidly asked, “But are you sure it’s actually him in there?”

“Honestly, I’d rather run than find out. I heard he once went into a bandit stronghold alone and ripped all sixteen bandits to shreds.”

“Seriously?”

Seeing the fear in the young mercenary’s eyes, the old veteran smiled and patted his back again.

“Come on, kid, let’s go. I’ll look out for you, don’t worry. You’ll be all right.”

“Ah, okay.”

The mercenaries turned around and withdrew from the battlefield.

The Rolmund soldiers who'd been sent to take command of the east gate invasion were panicking.

"H-Hey wait! You haven't honored your contract!"

The mercenaries shook their heads.

"Sorry about breaking the contract, but we're Meraldian mercenaries. If we stay and fight here we'll never be able to work in Meraldia again, and that'd be a problem for us."

At that, the Rolmund soldiers grew angry.

"If you're planning on running before the fighting's even started, then you shouldn't have come at all!"

"You're right there."

The mercenary captain smiled bitterly, then snapped his fingers. Instantly, the surrounding mercenaries pointed their crossbows at the Rolmund soldiers.

"Wha!?"

Smiling, the mercenary captain said, "You know, we can always kill you here and bring your heads to the Commonwealth for a reward."

Another mercenary captain added, "But of course, we won't. We'll also return the money you paid us, and give you a little extra as an apology for breaching our contract. So be satisfied with that."

The unsaid implication was that if the Rolmund soldiers weren't satisfied, the mercenaries would kill them here and now. There were only a few Rolmund soldiers here, so they had no choice but to quietly accept the mercenaries' conditions.

"Fine, do whatever you want, cowards!"

"Those are words of praise for us Meraldian mercenaries! See ya, Rolmund prudes!"

Grinning, the mercenaries mounted their horses and retreated.

Around the same time, a group of mounted nomads observed Ryunheit from

atop a nearby hill.

“Stop the drums. The mercenaries are leaving.”

At the lookout’s command, the group stopped their performance.

“Are you sure that’s enough? If it’s for Sir Aram, we can continue all night.”

“No, our job here is done. Put away Lotz’s flags. We’re borrowing them from old man Petore, so if we get them dirty, he’s the one we’ll have to answer to.”

At Aram’s command, the nomads had pretended to be Lotz’s army in order to get the mercenaries to retreat.

“With this, Sir Aram will welcome our young nomad immigrants with open arms. He’s a man of his word.”

“That he is. Alright, let’s go back and give our report. I’m looking forward to the lamb stew he’ll surely treat us to.”

After confirming the mercenaries had left the battlefield, the nomads spurred their horses back towards Shardier.

I left the unconscious Rolmund soldier in the care of Beluza’s landing force.

“Sorry, but can you look after the prisoner for me?”

“You got it, bossman! Oi, someone get me some water and a cloth!”

“Yo, I got your blankets.”

Despite their delinquent attire, Garsh’s men were well-disciplined. I should have figured that show-off had given me his very best troops. I’d decided to heal the wounded enemy survivors and keep them captive as prisoners of war. At this rate, I’d end up capturing half the mage corps. *You’ll all make for some great hostages.* I smiled and twirled a communicator ring I’d taken off of one of the soldiers between my fingers.

“Captain, it’s him! The black werewolf!”

“Don’t let him get close!”

Intercepting the enemy’s communications, I easily cornered their “third light cavalry battalion.” They were the ones riding those large birds. Their mobility

had been giving Beluza's troops trouble, but since I could hear all of their communication it was easy for me to cut them off. *There they are.*

"What's with this guy!? Why won't he die!?"

"Fire! Fire everything you've got!"

Bullets of light came at me one after another. It'd be a problem if a few strays missed me and hit nearby houses or people, so I thrust my hands out. In my mind, I imagined them becoming a powerful vortex, and the bullets were all sucked into my palms. Naturally, they did no damage to me, and just restored my mana. *No doubt about it, I definitely inherited part of Master's powers.* I could feel the inner scientist in me itching to experiment, but taking care of these enemies came first. I cast my best strengthening spells on myself, not worrying about the mana cost, and rushed forward at top speed. Normally these spells drained mana too fast to be viable in combat, but right now the enemy was providing me with free refills.

"He disappeared!?"

I didn't disappear. I'm just behind you guys. The incident with that girl earlier had proven to me that Rolmund soldiers wouldn't surrender. So I leapt into the middle of the enemy formation and let loose a full-powered Soul Shaker. Because of how much excess mana I had right now, its power was amplified more than even I expected.

"Waaah!?"

"Gah!?"

"Ngh!"

The soldiers were blown backwards along with their mounts and instantly lost consciousness. The sound waves shook the nearby buildings and shattered their glass windows. *Dammit, I wasn't trying to destroy my own city.* For some reason, even though all the soldiers had fainted, I could still hear a voice coming from somewhere.

"...me!? You have permission to retreat! Pull out at once!"

It was Eleora's voice, and it was coming from the communicator. I poured

mana into the ring on my hand and said, “The third light cavalry division has been eliminated. You’re next, Princess Eleora.”

“Is that you, Black Werewolf King!?”

I laughed into the communicator.

“Now then, let’s see how far you can run. Let me enjoy this hunt.”

Without waiting for a reply, I cut off the ring’s mana supply. The reason I’d provoked her like that was to take advantage of her personality. I knew she valued her subordinates more than anything. To the point where it was detrimental to her planning. Not only had she lost the majority of her troops, but her assault on Ryunheit had also failed. If, in a situation like this, the enemy general told her to run, I knew running was the last thing she’d do. Normally, such cheap provocations wouldn’t faze her, but right now she was likely shaken up enough that they would. As far as I could tell, the battle on Ryunheit’s west side had been decided. The enemies on the east side hadn’t even bothered to attack yet, and Baltze’s Azure Knights were guarding that gate anyway. The enemy’s initial assault had been rebuffed. I’d already sent out runners to the surrounding cities as well. Come morning, their reinforcements would arrive. Once that happened, even Eleora would opt to retreat. Her forces had infiltrated the city in squads of 20, and from what I could tell, squads 2 through 5 had either been defeated or retreated. But I had yet to meet a squad 1.

I sprinted out of the west gate and headed toward the forest. My senses were heightened by magic, and I could pick up on mana signatures from a much greater distance than normal. Since Eleora’s troops used magic weapons, they needed to have larger mana pools than the average soldier. And if 20 of them were all standing together, tracking their location was a piece of cake. While I had nothing to fear from their Blast Canes, I was still a little nervous walking into an ambush comprised of 20 elites. That being said, if I didn’t have anyone to protect, I could probably manage on my own.

As expected, I found Eleora right away. She was sitting atop a boulder in one of the forest’s clearings. All around her, I could sense hostility and mana. There were 18 soldiers hidden in the trees and behind bushes. Warily, I walked over to

Eleora.

“Eleora, there’s no point in trying an ambush.”

She smiled bitterly.

“So you noticed?”

“Unless your troops can hold their breath and make their scent the same as the earth around them, there’s no way to escape my senses.”

Surprisingly calm, Eleora asked, “So why haven’t you killed me yet?”

“Why, indeed...”

I could kill her whenever I wanted to, but killing an imperial princess would be a pretty big diplomatic issue. Frowning, Eleora spat, “If you don’t plan on killing me, why won’t you ask me to surrender?”

I smiled.

“What’s the point in asking, when I already know you have no intention to?”

The female soldier from earlier had tried to commit suicide the moment she realized she’d lost. My guess was Rolmund soldiers were forbidden from letting themselves get captured. No matter what they had to do, they wouldn’t let themselves become prisoners of war. In which case, it was obvious their leader wouldn’t surrender either. And as I’d predicted, Eleora nodded.

“Even a princess, no *especially* a princess can’t afford to surrender. That option isn’t available to me.”

“Then I’ll have to capture you by force. I won’t let you commit suicide.”

Eleora sighed in resignation.

“I really don’t have any right to choose, do I?”

She threw down her Blast Cane and saber, and got to her feet. Slowly, she walked over to me.

“Black Werewolf King.”

“What?”

“I admit defeat. You win.”

After accepting her defeat, Eleora seemed to be at peace with herself. She then said, “Like me, you’re an invader. But it seems your caliber far surpasses mine.”

I shook my head.

“That’s not true. I was just lucky.”

It was true. I was lucky to have such a competent master, and such excellent men. I was even lucky enough to be paired up against the right opponent. None of this was achieved with my power alone. Eleora sighed.

“If you brush aside your victory as luck, then wouldn’t that make me, the loser, even more pathetic?”

So you say, but... After thinking about it for a few seconds I came up with an answer that might satisfy her.

“If there really is a difference between you and me, it’s that I came here intending to integrate myself into their society, while you came here to impose yours onto them.”

Eleora looked stunned for a second, but then she nodded in understanding.

“I see... so that was it.”

It was true that I’d invaded my first city, but from then on I’d done my utmost to make sure those I’d conquered were satisfied with my rule, and had no reason to hold a grudge against me. Eleora took a few more steps toward me. We were close enough to feel each other’s breath on our faces.

“So in the end, your caliber really does surpass mine. Thank you for the valuable lesson.”

She smiled gently, looking somewhat forlorn.

“But I must say, Black Werewolf King, I’m rather tired.”

As she spoke, a tornado of fire rose up around the two of us. She’d summoned flames with magic! Within this burning bloom of purgatory, Eleora’s smile grew bigger. It was a genuine smile, one free of the burdens and pressures of her position.

“Did you know? I’m a master of destruction magic. If I’m not worried for my own safety, I can even cast spells like this. I’ll have you accompany me to hell, Black Werewolf King.”

Damn, she’s not joking. These flames felt as hot as normal fire to me. It made sense. Once destruction magic induced a physical force, that force followed the normal laws of physics. Meaning these flames may have been summoned through magic, but they were normal flames. I could absorb mana, but unlike Master, I couldn’t absorb other sources of energy like heat. *This isn’t good.*

Satisfied, Eleora crumpled to the ground, unconscious. She was still wearing that smile on her face. *This princess really is crazy. Wait, this isn’t the time to be praising her.* If I didn’t do something fast, I’d die too. Unfortunately, I didn’t know any magic that could dispel a blaze like this.



The tornado of fire coalesced, forming a wall that blocked me in from all sides. I had no way of knowing what was going on outside. And it was too risky to try and leap through the flames.

Still, I wasn't completely helpless. I hadn't been training with Master for more than 10 years for nothing. Strengthening magic had a few ways to cope with fire. I could increase my heat resistance while supplying oxygen to my lungs with magic, and force my way through.

I always preloaded at least one anti-fire spell before any battle too. I cast a heat resisting spell on both me and Eleora, then cast the spell that allowed people to breathe underwater on us. Eleora's lungs would probably get burnt from the heat of the air still, so I precast healing magic on them as well. All of these spells consumed large amounts of mana, but I had plenty to spare. Sadly, the spells I cast only took effect on living organisms themselves. Meaning I wouldn't be able to save Eleora's cape. Granted, that was a small price to pay.

"Your Highness! Your Highness!"

I heard a panicked voice screaming out of her earring. *It must be one of the soldiers waiting in ambush. If they've got one of her rings, they're probably someone she trusts.* I leaned in close to Eleora's ear and declared, "Princess Eleora has lost consciousness, but she's still alive. However I, the Black Werewolf King Veight, have taken her prisoner. If you value her life, then do not attempt to flee, or commit suicide. Surrender at once."

With this, the Rolmund soldiers would probably surrender obediently. I hoped.

—Adjutant Borsche's Dilemma—

I could only watch helplessly as Her Highness engulfed herself in flames. I never imagined she would do this. Her Highness had mentioned that she would act as bait to lure in the Black Werewolf King, and that she had a plan for defeating him. And indeed, this was an effective plan to defeat him. Her Highness was one of the strongest destruction mages I knew. However, she was trapped within the same spell that was meant to destroy the Black Werewolf King. This wasn't what she'd promised.

I had been born in the territory of Origania, and had been with Her Highness for years. Back when she had still been playing with dolls and reading picture books, I'd been there to protect her. Both as a soldier and as an individual, I couldn't bear to lose her. Yet here she was, burning to death in a faraway land. This was a nightmare.

"Adjutant!"

"Give the order to rescue her!"

The soldiers gripped their Blast Canes tight, but there was no way for us to douse those flames. Her Highness's magic was on a level far greater than ours. More importantly, she herself had ordered us to remain on standby until she gave further instructions. Meaning from the very start, she'd been prepared to do this. It was my fault for not seeing through her plan earlier.

The flames raged on, incinerating both Ryunheit's monster of a ruler, and Her Highness. I doubted she was even alive anymore. *What a nightmare. Please, if this truly is a dream, let me wake from it.* Just as I thought that, a man's voice rung out through the communicator ring on my finger.

"Princess Eleora has lost consciousness, but she's still alive. However I, the Black Werewolf King Veight, have taken her prisoner. If you value her life, then do not attempt to flee, or commit suicide. Surrender at once."

"What!?" Someone shouted. *How could anyone survive in that hellfire? I don't believe it! Is the Black Werewolf King immortal!?* I had no choice but to believe it, though. After all the voice coming through the communicator belonged to a man. The Black Werewolf King was alive. And if he was speaking the truth, so was Her Highness. Without a second thought, I shouted, "Understood! We surrender! So please, protect Her Highness! I'm begging you!"

He didn't reply to my request, but his calm voice made it clear that he was still in good health.

"Are we really going to surrender?" One of the soldiers asked me. I turned around and smiled sadly at him.

"If I told you to prioritize your duty over Her Highness's life, would you do it?"

“I...”

Judging by the hesitation in his voice, he probably wouldn’t. I turned to Her Highness’s subordinates and shouted, “The Black Werewolf King has captured Her Highness. As she is in no position to give orders, I will hereby take over as acting commander of the first battalion.”

Everyone nodded in acceptance, so I ordered, “We will hereby surrender to the Black Werewolf King. Prepare to disarm!”

“Yes, sir!”

Eventually, Eleora’s mana ran out and her fire tornado vanished into the ether. Some patches of forest were still burning, but I’d get the werewolves to put those fires out later. I princess-carried Eleora out of the clearing, and her soldiers walked out of the shadows. There were 18 of them. *That’s everyone.* After making sure Eleora was safe, they threw down their Blast Canes and swords. The oldest among them walked forward and said, “I am adjutant Borsche Norlinskar. As our commander is incapacitated, I have taken over command of the mage corps.”

He finished his introduction, then said, “Henceforth, the 209th imperial mage corps shall surrender to the Meraldian Commonwealth. But in return, I request that no harm come to Her Highness Eleora.”

“I swear on my name as a Meraldian Councilor that no harm will come to any of you.”

Borsche and his soldier saluted me in response.

Eleora opened her eyes and examined her surroundings. She was lying on a hospital bed somewhere.

“Where...”

I strode to her bedside and replied, “You’re in Ryunheit, inside the demon army’s hospital. You’ve been asleep for three days and three nights, Princess Eleora.”

According to Master’s diagnosis, Eleora had been overworked and

overstressed, so it was hardly surprising she'd collapsed. We'd used sleeping magic on her to let her rest, then made preparations to deal with her and her troops. It turned out our princess was more fragile than she looked. Eleora looked up at me and asked, "Why won't you kill me?"

"Because that'd just cause problems for us. If we kill you, Rolmund will have an excuse to invade Meraldia in force."

"I see."

Eleora returned her gaze to the ceiling and I continued, "All we want to do is chase you out of Meraldia and never have to deal with Rolmund again."

"So long as conquest of the south is an imperial edict, I'm afraid that'll never happen. Even if a new emperor is crowned, he will likely continue what the old emperor started. Besides, Rolmund's frigid land is unsuitable for large-scale agriculture. We're also running low on available land to gift to newly-minted nobles. Eventually, Rolmund will return to invade Meraldia."

Now that's a problem. But that aside, Eleora really had no awareness that she was a prisoner. Despite being my captive, she still took such an arrogant tone with me. Annoyed, I decided to prod her a little.

"Incidentally, your subordinates—"

Eleora sat up and shouted, "What did you do to them!?"

Her mage corps had suffered catastrophic losses. Of the 95 members of the mage corps that had participated in this operation, 61 had been captured. The remaining 34 had died. In other words, 40% of her forces had been killed, and of the survivors most were wounded. Of the dead, all of them belonged to the units who'd invaded the western gate. Seventy members of the mage corps had participated in the infiltration operation, and half of them had died during it.

Unfortunately, my forces had suffered casualties too. Beluza's landing forces had lost 19 of their men. Baltze's Azure Knights had been hit with a surprise attack as well, and had lost four soldiers. The one silver lining was that Master had returned right after the battle and treated those with mortal injuries. Without her magic, both sides might have lost a lot more men. While Eleora had been asleep, we'd already conducted funeral services for the dead. When I told

her as much, she smiled sardonically and said, “I never imagined you would take them prisoner. I suppose they’re hostages to ensure I don’t commit suicide?”

My general modus operandi was to let defeated enemies live so they felt indebted to me, but it looked like Eleora wasn’t going to accept my goodwill easily. *Fine, we’ll do things another way then.*

“If you attempt anything foolish, I cannot guarantee their safety.”

For some reason, Eleora seemed to look relieved when she saw me acting intimidating.

“I suppose I have no right to choose my fate. So what do you plan on doing with me?”

God, what an awkward woman. I’d noticed this a while back, but Eleora seemed obsessed with picking the thorniest path for herself at all times. There could be plenty of easier paths that led to more favorable outcomes, but she would definitely not choose them. Even if I was willing to set aside my responsibilities as a councilor and offer to protect her out of the goodness of my heart, she would refuse my help. If that was how she insisted on being, then all I could do was force her into picking the path with the least amount of hardship. I scowled and folded my arms.

“Honestly, you’re nothing but a nuisance for us. If I could, I’d just send you back to Rolmund and never hear from you again.”

“If you did that, I would be court-martialed and likely executed for my failures.”

The surviving Rolmund soldiers had explained the empire’s tangled political situation to me already, so I was expecting a reply like that. Quietly, Eleora added, “I’d rather you just kill me here than send me back. At least that way I would die an honorable death. More importantly, if it’s the empire who executes me, they’ll also execute every member of my mage corps, and the rest of my household, down to the apprentice maids.”

“That’s one frigid country you live in.”

“It is. But it’s not so frigid as the winds that blow through Meraldia.”

Sounds like you're sick of our country. Those words revealed just how exhausted Eleora was from her campaign.

"It's certainly true that there's no longer a place for you here in Meraldia."

"From the very start, the only place I could call home was when I was with my mage corps. Were it not for them, I would have been assassinated a dozen times over."

"Are people really that worried about someone sixth in line for the succession?"

Her expression grew serious.

"Those seventh in line and lower see me as a rival that needs to be eliminated. And those fifth in line and higher are worried I might be aiming for their lives."

Man, what a scary country. Isn't preventing squabbles like this the whole point of deciding who your successor is ahead of time?

"I see. I suppose the winds in Rolmund are warmer than the ones here."

Since they're blowing straight out of hell. I added, half-sarcastically, "You must have been surrounded by a lot of wonderful people in your life."

"Oh yeah. I reunited with my wet nurse ten years after she finished looking after me, and she'd turned into an assassin after my life. As a final act of mercy, instead of killing her I tortured her until she told me who hired her. First, I took her nails and..."

I despised talk of painful things, but I couldn't let her see me cringing. So I feigned composure and interrupted her before she got into the meat of her torture story.

"That's enough reminiscing. I care nothing for your past."

I had zero interest in what happened in that godforsaken country. Her talk of torture had shaken me a little though, so I decided to get the information I'd come for and leave.

"So why is it Rolmund's so harsh? You call yourselves the civilized ancestors of Meraldia's northern citizens, but you seem more barbaric than them to me."

Eleora averted her gaze. She looked up at the ceiling, then closed her eyes.

“Let me tell you the story of ‘Cold Micha.’ You’ll understand then.”

Who the hell’s that? In a surprisingly gentle voice, Eleora regaled me of this tale from her homeland.

“Deep inside a forest, Micha lived happily with her father and mother. But one winter, their crops went bad and they didn’t have enough food to survive until spring.”

I guess they’ll go searching for food and find a fairy or someone who’ll help them... right?

“The little food they had was only enough to get two people through the winter. So the father left the house and vanished into the forest.”

Stop, I hate sad stories like this. Even torture talk is better than this.

“Thanks to that, both Micha and her mom were able to survive the winter. But the harvest next year was poor too, and they only had enough food to get one person through winter.”

Expression still gentle, Eleora said, “So the mother left the house and vanished into the forest. Micha was left all alone.”

“What a horrid tale.”

“It’s a nursery tale everyone in Rolmund knows. In order to survive the harsh winters, the people must learn to harden their hearts.”

“I see, so that’s the kind of land you live in.”

Eleora smiled and replied, “Don’t worry, the story isn’t over yet. Micha grew up into an upstanding adult, and became a mother herself.”

Oh good, it’s not all doom and gloom.

“But then, the next year they had a bad harvest, it was her turn to vanish into the woods. She had to, in order to protect her own child. That’s why she’s known as ‘Cold Micha.’”

Why would you end the story in such a depressing way? This is like, psychological terrorism! I’m going to have nightmares about poor Micha now. I

just barely managed to feign composure in front of Eleora.

At the very least, now I understood why Rolmund had ended up the way it had. Its climate forced people to come together and serve harsh punishments for anyone who failed to complete their assigned duty. Because if even one person failed, the group perished. That was the kind of land they lived in.

“I understand now. The reason Rolmund is so harsh is because survival of the fittest is the only way for the country to survive.”

“Exactly. We don’t execute the family members of criminals and torture heretics because we like it. If only we were able to live in a warmer land, we wouldn’t need to resort to such measures.”

“Well, unfortunately that just proves Rolmund is my enemy.”

For one thing, I couldn’t abide by any nation that came up with a story as sad as “Cold Micha.” But more importantly, if what Eleora said was true, then Rolmund would always be a threat to Meraldia. They clearly hadn’t given up on their plans of invading. Even if I banished Eleora and collapsed the tunnels leading through the mountains, Rolmund would try again through a different route.

In order to protect the humans and demons living in Meraldia, I needed to do something about Rolmund. I also needed to figure out what I was going to do with Eleora and her troops. Now that they’d surrendered, I wasn’t heartless enough to just kill them.

Fortunately, in one of our council meetings, we’d come up with a countermeasure for this possibility. In my best evil villain tone, I offered Eleora a proposal.

“Eleora Kastoniev Originia Rolmund, you are my prisoner.”

She stiffened a little when she heard her full name. I leaned forward and brought my face close to hers.

“You were defeated by me, and now your life, your dignity, your subordinates, and your future belong to me. Everything from your last drop of blood to the tips of your hairs are mine.”

“...I understand.”

She closed her eyes. Sensing her resignation, I pushed forward. It was difficult keeping the sympathy out of my voice, but I did it.

“But I am a benevolent man. I know to show mercy to those who may still prove useful to me. You possess the right to ascend to Rolmund’s throne. All that remains to be seen is whether you are willing to serve me or not.”

“What?”

Eleora furrowed her brows suspiciously, but a moment later she realized where I was going with this.

“You mean to invade Rolmund and install me as your puppet empress?”

“That’s not a very nice way to put it. I am sure you, who values your comrades so dearly, will be willing to cooperate with me of your own free will.”

If you want to keep your men safe, you’ll try to be useful to me, right? No? Well then, I guess I’ll just execute all of your surviving subordinates. That was what I wanted her to think I was thinking. But of course, I wouldn’t actually kill her men. I didn’t have it in me to be so cruel. I knew it was soft of me, but executing soldiers who’d surrendered was impossible for me. If she refused, I’d come up with some other way to pressure her into saying yes.

Eleora stared into my eyes. Her gaze was cold as ice. I couldn’t help but get a little scared. After a few seconds, she finally sighed and looked away.

“Back then, I should have killed you no matter what it cost me. Not defeating you when I had the chance was my biggest mistake.”

Eleora then bowed her head to me.

“Black Werewolf King Veight. Please lend me your strength. If you make me the next empress of Rolmund, I swear I shall never invade Meraldia again.”

Just in case, I scrutinized her expression.

“Do you speak the truth?”

“I’ve been abandoned by Meraldia once before. Do you truly think I would attempt stepping foot in it once more? If I was that foolish, then you’d have no

use for me.”

Judging from her scent, she was telling the truth. She really had learned her lesson.

“Very well. I shall trust in your words. I hope we can form a mutually beneficial relationship.”

Grinning, I swept my cape back. If I could use Eleora to sow confusion within Rolmund, they’d be too busy with internal affairs to worry about invading other nations. At worst, I’d be able to buy Meraldia a few years. At best, a few decades. Either way, it’d be enough time for Meraldia to build up its defenses.

Besides, if I was able to make Eleora empress, she and her troops wouldn’t have to die. I did feel a little bad for the people of Rolmund, but I was neither a god nor a saint. My job was protecting Meraldia, and that came before all else.

“Rest and recover, Eleora. You’re our ally now, so you better make sure to keep me satisfied.”

Eleora closed her eyes and breathed a small sigh.

“I’ll try.”

Perfect, persuasion successful. I promise to treat you well, so help me keep Meraldia at peace, alright? I left Eleora’s hospital room and started thinking of ways to avoid seeing nightmares about Cold Micha tonight.

The Princess's Day Off

"Sir Forne, can't you change this line?"

I looked over the script of the latest play, and voiced my complaints to Producer Forne. The viceroy of Veira, the city of craftsmen, looked up from the playbills he was designing and turned to me.

"Which one?"

"The one the Black Werewolf King says here. 'We must fight tyranny when it threatens our doorstep.' See it?"

"I do indeed, but..."

Forne looked confused. We were currently holding a meeting regarding the latest installment in the Black Werewolf King series of plays. Originally they'd been propaganda designed to undermine Eleora's rule. But because of how major an event the attack on Ryunheit had been, Forne and I had decided to turn it into a play as well. In order to keep the retelling faithful, I'd decided to thoroughly check over the script. I explained to Forne, "Eleora's no tyrant. I want to avoid putting anything in the script that isn't true."

"It's fine to embellish her crimes a little, isn't it?"

Forne looked over the line in question, then sighed.

"Besides, most Meraldians see her as a tyrant. She imposed Rolmund's law and Rolmund's version of the Sonnenlicht religion on them. Wouldn't you say that's pretty tyrannical?"

"You may have a point there, but..."

Originally the line had called her a heartless despot. I had to fight to get it reduced to just tyrant. *Tyrant, huh?* It didn't really sit well with me, but I supposed that was just how propaganda worked. But she hadn't used fear-mongering to oppress the citizens, nor had she abused her power for her own benefit. I felt bad about casting her in such an evil light. As I stared sadly at the

script, Forne let out an exaggerated sigh and said, “Fine, fine, I’ll change it. You’re the invincible werewolf king, vice-commander of the Demon Lord, so please stop looking like a dejected puppy.”

Was I really looking like that? Forne scrunched up his face and tried to think of alternatives.

“Let me see... Hmm, this is the part where the Black Werewolf King rallies the people against Eleora so it has to sound impactful.”

“But think about it. Eleora had the support of all the northern viceroys, and even the citizens. Even now there are people who swear allegiance to her. What would they think if we called her out as a tyrant or despot in the play?”

It would be the same as stepping all over their loyalty. Since this was a play I wanted it to be enjoyable, not accusatory. Forne looked up at me and chuckled.

“We were going to change the script for the version of the play we’d show in the north anyway. I’m surprised you care this much.”

“Humans get scary if you anger them.”

“Says the man who could raze Ryunheit in a day if he so wished to...”

I definitely couldn’t, and even if I could, that didn’t make humans any less scary. Forne dipped his quill pen into an inkwell and said with a smile, “Well, no matter. It’s a request from the Black Werewolf King himself, so I suppose I can comply. Will this do?”

In elegant, flowing letters Forne wrote the sentence, “It should be us, the humans and demons of Meraldia who decide the fate of our land!” The line didn’t insult anyone, and it provided a cause that people could accept.

“Yeah, that’s good. Sorry for making you change so much, Sir Forne.”

“It’s fine, this is hardly much effort. Besides, speaking with you always reminds me of truths I’ve taken for granted.”

Forne gave me an amicable wink.

We finished polishing off the play’s script, and Forne returned home to Veira. I made myself some tea and relaxed in my office. My thoughts turned to Eleora,

who was still officially our captive. According to the werewolf assigned to keep an eye on her, she was still feeling down. I sighed to myself just as Airia walked into my office, and she smiled knowingly at me.

"Are you worried about her again?"

"Yeah. Eleora's an extremely valuable hostage. And I need her to do her job, or Meraldia's peace will be endangered."

I got to my feet, filled the kettle, and placed it on the stove. Since Airia was here, it was only polite to make her some tea. She sat down on the sofa and gave me a suggestive glance.

"Is that truly all there is to it?"

"Alright, I'll admit it. I do feel a little sorry for her."

I trusted all of the viceroys on the Commonwealth Council, but it was only Airia I could open up to completely. So I didn't bother hiding my true feelings from her. After thinking for a few seconds, Airia said, "It certainly is true that Lady Eleora has been in low spirits since her defeat. Though she does go on walks often, she doesn't appear to be enjoying them."

"Have you been observing her as well?"

"Yes. I've asked the garrison soldiers patrolling the city to keep an eye on her."

Poor girl. She's being watched both by Ryunheit's troops, and the demon army. Airia set a stack of documents onto my desk and smiled at me.

"I've granted the Rolmund soldiers a certain degree of freedom. They're free to roam the city, but they have to report their actions to me. From what I've read, Lady Natalia seems to be frequenting our city's theatre."

Oh, wow. Frequenting's an understatement. I perused through the documents and noticed every single one of Natalia's reports read "Reason for leaving the camp: theatre." Airia chuckled and said, "It seems the women of Rolmund find Meraldia's plays to be refreshing. They're quite fond of it."

"I see. Plays, huh?"

I could see girls really being into plays. After thinking for a few seconds, I

suggested to Airia, “How about we invite Eleora to a play?”

“Yes, I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

Airia’s smile grew wider.

Unfortunately, I’d made one huge oversight.

“All the plays being performed right now are ones from the Black Werewolf King series...” I grumbled to myself as I checked over the theatre schedule. Ryunheit might have been the demon capital, but it was still a small city with only a single, small theatre. There was also only a single troupe that played there. The owner of the theatre said apologetically, “I’m sorry, but right now we’re only showing the Black Werewolf King plays. Master Forne is providing the props and costumes free of charge, so we have no reason to perform anything else.”

Goddammit, Forne! It looked like I had no choice but to show Eleora one of the propaganda plays that had led to her defeat.

“Eleora, you should go out for a change. It might raise your spirits.”

When I visited Eleora’s room, she looked far more despondent than when I’d been fighting her. She shook her head and muttered, “How can I, a defeated princess, hope to feel happy again?”

A play might help... When she was being this much of a downer, it was hard to keep the conversation going. *You know one of your subordinates is spending so much money at the theatre that Ryunheit’s being flooded with Rolmund silver coins, right?* Apparently Natalia’s room was filled with so many woodblock posters and commemorative playbills that all of her roommates were getting interested in plays too. That being said, I could see Eleora’s point. She’d lost close to half of her men, failed her mission, and was now my prisoner. It’d be hard to enjoy yourself in a situation like that. This required a different approach.

“In that case, perhaps the defeated princess might prefer a lesson on why she lost.”

I smirked wickedly and walked over to her. She turned away from the window and gave me a blank look.

“What?”

I caught a faint whiff of fear from her sweat. She was likely remembering her confrontation with me. Taking advantage of her anxiety, I declared, “Don’t you want to see one of the factors that led to your defeat?”

“What factor would that be?”

Eleora’s frowned, puzzled.

In the end, I succeeded in dragging Eleora to Ryunheit’s theatre. We were sitting in one of the VIP boxes, but we also had a retinue of buff werewolf bodyguards so we looked pretty out of place.

“Natalia’s told me about this play...”

Eleora rested her chin in her hands and looked down at the stage.

“But I’m not a fan of this particular play, Black Werewolf King.”

Forne, who was also sitting with us, rounded on Eleora.

“You dare insult my production!?”

“It’s not the quality of the play that bothers me, Sir Forne, but the contents.”

Eleora’s dissatisfaction was only natural. After all, the play we were watching today was titled *Princess on the Precipice.* In other words, it was a play starring Eleora as the villain. I’d only checked over the script yesterday, so I was surprised it was already being performed. Forne was even faster at getting things out than I expected. To be honest, I hadn’t been expecting this either. I’d thought the theatre would be showing one of my older plays. But despite my worry that this would just make Eleora more depressed, Forne smiled confidently and said, “Princess of Rolmund, watch and learn. This is the difference between you and the Black Werewolf King.”

If anything, I think I’m the one who should learn from her... I couldn’t think of anything else to say, so I just sat there silently until the curtains were drawn. Soon enough, the actors took to the stage, and the play began.

-The Black Werewolf King has united the southern cities of Meraldia, and demons now live in peace with humans. But because of the unsanctioned actions of a few radicals within the demon army, the north still sees demons as their enemy.-

"Esteemed Black Werewolf King, what seems to be troubling you?"

Firnir the Swift Gale walked onto the stage and gestured toward the Black Werewolf King.

The real Firnir leaned forward and said excitedly, "Look, it's me!"

"You're supposed to be quiet inside a theatre. Also if you keep yelling like that, you'll ruin the cool image people have of you."

"Hey, that's mean!"

Back on the stage, the Black Werewolf King shook his head.

"Humans never forget their grudges. It is an undeniable truth that the demon army ravaged the north."

Airia the Demon Ambassador walked onstage and shouted, "Black Werewolf King!"

"What troubles you, o' beautiful Demon Ambassador?"

The real Airia's breathing suddenly became erratic. Worried, I looked over at her only to see her smiling happily. *It's getting hard to concentrate on the play when all the people the characters are based on keep distracting me.*

Onstage, Airia said to the Black Werewolf King, "An empire far to the north—the nation of ice and snow, Rolmund—has sent one of their imperial princesses, Eleora, to invade Meraldia. The northern cities have already sworn allegiance to her."

"Rolmund, you say?"

The Black Werewolf King swept his cape back.

“After cutting all contact for two hundred years, you say they’ve suddenly reappeared to conquer the people of Meraldia?”

“They have indeed, Black Werewolf King. They claim that Meraldians are descendants of Rolmund’s escaped slaves, and thus have no choice but to obey their masters.”

“How foolish.”

The Black Werewolf King frowned, and the orchestra started playing a haunting piano refrain. According to Forne, this melody was titled “The Werewolf Howls.” Everyone on the stage took a half-step back, intimidated by the Black Werewolf King’s majestic aura. The curtains closed on the scene, signaling the start of the intermission.

Eleora turned to me and smiled faintly saying, “It’s a good play.”

“I’m glad you’ve found it to your tastes.”

I grimaced inwardly. The next act would probably be the most awkward to watch. Since that would be when Eleora shows up in the play. Apparently, Forne had called in a famous actress from Veira to act her out in this play. He leaned in close to me and whispered, “The actress’s name is Levishe. She’s famous for both her beauty and her acting talent.”

Eleora overheard that and gave Forne a puzzled look, but before he could explain further the curtains rose once more.

The sixth auxiliary princess of the Holy Rolmund Empire, Eleora, proceeded to take over cities at lightning speed. Because the mage corps new weapons were still classified, the play didn’t touch on them.

“Don’t harm civilians! Plundering and looting are forbidden!” A beautiful woman in a crisp military uniform directed Rolmund’s soldiers, her voice carrying through the room. “We came here to govern the people of this country! It would not do to oppress those who will come to be our subjects!”

Thanks to Eleora's firm but fair leadership, the citizens that were originally afraid of her rule began to accept her as their new leader.

"Don't allow the Senate to trample over your freedom! Those corrupt politicians have no right to do as they please with Meraldia! Gather under Rolmund's flag and overthrow their tyranny!"

Just as she had in real life, play Eleora won the war against the Senate in a series of overwhelming victories. As a result, her popularity with the common folk skyrocketed. Because her military offensive was focused on the Senate and no one else, the northern viceroys and people grew to accept her as their new leader.

Once she'd defeated the Senate, Eleora bared her fangs against the demon army. But it was then that Eleora's plans slowly started going awry. Eleora gripped a letter in her hands, unable to hide her unease.

"How are we meant to destroy the demon capital's fortifications without catapults from the homeland? Return at once and request reinforcements."

"My deepest apologies, Your Highness, but the emperor stated that he can send no further aid."

Eleora shook her head at the imperial messenger.

"How am I to lead this campaign without troops? The demon capital's walls are thick, its gates sturdy, and its garrison numerous. My mage corps alone cannot hope to topple such a formidable fortress."

I knew Forne had written the play like this to improve Ryunheit's image, but it was still a little embarrassing to hear my city praised like this. The messenger withered in the face of Eleora's anger, but he refused to comply with her request.

"However, the emperor has decreed that you do just that. If you refuse, you and your subordinates will be branded traitors."

Eleora put a hand to the sword at her waist.

"We have risked our lives to carry out the emperor's will, yet you would call us traitors!?"

“Eeek!?”

The messenger ran off-stage, tripping as he went. Borsche appeared to take his place and said, “Your Highness, you must hold your temper. If we anger the emperor, he will cease to send us even the funds and supplies he has thus far.”

“But how can we hope to conquer the demon capital with the mage corps alone?”

“I realize we are at a disadvantage, but we have no choice but to achieve the impossible. Every member of the mage corps is willing to lay their lives down for you, Your Highness.”

Eleora expression grew miserable.

“I’m sorry... but right now your loyalty is all I have to depend on.”

The curtains closed again, marking the start of the second intermission.

This was about the halfway point of the story. Since the stage needed to be redone entirely for the second half, a different set of actors did a small skit to pass the time. The skit was titled *The Stubborn Old Man and his Grizzled Protégé.* Naturally, it was about the viceroys of the two marine cities. The actor playing Garsh was dressed as a sailor while the one playing Petore was dressed like a merchant.

“Yo, old man, what’s going on inside the empire?”

“Dunno. But it seems that the princess is stuck in a tough spot.”

Garsh dug an apple out of his rucksack and bit into it. He pulled out a second one and offered it to Petore.

“She may be a princess, but she’s little more than the empire’s pawn.”

“Oi, don’t be so dismissive. She may be an enemy, but she deserves our respect.”

Petore threw the apple back at Garsh, and Garsh threw two back at him. Petore threw those back as well, and this time Garsh threw three. The two started dancing as they juggled apples back and forth. Occasionally they’d throw knives or cutlery at each other as well as apples.

“Hey, that porcelain’s high-quality stuff from Veira’s Velde Kunk workshop. Be careful with it.”

“Come now, it won’t break from a small fall like this. Their things are famous for being beautiful *and* sturdy.”

It seemed Forne had managed to sneak a commercial into his skit too. He really was a shrewd man. As the skit drew to a close the two actors started keeping the apples they caught. Finally, all they were juggling was a few spoons.

“Oi, geezer, don’t drop that.”

“Says the kid who threw it at me.”

Just then, Petore’s actor dropped the spoon in his hand. Everyone thought it would break. But though it hit the floor with a loud clang, it didn’t even crack. Of course, that was because the old man caught it with his toes a second before it hit the ground and let the spoon down gently, but he did it so fast that only my eyes could follow him.

“Whew, that was close!”

Garsh wiped an imaginary bead of sweat off his brow, and Petore hurriedly pointed to the stage curtains.

“This is no time to be relaxing! The war’s begun! Run!”

“What!? Uh-oh!”

As the curtains began to rise, the two actors cartwheeled off stage. It appeared the preparations for the final act had been completed.

The latter half of the play began with Eleora leading her troops in an attack on Ryunheit. In order to make up for her lack of numbers, she’d hired as many mercenaries as she could. Unfortunately, her mercenaries had extremely low morale. Eleora’s overwhelming popularity had run its course, and the people were growing disillusioned with her. Furthermore, Meraldia’s mercenaries generally made their profit by getting involved in conflicts between Meraldian cities. If Rolmund conquered the entire region, there’d be no small-scale wars to make money off of.

“Sorry, but we’re not sticking with you any longer, Rolmund Princess.”

With that, the mercenaries left the battlefield. Eleora was left with only her mage corps. It was impossible to conquer Ryunheit with just them, but it was too late to retreat.

“This is the moment of truth, men! Defeat the Black Werewolf King! Charge!”

Eleora brandished her sword, and her men fought desperately to reach the center of the city. They were up against the demon army’s famous Azure Knights. The actors playing the dragonkin knights were dressed in scale mail, and the two sides ran back and forth across the stage as they fought. *I guess the scale mail is there to represent their scales.* Ryunheit’s garrison, Beluza’s landing troops, and Lotz’s elites eventually joined the fight as well. In the very end, Shardier’s troops and Thuvan’s kentauros showed up too. That wasn’t what had happened in reality, but this scene was meant to showcase the Southern Commonwealth coming together against Eleora, so a little embellishment was fine.

Finally, the werewolves appeared. Warriors clad in jet-black fur pelts started defeating the members of the mage corps. Naturally, the fights were all staged, but they still looked impressive. One by one, Eleora lost her comrades until she was the last one standing.

It was then that the Black Werewolf King reappeared. He was carrying a bloodstained Rolmund cape, which he threw down at her feet. Proof that he’d slain dozens of soldiers.

“Surrender, Eleora. You have no hope of victory.”

“I cannot.” Eleora drew her sword and pointed it at the Black Werewolf King. “The emperor’s orders are coiled about me like chains. Even if it means my death, I cannot defy his will.”

Eleora charged at the Black Werewolf King, but he easily blocked her attack. He then closed the gap between them and said, “Surrender, Eleora. If you pursue further bloodshed, I will have no choice but to kill you.”

“Then kill me, Black Werewolf King.”

Eleora put her entire weight behind the next attack, but the Black Werewolf

King stopped it with one hand.

“Surrender, Eleora.”

Three times the Black Werewolf King asked, and three times Eleora refused. She threw down her sword and clapped her hands together.

“I will not leave this forest alive. But if I am to die here, then I shall take you with me!”

Dancers bedecked in flowing red gowns started circling the two actors. They then unfurled spools of orange cloth, creating a wall that obstructed Eleora and the Black Werewolf King. *That’s supposed to represent a fire tornado, I guess.*

“If I cannot conquer the demon capital, then I shall at least make sure to defeat the famous Black Werewolf King and leave my mark in history! In doing so, my subordinates shall be spared execution at the hands of Rolmund’s tribunal!”

Eleora’s words rang through the theatre, but her figure was obstructed by the dancers. After a minute or so the dancers left, revealing an unhurt Black Werewolf King. He was carrying an unconscious Eleora. From the audience stands, it was impossible to tell if she was alive or dead.

“Eleora, is there truly any meaning in leaving your mark in history? Is that what leaders such as ourselves should strive for?”

No one answered him, but in the distance, people cheered the Southern Commonwealth’s victory. The play ended, and the curtains fell one last time.

The moment the play ended, Firnir excitedly got to her feet.

“Wow, that was amazing, Forne!”

“Oh, you thought so, too?”

Forne looked pretty pleased with himself. *Since when did those two become friends?* Airia, too, praised Forne’s play.

“It was tragic, but also inspiring. You did a wonderful job in capturing the spirit of two souls fated to fight, though they wish only for peace.”

“Oh, you thought so as well?”

Forne’s smile grew wider. To be honest though, it was a really good play. Even if you took away the fact that it was being used for propaganda, it was really well made. In a world without TV or internet, it was probably the most entertaining thing you could go see. I turned to Eleora, who seemed to be lost in thought, and smiled.

“Well, do you understand the difference between me and you now?”

“Yes, yes I do.”

Eleora nodded and looked up at me.

“This play may be a mere fabrication, but those who see it will come to sympathize with the Southern Commonwealth. At the same time, it will drive people away from me. But there’s one thing I fail to comprehend.”

“Oh?”

Sounding genuinely confused, Eleora asked, “Why would you portray me in such a good light? I’m your enemy, aren’t I?” Expression serious, Eleora continued, “Shouldn’t you be vilifying your enemies so that their allies no longer wish to assist them? Vilifying them also helps reassure your own subjects that the enemy isn’t worth worrying about. So why didn’t you do that here?”

“Ah, so that’s your question.”

Grinning, I turned to Firnir.

“How about you explain, Firnir.”

“Ah, okay.”

Firnir stopped pestering Forne to tell her what the next play would be on and puffed her tiny chest out proudly.

“Kentauros always praise the enemies they defeat as much as they can!”

“You do?”

“Yep! Cause, I mean, where’s the honor in beating a weak enemy? You want to be able to tell everyone ‘Look, that guy I beat was soooo strong!’”

Kentauros had a custom where they buried the dead of their enemies and

sang dirges for them. It was a way of showing just how powerful their foe had been, and how they'd fallen. When Firnir had first told me that, I'd been so moved I'd decided to adopt part of her culture myself. Customs like those were ones I was fond of, even if adopting them didn't bring me any tangible benefits. However, Eleora didn't seem to understand what Firnir was getting at.

"So in other words, by playing up how powerful I am, the play is showcasing just how amazing the Black Werewolf King is for defeating me?"

"You could look at it that way. But the truth is, we really did have a hard time defeating you. All we want is for the people to understand how difficult our battle was."

Beating Eleora had been especially hard because I had to defeat her without killing her, or I would have had to deal with a bigger Rolmund army on my doorstep. *I never want to face such a tricky opponent again. Oh yeah, I should probably explain that to her too.*

"Meraldia has no hope of invading Rolmund. Meaning we'll have to get along as neighbors if we want to survive. That's why I can't afford to kill you, nor can I afford to ruin your image via plays or the like."

"I see. Still, it never occurred to me that praising your opponents was a valid strategy to solidify your own position. This was a good lesson." Eleora looked off into the distance. "I see, so this is why I lost."

"No, this play was just one of many strategies."

"You're wrong, Black Werewolf King. This was the main reason." Smiling, Eleora shook her head. "I lost to your greatness. Seeing this play proved that to me."

"I'm not really all that great though."

I always end up resolving things through force, and then need everyone else to bail me out of the hot water I get myself into. However, Eleora smiled again and said, "I heard about this play from Natalia. I was actually thinking of going to see it once myself."

"Really?"

“Yes. I was curious how you would portray us. I wanted to know what version of us you wished to show to your people.” Eleora clapped politely for the actors who were bowing on stage, then muttered, “I was sure you’d portray us as a foolish, ugly lot... But I was wrong.”

She got to her feet and looked me in the eyes.

“You honor even those who did their utmost to kill you, and even go so far as to show our value to others. Even if it’s part of your strategy, only someone as great as you could conceive such a plan.”

“You’re really overestimating me.”

I just don’t want to slander people. Even enemies I had to defeat deserved a fair valuation. If I couldn’t do even that, I’d become a monster that was neither human nor werewolf. And that was something I was scared of. Eleora observed my face for a few seconds, then chuckled in resignation.

“It seems I never will be able to match up to you.”

“Hm?”

“It’s nothing. More importantly, I’d like to give my compliments to the actress who played me. Sir Forne, can you introduce her to me?”

“Of course.”

Forne got to his feet and led Eleora down to the stage. I couldn’t tell if this outing had managed to raise her spirits or not. After watching her walk down the steps for a few seconds, I got to my feet as well. *I should probably compliment the actor that played me too. After all, he was really cool...*

Afterword

Hello everyone, Hyougetsu here. I'm so glad to see you all again. This volume was the most stressful one by far. I had to move in the middle of its publication, so I was juggling two things at once. But it was well worth it, since now I have a place I can write comfortably in.

The place I lived in before was so cramped that I had to put mail on my futon and couldn't even store gifts from the editorial department anywhere. I knew I had to move this summer, or I'd go crazy. Thankfully, my new home is a lot more spacious, and I can actually sit down and write. This is all thanks to you readers. Thank you so much for supporting this humble author. I promise to keep writing as much as I can.

Incidentally, it's been about a year since I first started writing on Narou. Back then, if you'd told me I'd have four published volumes in a year, I would never have believed you. At the time, I just thought Narou would be a good place to practice my writing skills and get some experience under my belt. Which was why I didn't even use twitter or publicize my work until volume one was published; I was just writing to get better. But before I knew it, this story of mine had grown into such a popular thing... Life sure is unpredictable.

Now then, volume four is the volume that introduces Rolmund's princess, Eleora. She'll be fighting together with Veight for some time. From volume five onward she's going to be going through a lot of growth, so please watch over her. In fact, you can think of the next volume as her story.

Oh yeah, I'd like to thank Nishi(E)da-sensei for agreeing to draw illustrations for this book as well. They were truly wonderful. But if I can make a confession, I don't actually get to see his final illustrations until after the book's published. Right now, all I have to look at are his rough drafts. But knowing Nishi(E)da-sensei, they'll surely be as gorgeous as always. Thank you so much for bringing

my words to life.

I'd also like to thank my editor, His Highness Fusanon. By which I mean Saitou-sama. Our meetings are always so much fun that I often forget we're there to work. It's thanks to you that I can enjoy writing as much as I do. You're the best editor I could possibly hope for. And I know it could have ended up a lot worse. Thank you so much for everything.

Oh, also, the manga version that Terada Isaza-sensei is drawing should be coming out this August. The manga's going to be able to depict all the people in the novel who aren't lucky enough to get an illustration, so I'm glad it exists. I've also tweaked events and characters a bit to better fit the manga format, so I highly recommend checking it out.

Anyway, the Rolmund arc will probably continue for at least a few more volumes, so bear with me guys. May we meet again in the next volume.



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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 4

by Hyougetsu

Translated by Ningen Edited by Meiru

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