



Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight

— The Child of a Hero —



Hyougetsu
ill. Nishi(E)da



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Character

Veight

A Japanese man who was reincarnated as a werewolf in another world. He's the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander and a member of the Meraldian Commonwealth Council.

Airia

The first human Demon Lord. She's Veight's wife and pregnant with their first child.



Parker

A skilled skeleton illusionist and Veight's good friend. He went missing shortly after going to Kuwol.



Pajam the Second

Kuowl's King. He was slain by Zagar after being tricked by him.



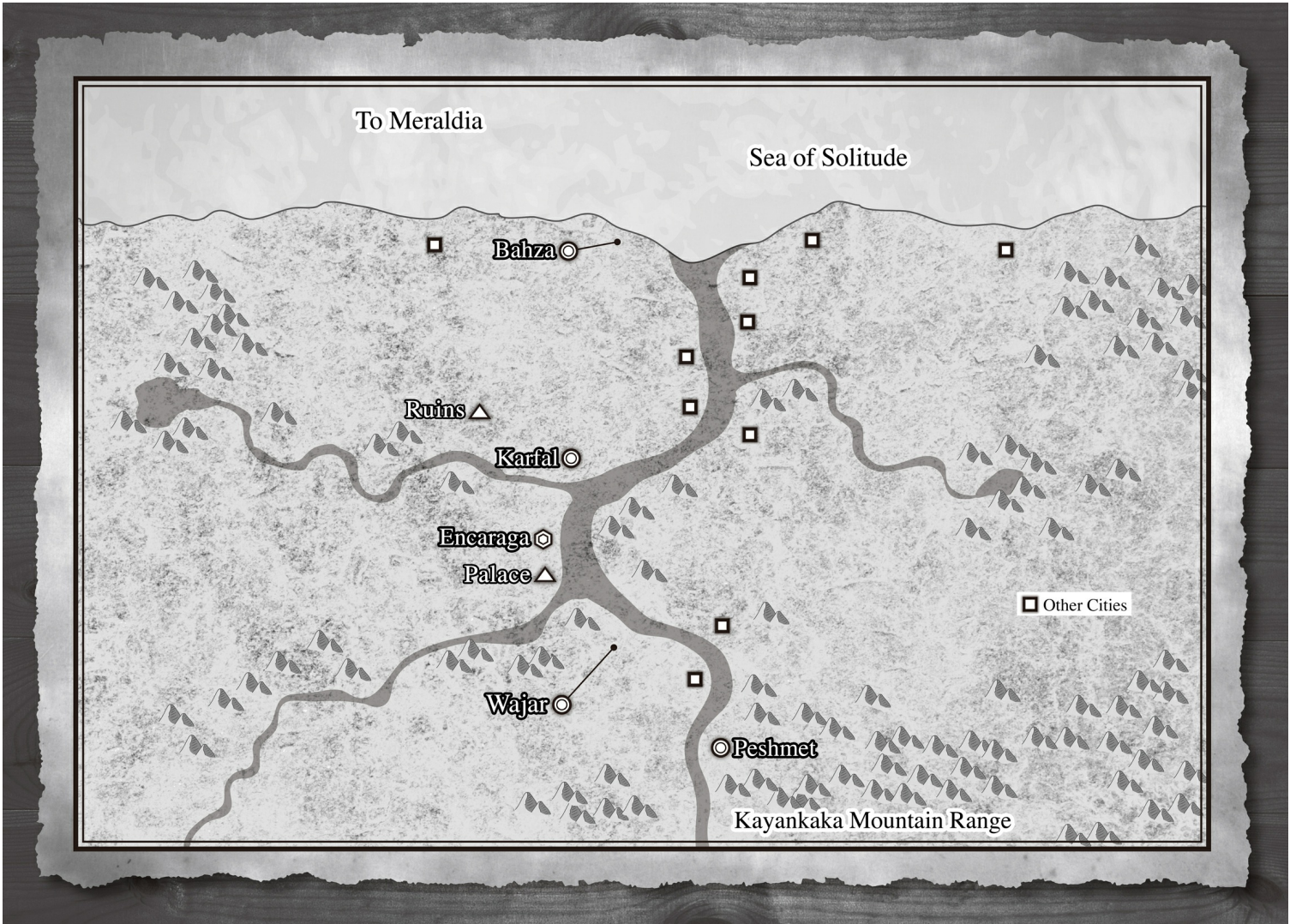
Kumluk

Zagar's Vice-Commander.



Zagar

The captain of the mercenaries hired by the coastal nobles. He slew the king to further his own ambitions.



The story so far

Back in Ryunheit, Veight has begun his new life as Airia's husband and Vice-Commander. However, before he could even settle in, a messenger from one of Kuwol's littoral cities arrived, asking for his aid.

The coastal nobles were currently at odds with the king, who raised taxes on their harbors. The situation had escalated to the point where civil war was imminent, and trade routes to Meraldia were being disrupted. Under the pretense of investigating this matter and de-escalating tensions, Parker was sent off to Kuwol in Veight's place.

Upon his arrival in the country, war soon broke out, leading to Parker going missing amidst the confusion. Stuck between worry for his pregnant wife and the desire to search for his missing friend, Veight was torn as to what to prioritize. Seeing him at a loss, Airia exercised her power as Demon Lord and ordered Veight to go to Kuwol and resolve the situation posthaste.

After landing on Kuwolese soil, Veight was greeted by Birakoya Bahza and introduced to her hired mercenaries. Soon after, he came to the realization that the mercenary group was every bit as suspicious as Parker's reports claimed. Keeping a close eye on their captain, Zagar, he discovered that the ambitious warrior used Veight's name to lure Kuwol's king out of the palace and assassinated him. Not only this, but Zagar had hidden evidence of his crime and was scheming to take over the kingdom.

As things stand, Veight is the only man capable of stopping the treasonous mercenary...

Extra Chapter

Extra Chapter



Der Weib

Chapter 11

I'd traveled to the far south to the scorching hot land of Kuwol to help mediate the conflict between the nation's king and the coastal nobles. However, now that the king had been assassinated, I was stuck dealing with the aftermath. The person responsible for this was Zagar, the mercenary captain Birakoya Bahza had employed. If word got out, Granny Birakoya would be in deep trouble. She might not have ordered the assassination, but Zagar was still her responsibility. Seeing as she was our main link to Kuwol, I wanted to avoid getting her in trouble. Of course, since Zagar had impersonated me to lure the king out, I would be considered a prime suspect as well, should news of the king's death leak.

"...Kuwol's king came here under the impression that he would be meeting with me. That means the people in the palace must know I'm in Karfal."

"So he got baited out by the fake messenger, then killed by Zagar," Monza recited, exchanging glances with me. The two of us were sprinting back to Karfal. We didn't have hard proof that was exactly what had transpired, but if that was the case, then we were in for a real mess.

"The king probably told at least one of his aides that he was going out for a covert meeting with someone. He brought some guards along, after all."

"Guess that means everyone's gonna suspect you, boss. Ahahaha."

This is no laughing matter. I needed to find some proof of my innocence in case word of the king's death got out, but in a medieval-era world like this, there weren't many options available to me. There wasn't even a concept of standardized time, so I couldn't craft an alibi. *I give up.* For now, my best bet was to report all of this to Birakoya and see what she had to say.

The moment we got back to Karfal I wrote up a letter and sent a messenger to deliver it to Bahza. Hopefully, she'd take some kind of action within the next few days. I'd written down everything I'd seen, as well as my hypotheses

regarding Zagar. Of course, with the king now dead, his new taxation policies were gone as well. The coastal nobles weren't interested in overthrowing the government, so at this point, they no longer had any reason to fight.

With the monarch now absent, their focus should be on ending this civil war and stopping Zagar. If the war ended, they wouldn't have any reason to keep him employed. Moreover, they could even put a warrant out for his arrest, but if they did that he'd likely start a revolt. There were only 4,000 or so mercenaries, but under his command, they could easily defeat the coastal nobles' forces around Karfal. Besides, even if they did succeed in capturing Zagar, there was no guarantee that the other mercenaries would quietly surrender. At this point, they'd already evolved from a mercenary company to a revolutionary army.

I could have my werewolf squad start hunting down the mercenaries, but there were way too many of them. If it came to a head-on clash, some of my men would likely die. I didn't want to lose any of them, so I decided to proceed cautiously for now.

The next morning, I gathered all my werewolves for a meeting.

"Zagar doesn't know that we've discovered his plot. Things will get messy if we fight him now, so let's wait and see what happens."

"You sure we can afford to take it easy like this, boss?" Jerrick asked, and I nodded in reply.

"We need to gather as many allies as we can while we still have time. Fortunately, Captain Zagar's generous gift will come in quite handy here."

"He gave us a gift?"

"He sure did. Oh yeah, keep the king's death a secret from them for now," I replied. Turning to Fahn, I said, "Please call the three girls in."

Fahn brought over the three former maids of Lord Karfal that Zagar had put in my care.

"These ladies are maids of Lord Karfal. Lady Shura is his chief maid, as well as the trusted aide of his first wife."

The mercenaries seemed unaware of the difference between an aide and a lover, but you needed to be quite talented to serve as the head maid of a noble house. Shura was a lot more capable than Zagar seemed to realize. The head maid for the Aindorf family and her primary assistant were both quite skilled as well. I felt a pang of homesickness, but I quickly shook it off and continued my explanation.

“In order to corner Zagar, I think it would be best to bring Lord Karfal over to our side. For now, I’ll prioritize protecting the city’s residents. Eventually, I plan to help him return to the city and win him over to our cause.”

“We have already sent a missive to our lord. He will no doubt be pleased to learn he has allies in the city,” Shura said with a smile. I couldn’t smell a lie on her like when she’d been deceiving Kumluk, so I knew I could trust her. According to Shura, Lord Karfal was a lecherous womanizer, but he was at least passably competent as a ruler. I thought back to the conversation we’d had last night...

“Is it really okay to badmouth your master like that?” I asked Shura.

“Of course. His wife complains about his lustful nature all the time,” she replied.

I mean, Kuwol nobles are allowed two mistresses, so if you wanna blame someone, blame the law. I shook my head and brought my thoughts back to the present. Karfal’s womanizing ways weren’t important right now.

“Lord Karfal is distantly related to the royal family, so he’ll be helpful to have around when we start negotiating with them.”

Naturally, Karfal was unaware that the king was already dead. That was something I’d need to tell him in person.

I gave everyone a pointed look which told them not to say anything unnecessary, then continued outlining my plan, “We also need to forge alliances with all of the river nobles who’ve surrendered to the coastal nobles. I plan to ask Lord Bahza to take care of that.”

Our top priorities were to create an anti-Zagar alliance, and make sure neither I nor Birakoya was suspected for the king’s murder. Once both of those were

accomplished, we could work on rounding up Zagar and his troops. I wanted to get this done as quickly as possible, but if I made even a single mistake, it was entirely possible Zagar would end up being this nation's new king. He was the last person I wanted to establish diplomatic relations with, so I would much prefer to keep Kuwol in its current state. Preventing Zagar from seizing power was both in the best interests of Meraldia and the Kuwolese people.

Though I tried to proceed with caution, the situation started deteriorating before I could implement even the first phase of my plan. Two days after the king was assassinated, a rumor that he'd fled the country started spreading throughout Karfal.

"Mister General, is it really true that the king ran away?" Miss Paga, the woman whose house I was staying in, asked.

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Our neighbor heard about it in the marketplace. I asked my husband if he knew as well, and he said he'd heard the news from our son, who was told by one of our guests."

I'd seen propaganda campaigns back in my old world, so I knew exactly what was going on. Chances were, it was Zagar's underlings who were spreading rumors that the king had fled. I could easily see them visiting the local bars and brothels and telling the prostitutes and barkeepers "in confidence" that the king had run away. From there, the rumors spread like wildfire, and now the citizens were hearing the same lie from multiple sources. Since everyone was corroborating the rumor, it felt more authentic.

America had used similar tactics when the Three Mile Island nuclear plant had a partial meltdown. Or at least, that's what I'd read online. Incorrect statistics were spread by the government, then everyone started parroting them. So long as you had decent reach, it was surprisingly easy to spread misinformation. Zagar wasn't just a skilled commander, but also a master at manipulating intel. Beating him wasn't going to be easy.

Dispelling this rumor would be hard, too, since it was an undeniable fact that the king was missing—except he hadn't run away, he was dead. Regardless,

since he couldn't appear publicly to quash the rumors, they'd continue to spread. Before long, they'd reach Encaraga and the other nearby cities. Even in death, the king was causing no end of trouble for everyone. Meanwhile, we were forced to lie low, lest we became enemies of the state, and the mastermind behind it all, Zagar, got to continue training his mercenaries without a care in the world. He came to talk with me from time to time too, and I was getting sick of his cheery attitude.

Monza's squad was still keeping an eye on him, but according to them, Zagar hadn't made any suspicious moves as of late. Granted, he had no reason to act, since his rumors were doing the job for him. Pajam the Second was already known throughout the country as an idiotic womanizer who appreciated fine art and had absolutely no interest in politics, economics, or military affairs. It was hardly surprising people believed he'd run away, considering the coastal nobles were almost at his front door.

Honestly, allowing the rumors to propagate helped me as well, since it meant I wouldn't be suspected of killing the king. *Man, why do I have to be so worried about a crime I didn't commit?*

A few days later, I called Grizz over for a meeting. The fact that he was the only person I could discuss tactics with showed just how bad a position Meraldia's army was in here.

"The big question is how the major players are going to move from here on out," I said, thinking out loud.

"That bastard Zagar won't show his true colors just yet. If he wants to beat the coastal noble alliance he needs the backing of the royal family, but it's too late for that now that he's killed the king. On the other hand, he doesn't have enough soldiers to take over the whole country."

I nodded. "That's true. Four thousand soldiers and a city's worth of plundered loot isn't enough to conquer the rest of Kuwol's territories."

He had enough soldiers to hold the city and its surroundings, but eventually, he'd be worn down by attrition.

Grizz cocked his head and asked, "All that leaves is...the people at the capital,

I guess. You got any idea what their plans are?”

“Not a clue. I did get a letter from Lord Karfal, though. He’s currently staying in Wajar, a city farther upstream. It doesn’t say much though; it’s basically just a thank-you note.”

In the letter, Lord Karfal had thanked me for keeping the citizens safe and keeping Zagar from defiling his maids. If his writing was anything to go by, he was a surprisingly decent person. At the very least, I wouldn’t feel bad about joining forces with him.

“I’m planning on asking the lord about the situation in the capital, and acting as a mediator between me and the nobles farther upstream. He’s a distant relative of the king, so he has a representative in the palace.”

“Well, that’s good news,” Grizz said with a wicked grin. The people on my side all looked so stereotypically evil I sometimes forgot we were the good guys. Just then, Fahn walked into the room.

“I’m back Ve—I mean, Captain Veight. I went around with Beluza’s soldiers to talk to the locals like you asked.”

My werewolves weren’t able to speak Kuwolese very well, which was why they’d needed the Beluzan soldiers to come with them as interpreters. This was a problem for our surveillance on Zagar as well, since Monza and the others weren’t always able to parse his conversations.

Fahn sat down next to Grizz with a tired sigh. “I didn’t expect Zagar to focus on spreading rumors instead of mobilizing his troops.”

“Yeah, he was smart to make it look like the king had vanished instead of died.”

I’d employed the same strategy when I had opted to exile Yuhit instead of killing him. When the leader of an organization died, someone was immediately chosen to replace them. This was one of the strengths of human society that demons lacked. But if the leader went missing and his status was unknown, it was harder to immediately select a replacement, since there was a possibility the current leader might still return. This was why the capital probably wasn’t looking to replace Pajam the Second, at least not right away. For the time being,

they'd instead focus their efforts on trying to locate the missing king. I'd explained as much to Fahn.

Folding my arms, I said, "If everyone suspects the king ran away, it's going to harm the prestige of the royal family. They definitely want to avoid that, so if we told them the king is dead, they would almost certainly select a successor immediately. The problem is, either me or Lord Bahza would be the prime suspect."

The fact that Zagar had sent a messenger while impersonating me made things complicated—especially since he'd then killed that messenger. Lord Bahza was the head of the anti-king alliance, and I was the foreign commander aiding her. The other nobles had absolutely no reason to trust me. If I was accused of assassinating the king, it would cause problems for Meraldia as well, which was why I needed to tread carefully.

"Ultimately, we need to make sure Zagar rightfully takes the blame for his crimes. And steer the country back on the right path. In order to do that, we need to build an invisible cage around him before he has a chance to show his true colors."

"Good thing that's your specialty," Fahn said with a smirk, and Grizz smirked as well.

"Yeah, you're the craftiest villain I've ever met."

I know I act the part sometimes, but I'm really not a criminal mastermind, I swear.

—The Stirrings of Ambition: Part 3—

The past few days had been full of apprehension for Zagar.

"Are the rumors spreading?" he asked the mercenary who came in to give a report. The mercenary nodded.

"Absolutely, boss. Everyone in Karfal believes the king ran away. He wasn't a very impressive ruler, so I can't say I'm surprised."

Zagar felt a wave of relief wash over him. "...I see. That's great. Now we just

have to wait, and they'll start getting exaggerated on their own."

While that was reassuring news, Zagar couldn't afford to relax just yet.

"That was the real king we killed... Right?" he asked.

"There's no way Rafhad would mess up, boss."

"Yeah. Rafhad knew what the king looked like since he saw him before when delivering a report as one of Lord Bahza's messengers. There's no way he'd mistake the king's appearance."

Rafhad had been one of Zagar's most loyal and reliable men. It was a shame he had been forced to kill him to cover his tracks, but Zagar knew it was a necessary sacrifice to keep the truth from getting out—or at least, that was what he kept telling himself.

The mercenary cocked his head and said offhandedly, "Come to think of it, I haven't seen Rafhad around recently."

Zagar smiled and replied, "Rafhad is on another covert mission for me. He's the best man for those kinds of jobs."

All of Zagar's men were quite competent; he was blessed to have a cadre of capable followers. Still, he couldn't allow himself to get complacent. His biggest worry right now was that foreign general from the north. There was a possibility that crafty werewolf had caught onto his plans.

"You're still keeping tabs on Lord Veight, right?"

"Yeah. He hasn't been doing much... Oh right, the other day he was teaching the old man who runs the fish stall a charm to keep his fish from rotting."

"What kinda charm?"

"I dunno. He was using words I didn't know like 'sterilize' and 'disinfect.'"

Zagar hadn't heard those words before, either.

His subordinate chuckled and added, "The guy's a total rube. I've heard the rumors, but he's the kind of guy who'd die on his first day on a real battlefield."

Zagar didn't agree at all. He had no doubt that Veight was simply pretending to be uninterested in this war and what he was up to. Zagar got to his feet and

clamped down on the mercenary's shoulder.

"Gah—"

"Do you really think I'd ask you to keep an eye on him if he was a fool? Do I look that stupid to you?"

"No, of course not! O-Owww!"

The mercenary tried to squirm free, but he was unable to escape Zagar's iron grip. Zagar waited until fear and obedience had permeated through his subordinate's expression before releasing him.

"E-Eeep..."

He looked kindly down at the mercenary and said in a gentle voice, "Thinking is *my* job. All you need to do is obey. As long as you do that, everything will work out just fine. My plan's success depends on capable guys like you. You understand, right?"

The mercenary nodded furiously, and Zagar smiled cheerfully.

"Good. Keep monitoring Lord Veight. He's only pretending to be stupid to throw us off his trail. Don't let your guard down."

Zagar's subordinate scurried out of the room, and he sat back down with a languid sigh. He couldn't read Veight at all. *There's no way he's an incompetent buffoon—that guy conquered the entire northern continent.* The more Zagar researched Veight Von Aindorf, the more he came to realize the Black Werewolf King was a monster beyond human comprehension. More importantly, Zagar's instincts were telling him that Veight was dangerous.

At the same time, though, Zagar was confused. *It doesn't make sense. He's popular, crafty, and wields vast authority. Working your way up to a position like that as a commoner should require tremendous ambition, but...I can't sense any desire from that guy at all.* In the same way that training with the sword left you with calluses, seizing power often meant the cost of that power was engraved into one's soul. No matter how hard they tried to hide those scars, they always surfaced eventually.

But Zagar couldn't even see any calluses on Veight, let alone scars. He seemed

detached from worldly affairs, as if he was already enlightened. Yet, at the same time, he showed no openings. *What the hell is that man? What kind of life do you have to live to end up like that? What ideals drive him? What desires motivate him?* The real reason Zagar was afraid of Veight was because he couldn't understand him.

Of course, Zagar knew he couldn't let his fear get the better of him. Now that he'd committed regicide, there was no turning back. Even if the person he'd killed happened to be a body double, the fact remained that he'd attempted to kill a king. The only path for him now was forward.

Fortunately, his plan was progressing smoothly. Once rumors that the king had fled reached the capital, the royal family's influence would begin to dwindle. After they were sufficiently weakened, he would capture Encaraga and end this civil war with a victory for Lord Bahza. Naturally, the nobles who held land around the capital wouldn't stay quiet. They enjoyed many privileges thanks to their proximity to the capital, and they wouldn't be happy at having those privileges taken away. Another war would inevitably break out, and once it did, Zagar would be in the perfect position to raise his status and enlarge his army. At the end of it all, he'd become king. When that happened, no one would care how the king of the old dynasty had died.

Until that happens though, I need to be wary of Lord Veight. Again, Zagar's thoughts turned back to the Meraldian General. The problem was, Veight was the biggest unknown. *I don't know if he's caught on to my plans or not, but if he has, he definitely wouldn't let me run free. He'd either try to blackmail me, strike a deal, or just arrest me. Since Lord Veight hasn't done any of those things, I guess he hasn't caught on? However, if he's even half the man the rumors claim he is, he must be up to something now that rumors of the king's disappearance have spread.*

The word on the street was that he was an elusive whirlwind that struck with lightning speed when you least expected it. *Maybe he has realized my plan and is just letting me run free for now?* Zagar felt a current of unease. He'd erased all evidence of his crime, and he was fairly certain he hadn't been tailed, but if Veight *had* discovered he killed the king, he would have to change his plans.

The problem was, changing them would mean openly opposing Veight, and

that was something he wanted to avoid at all costs. As far as Zagar knew, Veight had never once been defeated. He was invincible on the battlefield, and his strategies were flawless. On top of that, he was a terrifying schemer. No one had ever opposed Veight and come out on top—that was why he was the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander.

...He doesn't have many troops with him right now, but he's probably come up with a strategy that takes that into account. There's no way he's just relaxing and taking it easy. He bothered to come all the way out to the front lines, after all. Zagar was fairly confident that Veight was plotting something he was unaware of, but the people he'd sent to keep watch on him hadn't reported anything out of the ordinary. It was eerie how little he seemed to be doing.

Damn monster... Every time Zagar met Veight, he was so nonchalant that Zagar was terrified. *The scariest thing about him is his eyes. It's like he can see right through you. I always feel like they're telling me, "I can see through all of your plots, and you don't scare me one bit."* Suddenly, Zagar thought back to the night he'd killed Pajam the Second. The king had looked at him the same way Veight did. Even though Zagar had held Pajam's life in his hands, the king hadn't begged for mercy. In fact, the way he'd looked at Zagar made it seem like he was *pitying* him. Despite his best efforts, Zagar had been unable to make the king kneel at his feet. Neither Pajam nor Veight were scared of Zagar.

I'm the fearless legend who slew a king! I'm going to become this country's hero! Why aren't they cowed by my overwhelming presence?! Zagar couldn't articulate it himself, but he felt as though there was something those two possessed that put them on a different level than him. *What do they have that I don't? I'm way stronger than Pajam was, and Lord Veight might be strong, but I'm sure I could at least give him a run for his money.* Zagar just couldn't understand what separated him from Veight and Pajam.

He took pride in his ability to sniff out danger ahead of time, and right now, Zagar's keen nose was telling him to watch out for Veight. The so-called "Black Werewolf King" was the one person he absolutely could not afford to antagonize. Zagar would have to take the utmost care to keep Veight from learning about his plans.

At some point, Zagar noticed he'd downed the bottle of rum he'd taken out.

He prided himself on being able to hold his liquor, but he'd never before drunk this much while still feeling stone-cold sober.

"...God I'm pathetic," he whispered under his breath.

Zagar tossed the bottle away and heaved a weary sigh. The king was dead. Pajam the Second had no children, and most of his potential successors were dead, too. The previous king had gone to great lengths to ensure his son would be the only one fit to inherit the throne when he passed away. The royal family would probably feud for a long time over who the next king should be, but of course, none of them would take the throne, since Zagar planned to kill them all. He was going to start a rebellion so brutal it would drown Kuwol in a sea of blood. He and his mercenaries were hounds of war, and they loved nothing more than a good bloodbath. Mercenaries shined the brightest in times of strife. This was going to be his era.

*No way in hell I'll ever work for someone else ever again. From now on, my only boss is going to be **me**.* Zagar walked over and crushed the rum bottle under his heel as he thought back to the humiliation he'd suffered working under others.

As the rumors continued to spread, the suspicion that the king had run away turned to fact in many people's minds.

"The king must have really run away if he hasn't said anything, right?"

"Probably. He was never really that involved in politics, so..."

"Yeah, there's no doubt he fled."

"Damn. So who's going to be our next ruler, then?"

Since the royal palace had made no official statement, the people's interest quickly moved on to who the next king would be. I felt kind of bad for Pajam, being forgotten so quickly. *Though, I guess he deserves it, considering how bad a job he did running the country...*

One night, a small boat arrived on Karfal's shore.

"Is General Veight Von Aindorf present?" A smiling middle-aged man stepped off of the boat and did his best to suck in his potbelly. "I am Powani, Enike's

son, and the viceroy of Karfal. I must say, it's a rather strange feeling to be announcing myself in my own city."

Lord Karfal's ample stomach shook as he laughed heartily. A stern, strong-willed woman stepped up beside him.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Veight. I am Powani's wife, Rakesha. Are Shura and the others safe?"

After receiving Shura's letters, Karfal had decided to sneak back into his city. He hadn't brought any of his guards, just his wife. Honestly, I was surprised by how bold he was.

Still smiling, Lord Karfal said, "I rushed back because I wanted to meet the great Hero from the north. I'm a firm believer in first impressions. Letters alone weren't enough for me to grasp what kind of man you are, so I wanted to meet you face-to-face before deciding whether or not to work with you."

I wonder if that's a cultural thing. I thought. *Either way, isn't it dangerous for you to sneak back in here just to meet me?* I was a bit worried this viceroy might have a few screws loose, but I smiled amicably and said, "Welcome home, Lord Powani, Lady Rakesha. I have done my best to protect your city in your absence."

"You have my thanks for that."

"And you have my gratitude for protecting Shura and the other maids from those uncivilized mercenaries."

The couple thanked me profusely as I led them as stealthily as I could to the Paga family's house. Before, Miss Paga had shown me a route to get to the main square without being spotted, and I used that same route to lead Powani and Rakesha back.

"I-It's the viceroy..."

"...And his honorable wife."

The elderly Paga couple looked on in slack-jawed awe as I brought the viceroy and his wife into their home.

"For the sake of the viceroy's safety, and to bring this city back under its

proper ruler, please don't tell anyone what you're about to hear tonight," I told the two of them.

"O-Of course. I'll take this secret to the grave!"

Mister Paga clapped both of his hands over his mouth to emphasize his point. After Powani and Rakesha thanked the couple for letting them use their home. After formalities, we immediately got down to business.

"Lord Veight, where are my precious Suuni and Vivira?"

Shura loudly cleared her throat and said in a pointed voice, "*Sir?*"

"N-Now hold on! They may just be mistresses, but I care about them. Is it really so wrong to be worried about their safety?"

Oh, so those are the names of his mistresses. But why's he so scared of one of his maids? They work for him, don't they? I looked over and noticed that Rakesha was glaring at Powani as well.

She let out a defeated sigh and said, "Alas. A noble's mistresses are allowed by Kuwolese law, so I have no choice but to overlook my husband's infidelities. But never forget, that law was put into place because otherwise, we would have to jail over half of Kuwol's nobles. It's not meant to be an endorsement of the practice."

"I-I know."

Ah, so that's what the problem is. Well, it's nice to see the women here are allowed to speak their minds.

Rakesha's expression grew more stern and she added, "A viceroy is allowed one wife, one mistress, and one other mistress if they happen to travel for business frequently. You *never* travel, so why is it that you have two mistresses?"

Powani shrunk back. "But I mean...the judge said it was okay, so I..."

Shura and the other maids glared coldly at him. *You should just give up, man, no one's taking your side.*

"Surely you have mistresses as well, Lord Veight?" Powani turned desperately to me, but I shook my head.

“I’m afraid I have only a single wife. Monogamy is the norm in Meraldia.”

“I-I see...”

Now that he’d brought the topic up, I had the perfect excuse to brag about my wife.

“My wife, Airia, is wise, patient, and thoughtful. I have nothing but respect for her. She’s the greatest life partner I could ask for, and even in this faraway land, my love for her is strong enough that I have no need for other women.”

I didn’t want to sound *too* biased, so I kept my praise on the light side. Despite that, everyone had fallen silent. *Do you guys wanna hear more or something?* Before I could continue, though, Rakesha spoke up.

“Behold. Lord Veight is the perfect example of what a devoted husband should be like. You should learn from his example.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Lord Veight is practically a saint! I can’t be like that!”

If being monogamous makes me a saint, then like 90% of Japanese people are saints.

Powani hung his head and started muttering under his breath, “...His Majesty has dozens of concubines. Compared to him, I’m at least—”

Rakesha cut him off and said, “That’s because only male heirs can inherit the throne, but for noble families, women and adopted children can inherit titles too, so there’s no problem.”

Cold sweat poured down Powani’s forehead and he weakly protested, “B-But I mean, look at Lord Mubine. Since the law says nothing about male concubines, he has an entire harem of beautiful young boys. It’s not like anyone’s actually following the spirit of the law. I’d say I’m a lot better in that regard.”

“Dear, following the law is the bare minimum that is expected of you.”

“I know, I know! But you could at least be proud of me for being better than the others!”

Oh god, this is going to go on forever, isn’t it? Just then, Monza popped in to hand me a report and said, “Don’t worry, Lord Karfal, your mistresses are shagging Zagar every night. Ahaha, see you later.”

That really didn't help, Monza...

Powani turned to me with a look of trepidation and asked, "Wh-What exactly does 'shagging' mean, Lord Veight?"

Oh boy.

"Zagar is having coitus with your two mistresses every night. Quite loudly, apparently."

Powani looked blankly at me for a second, then balled his hands into fists.

"Raaaaaaah! How *dare* you! You'll pay for this, you lowborn bastard!"

Okay, yeah, I see why everyone calls this guy a worthless womanizer. Then again...maybe it's not pathetic for men to act like this in Kuwol? Perhaps this is actually considered super manly? Cultural values shifted a lot based on time and location, so it was certainly possible. Remembering that I had a job to do, I chased those idle thoughts out of my mind.

"Agreed... It's reassuring to know you're determined to fight, Lord Powani," I said. "Meraldia has been friendly with Kuwol for generations, and I would very much like to bring peace and stability back to this nation. We cannot allow men like Zagar to run rampant."

"Hear, hear! Don't you worry, Lord Veight, we'll smash that man's ambitions to pieces."

His motives might have been impure, but I was still glad that Powani was fired up. I had an overall positive impression of him, so I decided to let him in on the secret of the king's death.

"Captain Zagar, the leader of the mercenaries, harbors some rather dangerous ambitions. The taxes the king levied on the ports are the least of our concerns right now."

Powani's expression immediately grew serious and he furrowed his brow. "He's the kind of hooligan who ransomed off a viceroy. I can't imagine what ambitions he holds, but I know they can't be good. Wait...don't tell me he plans to revolt against the royal family?"

Powani may have looked like a carefree fool, but he was sharper than he let

on. He was quite quick on the uptake, too. In a slightly nervous voice, I explained, “Yes. And it’s no normal revolt he’s plotting, either. In fact, he’s already slain the king, or perhaps someone who was serving as the king’s body double.”

“H-He what?!”

I summarized the events up until now to Powani.

“By the time my men reached the ruins, the king had already breathed his last. Considering the situation, we couldn’t afford to recover his corpse, so we had no choice but to leave it where it was.”

That wasn’t *strictly* true, but a little white lie never hurt anyone. The blood drained from Powani’s face, and he stared intently at me.

“You... You weren’t involved in this plot, right?”

“Of course not. I swear it on the holy Mejire and on the Demon Lord’s honor.”

Powani scrutinized my face for a few seconds, then nodded.

“I believe you. If you were part of this conspiracy, you would have no reason to divulge this secret to me. Moreover, I can tell that you’re someone trustworthy.”

“Thank you.”

Phew. It’s good that he’s a reasonable guy. Shura’s description of him had been spot-on. Powani’s grandmother was of royal blood, which would make Pajam the Second his distant relative. That being said, it appeared they hadn’t been particularly close on a personal level and had only interacted in political settings—which explained why Powani wasn’t too upset about the king’s death.

“Our previous king was a wise ruler, but His Majesty Pajam was...never mind. Regardless of his failings on an administrative level, he was still the rightful ruler of the eternal Mejire. It is truly regrettable that he fell to an assassin’s blade.”

After a brief moment of silence, Powani pledged to investigate the situation in the capital upon his return. Their first priority would likely be to find Pajam’s body, but the ruins were a fair distance from the capital. Furthermore, with how warm Kuwol’s climate was, the corpse must have rotted by now. *It won’t*

be in an identifiable state, that's for sure.

“Lord Veight, I realize I’ve asked this multiple times already, but you’re certain Lord Bahza does not wish to eradicate the royal family and the nobles who serve it, correct?”

“At the very least, that doesn’t seem to be the case based on my interactions with her. Zagar seemed to be acting of his own accord when he slew the king.” I chose my words carefully, and paused for a moment before adding, “My peers back in Meraldia sincerely wish for Kuwol to remain a stable nation. Of course, we do not wish for the citizens to suffer, but to be blunt, it would be a huge blow for us if the sugar trade was interrupted. This is why I wish to end this pointless war as soon as possible.”

I explained both how I felt emotionally and where I stood politically. Everything I said was the truth, so hopefully it would convince Powani of my sincerity. In order to open all the schools, research centers, and magic academies that I wanted, Meraldia needed a stable source of ample income. The last thing we needed was to spend part of our military budget on this pointless civil war. Fortunately, it seemed Powani believed me.

“If you were truly plotting something, you would have killed me once I was at your mercy. Of course, the reason I came back at all was because I had reason to believe you wouldn’t do that.”

“I appreciate your kind words,” I said with a deep bow. It was a bit strange how easily Powani trusted me, but I had no intention of betraying that trust.

Smiling, Powani suddenly changed the subject, “I am currently staying with my old friend Lord Wajar, and she has a surprisingly vast network of connections. She’s also quite the beau—”

Powani cut himself off and looked behind him to see his wife and maids glaring at him once more.

“A-Anyway, she’ll be of great help to our cause. I’ve also heard that an incredibly powerful magician is now staying at her manor.”

Oh, she’s got a mage working for her? I’d heard that Kuwol wasn’t a terribly advanced country when it came to magic, but it was plausible there were one

or two sages here, too. The question was, just how good was this mage? If they were just amazing by this country's standards, they probably wouldn't be much help. Doing my best not to be rude, I subtly prodded Powani for more information.

"I see Kuwol has its share of great sages as well."

Powani grinned, and I could tell by his scent that he was withholding something from me.

"Oh, he's a foreigner as well, but he's incredibly wise and virtuous. I believe his name was... Ah yes, Parker."

"*Parker?!?*"

"So you *do* know him?"

"Yes. Unfortunately."

Oh, do I know him, and he is indeed an amazing mage. Man, what the hell are you doing all the way out there?

In an excited voice, Powani said, "The truth is, I've heard a great deal about you from Mister Parker. The reason we believed you were trustworthy, and the reason we wanted to meet you so badly, was because of him. Isn't that right, Rakesha?"

"Yes. You really are exactly the kind of man Mister Parker said you were. If anything, he sold you short."

I hope you didn't spread any weird rumors about me. Also, get back here already!

It was dangerous for Powani to remain in the city, so he left for Wajar the same night. He couldn't take his boat back since Wajar was upstream, so I had a retinue of werewolves led by Fahn escort him by land. A few hours later, Fahn returned with a smile on her face.

"He's a funny old man. You sure we can trust him?"

"Yeah. Appearances can be deceiving, but I'm pretty confident that he can be reasoned with. It helps that we got to talk in person, too."

When conducting negotiations, it was important to meet the other party face to face, if possible. That was probably why the late Pajam had been willing to leave the palace to meet me. If that really was the case, then I felt even worse for him since his trust had been betrayed. While I was forging alliances, Zagar continued to recruit more mercenaries and increase the size of his army. He had amassed even more soldiers than the 4,000 he'd started with when he attacked this city, and was training his new recruits at a breakneck pace. He was also using the money he'd stolen from Powani to buy weapons and armor for them. It was clear he was preparing for war.

I fished absently at the spot Mister Paga had led me to while pondering my potential options—or rather, I disinfected the fish he caught while getting no bites of my own.

“Mister General, do you know what the inscription on this cutting board says?”

“‘Kafi...Naime?’ it probably means something like ‘I command thee with my meager will, destroy all in my path.’”

There was a small magic circle inscribed on the cutting board. The spell inscribed into its circuits had been trimmed down to just two words. The redacted incantation combined with the wide area this spell impacted meant it was so diluted it lacked the power to kill even a mosquito. However, it was still strong enough to kill viruses and bacteria. *This is pretty interesting.*

“It’s a distilled version of a necrosis curse, Mister Paga.”

“Sorry, but I ain’t got the foggiest idea what a ‘necrosis curse’ is. Anyway, you just pour some purifying salt on this thingamabob here. With a little abracadabra, the fish won’t go bad for a long time!”

Mister Paga waved his hands as if sprinkling magic from his fingers. The “abracadabra” incantation didn’t seem to actually have any magical effects so I probably didn’t need to memorize it. From the looks of it, the salt itself was the catalyst that activated the magic circle, but I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why. It was something I’d like to take back to Meraldia for further study.

“Mister Paga, who came up with this process?”

“I got no clue. But rottin’ fish has been a problem since the dawn of time. People’ve been doing this since my great-great-grandpa was alive.”

The climate was hot, and the Mejire River wasn’t terribly clean to begin with, so sterilization magic went a long way here. I had no idea who had come up with this spell, but it had been simplified to do no more than necessary, which made it easy to emulate while still being effective. Crafting a sterilization cutting board like this would be easy even for a freshly apprenticed mage. Salt served as the catalyst to activate the magic circle, and since it was just a catalyst the salt itself didn’t get wasted.

“Wow...this is amazing.”

“Isn’t it?”

Me and Paga were impressed with this cutting board for entirely different reasons, but it was an undeniably convenient tool.

I looked forlornly up at the river. None of the small boats heading downstream were stopping at the pier. Parker was nowhere to be seen.

“Man, Parker’s late.”

The reason I was waiting here was because he’d sent a message saying he’d arrive today. Of course, the reason he’d gone into hiding in the first place was because of Zagar and his mercenaries. He was probably taking as many precautions as possible before coming to Karfal. Despite his penchant for clowning around, Parker was way smarter than I was.

I should just focus on fishing so I don’t get impatient. Just as I thought that, a lavish barge drifted into view. It was the kind of luxury vessel rich nobles would ride for fun. The center of the boat was structured like a gazebo, and there were a number of sailors, guards, and musicians crowded around it. Thin cloth curtains covered the gazebo, acting as walls and obscuring the inhabitants from view.

From within, I could hear a young woman say in a playful voice, “Okay now, I know you’re pulling my leg. Please don’t get my hopes up like that.”

I didn’t recognize her voice, but I did recognize the voice replying to her.

“Hahaha! Don’t worry, I’m sure my little brother will love you too! He’s got a weakness for beautiful women. In fact, his wife is the most beautiful woman in Meraldia!”

Wait a second.

“Of course, I have no eye for beautiful women. I mean just look at these empty sockets.”

“They sure are empty.”

Hold on just one goddamn minute. I shot Jerrick, who was also fishing a short distance away, a quick glance.

“Capture that barge. If you can’t, sink it,” I said.

“You got it, boss.”

Jerrick and his squad tossed their fishing rods aside and got to their feet. The ship turned slightly, making its way towards us.

“This ship doesn’t belong to me, so please don’t sink it,” the familiar voice called out to me.

“You better fix your attitude then.”

Do you have any idea how much trouble you’ve caused me? As the ship drew closer, I realized everyone on it was undead. The finely dressed musicians with their lutes, the soldiers stringing their bows, and the ferrymen with wide-brimmed hats were all skeletons. This ship wouldn’t be out of place in an aquatic Halloween parade. All of them were covering most of their bones with layers of clothing, which was why I hadn’t noticed until they drew closer. With how light skeletons were, Parker had probably filled the hold with some manner of weight to make sure the ship was sitting as low as it should when packed with a crowd of people. He was nothing if not thorough.

The undead ferrymen anchored the boat next to us, and a handsome young man wearing traditional Kuwolese clothes popped his head out of the gazebo. Parker was wearing the illusory appearance of himself when he was still alive.

“Hey, Veight, how’ve you been?”

“I was doing great until you showed up.”

In truth, I was extremely relieved to see him safe and sound. Since he was a skeleton, it was impossible to guess his feelings from his appearance or tone, but I'd known him long enough to pick up on even subtle changes in his demeanor. I could tell that he at least hadn't gone through any harrowing experiences.

"You really should be more honest with yourself, you know."

Parker stepped off of the boat and looked behind him.

"We've arrived, Lady Amani. This is Veight."

A non-skeletal figure stepped out of the gazebo. She was a woman in her early-to-mid-thirties. Though she was exceptionally beautiful, there were a number of painful-looking red rashes on her hands. Before I could say anything, she announced herself.

"I am Kishuun's daughter, Amani, and the viceroy of Wajar."

"You're Lord Wajar?! I'm terribly sorry for my rudeness. I am Veight Von Aindorf."

Why do all the nobles here name themselves without warning? Is that just a custom here or something? It's bad for my heart. Powani had mentioned that the Kuwolese weren't very diligent. It was a common saying in Kuwol that if you wanted something done, you had to do it yourself. Nobles hesitated to entrust truly important messages to envoys since they often lost their letters or forgot their messages. It was also why everyone was coming to meet me in person.



I made sure none of Zagar's goons were nearby, then surreptitiously invited Parker and Amani into a nearby thicket. Shade was a luxury in Kuwol, and there weren't many other places on this riverbank that were protected from the blistering sun. My original plan had been to ask Parker what kind of person Lord Wajar was, but now that she'd come in person, I was at a loss. Fortunately, lunch was already prepared, so I could at least give her a proper reception. We'd been salting and grilling the fish the Pagas caught throughout the morning. While the grilled fish tasted great, it had the same muddy stench all river fish did.

I wanted to prod Parker on what he'd been up to, but since Lord Wajar was here, she took priority. Looking relaxed, Parker gazed out at the river. *I bet you brought her because you didn't want me scolding you, huh?* Sighing to myself, I turned to Lord Wajar.

"Thank you for taking the long journey here, Lady Amani. I was hoping I would be able to meet with you eventually."

"The husband of Meraldia's Demon Lord is here in person. It's only natural that a mere viceroy such as myself come here to meet you," Amani said with a gentle smile.

Come to think of it, I guess I am a pretty important political figure now. I was famous enough that viceroys went out of their way to come greet me. Amani glanced back at the skeleton guards protecting her, then breathed a sigh of relief.

"I heard the details from Lord Powani Karfal. I believe that Lord Bahza and the coastal nobles have no intention of overthrowing the royal family."

"Thank you for trusting in us. This tragedy is solely a result of Zagar's ambitions. We must stop him at all costs."

I looked up at Karfal's walls.

"Those mercenaries are the foundation of his power. In order to stop him, we must sever their connection," Amani replied with a nod.

Amani was a young viceroy who had only just taken over from her father, but Wajar was Encaraga's bulwark, and one of Kuwol's most important cities. An

incompetent leader would never be allowed to become the ruler of such a vital location, and as expected, Amani's analysis was spot-on.

"The fastest way to do that is to force Zagar out of Karfal. So long as he has the city, he can continue to gather soldiers and resources," I said.

It was similar to how in SRPGs, units standing on forts regained health every turn. Zagar was popular with both the mercenaries and a section of the city's populace. He had no shortage of willing recruits, and was steadily increasing his forces. If his army was attacked here, the city would end up in ruins.

Amani nodded. "It's exactly as you say. Which is why..."

She suddenly pitched forward, her voice trailing off. I hurriedly stepped forward to grab her before she hit the ground. Initially, I suspected an enemy attack, but I couldn't smell any blood, or sense any foes. Besides, my werewolves were guarding this spot.

"What's wrong?"

Amani smiled weakly at me. "It's fine, I just feel a little nauseous. I've had River Rash since I was a child, so..."

That's that disease brought on by niacin deficiency which is basically pellagra, right?

"Sir Parker's treatment has been quite effective, but he has been unable to cure it completely."

I glanced over at Parker and he awkwardly scratched his head.

"Sadly I'm not an expert on healing magic, nor am I a doctor," he said. "I did try my best, though. You mentioned before that a change in diet would help, right?"

"I did, but Parker, don't tell me you..."

Parker waved his hands wildly and desperately tried to justify his actions. "Lady Amani can't stand the smell of meat or fish, so she rarely ever eats, either. I'm a skeleton so I can't judge smell or taste, and I didn't know what else to do..."

Don't tell me you were missing this whole time because you were trying to

help her? Well, whatever, I can grill you about that later. In due time. But first, we need to treat Amani.

“It’s best to let a specialist handle this. Someone go get Captain Grizz!” I said, then turned to Parker with a smile. “Helping others is an admirable thing. I’m proud of you, my dear older brother. And I’m glad you’re back.”

“O-Oh... Umm...well...”

Parker fidgeted in embarrassment and covered his face with the headscarf he was wearing.

“Now, Parker, tell me what happened while you were missing.”

“Oh, sure. So, the coastal nobles’ army started marching south right after I left for my next investigation.” Parker had been wary of the mercenaries from the start, and had wanted to avoid getting embroiled in Kuwol’s conflict. “I wouldn’t have been able to research anything while the mercenaries were raiding cities, so I traveled further south.”

In order to continue his investigation, Parker had gone upstream past Encaraga, all the way to Wajar. He’d assumed there would be no reason for the mercenaries to push past the capital.

“There, I collected rumors of ancient ruins, folktales passed down for generations, and so on. During my investigation, I learned that the viceroy of the city was in poor health. I thought this might be a good chance to foster a relationship with one of the river nobles, so I decided to help.”

So you were just trying to build connections, huh.

“The word on the street was that she had River Rash, and I figured that was something even I could cure. However...”

“However?”

“Lady Amani had just inherited the position of viceroy, and she was struggling with the challenges that came with her newfound authority. She reminded me a lot of your wife, and I felt like I couldn’t just abandon her.”

“I see...”

Well, if that’s why you stayed behind, then I can’t really get mad, now can I?

“When Sir Parker came to visit, my condition was so bad I was bedridden.” Amani Wajar smiled softly at me. “Fortunately, I got a lot better after eating the boiled liver he made for me.”

Though Amani looked nothing like Airia, her smile had the same warmth to it.

“Unfortunately, I have a hard time forcing myself to eat meat, and I’m not able to eat much of the liver Sir Parker makes. Of course, if I go too long without eating, my condition deteriorates again, and...”

“I have never hated my inability to taste or smell as much as I do right now. I guess it’s impossible for me to help people with this withered body,” Parker said with a sigh.

“That’s not true at all, Parker. You’ve already helped alleviate Lady Amani’s symptoms.”

It must have been really hard for him to properly cook foreign dishes when he couldn’t even taste or smell. Going that far for someone else isn’t something you could do unless you had a kind heart. Honestly, I respected Parker more than ever.

While we were talking, I spotted Grizz’s trademark mohawk in the distance.

“What’s up, boss?! I heard ya needed me, are we about to crack some heads?”

“No, but I do need you to crack some eggs.”

I introduced Grizz to Amani, then explained the situation to him.

“She came all the way here, so I’d like it if you can cook something healthy that’ll also suit her palate.”

“I see why you needed me now.” Grizz folded his arms and nodded to himself. “Alright, one divine meal coming right up!”

“There’s just one condition. You have to use chicken in the dish somewhere.”

“But, boss, didn’t you just say Lady Amani doesn’t like meat?”

“That’s why I need you to cook it in a way that she can stomach it. Also, you

can't boil it. Boiling it will cause the essential nutrients to leak out into the broth."

"That's a lot of restrictions, man..." Grizz cocked his head, considering his options. "It's gonna be pretty hard to get a meat-hater to eat meat. 'Sides, I'm a meat-lover so I dunno what kinda flavor meat-haters are looking for."

"Sadly, neither do I."

According to Amani, she didn't like the taste, smell, or texture of meat.

"This is gonna be one hard challenge."

"That's why I called you in," I said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "This is something only a pro can handle."

"You do know my main job is being a soldier, right?"

"Yeah, but you also run the Beluzan restaurant in Ryunheit."

Grizz grinned at that. "Guess I've gotta give it a shot then. My pride as head chef is on the line."

The grizzled warrior with a mohawk pulled an apron out of his pack. Once he'd put it on, he started skillfully chopping chunks of chicken breast.

"One thing I learned running that restaurant in Ryunheit is that a bunch of people in Ryunheit complained about the 'fishy' smell of seafood."

Beluza was on the coast, but Ryunheit was an inland city. Refrigeration didn't exist yet, and seafood wasn't valuable enough to deliver express, so a majority of Ryunheit residents hadn't tried it.

"Most of the people couldn't even handle dried fish. Like, come on. It caused me a bunch of headaches back when we first opened shop."

After separating the fat from the muscle, Grizz started finely mincing the chicken.

"I tried changing up the seasonings, the ingredients I used, and even the way I prepared the food. I've got a lot of experience with adapting food to fit people's tastes."

"I see."

At this point, Grizz's restaurant was the most famous one in Ryunheit.

"This time, I've gotta do something about the taste, smell, the texture, and even the aftertaste. When you've gotta remove so much, the best way to cook it is to grind it up until it barely even resembles chicken anymore. Ground meat's our best bet."

Normally he didn't look like a chef, but that mohawk seemed oddly fitting as he was pounding the chicken. Once he was done, he started chopping vegetables. This he did with less precision.

"It's better not to chop the vegetables too finely. That'll help them retain their texture and mask the meat's."

It feels weird hearing all this cooking terminology from a guy who looks like a gangster. Grizz then cracked open a few eggs and used the shells to separate the white from the yolk. From the looks of it, he was planning on using the whites as a sort of glue to stick the meat to the vegetables.

As he started whisking the egg whites I asked, "I get how you're camouflaging the texture, but what are you going to do about the taste and smell?"

"Getting rid of the smell is easy. I already bought a bunch of herbs and spices to get rid of the 'muddiness' of river fish. I'll probably use Kuwol orange leaves for this dish—they'll give it a nice citrus smell."

Citrus and meat, huh? I thought.

As he sprinkled the leaves in, Grizz grumbled, "Honestly, I don't like them much, but being a chef is all about making what the person you're serving wants to eat, not you."

Those are some nice words of wisdom.

"The smell of vegetables and citrus should be able to assassinate the scent of meat."

"I see."

"And now for the coup de grâce, I'll cook it all in cider. That'll slaughter any last trace of meat smell that's left."

Do you really have to use such violent words? Grizz furrowed his brow as he

concentrated wholeheartedly on his task. You could tell he was using every ounce of talent and experience he had.

“Now we gotta deal with the taste. Best thing for that is a sweet, sugar-based sauce. If I was in a proper kitchen, I’d fry the whole thing too, but we can’t do that here.”

“Sorry for making you do all this way out here.”

“No worries, we’re used to it. It’s the Beluzan Landing Corps’s creed to make sure we can cook good food no matter where we are. We’re the strongest in the world because we eat the tastiest food in the world!”

Grizz grinned as he kneaded the ground meat. *The tastiest food in the world, huh?* He did have a point of sorts. If healthy food didn’t taste good, people wouldn’t want to eat it.

The biggest problem Grizz faced was the limited preparation methods he had. Niacin was water-soluble, so if he boiled the chicken, it’d dissolve into the broth. *Wait a second. In that case, couldn’t we just make a soup or something using chicken stock and get the same effect? Also, now that I think about it, it’s not just meat that has niacin. I’m pretty sure I read somewhere that mushrooms have a bunch, too.* I had no idea if the mushrooms of this world also were rich in niacin, but they went well with soups, so it was worth trying at least. My food curiosity was piqued, and I decided to try my idea out immediately. I stole a bit of Grizz’s chicken and vegetable meatloaf for my idea and shaped them into meatballs. *I’ll start by making chicken stock, I guess.*

“Incidentally, Lady Amani, do you like mushrooms?”

“Hmm. I rarely eat them, but I don’t dislike them at least.”

“That’s good to know.”

I dumped a few dried mushrooms into the makeshift soup I was boiling to give it added flavor. Once the soup was ready, I took the meatballs out of it; now that the niacin was in there, there was no need for the meat. Finally, I added some of the soy sauce I’d brought with me for the finishing touches. It still tasted a bit bland, probably because I’d taken the meatballs out, but that was probably for the best, since Amani didn’t like meat. All that was left was to

chill it to let most of the smell dissipate. I spread a tablecloth over one of the tables in the shade and called Amani over.

“It took quite a bit of time, but I managed to make something you might like.”

“Th-Thank you.”

I smiled at Amani, who probably hadn’t expected this development.

“This dish should help alleviate your River Rash. You may still have trouble eating it, but I promise it’s healthy for you.”

I doubted she’d come here thinking she’d be getting diet therapy, but she seemed to be taking things in stride, and smiled sweetly at me.

“Not only did you welcome me despite the surprise visit, but you even went out of your way to prepare this. Thank you ever so much.”

I put on my business smile and said, “I just didn’t want all the effort Parker put in to go to waste. Hopefully, you can eat this.”

Amani timidly brought a spoonful of mushroom soup to her mouth and took a sip. Surprise lit up her face as the liquid slid down her throat.

“The meat smell is almost completely gone. All I taste is mushrooms and...something similar to the fish sauce used in Kuwol, but sweeter.”

“It’s a seasoning made from fermented soybeans. It does a good job of masking the scent of meat, and it doesn’t have the raw smell that fish sauce does.”

“I see... I don’t think anything in Kuwol has this kind of taste. It’s rather nice.”

Amani happily drank the Japanese-style soup that I’d made. She also liked the meatloaf that Grizz had made, and she took bites of that in between as well.

“The vegetables do a wonderful job of removing the texture and taste of the meat. The orange leaves give everything a fresh fragrance, and the sweet sauce is delicious. I can probably eat meat if it’s prepared like this.”

“Glad to hear it. I’ll write down the recipe for you later. Your chef should be able to make it pretty easily,” Grizz said with a grin as he washed his cookware.

It would be a waste to let this guy remain a soldier, I thought. After finishing

everything on her plate, Amani let out a contented sigh.

“That was delicious. I could eat food like this every day, I think.”

“Splendid. As long as you regularly include mushrooms and meat into your diet, your River Rash should subside.” I smiled at Amani. “Once you’re cured, we can go out to eat the things you love, but until then, please try to make these your main meals.”

“I’m not much of a gourmand, but this meal was fantastic. I could taste the care that went into preparing it,” Amani replied, returning the smile. She looked down at her now empty plate. “I see now why everyone calls you a noble among nobles, Lord Veight. To think you would go out of your way to personally prepare food for someone you have only just met... This is an honor I will never forget.”

I appreciate the praise, but isn't that going a bit overboard?

“You think too highly of me, Lady Amani. I may be a noble now, but I was born a commoner. Besides, I was an enemy of humans in the past.” Though I was a bit embarrassed by her overblown praise, I still had my job as a diplomat to do. “Parker, I, and all of Meraldia’s residents consider our Kuwolese neighbors our friends. If we can help bring peace to this nation, then it was worth making the journey here.”

I realized how much that sounded like lip service, so I decided to mention our vested interests as well.

I gave Amani a knowing smile and said, “Incidentally, I would be much obliged if you would be willing to open up more sugarcane trade routes with us. That’s all Meraldia wants, really.”

We had no intention of expanding our territory, and I wanted to make sure Amani was aware of that. She stared blankly at me for a few seconds, then chuckled.

“You’re a strange man, Lord Veight.”

“I’ve been getting that a lot from the people here.”

I wonder why.

The Vice-Commander of Meraldia's Demon Lord, Veight, is a legendary general and a master magician. Supposedly, once he transforms, he's unstoppable. It's strange to me that he's letting a mere mercenary captain run amok. If he's as strong as the rumors claim, he should easily be able to assassinate Zagar and wipe out his mercenary army. So why doesn't he do that? Of course, I realize the kind of chaos that would bring, but if you weigh the pros and cons, it's still a choice worth considering. I must admit, I'm unsure of this man known as Veight.

The reason why I decided to meet him anyway despite my misgivings is because of Sir Parker. He's done a lot for me, and with how much he talks about Lord Veight, he's clearly quite fond of him. It's rare to see someone so selfless and virtuous, so I can't help but be curious about the man he respects so much.

Now that I have met him, I have to say Parker was right when he said he has no eye for people. That isn't to say Veight was a disappointment—if anything, it's the opposite. He's so much greater than Parker led me to believe. He is of course quite handsome, but of particular note is his gentle smile, and the polite manner in which he interacts with everyone. It's a shame he's already married. Why are all of my ideal men always taken? Well, I suppose that's not important right now.

The other thing that left a big impression on me was the fact that he went out of his way to make a healthy meal I could eat. I came here to negotiate in a diplomatic capacity, but he nevertheless attended to my personal needs. Is this affable, unassuming young man really Meraldia's strongest general? It seemed strange at first, but now that I've given it some more thought, I'm beginning to believe it makes sense.

If all the stories about him are true, he's simply *too* strong. That means his might is the stuff of legends, and his tactical genius is unparalleled. No one can hope to assassinate him, and any attempts at undermining his power are doomed to failure. Nothing scares him. Even Zagar and his crew are hardly worth fretting over.

On the other hand, he isn't underestimating the harm Zagar could cause to Kuwol. If we don't resolve this situation carefully, it'll leave this nation deeply wounded—that's why he's being so cautious. Despite his overwhelming strength, he cares deeply for the weak. I realize my youth and inexperience may have caused me to misjudge him, but that's the kind of man I think he is, at least.

Now that I've met him, I'm beginning to understand why he's taking all of these actions that seem unnecessary at first glance. If all he wanted was to negotiate an alliance with me, there would be no need to go out of his way to treat my illness. This River Rash won't kill me for a good few years at least, if ever. A temporary alliance doesn't require curing me, but Veight doesn't calculate things based on profit and loss, he dedicates himself to saving everyone he can. Moreover, he doesn't seek out any reward for his actions. Veight truly is a saint.

There are, of course, other nobles as kind and caring as him. Powani Karfal, for example, comes to mind, but Veight was born a commoner, and he warred with humans in the past. His life must have been filled with strife and pain. I doubt he ever received a gifted education that taught him to be virtuous. Honestly, his past probably wasn't too different from Zagar's.

Yet, his demeanor is that of a well-educated noble. I can feel myself letting my guard down even though we've only known each other for a few hours. If you told me he was of royal lineage, I would believe you instantly. It's baffling that someone like him exists. Just who is this mysterious general from the north?

Talks with Amani went smoothly.

"When I spoke with Lord Karfal, he said that Meraldia could be trusted. He mentioned that you, Lord Veight, were a shrewd but kind man."

"It's an honor to hear that."

I took a sip of my herb tea and motioned for Amani to continue.

"It would be difficult to build a long-term relationship with someone incapable of understanding both party's interests, but if you were heartless, then we wouldn't be able to trust you. Take Zagar for example. He's shrewd, but he's also utterly lacking in compassion."

“Zagar loves drawing a line in the sand between enemy and ally, then surrounding himself with enemies so his allies look to him for guidance,” I replied. “Nobles such as yourselves make easy targets for his disgruntled base.”

While observing his recruitment methods, I’d noticed a trend. Zagar refrained from insulting his employer, Lord Bahza, but would rag on about all the other nobles.

“His stance is that the nobles are all incompetent leeches, but that he’ll give the people what they want.” Amani finished off her biscuit and frowned.

“I can’t say I particularly mind if he considers us all his enemy. I wouldn’t want to ally myself with him in the first place.”

“A wise decision, seeing as the only people he considers allies are those he can use as disposable pawns. I feel sorry for the men working under him.”

Kumluk’s smiling face popped into my mind. Even though he was working diligently as Zagar’s underling, it seemed he had no idea the king had been assassinated.

Amani’s expression grew serious and she said, “Karfal and Wajar are two of Kuwol’s most important cities, as they sandwich the capital. All cities in Kuwol are situated by the Holy Mejire, so to reach the capital one must capture either of the two.”

The Mejire was the main means of transportation for Kuwol’s residents. The two cities flanking the capital protected it from any attack via the river. I could see where Amani was coming from.

“Because of that, both Lord Karfal and myself are loyal to the royal family. Unfortunately, if we tried to move our troops now while the king is missing, the other nobles would grow suspicious.”

That was the same problem I was struggling with. Right before Lord Bahza’s mercenaries attacked Karfal, Powani ordered most of its garrison to go out and patrol the outlying villages. His plan had been to surrender from the start and tell the king his troops had been away when the enemy army came, so he had no choice. Instead, Zagar had launched a full assault, and Karfal fell almost immediately. However, most of Karfal’s soldiers were still in the area, and

Wajar's garrison was at full strength. If we added in the local guards the villages had, we could muster a force of about 3,000 to pressure Zagar.

The problem was, Kuwol's king was missing—an unprecedented event in the country's history. If any soldiers near the capital made a move, both the citizens and the surrounding nobles would suspect someone was attempting a coup. The lack of television broadcasts and newspapers made it easy for misinformation to spread, even among the well-informed. The speed at which Zagar's rumors had proliferated proved that. He didn't have to think about what political ramifications his actions would have, but we had to weigh each and every action carefully. Fortunately, Parker was back so I could make use of him.

"Parker, I want to make sure the person Zagar killed really was the king. Our future plans hinge on that information."

I was already pretty certain it was him, since the royal family was maintaining radio silence, but I needed confirmation. I also needed to find out what the royal family was up to.

I waited for nightfall to come, then went with Parker to the ruins where the murder had happened. Amani requested to come along, so she was with us too. Slipping past the mercenaries' surveillance net took some time, but we managed to safely make it to the ruins.

"It smells like death."

"The stench is going to cling to my clothes."

My werewolf guards grumbled about the pungency in the air, so I decided to use magic to dull Amani's sense of smell before she could pick up on it herself. She could barely handle the smell of cooked meat—the rot of corpses would be too much for her.

"Excuse me."

I poked Amani's nose and cast the weakening spell. Knowing how to strengthen a sense or muscle meant you knew how to weaken it too, since they were two sides of the same coin.

"You should be fine now."

“Huh? Okay...”

Confused, Amani patted her nose. Her gestures really were similar to Airia's. *I see why Parker felt like he couldn't leave her alone.* When we reached the well, Parker nodded.

“I can sense a strong hatred lingering here. It'll be difficult to persuade the spirit to return.”

“But you can do it, right?”

“Of course.” Parker grinned. “My comedy is so divine it even has spirits bursting out in laughter.”

“Please don't tell this spirit puns.”

“I was just joking.”

Were you really? Parker lit a stick of incense and brought out an offering of mead. It was only at times like these that he looked like a proper necromancer.

“Do not be alarmed by my voice. My name is Parker, and I am a necromancer from the faraway land of Meraldia.”

Parker's voice was gentler than usual. As the incense spread through the clearing, the smell of death began to fade. Parker then uncorked the bottle of mead and poured its contents into the well.

“I can tell your rage at the unjustness of your death is beginning to fade, but I see your lingering regrets and beseech you to heed my call. I am Parker, the listener of the dead.”

I could sense a change in the air. Parker's compassionate coaxing methods were almost identical to Master's. He'd grown a lot since I last saw him.

A faintly glowing fog began to rise out from the old well. A young man's figure flickered in and out of existence within the fog.

“Your Highness?!” Amani shouted, and the fog thinned.

I hurriedly turned to her and whispered, “I'm sorry, I forgot to mention this, but while spirits possess no physical form, loud noises emitted by the living can harm them.”

“I-I see, my apologies. But that figure is undoubtedly His Majesty, King Pajam the Second.”

A spirit’s form was composed of memories. While people occasionally beautified themselves in their minds, most at least saw their own appearance as a rough version of what others did. This proved that it was indeed Pajam the Second who’d been killed.

Parker’s expression grew grave and he asked in fluent Kuwolese, “I am Parker, disciple of the great Demon Empress who rules Meraldia. I apologize for calling you out so suddenly.”

The faintly shimmering mist answered in a soft voice, “I...do not mind...but...where am I... What happened to me?”

The dead saw a world completely different from ours. Pajam’s spirit was currently wandering in the darkness between this life and the next.

“I have heard that mercenary captain Zagar slew you. Is this true?”

The whole time, Parker’s voice remained gentle. After a frustratingly long silence, the voice spoke again.

“Yes...I...remember now... I was slain by a ruffian called Zagar. I thought I would be meeting Lord Veight...but I was deceived...”

Black sludge started encroaching into the white fog. *Crap, at this rate, he’s going to turn into an evil spirit.* I stepped protectively in front of Amani, but Parker calmly soothed Pajam’s spirit.

“I have brought the real Lord Veight with me. Your Majesty, please tell him what happened to you.”

Tell me? Parker ignored my confusion and continued pacifying Pajam’s spirit.

“Lord Veight is a Hero among Heroes who has not lost a single battle on the northern continent. He possesses great knowledge, wisdom, and courage. I have no doubt that he can clear away any lingering regrets you may have.”

Now hang on a second. Parker’s words managed to stop the black sludge from spreading, and the mist turned gray once more.

“I cannot see...where... Where is Lord Veight?”

Guess I can't stay out of this any longer. I knelt in front of Pajam's spirit.

"Your Majesty, Pajam the Second. I am the Vice-Commander of Meraldia's Demon Lord, Veight Von Aindorf."



I'd learned a little bit about how to converse with spirits from Master. So long as the spirit was under a necromancer's control, I could talk to it.

The king's features grew more distinct, and he said, "I wished to meet with you, Vice-Commander. This plot to murder me was not your doing, was it?"

"I would never dream of doing such a thing. The reason I came to Karfal was to mediate a peaceful solution. I intended only to meet in order to warn you against doing anything foolish."

The king cocked his head.

"...Warn me?"

I didn't really want to rag on a spirit, but I knew from experience that it was better not to lie when speaking to one. Honesty was the best policy, since spirits no longer had anything to lose.

I doubled down and said, "Increasing taxes on your ports will only harm your nobles and your citizens. Money does not grow on trees, Your Majesty. You cannot just take the bounty your people have worked so hard to earn."

I could tell from her scent that Amani was growing nervous. She was probably terrified of talking back to her king. I was from Meraldia, though, and a famous demon army general to boot. I had nothing to fear from a foreign king, regardless of whether he was dead or alive.

I grinned wickedly, as befitting of a werewolf general, and said, "I have defeated countless men like you, Your Highness. Originally, I planned to teach you a painful lesson by any means necessary, however..." I sighed, lamenting the fact that it was no longer possible. "...My ultimate goal was to stabilize Kuwol's political situation so that Meraldia's trade routes wouldn't be harmed. Taking your life would only throw the country into further turmoil, which is the last thing I want."

The king mulled over my words for a few minutes.

"I see... So my death was a result of my own folly..."

I nodded, since that was the truth.

"...I believed that if I spoke with you, this crisis would be resolved," Pajam

muttered softly. After a brief pause, he began talking about himself.

Pajam the Second was his father's only son. He wasn't a very talented leader, so Pajam the First did everything he could to eliminate his son's potential rivals. Being that only men could inherit the throne, he forced all of his male relatives to become priests, thus removing them from the line of succession. Seeing as he didn't assassinate them all, he'd at least been more merciful than many of Rolmund's nobles. In fact, members of the royal family that became part of the church were usually given preferential treatment.

The problem was, Pajam the Second had no knowledge of politics or economics, and he had no interest in learning how to govern. Apparently, however, he was a master poet and artist, but those skills were of no use in the political sphere. By the time Pajam's father realized that it was too late, and Pajam the Second was the only male available to inherit the throne. Pajam the Second reluctantly became king, and for a time, things worked out as his father took care of most of the day-to-day business of ruling. Things started going south after Pajam the First passed away, though.

"I wanted to leave something of value behind for the generations of rulers who would come after me. I knew I lacked the skill to rule, so I hoped to use my artistic talents to make my mark instead..."

Man, why is everyone so obsessed with helping future generations? Well, I guess I can't talk since I'm funding Meraldia's universities for the exact same reason. I swallowed the lecture I was about to give and continued listening.

Pajam the Second was quite the architect, and he designed numerous buildings for the capital. Unfortunately, he didn't pay attention to how much they would cost to build.

"It made me happy to imagine how the parks and palaces I designed would move people for centuries...to come..."

I know this is none of my business, but I really can't let this slide anymore.

"...Your Majesty, it would have been better to leave behind things that cost less to create."

You could have just, like, composed some songs, or poems, maybe dances, or something. It was an ironclad rule of the universe that if you spent more than you made, you'd eventually go bankrupt. It didn't matter if you were a person, an organization, or a nation.

The king looked down apologetically at my rebuke. It seemed he did at least regret his actions.

"It is too late for regrets now...but you are absolutely correct. In retrospect...why *was* I so desperate to build so many things?" Pajam's expression grew distant. "I used to believe that a king was nothing more than an empty figurehead... It mattered not who sat on the throne, since they were just a token decoration adorning...the nation known as Kuwol..."

Parker inclined his head towards me. "Hey, Veight, do you get what the king's trying to say here?"

"I can't be certain, but it sounds to me like the royal family has a streamlined system in place—which means that the country can function just fine regardless of who's king, as long as they don't do anything stupid."

Honestly, the royal family was mostly just a mediator between the various nobles, so for the most part, they didn't need to do anything at all. It's not surprising that some kings would start to question what the point of their position even was. The fact that Pajam the Second was one of them proved that he hadn't been as stupid as everyone thought. If he'd been more of a simpleton, he could have just enjoyed an easy, boring life and none of this would have happened. Unfortunately, because he'd been smart enough to question his purpose, he'd ended up burning the country's budget on the one thing he was skilled at, art. *And so here we are in this mess.*

Rolmund's old emperor, Bahazoff the Fourth, had been similar. He'd been a mediocre ruler, but when he realized his death was near, he ordered the invasion of Meraldia so he could have at least one achievement to his name. *Everyone's so obsessed with making their mark on history, huh.* Unaware of my inner thoughts, the king's spirit continued talking.

"I became afraid when the coastal nobles went as far as raising an army, but I couldn't rescind my edict... My father instilled in me that a king should never go

back on his word...”

Were you worried you'd hurt the dignity of the throne or something? In that case, you should probably choose your decrees more carefully... I didn't want to keep picking out the king's faults, so I decided to keep this particular complaint to myself.

“But then...I heard you'd come to Kuwol, Lord Veight... The Demon Lord's husband had personally arrived on my shore... I thought someone of your noble stature would be able to...understand me...”

I didn't fully understand what he was so hung up about, but I did get that he had his reasons for being so stubborn. From the sound of it, Pajam probably felt like it would be admitting defeat to acquiesce to the nobles' demands, and he seemed to think a king could never admit defeat. Whether or not that pride was something Kuwolese people considered a virtue, it didn't change the fact that he'd been slain as a result of it.

Now that I think about it, the people who can apologize for their mistakes and thank others when they receive help are probably the ones who'll last the longest. I need to make sure our kid grows up to be someone like that. Also, I need to work harder at doing that myself. I reverently bowed my head to Pajam.

“Your Majesty, the fact that you sought out dialogue and tried to avoid bloodshed to the very end proves that you were a worthy king. I swear that I shall carry on your will and protect your honor.”

Pajam's wispy lips curled up into a smile. “That...makes me happier than you can imagine... Lord Veight...may the blessings of the Mejire be with you...”

Pajam made some sort of gesture within the fog; it was probably a Kuwolese blessing. Had I been able to speak to him while he was still alive, we probably would have been able to thwart Zagar's ambitions from the start. It was too late for that now, though, and we had to stop Zagar without a king. *At any rate, it's probably best to exorcise the king so he can move on to the afterlife.* Just as I thought that, Pajam started speaking again.

“I believe you are a true friend, and thus I shall entrust my two most important secrets to you...”

Hm? The way he phrased it, they sounded like terribly important state secrets, but knowing Pajam, it was possible they were completely trivial, too. Either way, I decided to hear him out and motioned for him to continue.

“I do have a successor...though he has yet to be born. One of my wives is pregnant with my son.”

“Impossible...” Amani muttered.

At present, there were almost no legitimate successors left in the royal family. There wasn't a single male relative of the king eligible to take the throne, so if what Pajam said was true, that was huge. *But does a magically underdeveloped country like Kuwol have any mages capable of discerning a child's gender before they're born?*

“Are you absolutely certain your unborn child is a boy, Your Majesty?” I asked.

“I am certain... The royal physician used divining magic that has been passed down for generations...”

That magic was probably a simplified charm like the disinfecting charm on Paga's cutting board. Its applications would be limited, but it was probably a reliable spell. The royal family hadn't been eradicated, after all.

“My wife, Fasleen, evacuated to one of the palaces still under construction when the war began. It's the Fasleen Palace, which I christened in honor of her pregnancy.”

Did you seriously commission an entirely new palace to celebrate the birth of your kid? I guess that proves you're a doting dad at least.

Grief filled the spirit's eyes. “My only earthly worry now is for the safety of my wife and son... I'm afraid the ruffians who slew me will target them next... Please, Lord Veight...”

“Fear not, Your Majesty. My wife is expecting our first child soon as well, so I understand how you feel. I shall protect your wife and child as if they were my own,” I replied resolutely.

“Ah...that's reassuring to hear... Your sincerity warms my heart... You have my

thanks...”

The white fog began to flicker. You could say it was Pajam’s way of signaling his relief. It was the equivalent of a living person saying “Oh, thank God!”

“You will need the password we agreed on... When you meet Fasleen, tell her, ‘The crimson flower blooms on the misty moon.’ Do that, and you will be able to see her most beautiful expression...”

Pajam the Second smiled to himself as he recalled fond memories of his wife.

“There is one more secret I wish to divulge to you, Lord Veight... Enshrined on Mount Kayankaka, the source of the Mejire...is a treasure known as the Valkaan Orb... It has the power to transform humans into Valkaan... The royal library...contains records of it...”

Valkaan, huh? I recognized that word. It meant “War God,” and was used to refer to what we called Heroes and Demon Lords in Meraldia. In other words, this Valkaan Orb was another one of those ancient artifacts that had caused us so much trouble in Meraldia and Wa. I figured there had to be one in Kuwol as well, and it seemed my hunch had been correct. *We can’t afford to leave something that dangerous alone.*

Looking up, I noticed that the fog was beginning to fade. Pajam’s connection to the mortal plane was weakening.

“Parker, the king’s spirit is—”

“I know, but I can’t do anything about it. The king himself wishes to return.”

Parker made the necromancer’s sign over and over in different locations, but to little effect. He looked like an office worker pacing around the building trying to find a spot with cell service. *Guess this is it.*

In a rapidly fading voice, the king said, “...Lord Veight, you are an honest man... I realize this is selfish of me, but...please take care...of my country... I am too tired to go on... I should have...never...ascended to the throne...”

Your dad worked pretty hard to put you there, you know. Besides, the people need a king. That aside, spirits under a necromancer’s control were unable to lie. What he said right there were Pajam’s true feelings. Honestly, I could

sympathize.

The white fog continued to thin until finally, it disappeared. Parker kept watch for a few seconds longer, then said, "He's gone. At least he was at peace by the end."

"That's good."

I breathed a sigh of relief and wiped a bead of sweat from my brow. Spirits could get emotional over the strangest of things, so it was difficult for non-necromancers to hold a conversation with them. Technically, I wasn't really a necromancer either, so I'd been pretty nervous the whole time. *I hope you were able to move on, Pajam.*

Parker held a small funeral service for the knights who'd died with their king, then turned back to me with a grin on his face.

"That was really impressive! I guess it doesn't matter whether they're human, demon, dead, or alive, you can make everyone dance in the palm of your hand!"

"Come on, don't be rude. Besides, I just..." I chose my next words carefully. "I just told him what I would have wanted said to me were I in his position."

Parker's expression grew solemn for a few seconds, but then he smiled again. "That's not something just anyone can do, though."

"Really?"

Parker said nothing and offered a silent prayer to the corpses in the well.

"Well, that went swimmingly. You helped the king's spirit pass on, so our job here's done. All that's left..." Parker glanced over to a corner of the ruins. "I sense an incredibly strong resentment from that direction. Do you know what it is?"

"It's probably coming from the mercenary Zagar killed."

He was the one who disguised himself as Lord Bahza's messenger and lured the king out here. After the meeting, Zagar killed him to keep his mouth shut. I got to my feet and brushed the dust off of my knees.

"Let's go check it out. I'd wanted to talk to him, too."

He's probably got some juicy intel for us.

Parker walked into the crumbling building and started searching for the spirit's presence.

"Ah, found it. He's nearly devolved into an evil spirit, are you sure you want me to call him?"

Technically, our job here was done, but since this guy's spirit was still hanging around, I figured we may as well talk to him. After all, he'd been loyal to Zagar, and the only reward he'd received for it was a knife in the back.

"He might know some of Zagar's secrets, so I think it's worth a shot. As long as you're around, we'll be safe, right?"

"I suppose."

As far as I knew, there was no spirit Parker couldn't control. He was the only person in existence who knew the secrets of both life and death—though he didn't look like anything special.

"Alright then, here goes... Oh, this isn't going to work. He's not listening at all. I guess I'll have to forcibly summon him instead." Parker cleared his illusory throat and said in a menacing voice, "Parker be mine name. I am he who wanders the threshold between life and death, friend to the living and king to the dead. Heed my call, o' writhing mass of hatred."

I didn't know enough about necromancy to understand what Parker was doing, but I could tell he was using his mana to complete some manner of transaction with a being we couldn't see. Also, I could tell Parker was negotiating the transaction in a very Parker-esque way.

"Ah, hey! Don't think you can escape from me! I'll drag you out...no matter where you hide..."

He's not a kitten hiding underneath your sofa, man. Don't talk to him like that. I was beginning to have second thoughts about leaving this to Parker, but he was the world's best necromancer, so I didn't interfere. After some time, a black mist began to form, and a depressed middle-aged man's face appeared in the middle of the mist cloud.

“Why... What did I do to deserve this... Damn it... *Damn it all...*”

“Yes, yes, a tale as old as time. We’ll listen to your gripes, so perk up. You look dead on your feet.”

Parker taunted the spirit with a lighthearted jab. That didn’t seem to elicit any reaction from the spirit, so he switched tacks and laid into his threatening voice.

“Your despair does not even scratch the surface of the deep darkness dwelling within me. If you truly believe your suffering to be greater than mine, then speak!”

His tone had changed, but he was still trying to goad the spirit. Humiliated, the spirit’s face twisted in rage.

“All he told me was to disguise myself as a messenger and lure out the king! I did everything he asked! *Everything!* I didn’t harm anyone—not our allies, not even our enemies! So why did he kill me?!”

“To keep you quiet probably,” Parker said casually, stirring the spirit up even more. *Is this really the right approach?* However, my misgivings appeared to be unfounded, and the spirit easily divulged his secrets.

“Killing the king was never part of the plan! The captain said he was going to pretend to be Veight and negotiate with him— that’s all! But instead, he went ballistic and killed the guy!”

So Zagar killed the king on impulse, then. No wait, he doesn’t trust his men. It’s possible he just hid his true objective from these guys and was planning on doing this from the start. While I pondered, the mercenary continued his tirade.

“I was loyal to the captain! I did every mission he asked, no matter how impossible! So why?! Why did he kill me?! Everyone else gets to party and celebrate the birth of King Zagar! How come I’m the only one who has to suffer like this?!”

“King Zagar,” huh? Doesn’t have a very pleasant ring to it. I was starting to feel sorry for this spirit.

“Parker, is it alright if I talk to him directly?”

“Sure. If he tries to get violent, I’ll wrangle him under control.”

Relieved by Parker's light tone, I turned to the spirit.

"Can you hear me? My name is Veight. Look at my soul."

Spirits had no physical body, so they could only perceive the souls of living people. The mercenary looked me up and down, then opened his mouth in shock.

"Y-You're..."

"That's right, I'm the *real deal*. The Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, Veight Von Aindorf."

I looked intimidatingly down at him for a few seconds, then let the tension drain from my shoulders and smiled softly. I was aiming to imitate Zagar's casual geniality. *Actually, Zagar's a horrible role model. Let's try and act more like Woroy.*

"Now, tell me your name. The two of us have no reason to fight. I simply wish to ask you a few questions."

The spirit stared silently at me for a few seconds, then finally said, "Rafhad. The son of Shariga, Rafhad."

"I shan't forget it. Rafhad, do you hold a grudge against Zagar?"

"I do." Rafhad replied immediately, but then he added in a quieter voice, "...But I also owe the captain a lot. He looked after me, and he gave me work that made me feel proud of myself. Which is why I..."

Zagar's pretty good at manipulating people. Even after being killed by him, Rafhad still felt indebted. I could tell he was uncertain, though, so I decided to take advantage of his hesitation.

"Open your eyes, Rafhad. To Zagar, you were nothing more than a sacrificial pawn. He didn't care about you nor your dreams. Despite the lengths you went to, he just saw you as a liability. There's no reason to feel indebted to a man like that."

Zagar, you bastard. You're running your mercenary company like some kind of soulless corporation. I was even angrier with Zagar now. *I get being cruel to your enemies, but at least treat your allies with respect!*

As my anger reached a fever pitch Parker softly muttered, “What good will come out of antagonizing him?”

Shut up, this is important.

“You were my enemy, and your mistakes have brought misfortune to all of Kuwol. What you did isn’t something you can excuse away by saying you were ‘just following orders,’ but that’s not important right now.”

I balled my hands into fists.

“I know how it feels to not be respected as a person by my superiors. So I’ll get *revenge* for you. I’ll make Zagar pay for what he did.”

“O-Okay...” Rafhad’s spirit nodded timidly.

Come on man, put your wispy back into it. You need resolve if you wanna get revenge.

“Zagar needs to learn how it feels to be thrown away by someone after devoting blood, sweat, and tears to help them. You have every reason to be as pissed as you are, but don’t worry, I’m on your side.”

“Veight! Listen to me, Veight! You’re letting your emotions get the better of you!” Parker protested. “That bad habit of yours in sympathizing too much with a spirit is coming out again!”

Shut it, Parker. I understand this man’s pain all too well.

“I’ll get revenge in your stead. However, in order to do that, I need you to tell me what you know. The information you have will lead to Zagar’s downfall.”

I shuffled closer to Rafhad, and he nodded, pale-faced.

“A-Alright...I-I’ll tell you everything.”

“That’s more like it.”

You’ll pay for this Zagar. Mark my words.

According to Rafhad, Zagar had first ordered him to find a way to get in contact with the king and his aides. Once his contract with Lord Bahza was up, he would be out of a job, and it was unlikely that she would extend her contract

just for him, so Zagar had hoped to use this war to find some more stable employment. He hadn't told the details of his plan to Rafhad, but it was obvious one option he was considering was defecting to the king's side.

However, the king hadn't been interested, so that strategy failed. As a result, Zagar ended up changing his plans to murdering him and staging a coup. Of course, he hadn't told that to his men, so Rafhad was surprised when I explained as much to him. I didn't know if he'd been planning on killing the king from the start or if he'd had a last-minute change of heart, but it didn't matter. After that, Zagar had told Rafhad that too many people recognized his face, then killed him. *Now that's just plain cruel.*

I clenched my fists, and in my rage, I started transforming.

"Zagar's treating his men the same way he was treated before... Wasn't the whole reason he wanted to move up in life because he was tired of being a disposable pawn? Why is he treating his men like that if he knows how it feels? It's not right!"

I slammed my fist into the wall, pulverizing the rotting bricks and creating a strong gust of wind.

"Anyone who treats people as if they're disposable doesn't deserve to be king! Don't you agree?"

"Y-Yeah..."

Rafhad nodded hesitantly. *You're too soft! You need to hate Zagar more!*

Looking perplexed, Rafhad asked, "You're a strange one... Why are you being so nice to me?"

That's...not an easy question to answer.

"I'm already dead. Now that I've told you everything I know, I can't be of any more use to you. You shouldn't have any reason to be nice to me."

Now that you mention it, you've got a point. But even if he had a point, my feelings didn't change. With that in mind, I answered, "I don't really know, but there's nothing wrong with having a few strange people in your life, right?"

Rafhad let out a surprised chuckle. "Hah, yeah, you're weird, alright. I never

knew there were nobles like you out there...”

The mist, which had turned white now, began to fade.

“Thanks, Veight. If I had been able to work under you, my life might have gone differently...”

With those parting words, Rafhad’s spirit vanished.

Parker kept an eye on the surroundings for a few seconds more, then said, “He’s gone. I don’t sense any hatred from him anymore. I doubt he’ll return to this plane.” He turned to me and said in a surprisingly stern voice, “That was far too reckless. The dead are bound by different rules and follow a different form of logic than the living. You have to be exceedingly careful when speaking with spirits. Did you forget what Master taught you?”

“No, I remember.”

Parker let out a weary sigh.

“You’re too kind to spirits, Veight. Haven’t you learned your lesson after what happened that one time?”

“Please don’t bring that back up.”

I was tired of that old event being dug up every time Master’s disciples got together. Granted, what happened back then had been entirely my fault. Necromancers normally approached the spirits they summoned with the same professional attitude a doctor or lawyer would have with their client. They made their differences in position clear from the start, then dealt with the situation calmly and rationally.

In that respect, what I’d done was completely out of line. Had things gone poorly, I might have ended up possessed. In fact, I *had* gotten possessed once during my apprenticeship. Parker made a quick hand sign and offered a short prayer for Rafhad’s departed soul, then turned back to me.

“Master made the right call when she forbade you from studying necromancy. No self-respecting necromancer would have done what you did back there. But...”

“But what?”

Parker's expression softened and he smiled. "It's an undeniable fact that your method saved another soul. I'm proud to call you my little brother."

"I'm not your brother—we're just disciples who studied under the same master," I said in a pouty voice, looking pointedly away from Parker.

As we made our way back to Karfal, I discussed my next course of action with Amani.

"I didn't think Zagar was so ambitious that he'd aim to be king himself. To think he stole His Majesty's life for such a worthless goal..." Amani muttered, a sorrowful look on her face.

I wasn't familiar with Kuwol's laws and customs, so I asked, "Could we make the truth public and have Zagar punished for his crimes? Necromancy would provide all the proof we need."

Amani shook her head. "Kuwol's magic isn't very advanced, so proof derived from necromancy wouldn't be accepted in court. There's no one who could verify the evidence Sir Parker would present."

Fair enough. Seeing as Zagar had gone so far as to kill his own subordinate to hide his tracks, I doubt he'd left behind any physical evidence linking him to the crime.

"I guess that means our only option is finding a pretext to remove him from the post of mercenary captain."

The problem was, I couldn't think of any good ways to do that. If we tried to strip him of his right to command, he'd immediately bare his fangs at us. Any overt means of undermining his power wouldn't work—he'd just turn Karfal into a sea of blood. We needed some roundabout way of separating him from his soldiers. If worse came to worst, assassination was always an option, then we'd mop up his disorganized men, but that would still mean fighting in the city. My men and innocent civilians would get hurt.

I'd rather not go down that route. The 4,000 mercenaries under Zagar's command were all more or less pros. It would be best to avoid incurring casualties among the civilians. I didn't want Powani hating me for wrecking his

city, and I didn't want to cause any diplomatic incidents either. Most of all, though, I didn't want good people like Mister and Miss Paga to suffer any more than they already had. After a lot of deliberation, I could think of only one solution.

"We need to convince the mercenaries to leave Karfal and head for the capital. According to Lord Bahza's letter, Zagar's contract with her is almost up. He needs to make his move before it expires."

Even if Zagar was in charge of the troops, they were all under Lord Bahza's employ. Once their contract was done, she would order them to return home to hold a tribunal. If they did as she asked, almost all of them would end up in jail.

"The purpose of this army was to show the king that the coastal nobles were serious about their demands. Now that he's been murdered, there's absolutely no reason to fight," I explained.

The one way this civil war couldn't be allowed to conclude was with the coastal nobles occupying the capital. If they did, that would cause the river nobles to fight back, and a new conflict to break out. The ideal resolution would be to get the coastal nobles' army to back off and let the palace select a new king. From there, Lord Bahza and the others could negotiate with him, and assuming he wasn't a complete moron, he'd rescind the harbor tax.

Amani placed a finger on her cheek and said thoughtfully, "True, for all intents and purposes, this war is over now. But if it's allowed to formally conclude, Zagar will be ruined. This is his last chance."

Right now, Zagar had the soldiers Lord Bahza had lent him and the money he'd stolen from Powani. It was easiest for him to act while he still had control of both. As soon as the contract with Lord Bahza was complete, he'd lose the right to command his troops. He needed to make his move before then.

"I have no idea what Zagar will try once he enters the capital, but if he wants to rule, he'll need some sort of legitimacy. If he enters as a usurper, all the nobles will band together to crush him. It doesn't have to hold up against scrutiny, but he does need some sort of pretext for occupying the capital that other nobles would be willing to accept."

Amani nodded in agreement. "If he's looking for an excuse to justify his

actions, then we need to make sure we don't give him one. I'll tell the other river nobles not to move their troops prematurely."

"That will certainly be helpful."

I tried to see things from Zagar's perspective and happened upon a sudden realization.

"If the river nobles raise an army to retake the capital, Zagar will use that against them. He'll claim that the nobles are trying to take advantage of the king's absence to stage a revolt, and say that he'll protect the capital from them."

"I could see that happening."

Zagar was an expert at warfare. Letting him turn the capital into a battlefield would be playing into his hands. He knew how to strategically sacrifice his forces to maintain an overall advantage, and right now he had a lot of fresh blood he could easily sacrifice.

In a worried voice, Amani asked, "In that case, how do you think Zagar will act if the nobles don't move their armies? The royal guard cannot sortie without a direct order from the king, so unless Zagar attacks, they won't fight him."

"If they won't attack, I doubt Zagar will go out of his way to antagonize them. He's a crafty man."

The question is, what will he do? He wouldn't give up on his dreams of ruling, that was for sure. Unfortunately, I couldn't puzzle out what his actual next move would be.

"If he learns that King Pajam has an heir on the way, he'll probably try and capture Queen Fasleen. Furthermore, should word of the existence of the Valkaan Orb reach his ears, he'll almost certainly try to get his hands on it. So long as he's ignorant about both, though, I have no idea what he'll try."

Amani grinned mischievously and replied, "In that case, why don't we leak one of the two secrets to Zagar? He'll be so distracted by this new information that he'll be easy to read."

I didn't think of that. This woman's frighteningly clever. I did feel a little

reluctant to intentionally leak a secret that had been told to me in confidence, but I couldn't deny that it'd be effective bait to lure out Zagar. Of course, I wasn't so heartless as to use a pregnant woman as bait, which meant I'd have to tell him about the Hero-making machine. Fortunately, if he went for that, I knew exactly how to deal with him.

"That's a great idea. I don't want to put Queen Fasleen in danger, so let's lure Zagar out with intel on the Valkaan Orb. Do you have any concrete ideas for how to leak it anonymously?"

"Yes, you can leave that to me," Amani said, her smile growing wider. "Wajar is the center of the upper basin, and I have my ways of spreading rumors on the Mejire. We'll become your wolves, and help you corner this mad dog."

Her smile is a little scary. She was someone I definitely didn't want to make an enemy out of.

As soon as we reached Karfal, I saw Amani off. Her ship was filled with armed guards who had stayed below decks until now, so she didn't need Parker to escort her. It turned out that was why her boat had sat low in the water, not because of anything my necromancer comrade had done. *She's a lot more cautious than she lets on.*

Just in case, I sent a single werewolf squad to guard her as well. If the worst were to happen, they could still carry Amani and run faster than a horse, so they'd be able to take her to safety.

"Farewell, Lord Veight. After I unite the river nobles, I'll make preparations to leak the information to Zagar."

"I'm counting on you, Lady Amani. In the meantime, I'll meet with Queen Fasleen and win her over to our side. If possible, I'll bring her somewhere safe as well."

"I have faith in you, Lord Veight. If you need anything, you're always welcome in Wajar. I'll protect you within the city's walls."

Amani bowed to me, then slipped away under the cover of night.

Now then, time to get to work.

“I’m going out for a bit. I need one squad to come with me. Also, someone bring Parker. He’s light, so you can just fold him up and carry him.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? Look, I can already fit perfectly inside this sack!” Grinning, Parker opened up the burlap sack he’d brought with him.

I sighed and said, “I’ll need a second squad to guard him.”

Jerrick’s squad and Fahn’s squad volunteered to accompany us. Queen Fasleen’s palace was still being built, so it was surprisingly easy to sneak in. It was located in the southern section of the capital, close to the river. The walls and one wing of the palace were complete, but the courtyard and most of the smaller buildings were still under construction. There was also a large depression connected to the Mejire River by an irrigation channel that was probably meant to eventually be a man-made lake.

The entire compound had been designed to be aesthetically pleasing rather than defensible, and it was situated on easy to infiltrate terrain. It was probably the worst place to evacuate someone, but considering how little Pajam the Second had understood about warfare, I wasn’t really surprised.

“We could just ask the guards to let us meet with Queen Fasleen, but it’s possible some of Zagar’s spies are in this palace, too. I don’t want anyone to know we were here, so we’ll sneak in.”

“No matter how much time passes, or how many fancy titles you get, you’re still the same, boss,” Jerrick muttered with a smile.

Fahn nodded and added, “You come up with all these elaborate plans, but once it’s time to actually go through with them, you just wing it.”

You got me there. Regardless, we waited until nightfall, then transformed and leapt over the walls. There was only a single building that was completely built, so Queen Fasleen was almost certainly there.

“Fahn, you take your squad and scout ahead. I’d rather not scare the queen, so it’s better if you and your girls approach her first.”

Grinning in the darkness, Fahn said, “Oh, when did you get this shy? Or are

you saying this out of consideration for Airia?”

What does this have to do with Airia? Snickering, Fahn ran off. A few minutes later she returned and said, “I found a pretty lady playing some kind of instrument. The only guards are outside the building. There are four or so maids inside, but they’re all old ladies, so they probably can’t fight.”

Pia, Jerrick’s girlfriend and Fahn’s squad partner, added, “We thought about talking to her, but none of us really know Kuwolese, so we came back.”

Oh yeah, I totally forgot about that.

“Got it, I’ll go. If you’re all with me, we might scare her, so stay out of sight for now.”

“Roger.”

“Got it.”

Eight werewolves and one skeleton nodded.

I quietly made my way over to the building, being careful to avoid detection. Just as Fahn had reported, I could hear someone playing a string instrument inside. They were playing quietly to avoid disturbing anyone, but my werewolf ears could easily pick up on the tune. I leapt up and deftly slipped into the building through the third-floor window. The window was protected by iron bars, but wrenching them apart didn’t take much effort. I’d destroyed part of the palace property before it had even been completed, but considering the situation, it was a necessary sacrifice.

The room in which I found myself had a high, dome-shaped ceiling. The lack of furniture and personal effects gave it a rather desolate feel, and Queen Fasleen looked awfully forlorn inside it. The only light in the room was the moonlight streaking through the window.

The queen continued playing her strangely-shaped instrument far below, unaware of my intrusion. I silently jumped down behind her...and realized if I called out to her now, she’d almost certainly stop playing. If that happened, the maids would come in to check on her, so I decided to wait for her to finish her performance. I transformed back into my human form and hid in the room’s shadows.

The queen's music felt somber and disconsolate. Judging by her appearance, she wasn't even 20 yet. I felt bad for her, being widowed at such a young age. Once her performance came to an end, I stepped into the moonlight.

"My apologies for disturbing you, Queen Fasleen," I quietly said.

The queen looked pretty surprised to see me, but she didn't scream.

"Wh-Who are you? This is the queen's private chambers."

"I know. I am the Vice-Commander of Meraldia's Demon Lord, Veight Von Aindorf."

I dropped to one knee and paid my respects to the queen.

She looked at me for a few seconds, then asked resolutely, "Are you friend or foe?"

"Friend...or so I hope."

I wasn't sure if I had the right to openly declare myself her ally, so I added that small footnote. She looked warily at me, and I repeated the password the king had told me.

"I bear a message for you from the king, 'The crimson flower blooms on the misty moon.'"

When she heard that, Fasleen blushed so deeply I could see it in the darkness. *So that's what he meant when he said "I'd be able to see her most beautiful expression."* Apparently, the king had loved seeing his wife's embarrassment. *That's some interesting taste you have there.*

"Th-That's a verse from the poem His Majesty wrote for me. He, umm, only sang it during...tender moments so the only people who know it are me and him."

"Tender" moments, huh? I didn't get what that was a euphemism for at first since I wasn't super familiar with Kuwolese, but Fasleen's bashful expression eventually made it clear. *You were into some pretty weird stuff, man.* The king's sexual habits made me want to sigh, but at least I had Fasleen's trust now. That verse had been more effective than I expected. Personally, I wouldn't trust someone who barged into my home and said a secret password only me and

one other person were supposed to know, but if Fasleen was satisfied, that was all that mattered. I needed her to trust me if I was going to fulfill my promise to the deceased king.

In a timid voice, Fasleen asked, "...But how did you come to learn this verse?"

"His Majesty the king told it to me in confidence. He asked me to protect you and your child."

The young queen paled. "D-Don't tell me...His Majesty is..."

You're a sharp one. This was going to hurt to say, but Fasleen desired the truth. Still kneeling, I bowed my head.

"I'm afraid so. The mercenary employed by Lord Bahza, Zagar, used a disguised messenger to lure His Majesty out and assassinate him. You have my condolences."

Fasleen fell silent—her expression a mask of fear and despair. I probably wouldn't get to see her embarrassed, blushing face again anytime soon. In retrospect, Pajam might have wanted to show me his wife's most beautiful expression because he knew she wouldn't make it again after she learned the truth.

Fasleen staggered backwards and collapsed onto her bed.

"This... This can't be," she muttered. "His Majesty said that this war was just for show—that the coastal nobles' army wouldn't actually invade the capital."

To the coastal nobles, this really was nothing more than a political protest, but Zagar had slipped into the crowd of peaceful protestors and was now throwing bombs at the police. I thought about explaining as much to Fasleen, but it wasn't as if the added nuance would ease her pain. Instead, I just waited quietly for her to compose herself. *If I died right now, is this how Airia would react?* The thought made my chest feel tight, so I decided not to dwell on it.

Fasleen quietly sobbed into her sheets for a few minutes, but she knew she had a job to do. Wiping the tears from her face she forced herself to her feet.

"My apologies for losing my composure."

"Oh, no, I understand completely. My wife is pregnant as well, so I can

imagine how you must feel,” I answered sincerely.

Fasleen nodded, the sorrow still fresh on her face, and replied, “Thank you... I’m afraid I have no one else I can rely on right now. I have lived my entire life in the palace; I have no allies outside the city walls.”

“Fear not—both the coastal nobles and the river nobles still swear fealty to the royal family. This insurrection is all Zagar’s doing.”

After I said it, I realized that sounded like a lie to make her feel better, but it really was the truth.

“Lord Bahza, the leader of the coastal nobles’ alliance, as well as Lord Karfal and Lord Wajar are all your allies. Naturally, I am on your side as well.”

Sadly, no matter how many allies Fasleen had, it didn’t change the fact that her husband was dead. In order to console her, I decided to say something a little more underhanded.

“The child in your belly right now is the last ray of hope for Kuwol’s royal family. Not only that, but he’s the ultimate legacy Pajam the Second left behind.”

I knew it wasn’t fair to say something like this, but it still helped bring some life back into Fasleen’s eyes.

“His Majesty’s...legacy...”

“If your son is safely born into this world, it will be proof that His Majesty’ Pajam’s life had meaning. You must protect him, no matter the cost.” I could feel my conscience withering with every word I said. Sighing, I scratched my head and added, “Most of all, I feel sadness for your son. He is not yet born, but his father was killed due to a cretinous political scheme, and his mother’s life is in danger. It just doesn’t feel fair.”

I clenched my fist, thinking about what would happen to my kid if I died.

“If I was in His Majesty’s position, I know my only wish would be for my wife and child to survive—and if possible, for them to both live happy lives.”

“Lord Veight...”

Fasleen smiled weakly and patted her protruding belly. After a few seconds,

she nodded and said, “Thank you... I’m sure that’s exactly what my husband would have said if he was here right now. I need some time to sort out my feelings, but you’re exactly right. I have to be strong.”

The final sentence sounded more like she was talking to herself than to me. It truly was a shame that people of high standing weren’t even allowed time to properly mourn their loved ones.

I bowed and said, “Please allow some of my men to guard you from now on. They’re all friends that I grew up with, so you can trust them.”

“Of course. I have faith in you, Lord Veight.” Fasleen bowed in return. From what I’d heard, it was exceedingly rare for members of the royal family to bow to anyone in Kuwol. It proved just how much she trusted me.

I took out my dog whistle and called Fahn and the others with it.

“Oh, there’s one important thing I forgot to mention.”

“What would that be?”

Fahn’s squad landed behind me as Fasleen cocked her head to one side. All four of them were still transformed.

“Has everything been settled, Captain Veight?” Fahn asked in her professional voice. She was probably trying to act proper in front of the queen.

I gave Fasleen a playful smile and said, “We’re all werewolves. Every one of my men is stronger than ten soldiers, so you’ll be well guarded.”

Fasleen went pale again and sunk to the ground in shock.

—The Stirrings of Ambition: Part 4—

“I see, so they’re finally willing to negotiate,” Zagar said with a smile as he read over Kumluk’s report. “It’s been ten days since the king went missing. Looks like they realized they can’t keep going on like this.”

“Yes. The grand chamberlain was reluctant, but the captain of the royal guard convinced him.”

“There was a time when the royal guard hired me to guard one of the king’s

villas. The connections I made back then are finally coming in handy.”

Zagar had blackmail material on all of the royal guard’s top brass. Most of them were guilty of bribery, and quite a few had a lot of problems in their personal lives. Kumluk didn’t know that, though, and believed Zagar genuinely was friends with them.

“I see. I suppose a man as great as you has friends everywhere.”

“Naturally.” Zagar got to his feet and looked out of the window. The city of Karfal spread out below him. “I’m tired of this place. I think it’s about time we resumed our march.”

“Yes, sir!” Kumluk saluted immediately, but then he added somewhat hesitantly, “By the way, Captain.”

“Yeah?”

“Why exactly are you spreading rumors that the king ran away?”

Kumluk was a capable officer, but sometimes Zagar felt that he was too smart for his own good.

“Oh, that? I’m simply making sure the people are aware of the truth,” Zagar replied, but that wasn’t enough to placate Kumluk.

“Normally when you do something like this, you’re trying to spread misinformation. Which means the king is actually...”

Unable to bear his vice-commander’s accusatory gaze, Zagar slammed the window shut and turned around.

“Yeah, that’s right, the king’s dead. So *what?*”

“I-It can’t be... A-Are you sure about that?!”

“Of course I’m sure, I killed him myself,” Zagar scoffed dismissively.

Kumluk took a half-step backwards and shouted, “Why would you do such a thing?! No one has ever committed such a heinous crime in the history of Kuwol!”

“Because I deemed it necessary. Just because no one else has tried it doesn’t mean I won’t.”

Zagar double-checked to make sure that Kumluk was unarmed, then made sure he had the hidden dagger he usually carried with him. He smiled magnanimously and said, “Kumluk, do you have a problem with the way I’m doing things?”

It was his policy to get rid of anyone who questioned him, regardless of how useful they might be to have around. There were countless subordinates he’d discharged, sent to the front lines to die, or killed by his own hands. Kumluk didn’t know that of course, but even he was aware that crossing Zagar was a bad move.

“W-Well...”

Zagar leaned forward. “You and every other person in this company swore fealty to me. You promised to trust me, and to follow my command.”

“I-It’s as you say. I’ve pledged my life to you, Captain.”

“Then you’d better do as I say. Don’t worry, I never fight battles I can’t win. Everything is still going according to plan.”

In truth, there were so many unknowns that Zagar wasn’t at all confident he could succeed, but a leader couldn’t afford to look indecisive.

Zagar stretched his back and flashed Kumluk a confident smile. “Look at this country. You kill the king and no one says a word. That’s proof that our king is nothing more than a figurehead. What’s the point in having a ruler that’s just for show? If anything, I’d do a better job ruling.”

Kumluk nodded, but his expression was pale.

“I do believe that a man of your caliber would make for a splendid king, but...you didn’t have to kill the previous one...”

Annoyed, Zagar glared at his vice-commander.

“It’s because the king was worthless that the country fell into chaos. Here we are—stuck risking our lives for pennies. I’m gonna become king and lead Kuwol down a better path.” The venom in his glare vanished and he smiled. “Once I become ruler of this land, I plan to make you my vice-king. I want you to make Bahza the second-greatest city in the kingdom. I’m sure Birakoya will be happy

when she hears that.”

“D-Do you really think so?”

“Of course—but to make my dream a reality, I need your negotiating skills. When we march on the capital, I’ll need you more than ever.”

Because of his privileged upbringing, Kumluk wasn’t that great of a soldier, but he was literate and knew how to negotiate—both skills the rest of Zagar’s men lacked. It was because Zagar had gone out of his way to recruit people like Kumluk that he’d been able to negotiate better contracts with his employers. Most other mercenary troupes weren’t aware of this, but the fiercest fights happened at the negotiating table, not on the battlefield. That was why Kumluk was Zagar’s vice-commander.

“I plan to instate a blanket ban on looting and plundering when we take the capital. Our unit is going to be even more law-abiding than the regular army. We’re going to do things like we did back in Bahza. If someone wants women or booze, we’ll pay for it out of our pockets. The only person who can make sure every single person in my unit follows my orders is *you*. I need you, Kumluk.”

“Yes, sir!”

Kumluk nervously straightened his back. In Zagar’s eyes, Kumluk was a timid but obedient subordinate.

“We need to claim the capital before our contract with Lord Bahza is up. Once it expires, we’re going to sign a new one with the royal family. We’ll be working for the kingdom next, understood?”

“...But didn’t you say the king was dead?”

“As far as the public’s concerned, he’s just gone missing. The grand chamberlain will be willing to draft up a contract in his stead.” Zagar grinned and took a sip out of his bottle of rum. “After that, we’ll offer to help search for the missing king, who we of course won’t be able to find. Before the dust settles, another civil war will break out. I’ve got no doubt that there are ambitious nobles out there looking to stake their claim for the throne.”

Realizing where this was going, Kumluk asked, “Are we going to be the ones to put those rebellions down?”

“That’s right. Soon enough I’ll become the official guardian of the royal family, and they’ll give command of the military to me.”

“But they’ll crown a new king eventually, won’t they?”

“Don’t worry about that. The only potential candidates are minor nobles who are distant relatives of the king or former priests who gave up on religious life. Regardless of who becomes the next ruler, they’ll just be a figurehead like Pajam was.”

Zagar didn’t know that Pajam the Second had a legitimate heir.

“Given the choice between an undefeated general and a figurehead of a king, it’s obvious who the nobles and regular citizens will put their faith in. After that, I just need to start a new dynasty.” Zagar tilted his bottle back, downing the rest of the rum. “At most, it’ll take three years—but if things move fast, I’ll be king by next summer. Isn’t this whole situation exciting?”

“Y-Yes...”

Kumluk nodded, but it was obvious from his expression that he didn’t think so in the slightest. Irrked, Zagar dismissed him.

“If you get it, then get out. Figure out a new set of rules to make sure none of my boys step out of line. Oh, and make the punishment for breaking any of them a beheading. We’ll need to be strict on everyone.”

“...Yes, sir.”

Kumluk bowed and left the room. His retreating back looked awfully small to Zagar.

“What a coward,” Zagar muttered with a sigh, then called another one of his officers in. “Keep an eye on Kumluk. If he does anything out of the ordinary, report to me immediately.”

The officer blinked in surprise.

“What’s all this about, Captain? Did Kumluk do something?”

“Just follow my orders. Kumluk’s *wavering*. Watch him to make sure he doesn’t defect, got it?”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

The officer left, leaving Zagar to his thoughts. As he looked out at the setting sun, he poured himself another glass of rum.

“There’s no turning back for me now,” he muttered in an attempt to convince himself, and brought the jade glass to his lips.

—The Vice-Commander’s Woes—

Kumluk returned to his modest room and sighed as he sat down in his chair. *I’ve gotten mixed up in a truly terrifying scheme.* Kumluk hadn’t taken part in any of Zagar’s other underhanded plots; he’d only participated in official business. Now that he’d discovered Zagar’s true colors, he wasn’t sure what he should do. *I thought the captain was a legendary general and an ally of the weak. Well, maybe that’s still true...*

To someone like Kumluk, who’d been born into a wealthy merchant family, Zagar had been a mysterious and enticing figure. Kumluk had truly believed that Zagar fought to protect those at the bottom of the pecking order, like mercenaries and the poor. He’d been willing to overlook the few illegal deeds he was aware of because he’d thought Zagar was doing them for the sake of a noble cause. Kumluk was pragmatic enough to realize unsavory acts were sometimes necessary for the greater good. He’d also been willing to accept Zagar’s argument that attacking nobles and stealing their fortunes was just. After all, without war, mercenaries would have no way to feed themselves. It was better for a few rich nobles to be harmed than for 4,000 men to resort to banditry.

However, killing the king was going too far. Now an inordinate amount of blood would be shed, and the country would be rife with refugees and bandits. The people Kumluk believed Zagar was trying to help would suffer more than ever before. *Did the captain change suddenly? Or was he like this from the start?* Kumluk sifted through his memories of Zagar. *It’s true that the captain would make a worthy king. Would Kuwol become a more prosperous country if he was on the throne?* Kumluk couldn’t find an answer to that question. He just didn’t know enough about politics. Being born a commoner, his status as a

merchant meant he'd mingled with nobles before, so he knew better than most that society was a complex thing. Kumluk decided to use another country's example to try and envision what Kuwol's future might look like.

When the Meraldian Senate was destroyed, the demon army put a council in place, didn't they? Lord Veight, the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, was on that council as well. Kumluk felt a wave of relief wash over him as he imagined Veight's affable smile. Veight was not just a brave general and capable statesman, but an honorable and kind man, too. He was able to manipulate events to his benefit the same way Zagar was, but unlike Zagar, he never stepped out of line. Also, though it seemed he wasn't aware of it, he treated everyone with compassion and respect. This explained why even the citizens of Kuwol had warmed up to him, and why his subordinates were so loyal and well-mannered.

I wouldn't mind if someone like Lord Veight became king. He's popular with the common folk, and he knows how to rule. Kumluk blinked in surprise as he realized he would rather have a foreign general as a ruler than the man he swore to serve. *I guess that means...the captain really isn't fit to be king?* Zagar had claimed he would do a better job as king than Pajam the Second had. That was why he killed him, or so he declared, but it was clear to Kumluk now that Veight would make a far better king than Zagar.

In which case, the captain had no right to complain if Veight killed him. The moment he thought that, Kumluk shook his head. *Oh no, what am I thinking? I'm Captain Zagar's Vice-Commander. Besides...I owe him a great debt.* If even Kumluk turned his back on Zagar, it would be just too sad. More importantly, it would mean repaying Zagar's goodwill with betrayal. When he'd been appointed vice-commander, Kumluk had sworn to support Zagar to the best of his ability.

I'm Captain Zagar's vice-commander, not Lord Veight's. I need to support my master. Kumluk pushed aside his unease and picked up his pen. He opened up his notebook, but it was a while before he could finally bring himself to start writing.

Shortly before his contract with Lord Bahza was up, Zagar gathered his mercenary army and prepared to march out of Karfal. As his men lined up, he

turned to me with a flourish of his embroidered cape. He was wearing his formal general's uniform.

"Lord Veight, I intend to go to the capital as an envoy of the coastal nobles. Please take care of this city in my absence."

"As you wish, Captain Zagar. Once the regular army arrives, we'll head out as well, as your rear guard."

Zagar and I smiled and exchanged bows. *What a farce.* According to Monza's report, Zagar was planning to betray Lord Bahza once he was inside the capital. He wasn't loyal to anyone but himself, so naturally he would switch to whichever side benefited him the most. The one thing Zagar was good at was sniffing out who held the upper hand. Unfortunately for him, his sharp nose made it easy for us to predict his next course of action, since he always made the optimal choice.

Right now he was marching on the capital as an "envoy of the coastal nobles." On the surface, it looked like he was just going to ask the royal family to rescind their taxes on the ports.

"What kind of messenger takes four thousand soldiers with him?" Grizz muttered darkly as he watched the mercenary army head south.

I smiled wryly and replied, "Thanks to that, there are barely any mercenaries left in Karfal—just enough to serve as messengers in case anything happens. We should be able to subdue them with ease."

"So, is it finally time to clean house?" Grizz asked with a wicked grin.

I shook my head and replied, "No, first we need to get the coastal nobles' regular army to retreat."

"Retreat? But that slimy bastard's finally made his move."

Grizz cocked his head, and I explained, "That's exactly why. Zagar sees war as a way to rack up achievements. If we leave a large army near him, he's going to find an excuse to attack it. The coastal nobles' army has no experience with land warfare; they're the perfect target for him."

"You've got a point, but then who's gonna defend Karfal?"

“We don’t have to defend it at all for now. Since he captured the city, it’s technically under his control. Only a moron attacks their own city.”

I was more worried about the safety of the capital and Karfal’s citizens, but Zagar should know that attacking citizens wouldn’t win him any medals—not unless they started a rebellion. And if he bungled things so badly the peasants were rising up in revolt, his name would be tarnished anyway.

“Zagar doesn’t like war, he likes victory; specifically victories in which he gains a lot of wealth and fame.”

“So you’re gonna have the army pull out to prevent him from getting that victory?”

“That’s right. We’re Meraldian soldiers, so Zagar can’t fight us. If he tries, I’ll just have my werewolves kill him.”

I could kill Zagar any time I wanted, but the moment I did, his mercenary army would turn into a highly trained bandit group. For now, I needed him alive to keep his men under control.

“I want the Beluzan landing forces to patrol the city streets and keep things in order. The citizens seem to like us, so they should welcome your protection.”

“You got it, boss.”

It felt strange to ask a bunch of mohawked soldiers to take care of public safety, but the people really were fond of Grizz and his men. Their appearances were so intimidating that just by acting like normal people, everyone thought *“Huh, maybe these guys are nicer than they look.”*

“Me and my werewolves are going to be busy keeping tabs on Zagar. I want you guys to protect Karfal while I’m gone. The city’s garrison should be coming back shortly, so work together with them.”

“Aye, aye. You can count on us, boss,” Grizz said with a nod. I could rest easy knowing Karfal was in safe hands.

With this, the coastal nobles would pull their armies back, and the river nobles wouldn’t mobilize theirs. Zagar would have no one to fight, and would therefore be unable to rack up any military achievements. The only potential

opponent he could fight would be the royal guard, but if he did that, he would be considered a traitor by all sides. If he became unable to strengthen his position through military accomplishments, he'd be forced to earn legitimacy elsewhere. Unfortunately, 4,000 mercenaries were of little use anywhere except the battlefield.

The question then became: What would Zagar try next? Since he always made the optimal choice, it was easy to guide his actions. I called all of my werewolves over.

"Wait a few days, then arrest the mercenaries remaining in Karfal. Zagar took most of his money with him, but he left behind catapults and other large siege weapons he couldn't take into the capital. I want you to confiscate everything he left here."

"You got it."

"You really like catapults, huh, boss?"

It wasn't that I liked them, but they were just too dangerous to leave lying around.

I frowned in an exaggerated manner and folded my arms. "You guys aren't expecting me to kick away rocks like I did in Zaria, are you?"

Everyone laughed. *Alright, enough joking around, we've got work to do.*

"Once Zagar's in the capital, I want you guys to go to the surrounding villages and call all of Karfal's garrison back."

"You sure you wanna do that? What if Zagar gets mad and uses that as an excuse to attack Karfal again?" Monza asked, confused.

I grinned and replied, "We'll hire them as temporary Meraldian reinforcements. Though, of course, Lord Karfal will still be the one paying their salaries."

"Huh? I don't get it... What's that gonna do?"

Enjoying Monza's confusion, I grinned even wider and replied, "The reason Karfal's garrison is scattered is because the city surrendered, and Lord Karfal was chased out. Technically, this means that right now all of these soldiers are

unemployed. Since they're out of a job, I can *hire* them."

"You can't just—"

I interrupted Monza by showing her a sheaf of documents. It was a secret contract I'd signed with Lord Karfal.

"I've already distributed demon army flags to all of Karfal's troops. If Zagar attacks any unit flying our banner, I'll have a legitimate excuse to kill him."

Zagar wasn't the only one who could come up with hogwash justifications to do what he wanted.

"All we have to do is order the Karfal soldiers flying our flags to go back to guarding Karfal. By doing this, things will go back to normal, and the residents will be happy, too."

However, Monza still looked unconvinced.

"Are you sure about this?"

"If it turns out I'm wrong, it means you'll get to kill everyone who attacks us. You haven't started to hate killing, have you?"

Monza gave me a bright, innocent smile and shouted, "No way!"

Thought so.

The day after I learned Zagar's men had entered Encaraga, I put my plan in motion.

"Capture all the mercenaries in the city. You're free to beat up anyone who resists."

"Ahahaha, finally!" Monza shouted, transforming instantly and leaping away. *You're supposed to be on lookout duty, you know...* I walked into the viceroy's manor after Monza and shoved a piece of parchment under the drunk mercenaries' noses.

"I have written orders from Lord Bahza. The lot of you are under arrest for breach of contract. Resist, and your lives are forfeit."

The mercenaries didn't take too kindly to that, and they drew their weapons,

abandoning their drink. One of the more green-faced mercenaries shouted in a rough voice, “The fuck?! Get sparrowed, ya fogley! Raaah!”

Sorry, but I don’t understand Kuwolese slang. Fortunately, he also slashed at me to get his point across, so I had an excuse to try out a new strengthening spell I’d been developing. I didn’t even need to transform against someone this weak, so I used strengthening to magic to enhance my reflexes and dodged out of the way. The man’s swordsmanship was so slow and simple that it was easy to bop him on the head as I sidestepped him.

“Lights out.”

The man hit the ground face-first.

“Guwah!”

Ooh, that looked like it hurt. The man flailed his limbs wildly, but he was unable to get his face off of the ground. I’d used magic to make his head heavier. It was the first spell I’d ever learned. Strictly speaking, the spell just strengthened someone or something’s attraction with the ground, but I’d been wondering recently if it could have combat applications. Normally, casting strengthening magic on an enemy had the potential to backfire, but right now I had a thousand Kites of mana, so I could afford to be a bit daring.

“Mmmgh! Mmmmpf?!”

From the looks of it, this experiment was a success, too.

“If you struggle, you’ll break your neck. Don’t worry, the spell will wear off eventually.”

I didn’t know how long ‘eventually’ would be, but I’d make sure to record the time for future reference. *Let’s test this out on a few more people.* I turned around looking for my next test subject, but all of the mercenaries had already been defeated.

“Is that all you’ve got? Come on, at least put up a fight.” Monza grinned as she tossed the mercenaries into one big pile.

Well, I’m glad you’re having fun at least, I thought. After subduing the manor with ease, I let Lord Karfal’s maids in. Originally, this was their workplace.

“I return this manor to you, Shura. Would you mind cleaning the place up before Powani returns? If you need helping hands, I can lend you some.”

“As you wish, Lord Veight.”

I handed the manor’s keys over to Shura, and the three maids bowed to me.

“Thank you for retaking this manor from those lawless thugs. We will never forget this debt. From this point onward, we will strive even harder to be of use to you.”

“Thanks. The city’s garrison will be returning soon, so there shouldn’t be anything to worry about from here on out.”

I can finally relax a little.

“Alright, now that Karfal is back to normal, all that’s left is to separate Zagar from his mercenaries and take him out. After that...”

“What’s the plan, boss?” Jerrick asked, carrying a piece of lumber over to repair a broken section of the manor.

“We’re gonna end Zagar’s ambitions here and now. I’m just trying to think of how to clean up the aftermath.”

“What do you mean ‘aftermath’?” Jerrick cocked his head at me.

—The Stirrings of Ambition: Part 5—

Thanks to how disciplined his men had been, Zagar was relatively popular with the people of the capital. He’d successfully managed to sign a new contract with the royal family after the one with Lord Bahza expired, and he was now part of the city’s provisional defenses. There’d been a public announcement that he was working for the kingdom too, so the residents of the capital weren’t afraid of him.

“I heard His Majesty brought the mercenaries working for the coastal nobles over to our side.”

“Wait, didn’t the king run away?”

“I dunno, but either way, we’re safe now. As long as these guys and the royal

guard are around, the coastal nobles won't be able to touch the city."

"Good grief. I'll finally be able to start trading again."

"Can we really trust these mercenaries, though?"

"They're super disciplined. Honestly, I couldn't believe they were mercenaries. They even paid for the goods they bought from me."

"Huh... I guess that Captain Zagar fellow knows how to keep his men in line."

"Maybe it's not such a bad idea to let them guard the capital, after all."

The rumors on the streets made it obvious that Zagar and his men were welcome in the capital. The mercenaries didn't go out into the city very often, but even so, Zagar was the talk of the town. According to some, he'd stopped a thief in the streets and returned the stolen goods to their owner. According to others, he'd repaired broken buildings and shrines. And according to yet others, he was distributing food to the poor. As more rumors spread, the perception that Zagar was an honorable mercenary captain solidified. However, Zagar himself was currently panicking.

"No one's moving their armies?"

Kumluk straightened his back and nodded. "Y-Yes, sir. At present, no nobles are advancing on the capital."

"You're absolutely certain of this?"

"I believe so. We don't have many scouts, so it's possible we missed something, but with all due respect, armies are pretty easy to spot. If someone was coming to attack us, we would know."

Zagar got to his feet and kicked his chair away. He was currently on the top floor of the inn they were renting.

"That's impossible! Even if the commoners are clueless, the nobles should realize by now that the king really is missing! And I'm right here in the capital while the throne's empty! Why isn't anyone coming to fight me?!"

"I-I don't know."

"Damn it all!"

Zagar calmed down a little as a new idea came to him.

“Wait, I’ve got it. If the river nobles aren’t attacking, we can take down the coastal nobles’ army. Now that we’ve signed a new contract, they’re technically our enemy. They should still be around Karfal, so we can kick their asses and gain some fame that way.”

“Isn’t that a little excessive?!”

Before Zagar could respond, one of the scouts returned to deliver his report.

“Captain, the coastal nobles’ army appears to have retreated. It appears that they were so scared they didn’t even want to risk fighting you.”

The scout smiled, believing he was bringing good news, but Zagar frowned.

“What?! They turned tail and ran?! What the hell?!”

“Err...”

Kumluk and the scout exchanged glances, but neither of them could think of anything to say. Zagar smashed his wineglass onto the floor and shouted, “Fine! Whatever! We can just ignore them!”

“Are you certain?”

“We don’t have the speed to chase a retreating army—almost all our mercs are foot soldiers. By the time we catch up to them, we’ll be too far from the capital.”

Zagar knew that if he left, there was a strong possibility that the grand chamberlain and the royal guard would betray him. After all, the Meraldian Vice-Commander was still in Karfal. *If Veight makes a move, they’ll abandon me in a heartbeat and take his side instead.* His brief talk with the king had driven home the fact that he was just a commoner. No matter how many achievements he racked up, that was all he’d ever be to the royals. He needed to build up his influence in the city to make it so the grand chamberlain couldn’t remove him. The problem was, there weren’t any enemies for him to trounce and boost his popularity.

“We need to keep winning to stay afloat, but if there are no enemies to fight, there’s no one to win against.”

“What should we do, Captain?”

Zagar smiled confidently. “I didn’t want to go down this route, but it looks like I’ve got no choice. Come up with some excuse to get all of the king’s retainers, chief guards, important priests, and ministers in one room.”

“A-Alright. There’s supposed to be a meeting of retainers and ministers the day after tomorrow. We’ll be in charge of guarding it, so you can get into the room if you want, Captain.”

Zagar nodded in satisfaction.

“Perfect. It’s time to show everyone I *do* have what it takes to be king.”

On the day of the meeting, Zagar gave a speech to the gathered officials.

“Please let us take over the search for the king!”

The grand chamberlain, the country’s most important ministers, and the commander of the royal guard were all present. The head of the Mondstrahl church in Kuwol and his closest aides were there as well. All of them were currently listening to Zagar’s speech.

“My men are familiar with the terrain around the capital. We wish to find him as soon as possible to quell the unrest spreading throughout the nation!”

If it became clear whether or not the current king was dead, it would be possible to crown a new one. Of course, Zagar knew how ironic it was for the person who killed the king to offer to look for him, but judging by the reactions of the people in the room, they weren’t aware he’d been assassinated.

The Mondstrahl chief shaman sighed and said, “It’s certainly true that we cannot leave the throne empty for long. Seeing as His Majesty Pajam has not returned, we may have to consider choosing a new king...”

“We cannot. His Majesty’s cousins Prince Kasum and Prince Haadi are both members of the clergy. Tradition dictates that one who takes up the cloth cannot be allowed to return to politics,” the master of ceremonies countered.

“I understand your concerns, but there are no other suitable candidates.”

The master of ceremonies glared at the chief shaman. “You aren’t just saying

that because you want to increase the Mondstrahl temple's influence over the nation's affairs, are you?"

The chief shaman frowned and replied, "We have no interest in worldly power. But if the king remains missing, this country will fall into chaos."

Good, good. Zagar grinned to himself. *Keep on arguing, you morons.* If this escalated into a conflict, both sides would need fighting power, and it was Zagar who held the most military might in the nation right now. He didn't care who he sided with, so he was willing to sell himself to the highest bidder.

Just then, the doors to the meeting room were flung open.

"Sorry I'm late," a voice Zagar recognized, a voice that filled him with dread, said. He turned around and saw the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander standing in the entryway.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, ladies and gentlemen. I am Veight Von Aindorf, Meraldian councilman and the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander," he said, bowing to the gathered ministers. It was low enough that his foreign robes brushed against the floor.

In a shocked voice, the grand chamberlain sputtered, "Wh-What on... How did... It is an honor to meet one of Meraldia's councilmen, but if I am not mistaken, wasn't Lord Wajar Amani supposed to be the one to attend this meeting?"

Veight smiled pleasantly and said, "Lady Amani is with me of course. We accompanied her to ensure her safety."

"'We'?"

Everyone looked at Veight in confusion, and Amani walked into the room with a beautiful woman. The moment he saw her, Zagar felt a shiver run down his spine. She was in a dress that only official consorts of the king were allowed to wear. Not only that, but her belly was bulging. She was pregnant. If she was a queen, then the child in her belly undoubtedly belonged to the king. There would exist a royal child.

"Wh-Who..." Zagar started to mutter.

The woman's cold, sharp gaze pierced through Zagar, silencing him. She was looking at him the same way the king had just before he was killed. There was a mixture of scorn and pity in her glare.

After staring at him for a few seconds she turned to everyone else and bowed. "I am Pajam the Second's consort, Fasleen."

"Lady Fasleen!"

"By Fasleen...you mean the woman who was the most likely candidate for the king's official wife?"

The ministers and priests hurriedly got to their feet and knelt to her, though Zagar wasn't aware that she was a woman of high status. *You can't be serious! One of the king's consorts was pregnant?!* Had he been aware of this fact, he certainly wouldn't have let Fasleen live. Zagar had done his best to gather all the information he could about the king's concubines, but there were a lot of women in the king's harem, and most of them rarely left the palace, so he hadn't been able to learn much. No one had said anything about a potential successor, so Zagar had assumed none of the king's consorts were pregnant.

Veight stepped forward and said, "The child in Lady Fasleen's belly is a boy. This record of the court physician's examination is proof of that."

What?! Zagar had no idea that it was customary for pregnant ladies to seek out doctors if they could afford one. He grit his teeth as he realized the men standing behind Fasleen were likely doctors. *Shit, I slipped up!* Zagar's plan had been to maneuver behind the scenes while everyone fought over the empty throne, but now, his hopes had been crushed.



With a legitimate heir, there wouldn't be any chaos unless Fasleen had a miscarriage. The other members of the royal family already had important posts in the Mondstrahl Church, so they had no reason to fight for the throne. *No... My battlefield is vanishing...right before my eyes...* Zagar had finally managed to become the leader of an army thousands strong and hold actual political clout. This was supposed to be the beginning of his rise to fame, but he'd been shut down before he even got a chance to get started.

Veight turned to the gathered officials and said, "His Majesty may still be missing, but his heir will soon be born. It will be you fine gentlemen's job to raise him into a fine ruler. Your wisdom and experience will be necessary to teach him what his father and grandfather won't be here to do."

For all his flowery language, Veight was basically inviting the nobles and ministers to serve as king regent while Pajam's son was still young. Naturally, that was quite an enticing proposal to them.

"But of course, as Kuwol's stalwart ally, Meraldia will support you in your endeavors. If anything happens to the royal family, or if Kuwol's stability happens to be threatened, the demon army will immediately rush to your aid. Our giants and dragonkin will be at your disposal."

Everyone started whispering excitedly to each other. Veight had effectively declared that Meraldia would send its elite demon soldiers in if anyone tried to assassinate the future king or start a civil war. In fact, that could even be taken as an implied threat that Veight would conquer Kuwol himself if someone harmed the king. No one would dare make a grab for power now.

Veight went on to explain the details of his policy, but Zagar didn't even have the energy left to listen. The only thing keeping him standing was the knowledge that if he looked visibly crestfallen here, everyone would grow suspicious of him. After some time, Veight finally turned to Zagar.

"I see we meet again, Captain Zagar."

"Yeah..."

I wanna wipe that arrogant smirk off your face so bad! But Veight's next words transformed Zagar's anger into fear.

“Rafhad is waiting for your return.”

“Wha—?!”

Zagar wanted to ask Veight what he meant by that, but the Black Werewolf King had already turned back to the ministers. The sun slowly sank in tandem with Zagar’s feelings.

—The Stirrings of Ambition: Part 6—

“Fuck! Fuck! *Fuuuuuuuuuuck!*”

After returning to his room, Zagar drew his sword and slashed at his bedsheets. There was a shattered rum bottle on the floor, and the cloying smell of alcohol permeated the room. Unsurprisingly, Zagar had finally lost his cool.

After Veight’s entrance, Amani Wajar gave a speech. She said that all of the river nobles upstream of the capital were praying that Fasleen would safely deliver her baby, and that they would accept her son as the new king. Once she was done, Powani Karfal showed up and mentioned that all the river nobles downstream of the capital felt the same way. Not only that, but a messenger from Birakoya Bahza showed up to declare that the coastal nobles recognized the legitimacy of the new king as well. The entire country had sworn fealty to Queen Fasleen and her unborn baby.

It was the worst possible outcome for Zagar. He’d finally stirred things up enough to get a civil war started, but now everything was calming down. *I even sabotaged Bahza’s port to get the ball rolling last time! I should have easily been able to spark another civil war!* Everything up to occupying Karfal had gone according to plan. However, Pajam the Second had rejected Zagar’s proposal, which snowballed into everything going wrong.

No, wait, that’s not quite right... Zagar thought back to everything that had happened thus far. *It’s all that damned demon’s fault. Everything went to hell after he showed up.* Zagar just couldn’t fathom how Veight would move next, or what drove his actions.

Most of Zagar’s mercenaries didn’t make for good spies, and the few that he did have were infiltrating the royal family or the nearby noble houses. Of

course, now it was clear to Zagar that Veight was a greater threat than anyone in Kuwol. *Should I just kill him?* Zagar briefly entertained the thought, but quickly discarded it. He wouldn't stand a chance against a werewolf. The only way humans could beat werewolves were if they caught them unaware *and* had a massive numerical advantage.

That guy never drops his guard for a second. Despite looking like he was wide open, in reality, Veight was constantly on alert. He kept at least four guards with him at all times, and maintained an eye on everything that happened within his surroundings. Zagar had asked a number of his men if it was possible to assassinate Veight, and they'd all said they wouldn't be able to do it. At this rate, Zagar's war would end before it even got started. Once the new king was born, the nobles would serve as his regent until he was of age—which meant Kuwol's policies and political structure would remain mostly unchanged. Moreover, once order was restored, they would start searching for the king in earnest.

"This isn't looking good..."

Veight had mentioned Rafhad's name during the meeting earlier. He was the same man who'd disguised himself as a messenger to lure the king out. The fact that Veight knew who he was meant that he'd uncovered the truth behind the king's disappearance. Zagar was trapped in a cage he hadn't even realized had been closing in around him.

My only option now is to take my 4,000 mercenaries and burn the capital to the ground... he thought. If he could just raid the palace and kill Fasleen, the royal family would be stamped out for good. Of course, that would make Zagar an outlaw, but at this point, he didn't have any other choice. It wasn't possible to do everything under the table anymore.

"Alright."

Zagar thought about summoning Kumluk, but then he stopped with his hand on the door.

"Hold on... Can I really trust him?"

When Kumluk had learned that Zagar had slain the king, he'd been visibly shaken. Furthermore, he had spent a lot of time around Veight. It would explain

a lot if Kumluk had betrayed Zagar and told Veight about what he'd done. Though, it was still entirely possible that Veight had learned the truth through other means, too. Zagar couldn't be sure who was friend and who was foe.

"Goddammit!"

Zagar rolled up his map of the capital and its outlying regions and threw it on the ground. A second later he heard a deep voice from the hallway, "Captain it's me, Balkel. I have something to report."

"...Balkel?"

"Yes, sir. You hired me in Karfal. I was patrolling the palace, but I rushed here because I thought there's something you should know."

Now that he had over 4,000 men, Zagar wasn't able to remember all of their names. Sighing, Zagar waved his hand and said, "Alright, get in here. What have you got?"

A middle-aged warrior stepped into the room. He was wearing a mismatched suit of armor that was in awful condition. Nevertheless, he straightened his back and tried to project as much dignity as possible.

"I spotted what I believe was a few Meraldians near the palace's library tower. They were speaking in Kuwolese, but the contents of their conversation —"

"Hold on. How can you be sure they were Meraldians?"

Meraldians and Kuwolese didn't differ much by appearance. If a Meraldian was speaking in Kuwolese, it would be almost impossible to tell they weren't native.

Balkel grinned and said, "They didn't have much of an accent, but they used phrases like 'Mejire River' instead of just 'Mejire,' so I could tell they weren't a true native."

"I see."

In Kuwolese, the word "mejire" simply meant "big river." For that reason, no native speaker would say the words "Mejire River." *If they were using Kuwolese, they were probably trying to pass as natives—meaning they might be spies of*

some sort. This definitely warrants attention.

“So, what exactly were they talking about?”

“It appears they were investigating something in the royal library, sir. I heard the word ‘Valkaan,’ and mention of some hidden royal treasure.”

“Valkaan...you say?”

War Gods who possessed unparalleled power were called Valkaan. Moreover, if this was some hidden treasure of the royal family, it was probably something powerful.

“Do you have the keys to the royal library?”

“I’m afraid not, sir. You have to borrow them from the royal librarian, and he only gives them out to those of high status.”

“Go tell the librarian there’s a possibility thieves may have snuck in, and tell him to give you the keys. Let him know that Zagar, the man in charge of the capital’s defenses, will take full responsibility for whatever happens.”

“Yes, sir!”

Once he had the keys, Zagar headed to the royal library alone. He’d done basic guard duty plenty of times back when he’d been a small-time mercenary, so convincing the librarian to let him in alone had been easy. Books were valuable, but they were harder to preserve than currency or gemstones. They couldn’t just be locked away in a safe, they needed to be kept in a place with low humidity and no insects. They also decayed in sunlight, so they needed to be in dark rooms with good ventilation. Plus, they were extremely susceptible to water and fire damage, and really easy to steal. There were very few places books could be safely stored.

Now then, where are you? He scanned the dust-covered spines looking for a book that had been recently taken off its shelf. Nothing jumped out at him immediately, but he noticed there was one spot with relatively fresh fingerprints. Upon closer examination, he realized the bookshelf’s depth didn’t line up with how wide the side was. *Nice trick.*

Zagar had seen plenty of similar gimmicks in his time as a guard, and rapped

the bookshelf with his knuckles. As expected, a hollow echo came back. Relying on his memories of similar hidden bookshelves, Zagar slid one of the ledges back. The ledge in front was nothing but a facade. The real bookshelf was behind it. Zagar read the titles on the spines, and soon found one that looked promising called *The Secrets an Heir Must Know*.

The title made it pretty obvious that this was the book a king had his heir read when relinquishing the throne. As he flipped through it, Zagar found a passage detailing a secret treasure that could turn ordinary people into Valkaan.

“In times of great crisis, the king must use the Valkaan Orb and gain the strength to eliminate whatever threatens the nation. Those who become Valkaan cease to age. After fifty years, it is the king’s obligation and duty to abdicate the throne and spend his remaining days guiding his successors.”

The rest of the passage talked about how Valkaan needed to act in a morally upstanding manner so as to set a proper example to others, but Zagar didn’t bother reading any of that. *I see, so this is the royal family’s trump card. If you become a Valkaan, you can easily take on armies a million strong all by yourself. None of the nobles would oppose you, either.* Zagar finally understood why everyone respected the royal family so much, despite the fact that they were just figureheads when it came to politics. Of course, Zagar had come to a mistaken conclusion, but no one was around to correct his misconceptions.

If I turn into a War God, I won’t have anything to fear. No one will be able to arrest or assassinate me. The legends made it clear just how much stronger a War God was than normal people. *Where is it?! Where the heck is this legendary treasure hidden?!* All the book said was that the Valkaan Orb was stored away in the base of Mount Kayankaka within the mountain tribes’ sacred land. Mount Kayankaka was located in a remote region of Kuwol, and was said to be the source of the Mejire. A round trip from the capital would take half a month or more.

If Zagar left now, the political situation would be completely stabilized by the time he returned. He’d lose everything he’d built up until now. However, all that waited for him was execution if he stayed. Sooner or later, word would get out that he’d killed the king. *Now that Veight knows the truth, it’s just a matter of time. Bribery, threats, assassination... Nothing will work on him.* Zagar didn’t

understand why, but Veight seemed hell-bent on thwarting his ambitions. *I'm better off placing my bets on the possibility of becoming a Valkaan than staying here and trying to reverse the situation.* Making up his mind, Zagar began planning his next move.

“Hahaha! There’s no greater honor for a military man than being able to share a seat at the same table as you, Lord Veight!” An old man with a stubbly beard said, then bit heartily into a grilled lamb leg. “I’m worried I may have used up all of my luck for this year.”

He washed down the hunk of meat with a long swig from his goblet before continuing.

“My family owes the Wajars a great debt, since the previous viceroy, Kishuun Wajar, saved my grandfather’s life. Hopefully, I’ve managed to repay some of it.”

“You most certainly have. Thanks to you, we’ll be able to avoid needless bloodshed. I have no doubt that the late Lord Wajar is proud of you as well.”

I’d met Balkel once in Karfal. He was that shabby mercenary who’d been looking to join Zagar’s crew. His armor was still mismatched and dented, but his demeanor was still as regal as before.

“My grandfather was once part of the royal guard, but he did something that got him in trouble with the palace staff. He never told us what exactly happened, but apparently, it was a mistake big enough that he would have had to pay with more than just his job to make up for it.” Balkel smiled wistfully. “But Lord Kishuun vouched for my grandfather and managed to get him pardoned. If he hadn’t, both my grandfather and my father—who was a child at the time—would have been executed.”

Damn, that’s a pretty big deal.

“Not only that, but Lord Kishuun also paid for my grandfather’s living expenses. Because of his backing, the previous Lord Peshmet granted our family a plot of land. My older brothers still run a sugar plantation there.”

Peshmet was the city furthest upriver, and was rather remote. The fact that Balkel’s family had been granted land there meant it would have been a

problem if they'd been allowed to stay near the capital. *Now I'm curious what kind of insane thing Balkel's grandfather did to get so much attention.*

Amani, who was also eating with us, took a sip of the chicken dumpling soup me and Grizz had come up with and said, "My father believed in showing kindness to all. Or, well, I should say he believes, since he's still in good health." She smiled and added, "Even if your generosity goes unrewarded, your reputation as a generous person has value in and of itself. Eventually, that reputation will aid you or your descendants. At least, that's what my father says. Quite often, mind you."

I see you're sick and tired of hearing the same lecture from your dad. Amani's smile turned rueful and she looked up at me.

"However, I suppose I now have no choice but to accept that my father was right, seeing as Sir Balkel was saved thanks to him, and now he's the one saving us."

"Ah, that's true."

I nodded in agreement. Balkel was here as a mercenary on Lord Peshmet's orders. His job was to infiltrate Zagar's company and keep an eye on what he was up to. Amani and Lord Peshmet were close friends, which was why she'd been able to get in touch with Balkel to finish the trap we'd sprung on Zagar. I didn't have a full picture of who was in the river nobles' employ, but I knew there were more spies than just Balkel in Zagar's company.

This time around, Balkel had been instrumental in putting on a convincing enough act to get Zagar chasing after the Valkaan Orb. I'd set up the whole act, and even created a fake book and secret bookshelf for Zagar to find. The fake book was based on the real one Pajam had told me about, and even used the exact same binding, but it was missing the pages that detailed how to actually use the orb. On the off chance that Zagar actually managed to acquire it, he wouldn't be able to do anything with it. Parker had summoned the spirits of a former librarian and royal secretary to help make the book as authentic as possible, so I doubted Zagar would realize it was a forgery. The ease with which he'd called them was a chilling reminder that if anyone got on his bad side, Parker could easily summon an undead army large enough to raze a nation to

the ground.

Balkel sipped on the high-grade rum we'd gifted him and said with a faint blush, "I'm really happy I was able to repay my debts to Lord Kishuun and Lord Peshmet. I am in truth a mere wandering mercenary, so had you not told me about Zagar's plot, I would have remained his loyal subordinate."

A little hesitantly, Amani asked, "Why not use this opportunity to work officially under Lord Peshmet? I'd be happy to write you a recommendation. If he says he has no need for your services, you're welcome in Wajar."

Balkel was both loyal and surprisingly versatile. His skills as a soldier were top-notch, and he knew Meraldian as well. Honestly, I could see why Amani wanted him on her side.

"Lady Amani's right, Balkel. You're far too good to waste away as a mercenary. As Meraldia's representative, I'd like to reward you as well. Seeing as you know Meraldian, you'd be welcome in the demon army any time."

Balkel looked up at me in shock, then awkwardly scratched his head.

"Errr...well, this is quite the pickle. Such an important position would be too high an honor for someone like me. I never imagined the day would come where both Lady Amani and the Vice-Commander of a foreign king would want my services." He shook his head as he said that. "However, I'm afraid I'm too much of a patriot to leave for Meraldia. Please forgive me, but I'm afraid I must decline."

"Oh, no, if anything I should apologize for making such a brazen request."

Crap, I almost forgot the people of this world care way more about their homeland than people back on Earth. Of course, I still wanted to thank him, so I thought up a different reward I could offer.

"In that case, would you prefer a gift of currency? I could also provide you with superior armor and a powerful warhorse if that's what you desire instead."

"No need. My achievements this time around were not in battle. It would be wrong of me to ask for too much." As he said that, Balkel shot me a suggestive glance. "...I realize this may be presumptuous of me, but would you be willing to grant me your name instead, Lord Veight?"

“‘My name’? What do you mean?”

“I would like to formally receive one letter from your name and henceforth call myself Valkel. Would that be an acceptable reward to ask for?”

I was surprised an old Japanese tradition existed here in Kuwol as well, though I was more surprised that was all Balkel wanted—especially since it would barely even change the pronunciation of his name.

Amani chuckled and explained, “I thought you were a man of few wants, but I see you desire something far more valuable than a legendary sword or famous warhorse. Receiving a letter from the name of a foreign king’s vice-commander is an honor as great as being appointed the captain of the royal guard.”

“Is it really?” In my head, I realized it was a great honor, but it still didn’t *feel* like one. *But hey, if that’s what you want, I don’t mind.* “If my name alone is enough to satisfy you, then by all means feel free to adopt it. Hey, is there anyone around? I need some contract paper.”

One of the servants brought me a piece of enchanted paper and I started writing. Once I’d penned the contents of the reward, I put down my signature in special ink, and the paper began to glow faintly. The spell on the parchment would prevent it from fraying or collecting dust. So long as it wasn’t treated roughly, it would last over a hundred years.

“Here you go, Balkel...or rather, Valkel.”

The unkempt warrior accepted the paper reverently with both hands.

“This truly is an honor beyond words. I, Valkel, shall treasure your kindness for the rest of my life.”

You really like that new name, huh. Valkel rolled up the parchment and carefully placed it in his pouch.

“At long last, I have restored my late grandfather’s honor. He was a kind man, and in his final years, he was constantly apologizing to us for ruining our family name. Now that I have earned this new name, I can visit his grave with my head held high.” Valkel got to his feet and bowed. “Now then, if you’ll excuse me, I wish to return home and help my brothers tend to the sugarcane fields. Now that I have this certificate, I’m sure I’ll be able to find a splendid lady willing to

be my wife.”

Amani also got out of her chair and said, “Are you sure this is all you desire, Sir Valkel? I would still be willing to hire you.”

Valkel smiled and replied, “I have already received more honor than a mere man-at-arms such as myself deserves. Even if I were to serve you, I would be able to gain no greater merit.”

Confused, I asked, “You’re a skilled soldier, and you’re loyal to a fault. If you wanted to, you could earn a lot of fame as a warrior. So why is it that you feel like you can’t achieve any more?”

Valkel let out a hearty guffaw. “Hahahaha! What a strange thing to say! The reason for that lies with you, of course, Lord Veight.”

“Me?”

“Indeed. So long as you are around, there will be no more large-scale conflicts. How can I raise my fame if there are no wars to be fought?”

After saying that he got down on his right knee and bowed to me.

“Lord Veight, I beg of you. Please preserve this country’s peace. I could ask for no greater reward than keeping my home safe from the ravages of war.”

“You have my word, Sir Valkel, that I will do everything in my power to keep Kuwol safe.”

I clasped his calloused hand and shook it.

Two days had passed since Zagar had learned of the existence of the Valkaan Orb. I was in a meeting with the palace’s courtiers when I heard a werewolf’s howl in the distance. *That sounds like Monza, but I’ve never been great at telling the howls apart.* My brain was still running human software, so I had a hard time doing a lot of things most werewolves found natural.

“Is something wrong, Lord Veight?” the grand chamberlain asked. I bowed to him and rose from my seat. “My apologies, but it appears I have a matter I must attend to.”

“So that scoundrel Zagar has finally...”

“Yes. I just heard from one of my subordinates that he’s taken five hundred cavalry and left the city.”

“That’s a rather large entourage to be taking to ‘search for a missing king.’”

The officials frowned unhappily, though I could tell they felt a bit of relief as well as distaste. Zagar had left the capital to search for the treasure that would turn him into a Valkaan. Of course, the official reason for his departure was that he was going to look for the king, but everyone knew he was basically running away.

Queen Fasleen gave me a confused look and asked, “Zagar has four thousand men under him, doesn’t he? Why isn’t he taking them all?”

Ask him, not me. Still, I gave her my best guess for his actions. “I suspect it’s a problem of logistics. He’ll have to pay for his soldiers’ food and lodging all the way to Mount Kayankaka. Now that the nobles have effectively turned against him, it’ll be difficult to find financial help to pay for all four thousand soldiers’ travel costs.”

The nobles had pinned their hopes on Fasleen’s unborn child, so they had no reason to aid Zagar. Without their support, the only way he’d be able to raise enough supplies for all of his men would be to raid the countryside, and doing that would paint a target on his back. So he took only his 500 cavalry.

“Of course, there’s a reason he took only cavalry, too. If he included foot soldiers in his unit, it would take him far longer to reach Mount Kayankaka.”

The vast majority of Zagar’s company was infantry. Few of his mercenaries had training in horseback riding, and he had even fewer warhorses. The only way he could get 500 warhorses would be to raid the royal guard’s stables, so I suspected most of his cavalry were using plain riding horses. Naturally, riding horses weren’t suited for combat, but warhorses were far more expensive since they were trained in combat maneuvers and knew not to panic even in chaotic situations. A rather sinister plot came to mind as I explained the situation to Fasleen.

“Seeing as Zagar has basically fled the capital, it’s safe to assume he’s abandoned the mercenaries he’s left behind. It’s possible he left some kind of secret orders behind for them, but seeing as he took most of his best men with

him, I think that's unlikely."

"Does that mean we can finally relax?" Fasleen asked, which prompted me to say the one thing that had been on my mind for a while.

"That I'm not sure of, but there's one thing I want you all to understand."

"What's that?"

"These mercenaries are just doing their best to scrape by. They're desperate because they need work to buy their next meals. Some of them might have homes and farms to return to, but those who don't will almost certainly resort to banditry if they can't make ends meet as mercenaries."

"Oh my..."

Fasleen and the courtiers looked worriedly at each other. *Alright, here's my chance.*

"...Which is why I implore you—please give these men a roof to sleep under and food to fill their bellies. The capital will be that much safer if they aren't starving and homeless."

"Are you...sure?"

"Absolutely," I replied. Only those who had experienced poverty knew how desperate it made you. "Very few people will try to do the right thing when they've gone hungry, have spent days exposed to the elements, with no way of knowing if they'll make it to tomorrow, and assume that the rest of society scorns them."

That was how us werewolves had been in the past, and many humans were suffering under similar conditions even now.

"It's impossible to understand what starvation drives people to unless you've been starving yourself. The biggest threat to a nation's stability is from within. That's the greatest lesson I've learned from touring various countries."

Technically I learned that by studying history, but this sounds more impressive.

Powani Karfal folded his arms and muttered, "Lord Veight is absolutely right. When I, my wife, and my child were chased out of Karfal, I was overcome by hatred, but also desperation. Had Lady Amani not offered me her aid, who

knows what depths I may have fallen to.”

He said nothing more, but I could easily imagine the lengths he would have gone through to protect his wife and kid. After all, I would do the same in his position.

Amani smiled and replied, “Very well, then all of the nobles and ministers shall work together to find a way to house and feed the mercenaries. If they’re willing to follow the law, I wouldn’t mind employing a number of them as guardsmen for Wajar.”

“Thank you all very much.”

As I bowed my head, the royal secretary walked into the room. He handed a sheaf of documents to the master of ceremonies, then bowed and exited the room. The master skimmed over them, then turned to me.

“I have just now issued an arrest warrant for Zagar,” he said. “He’s wanted as a suspect for the king’s murder. Kuwol’s soldiers have permission to execute him if he resists.”

“You have my gratitude. I can take over from here.”

I was now legally able to apprehend Zagar, but I suspected this would just give me a legal excuse to kill him. There was no way he was coming quietly.

Fasleen looked up at me, a hint of concern in her expression. “Please be careful, Lord Veight. For the sake of your wife back home.”

Airia’s smile flashed through my mind. From the few letters we’d exchanged, it sounded like she was doing well, but knowing her, she was probably hiding her real feelings so as to not worry me.

I bowed my head and replied, “Thank you for your concern. Both for the sake of my unborn child and yours, I swear that I will bring peace back to Kuwol.”

Now then, all that’s left is to catch this guy.

The same day, I took my werewolf unit and headed out. Of my 56 werewolves, two squads—in other words eight werewolves—were staying behind to guard Fasleen and serve as messengers. The remaining 48 were

traveling with me. We had the Blast Rifles we'd kept hidden until now, since I was expecting things to get bloody.

"Hey, boss, there's still like four thousand guys left back at the capital, right? You sure we only need eight guys to guard the queen?" Jerrick asked worriedly, glancing back towards the capital.

I smiled wryly and said, "That's all I can spare. If Zagar's taken five hundred men with him, then I'm going to need almost all of you to beat his entourage. Hopefully, the nobles at the capital will properly take care of the mercenaries."

Fahn seemed worried as well, and she asked, "Can we really trust them?"

"Not all of your citizens will be good people. Even your criminals and outlaws are still your citizens. It's the job of nobles and kings to properly manage everyone, including those who've strayed from the right path."

I wasn't good enough to do that, which was why I constantly had to rely on force to resolve problems. Furthermore, a true leader was someone who could get people to follow them even without the threat of military retribution.

I realized I was trying to convince myself as much as I was Fahn so I added, "If they can't manage a simple task like this, then they won't be able to hold the country together long enough for the prince to come of age anyway. In which case, we may as well see if they have what it takes."

If they don't...I guess I'll have to look into forming a United States of Meraldia and Kuwol. I really hope it doesn't come to that, though.

"Alright, everyone. It's time to go to Mount Kayankaka where the War God's treasure is enshrined. We're going to follow the river all the way upstream." I waited for everyone to nod, then said, "Zagar and his cavalry have half a day's head start, but if we transform, we should be able to catch up to him quickly enough."

"When are we gonna attack?" Monza asked, barely holding back her excitement. I pointed to the map in front of me.

"After we've passed the southernmost city, Peshmet. If there's a city nearby when we strike, Zagar might try and seek refuge there. He doesn't give a damn about civilian casualties, so I want to avoid a battle in the streets."

When he'd taken Karfal, Zagar had killed a good number of civilians and destroyed many more's homes. *The only people who should die on a battlefield are soldiers.*

"I asked Valkel to deliver a letter to Lord Peshmet on his way home. We should be able to resupply there, but Zagar will be turned away. Once we're past the city, there won't be any others on our route, so he'll probably show his true colors then."

The mountain tribes that lived around Mount Kayankaka weren't Kuwolese citizens, so Zagar would have no qualms about pillaging their lands.

Fahn grinned and said, "But there's no way he'll be able to raid the mountain tribes, right?"

"With just five hundred men, he probably won't be able to manage it, yeah..."

I opened up the *real* copy of *The Secrets an Heir Must Know* to a specific page. Unlike the fake I'd left for Zagar, this had plenty of information about the tribes living by the mountains. It also gave specific directions to where exactly the Valkaan Orb was hidden away. After reading everything in this tome, I finally understood why Mount Kayankaka was the safest place to hide the treasure.

"Honestly, Zagar isn't even our top priority. While he's lost in the mountains, we'll head straight for the mountain's summit, where the shrine is."

"You got it, boss!"

The werewolves grinned in anticipation of the hunt to come.

—The Stirrings of Ambition: Part 7—

Zagar's vice-commander, Kumluk, was panicking.

"Captain, the majority of our cavalry isn't actually able to fight on horseback. If we were to be attacked by bandits..."

"Don't be stupid. What kind of bandits would attack an army? We're *official* soldiers of Kuwol now, remember?"

Zagar laughed off Kumluk's worries, which didn't reassure him in the slightest.

“But the nomad tribes in this area despise Kuwol’s army. Besides, even if our main force is safe, our scouting party most definitely isn’t.”

Zagar had a few mercenaries riding out ahead in a constant rotation so that he’d always have some forward scouts. However, he wasn’t the least bit concerned for their safety.

“I know our scouts are risking a lot, but we can’t afford to let our main force get caught by surprise. You should be happy I gave them horses, at least.”

Kumluk fell silent for a few seconds, but then hesitantly asked, “...Are we really out here to search for the king?”

Kumluk already knew that Zagar had slaughtered the king and dumped his corpse in the outskirts of Karfal. He also knew they wouldn’t find anything at Mount Kayankaka. Everyone who was part of Zagar’s inner circle understood that this entire search was a farce. Most of them thought this was just Zagar’s way of pretending he’d tried so that he could make himself look better, but Kumluk wasn’t so sure.

“The only time you personally lead your troops is when you’re after something big. What’s the real reason you’re taking us to Mount Kayankaka?”

Zagar curtly replied, “Just shut up and follow my orders.”

“Captain!” Kumluk shouted, beside himself. Some of the other veterans of Zagar’s squad turned around, but he waved them off and said, “It’s nothing, don’t worry.”

“I’m sorry for speaking out of line, Captain. But as your vice-commander, I want to know what your real objective is,” he asked, in a quieter voice.

Zagar frowned at his persistent vice-commander. “You’re wasting your time, there is no real goal.”

His glare was sharp, almost as if he was staring at an enemy. For the first time that he could remember, Kumluk was afraid of his captain. Seeing his fear, Zagar awkwardly turned away and said, “You might think you understand me, but the truth is there isn’t anyone who does.”

He spurred his horse onward, not once looking back at his subordinate.

Kumluk's horse was also a warhorse, but it wasn't nearly as fit as Zagar's. He didn't want to push his tired horse any harder, so he let Zagar outpace him.

"Captain..." he muttered to Zagar's retreating back.

Meanwhile, Zagar's scouts had reached the base of the mountain. Unlike the barren plains they'd been traveling through until now, the foot of Mount Kayankaka was a lush forest. Verdant greenery spread out as far as the eye could see. It was the height of summer though, so the interior of the forest was hot and humid.

"I thought we'd be able to cool down in the shade, but it's like a sauna in here..." one of the mercenaries muttered, wiping sweat off his neck. The others nodded in agreement.

"It's too goddamn humid to be wearing armor."

"Our horses are beat, too. We should rest them by the stream."

The mercenaries had found a clear stream that wasn't too far into the forest. It was one of the many sources that fed into the Mejire. While they were technically on a scouting mission, it wasn't as if there were any enemies nearby, so naturally, the mercenaries let their guards down. The seven scouts chatted idly with each other as they led their horses to the stream.

"Is it just me, or has our captain been kinda weird recently?"

"Yeah, a little. He used to smile a lot more, but these days he just yells all the time."

"He hasn't been paying us as much, either."

"Yeah, and he keeps going on about how we've gotta follow the rules and crap while we're in the capital. I heard he's being even stricter on us than the royal guard is to its soldiers."

"We're not even being paid as much as those guys."

The mercenaries were getting fed up with Zagar—especially the scouts, since they were doing dangerous work for no extra reward.

"A good mercenary captain should be undefeated, reasonable, and pay well,

am I right?”

“We haven’t fought much recently so I guess we’re undefeated, but the pay sucks, and the captain’s far from reasonable now. Maybe it’s time we quit.”

“You say that, but it’s not like there’s any better mercenary companies we could join.”

The only thing driving these scouts on was the knowledge that this work was still better than anything else they could find. Just then, one of them stopped his horse.

“...Someone’s here.”

“Which direction?”

The mercenary silently pointed to the stream that could be seen peeking through the foliage. All of them slipped off their horses, took out their crossbows and swords, and hid in a nearby thicket.

“Heh, those are some pretty lasses.”

Sitting on a boulder near the stream were three young women. Their bamboo baskets were filled with fish, but the mercenaries couldn’t see any fishing tools anywhere.

“Are those the barbarians that live around Kayankaka?”

“Probably. Look at those thighs.”

The women had rolled up their loincloths, and their tanned legs were in full view for the mercenaries. Eventually, one of the mercenaries muttered, “I think it’s time we took advantage of the perks of our job. I’ll lose my mind otherwise.”

“Hey wait...” Another mercenary tried to dissuade him, but his eyes were glued to the women’s legs too. “Those girls aren’t Kuwolese, they’re just mountain barbarians. And from the looks of it, there isn’t anyone else around.”

“Yeah, but what’ll we do with them after we’ve had our fun?”

“Drown them in the Mejire.”

“Sounds good to me.”

The mercenaries tiptoed out of the thicket. By the time the dark-skinned women noticed them, they were already surrounded.

“Hey there, pretty ladies. Are the fish biting?” One of the mercenaries said to give his friends time to finish the encirclement.

“Get ‘em!”

The men charged as one.

The clear stream was dyed red with rivulets of crimson.

“So, who the heck were these men?” One of the women asked in thickly accented Kuwolese. She tightened her belt and looked over at her two companions.

“I think Lord Peshmet said they were fugitives who killed the king or something.”

“Pesh...met? Who is... Oh wait, he’s that old guy who always gives us meji, right?” The youngest girl asked with a smile.

“He’s the ruler of a city—you can’t just call him an ‘old guy.’ Show him some proper respect.”

“I know, I know. I like meji bread, so anyone who gives us meji has to be a good person.”

“You don’t get it at all, do you?” The woman who was tightening her belt said with a sigh, then looked down at the corpses of the seven mercenaries who’d attacked them. Their bodies had been ravaged, and their clothes were drenched in blood.

“Hey, sis, does this mean we can kill everyone who comes here wearing armor?”

“Not necessarily. Lord Peshmet said to wait until we’re attacked before fighting back. Some of the people coming are supposed to be our allies, like this guy called Lord Veight, so we can’t just kill off everyone we see.”

“God, what a pain...” The youngest girl raised her head and perked her ears up. “Sounds like there’s more coming. Maybe ten or so this time? They’re

around Turtle Rock.”

“Oh, so they are. That’s a big group.” The eldest sister frowned and placed a hand on her cheek while the middle sister grinned. “Not big enough to beat us, though.”

“Yeah, but we don’t know whose side they’re on yet. Let’s hide the corpses for now.”

A couple of minutes later, a group of cavalry wearing the same style of armor as the earlier mercenaries appeared by the stream. However, these men didn’t have their weapons out. The sisters watched them warily, and the group’s leader nudged his horse forward and introduced himself.

“Excuse me, ladies. I am the vice-captain of Encaraga’s defense force, Haluam’s son, Kumluk.” The well-built man dismounted from his horse. “I’m searching for my advance party which I sent to scout out ahead. I don’t suppose you happened to see them?”

We overtook Zagar after leaving Peshmet and were now in one of the villages of the mountain tribe that lived halfway up Mount Kayankaka. Most of their settlements were in or around the crumbling ruins of an ancient city that had once existed here. The tribesmen appeared to have a rather modest lifestyle, but they were by no means impoverished. It was clear the villages had more than enough food, and the tribe members’ clothes were colored with vibrant, luxurious dyes. The buildings were all made of wood, but they were sturdy and well-ventilated.

After presenting the tribe elder with a dragonscale gem as a gift, I then introduced myself.

“It’s an honor to meet you. I am Veight Von Aindorf, werewolf of the Demon Army, member of Meraldia’s Commonwealth Council, and Vice-Commander to the Demon Lord.”

“Welcome, Veight. This is my first time meeting with a werewolf.”

The kindly-looking elder nodded and accepted my gift. There were a lot of rules and customs in Kuwol regarding gift-giving, and the fact that he’d accepted mine meant he had no intention to fight. He examined the glittering

jewel for a few seconds, then carefully put it down on a nearby table. He then raised his palms into the air.

“Spirits of my forebears, your blessing has graced us with this divine treasure. Guest to my home, may the blessings of my forebears go with you.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” I said, bowing slightly.

When we’d stopped in Peshmet, the viceroy had taught me a little about mountain tribe etiquette. Guests were supposed to bow as low as the chieftain indicated with his raised hands. How high the chief raised their hands showed just how welcome a guest was. If they were unwelcome, the chieftain would put their hands so low you’d have to press your head against the floor. The short elder was doing his best to raise his hands as high as possible, so I barely had to incline my head.

Smiling, the elder said, “I see you took the time to learn our customs. We would like to repay the favor by learning yours.”

“You honor me.”

Back on Earth, it was normal for Japanese people to study up on the customs of whatever place they go to visit, but in this world, it appeared that wasn’t the case. At the very least, the elder seemed surprised that a foreigner had gone out of their way to learn about his tribe.

“Incidentally—”

Before he could say anything more, I heard a commotion outside. The chieftain and I exchanged glances, then got to our feet. As we walked out he muttered, “Your warning was well-timed, Veight.”

Upon stepping out of his house, I was greeted with exactly the sight I expected to see.

“We’re back, elder!” A grinning young girl shouted, a bag of swords and spears slung over her shoulder. Behind her was a group of mounted, unarmed mercenaries—all of whom looked terrified. When I saw Kumluk among them, I breathed an audible sigh of relief. *Thank god you didn’t get killed.* Two older women were at the head and the rear of the line of mercenaries to make sure they didn’t try anything funny. All three of the girls were wearing mountain

tribe clothing. Normally, it'd be strange for ten trained mercenaries to be afraid of three unarmed women, but I wasn't surprised by their reaction. If anything, it would have been strange for them *not* to be terrified of these girls.

"Kumluk!" I shouted, and he looked up in surprise.

"...Lord Veight?!"

I walked over, and Kumluk hurriedly dismounted from his horse. The girl at the head of the group turned around and shouted, "Hey, no one said you were allowed to get off!"

I smiled at her and said, "Don't worry, he's not dangerous. I promise he won't cause a scene."

"You sure? Actually, wait, who even are you, Uncle?"

"Uncle...?" I repeated, flabbergasted. The oldest of the girls bopped the younger one on the head.

"Owwwww!"

She then gave the youngest girl a noogie and said, "Lord Veight is a general visiting from another country! Did you already forget what Lord Peshmet said? He's the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander!"

"Owowowowowowow! I didn't forgeeeeeeeet!"

I can't believe...I'm old enough that people are calling me "uncle" now... This was the first time someone had called me that since I'd reincarnated, so it came as a bit of a shock.

The eldest girl smiled and said, "I'm terribly sorry about my sister, Lord Veight, but you don't need to look so shocked. In Kuwolese 'uncle' just refers to anyone who's married. It has nothing to do with *age*."

"It's fine, I'm not upset."

I know Lord Peshmet said he'd told the mountain people about me, but why did he tell them about my marital status too? Well, whatever, that's not important right now. I turned back to Kumluk, who looked like he wasn't following along at all, and said, "Thank goodness you're alive, Kumluk. You're not hurt, are you?"

“N-No, I’m fine... But I just saw something terrifying enough to give me a heart attack.”

“I assumed as much.”

The fact that Kumluk and his men were still alive proved they’d made the right choice. If that was the case, then I could probably convince the elder to leave them in our custody—or so I’d hoped, but it appeared the situation was a bit more complicated than that.

When I turned to the elder he shook his head and said, “Those men’s comrades attacked my people.”

“How reckless can you get...” Fahn, who was my guard for today, muttered. She gave Kumluk a pitying look and said, “Bet you thought you were gonna die, huh?”

“Yes, I never imagined such beautiful women would suddenly...” He trailed off, realizing it might come off as an insult if he described what they’d suddenly done. The last thing he wanted was to make these three girls mad.

Apparently, Zagar’s advance scouts had gone and caused trouble already, so now the people of Mount Kayankaka saw his mercenaries as their enemy. I’d let my guard down because he’d kept his men in line while in the capital, but now that I thought about it, these guys were still just glorified bandits. *Why do you people always make the worst possible choices at every turn?* Sighing, I turned back to the elder again.

“Kumluk is like the mercenaries’ conscience. We’ll need him if we want to convince them to retreat without attempting to raid your villages.”

My plan was to have Kumluk reorganize the mercenaries and lead them back to town after I’d taken care of Zagar. He was decently popular within the unit, and his administrative skills were necessary to keep the mercenaries in line.

The elder grinned and said, “Why bother asking them to retreat when we can just annihilate the lot of them? It’s been a while since our tribe’s had a good fight.”

Why is everyone such a warmonger? Seeing as the elder was raring to go, I decided to try a different tack.

“Err, in that case, could you at least spare Kumluk and his men?” I asked.

“We’ll have to investigate whether or not he’s committed any crimes in Kayankaka before we can do that. If he’s innocent, we’ll believe the people he leads are, too.”

And how exactly do you plan to investigate that? Just as I thought that, the villagers started preparing something behind me. A few minutes later, Kumluk walked over to the table they’d readied, wary of the armed tribesmen all around him. Worried, he looked around and asked, “What’s going to happen to me, Lord Veight?”

That’s what I want to know. The elder looked down at Kumluk and declared, “Kumluk, son of Haluam. We will now hold your trial.”

Someone placed a plate of dried beans in front of Kumluk. *The heck?*

“Those are judgment beans, a special legume that grows only in Kayankaka’s sacred sanctuary. Their holy properties have the power to slay sinners.”

Kumluk looked down at the plate in shock. I doubted mere beans had that kind of power, but I knew Kuwolese people were superstitious. Kumluk at least looked sufficiently terrified of them.

With a gentle expression on his face, the elder said, “Prove your innocence by eating these beans, Kumluk. If you truly have committed no crime, then they shall not kill you.”

“I-I’m innocent, I swear.”

“Then prove it.”

The elder pointed to the plate of beans. Kumluk was getting overwhelmed by the atmosphere. It wasn’t surprising, since his men had been restrained, and villagers were staring menacingly at him while fingering their axes and hatchets. If he failed the trial, it was obvious what fate awaited him and his men.

“Y-You want me to eat these beans?”

“Yes. Now hurry up.”

The elder glared at Kumluk, seemingly running out of patience. I had actually heard about this ritual before. As things stood, this was a bad situation for

Kumluk, so I shouted in Meraldian, “*Gueita!*”

Both the villagers and Kumluk turned to me. The elder asked politely, “Is something wrong?”

I calmly replied, “I simply told him ‘good luck’ in Kuwol’s coastal dialect.”

“I see. I’m afraid I must ask you to refrain from speaking during the ritual.”

“My apologies, it won’t happen again.”

Kumluk was proficient in Meraldian. There was no way he’d mistake the actual meaning of what I’d said. Cold sweat dripped down his pale face as he looked at me. I nodded, trying to encourage him. Gathering his resolve, Kumluk lifted the plate with both hands and poured all of the beans into his mouth at once. He crunched on them loudly, then forced them down his throat. Everyone watched in silence to see what would happen. After a few seconds, Kumluk started retching violently.

“Gah! Blegh! Gwooh!”

One of the tribesmen casually brought a bucket over, and Kumluk threw up into it. Eventually, the vomiting subsided, and Kumluk raised his head. He’d gone from pale to deathly white, but he was still alive. I turned to the elder with a grin.

“He’s still alive.”

“So it seems. His innocence has been proven.” The elder raised his hands into the air and shouted, “The trial is done! The holy land of Kayankaka has judged this man to be guiltless! He and his men are innocent! Untie them and welcome them as guests!”

The terrified mercenaries slumped to the ground, relieved. Kumluk was released as well, and the mountain people offered them a modest meal. The mercenaries were half-forced to eat the grilled venison and fresh fruit served to them. They’d just seen their boss puke up a plateful of poisonous beans so none of them had much of an appetite, but they ate regardless so as to not anger their hosts. From the looks of things, they weren’t able to taste the food at all. *Poor guys.* At some point during the meal, I had a chance to talk privately with Kumluk for a few minutes.

“Thank you so much, Lord Veight,” he said, bowing his head. “Had you not told me to ‘eat it all in one go’ I would have been too scared to do more than nibble on them one by one.”

“If you’d done that, you would have been killed for a crime you didn’t commit.”

In my past life, I’d read about a bean known as the “calabar bean.” It possessed a slow-acting deadly toxin, but it also had a slightly nauseating effect. If you ate it in small doses, the nausea would barely register, and the poison would kill you. However, if you consumed a bunch at once, you’d feel like throwing up, which would save your life. I’d read that there were indigenous tribes who used this exact same method to trial people back on Earth. There was a similar species of bean in Meraldia as well, and it was used for a similar purpose. The one back home was called “sinner’s bean.” I suspected the species used in Kuwol was the exact same, considering the climate.

The idea was that those who didn’t feel guilty would eat the plate all at once and thus survive while those that did would slowly nibble on the deadly plant and succumb to the poison. Kumluk had been lucky. I explained all of this to him with a friendly smile.

“I just didn’t want to see a good, honest person like you die for a crime you didn’t commit. The elder probably didn’t appreciate me interrupting his sacred ritual, but to me, your life is more important.”

“Lord Veight...” Kumluk did his best to look composed, but I could see the tears spilling from his eyes. “Why would you...risk so much for someone like me?”

“Like I said, it’s because you’re a good person.”

Kumluk covered his face with his hands and bit his lip, his shoulders trembling.

—The Stirrings of Ambition: Part 8—

“Stop moving so slow! Don’t break formation! At this rate, it’ll be dark before we set up camp!” Zagar shouted to the cavalry trotting up behind him.

The sun was beginning to set, and the entire party was in the forest. The mercenaries timidly snapped their reins, but they weren't trained horsemen, and their horses weren't warhorses. Before long, the formation started to crumble again.

"Shit. The whole reason I shrunk my unit down to five hundred men was so we could all have horses, but..."

The reason for Zagar's unease was the fact that most of the scouts he'd sent out hadn't returned. He doubted there were any enemies waiting to ambush him up ahead, but if his scouts hadn't been killed it meant they were deserting. If there were deserters, that meant his command over the men was falling apart. Up until now, Zagar hadn't had a single deserter from his unit. *This isn't good...but I just have to hold on until I get my hands on the Valkaan Orb and then none of this matters.*

"Hey, what happened to Kumluk's squad?"

"They still haven't returned, sir..."

The man's reply only served to increase Zagar's unease. He doubted a man as loyal as Kumluk would desert him. That meant either Kumluk had either been attacked by someone or gotten lost. *Should I have everyone dismount and prepare for a potential ambush?* Zagar's unit was currently marching through a narrow forest path. His men were used to chaotic melees, but not to fighting on horseback. If they were ambushed now, his unit would almost certainly get wiped out. He was aware of how dangerous it was to advance into uncharted territory while his scouts were missing. *But if I don't brave this kind of danger, my final opportunity will slip through my fingers...* Zagar steeled himself for the trials to come.

According to *The Secrets an Heir Must Know*, there were less than 1000 mountain people, and they had only a few villages scattered across the slope. At most, they had maybe 100 trained warriors. A force that small was no match for Zagar's mercenaries. However, the problem was that his unit's morale was low. Because he was officially looking for the missing king, his men hadn't been able to pillage the towns they'd passed. Of course, it was unlikely that he'd actually get into a fight, but expeditions were always a risky endeavor. *I need to*

do something to raise everyone's morale...and fast.

Making up his mind, Zagar shouted, "Listen up, everyone! We're almost to the mountain tribe's villages! Those bastards aren't Kuwolese, so Kuwol's laws don't apply here! You know what that means, right?!"

The mercenaries started muttering excitedly to each other. They finally had permission to loot and pillage to their heart's content.

Zagar added, "From what I've heard, their women are all ravishing, too. Though, they're all dark-skinned barbarians."

"Ohhhh..."

The mercenaries' lips curled up into vulgar smiles. Zagar smiled as well, glad that his unit's morale was restored. *Honestly, I have no idea if the mountain women are hot. Whatever, once I become a War God, it won't matter if these guys stay loyal or not.* For a moment, Zagar stopped to consider what might happen if he failed to get his hands on the Valkaan Orb. *I'm past the point of no return. Either I realize my ambitions, or I die.*

Realizing he was getting desperate, Zagar said, "The palace probably expects us to be gone for a while. Let's take our time and have some fun raiding the villages!"

"I'm afraid I can't allow that," a voice Zagar recognized replied. He looked in front of him and saw a single man blocking his mercenaries' path.

"Veight?! What the hell are you doing here?!" he shouted in disbelief.

With a sympathetic sigh, Veight replied, "You're the one who dug your own grave, Zagar."

"What?"

There was no equivalent for the saying "dug your own grave" in Kuwolese, so the nuance of what Veight said was lost on him. Despite this, Zagar still understood that Veight was here as his enemy.

"Kill him!" Zagar snarled.

"Now hold on a second!"

Veight held out his hands and gestured for Zagar to calm down, but the mercenary captain drew his sword and ordered his men to charge. *I have an overwhelming advantage in numbers here. Even if a ton of my men die, I should be able to take him out!* Zagar knew on an instinctive level that as long as Veight lived, nowhere in the world was safe for him.

Veight didn't run as the mercenaries charged him. He simply brought the staff in his hands up to eye level and pointed one end at them. *What's that?* An indescribable fear gripped Zagar's heart. A second later, a bright flash filled the twilight forest, making it look like it was noon again.

"Gyaaah!"

"Grah, my eyes!"

"Waaaaaaah?!"

Screaming in pain, the mercenaries fell from their horses. Their horses collapsed as well, tripping the group that was following close behind them.

"What?! What happened?!"

Despite the danger he sensed, Zagar spurred his horse into a gallop. He knew that if he didn't, he'd be trampled underfoot by the unit charging behind him. Moreover, his sixth sense as a mercenary was telling him he'd die if he stayed in place. A second later, the spots in front of and behind his unit glowed brighter than the midday sun.

"Gaaah!"

"Gyaaaaaaah!"

There was screaming all around Zagar, and the nearby horses were panicking. They weren't trained warhorses, so the flashes were spooking them so hard their riders couldn't control them.

"Waaaah?! Help!"

"Hey, don't run into me!"

"You're the one who ran into me!"

The confused mercenaries started yelling at each other, even though this was

no time for infighting. As the seconds ticked by, the number of mercenaries still capable of fighting continued to dwindle. Zagar drove his horse forward and noticed that the people he was passing had their shoulders or heads caved in.

“Spread out! Watch out above you! He’s dropping something onto us from above!”

A second later, streaks of light rained down on the clumped mercenaries. It was like a meteor shower.

“Aaargh!”

“Run! Escape into the forest!”

A few of the mercenaries tried to drive their horses into the dense undergrowth, but the horses were terrified by whatever was in the trees, and refused to go in that direction.

“H-Hey, move!”

“Gaaah!”

The relentless torrent of light continued picking off the mercenaries who were rooted in place. *What’s going on?! Did he prepare more than just this strange new weapon that’s attacking us from above?* Upon closer inspection, Zagar realized there were soldiers waiting to ambush them in the forest as well. He had no way of telling how many, but clearly it was enough. The light raining down from above wasn’t constant, but the flashes were so bright they blinded the horses. Because they were panicking, Zagar’s unit couldn’t flee *or* counterattack. However, Zagar’s own warhorse was trained for this kind of situation, and it continued carrying him along the small dirt path.

A brief glance made it clear that his unit had been completely decimated. There were still a good number of survivors among them, but they’d lost control of their horses—and even if they hadn’t, they’d all lost the will to fight. *Bunch of worthless morons!* Zagar used his panicking men as shields and wove his way forward. Veight had no guards with him. Zagar suspected he’d hidden all of his men in the trees for this ambush. The only safe path of retreat was directly behind him, but Zagar had a feeling Veight had accounted for that. In other words, there was nowhere for him to flee.

My only hope is to slip past him! Veight was mowing down the few mercenaries still charging with his mysterious weapon. His aim was impeccable, and each shot brought another man down. However, Zagar was still able to use those men as meat shields, and he successfully managed to gallop past Veight. *I did it!* Veight saw Zagar leap past him, but he was too busy shooting down the mercenaries to turn around and chase after Zagar. Everything was going exactly as Zagar had hoped.

“Hey, get back here!”

“Boss, what are you doing?! You let one of ‘em escape! Zagar’s running away!”

Zagar heard people shouting behind him, and a few beams of light streaked past him, but none hit. *Looks like Lady Luck’s on my side... Or perhaps this is just fate?* Zagar’s ungodly luck gave him courage, and he spurred his horse on. Before long, he’d left the tumult of the battle behind and was surrounded by darkness. Relying on his memory of the map he’d seen in the book, he guided his horse to where the Valkaan Orb was supposed to be. Apparently, it was enshrined in a stone temple halfway up the mountain.

Because he kept his horse at a gallop the whole time, it was frothing at the mouth by the time he reached the temple. He dismounted, ignoring his horse’s exhaustion, and dashed over to the temple’s gate. *I’m finally here!* All he had to do now was grab the orb and his dreams would be realized.

Before he could go inside, he heard a voice behind him, “...So this is your final answer, Zagar?”

“Wha—?!”

He whirled around and saw Veight standing a short distance away, a sad expression on his face.

“Wh-When did you get here?!”

“Don’t think you can ever escape from a werewolf. We’ve spent millennia hunting your kind.”

Veight slowly walked up the temple’s stone steps. Zagar drew his sword, but as Veight made his way up, he began to transform. Fur darker than night

covered his entire body, which grew to almost double its original size. The light of the full moon shone down on him, giving his coat a glossy sheen.



“The Valkaan Orb you seek isn’t here. This temple is where the mountain tribe’s ancestors judged sinners. You were led here by false information, Zagar.”

“What?!”

Zagar tried to ready his blade, but he was too intimidated by Veight’s appearance. He knew full well he couldn’t win this fight—especially since the members of Veight’s pack were beginning to gather around him. There were 14 werewolves in total—meanwhile, Zagar was by himself.

“This is where your ambition ends.”

As he declared that, the werewolves around him let out a blood-curdling howl.

I showed Zagar the formal arrest warrant I’d received from the master of ceremonies.

“You’re under arrest for murdering the king.”

“Fuck...”

Zagar understood now that any position he might have had in high society was gone now. He could no longer return to the capital, and he would be a fugitive wherever he went within Kuwol’s borders. He was well and truly trapped. He showed no signs of resisting, so I had my werewolves take him away.

Just then, Vodd showed up with his squad.

“We’re done inspecting the battlefield. There are some unlucky fellows who’re still alive.”

That’s an odd choice of wording.

“Why are they unlucky?”

Vodd grimaced, then let out a small sigh. “Because there’s no saving them now. I’ve seen a lot of people end up like that during my mercenary days. Even you can’t regenerate lost limbs, right kid?”

“Unfortunately...”

I was an expert at strengthening magic, not surgery. Not only could I not

regenerate severed limbs, but I also couldn't even replenish lost blood. The most I could do was sterilize the wounds and help close them up, but people who'd lost too much blood would need a transfusion or they'd die anyway. Indeed, another werewolf showed up a few minutes later to let me know all the prisoners had died.

Blast Rifles were just too strong. You could theoretically lower their firepower by using less mana per shot, but then they wouldn't have any range either.

Vodd turned to me and gruffly muttered, "I finally understand why you're so obsessed with using those newfangled Blast Rifles every chance you get."

"Where'd that come from?"

"We took on five hundred men with forty-eight werewolves this time around. In other words, we were outnumbered ten-to-one."

Vodd looked up at the night sky.

"...If we went up against ten times our number of armed men, normally we'd take some losses—even werewolves aren't invincible—but we came out of this fight without a single werewolf getting hurt. On top of that, we slaughtered every single one of our enemies."

"Yeah."

Everyone had transformed and rained death on Zagar's men from the treetops. They were sitting ducks for us, while their swords and spears couldn't even reach the werewolves hiding in the trees.

Vodd stroked one of his old battle scars and mused, "That wasn't even a battle...it was a massacre. Like slaughtering a field of cows. I felt like I was doing a butcher's work, not a soldier's." There was a deep sadness in his voice. "These Blast Rifles are handy, and they're powerful. I guarantee you they're gonna change the way wars are fought once everyone has them. But you know, it doesn't really feel like I'm using a proper weapon. Just a tool for murder."

I guess? Vodd patted the mass-produced Blast Cane model he was using for this mission and sighed.

"We're about to enter an era where everyone just shoots at each other with

these things. To be honest, I don't wanna be on a battlefield like that. Pulling the trigger isn't fun, and getting shot doesn't sound too fun either." He smiled to himself. "Thinking back on it, I was born at the perfect time to be a mercenary. I got to enjoy war before it got ruined."

"Enjoy war, huh..."

Only a werewolf would ever say war's fun.

A short time later, the mountain people came over after touring the battlefield.

"To think you were able to annihilate five hundred horsemen in such a short period of time..."

"Not only that, but all of the werewolves are unscathed."

"We might have underestimated these guys."

I smiled to myself as I listened to the elder's conversation with his companions. I felt bad for killing the mercenaries like that, but their sacrifices helped showcase just how powerful Meraldia's demon army was to this tribe. Demons deferred to the strong on principle, so hopefully this meant the mountain tribe respected us more now. In fact, it was possible they had a high enough opinion of us that I'd be able to follow through with one of the more brazen plans I'd come up with.

First off, though, we needed to figure out what to do with Zagar.

The mountain tribe's elder walked over to me and said, "Veight, thank you for eliminating the ruffians who dared to trespass on our lands."

"Don't mention it. If anything, this is our fault for letting the royal family's secret slip to a man like him. We were just cleaning up after our mess."

I had no intention of ever telling him that we hadn't "let the secret slip," but rather used it as bait to lure Zagar out. The mountain people looked over at Zagar.

"I heard what this man said about us upon entering our territory. He sorely underestimated my clan. We're friends with the flatlanders who live close by,

but this man is no friend of ours.”

“Yeah, we don’t trust him.”

“Plus he’s weak.”

At that final comment, Zagar snapped. “You wanna say that again?! I’m the undefeated mercenary captain, Zagar!”

“Didn’t you just lose five minutes ago?”

“Yeah, you’re *real* weak.”

You guys really like kicking him while he’s down, huh? I glanced back and realized it wasn’t even the mountain people who were insulting him, it was my own werewolves. Considering how much they’d seen of his bad side, I couldn’t really blame them for having pent-up resentment against him.

His expression dead serious, Zagar turned to the chief of the mountain tribe and said, “I won’t beg for my life, but know this, I am not *weak*! Whether it’s commanding an army from the rear or leading the front lines myself, there’s no one stronger than I! I’m a true warrior!”

“Hmm...”

The mountain people exchanged glances, debating over what to do. *I’d rather you not take his side, please.* That being said, I fully intended to respect their decision. There was a silent conversation held through just glances, after which the elder finally came to his conclusion.

“Very well, Zagar. If you truly believe yourself to be a mighty warrior, prove your worth through the Divine Duel.”

“Huh?” Zagar frowned in confusion.

The elder explained, “Since ancient times, the people of Kayankaka have used the Divine Duel as a trial to see whether or not one is worthy of power beyond mortal ken.” The elder pointed to the temple’s stone steps. “That temple just so happens to be where the trial is held. This is your one chance to reclaim your honor. If you prove to us that you are indeed as great a warrior as you claim, we shall spare you.” He smirked slightly. “Assuming you survive the trial, anyway.”

After hearing the rules of the Divine Duel, I offered to be Zagar’s second.

“What are you playing at, you bastard?” he spat.

I sighed and replied, “I’m the one who drove you into a corner and caused you to self-destruct. The least I can do is take responsibility for that until the very end.”

“You think I’m going to die here?”

“Absolutely. There’s no way for you to make it out of this alive. Officially, this is a duel, but it may as well be your execution.”

Among the various forms of human sacrifice the Aztecs practiced, duels were one of them. The sacrificial victim would have a weight tied to their leg and be forced to fight with a bouquet and a feather plume instead of a sword and shield. In other words, they were rendered almost completely helpless. Meanwhile, the warrior chosen to duel them would be an elite soldier armed to the teeth. It was obvious who the victor would be before the battle even began. The duel Zagar was about to fight was fashioned in a similar vein, but it seemed he wasn’t aware of it.

“Maybe I’d be doomed if I was up against a werewolf, but these guys are just barbarians. Not only that, it’s a bare-handed one-on-one duel. There’s no way I’ll lose here.”

More like there’s no way you’ll win here, but I’m not allowed to explain anything else, so have fun, I guess. In truth, there was a mountain-load of things I wanted to tell Zagar. I also wanted to ask him what drove him to kill his king and one of his own men. There was almost certainly a better way for him to have gotten what he wanted without killing people. Most of all, I wanted to ask him what made him so callous that he didn’t care what happened to others as long as he was sitting pretty. I wanted to grill him on all of these things and more but what came out of my mouth instead was, “No matter how hard you struggle, you will never be king.”

“Where’d that come from?”

“Those who care for nothing but their own well-being can never rule. A true king is someone who wants for nothing. Not money, not honor, not fame.”

Zagar sneered at that. “Would an unambitious guy like that even want to be

king?”

“Probably not, but I once knew a king who was exactly as I described.”

A memory of Friedensrichter hunched over in his study, poring over reports, flashed through my mind. He had undoubtedly devoted his entire life to bettering the lives of others. He’d poured his soul into making the people around him happy, and at the very end, he’d fought and died for those who followed him. In my mind, he was the perfect example of a true king. I would never be even half the man he was.

I got to my feet and looked down at Zagar, who was still sitting.

“I’ve met a true king. I know what they’re like. It’s why I know I’m not fit to be one myself. No matter how much time passes, I will always be nothing more than the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander.” I glared angrily at Zagar. “You lack the qualifications of a king. If you couldn’t even beat a king’s second, what makes you think you’ll ever sit on the throne?”

Zagar got to his feet with a huff and threw his sword belt at me.

“I don’t have time to listen to your bullshit philosophy. Lecture me all you want after I’ve won my duel.”

As I caught the sword belt, a voice called out to Zagar from the arena, “Step forward, challenger!”

Zagar turned back to me with a confident grin. “Thanks, Veight. If I die here, I’ll at least be able to die as a warrior instead of as a criminal. No matter how the cards fall, this is a better fate than being beheaded in Encaraga.”

“You never struck me as the kind of man to care about how he dies.”

“I want to stay true to myself until the very end. Even if I have to trample over other people to do it, I won’t stop being me.”

With those parting words, Zagar walked into the arena.

The arena resembled an ancient Roman colosseum—though it was much smaller, it still had enough room to seat everyone present. There were burning braziers set around the arena’s perimeter at regular intervals, and the arena

was brightly-lit. Waiting for Zagar in the stone fighting pit was a lone woman wearing rather revealing clothing. *She's the one who captured Kumluk, isn't she?* Zagar grinned confidently.

"So my opponent is one unarmed woman?"

She smiled back and replied, "I'm more than enough to beat one unarmed man."

Following the custom of all warriors who lived in this region, she formally named herself to her foe.

"I am a member of the Kayankaka tribe, daughter of Ornte, Elmersia!"

"I am Jakarn's son, Zagar."

"...Did you say Jakarn?" Elmersia smirked. Jakarn had been Kuwol's last War God. She unwrapped her belt and spread her arms out wide. Her stance looked like the start of a ceremonial dance. "You're a funny guy. I kinda like you."

"If you like me now, then you'll *love* me when I'm through with you." Zagar also unwrapped his belt, then bent his legs and lowered his center of gravity. His stance was ideal for wrestling an armed soldier to the ground in close combat.

After a few seconds of tense silence, the elder shouted, "Begin!"

The time had finally come to see Zagar's final moments. Elmersia kicked off the ground and transformed mid-leap into a tiger. Her fur was black, with gold stripes. She was one of the old demon races that didn't exist in Meraldia—a werecat.

"Raaaaaaaah!"

Elmersia launched a flying roundhouse kick at Zagar, who still hadn't moved an inch. That wasn't surprising, since a human's kinetic vision couldn't even keep up with her speed. Her leg sliced through the air and slammed right into Zagar's head. The poor ambitious fool died in an instant, with blood and brains flying everywhere. Never again would he be able to dream of glory. *Rest in peace.*

As she landed, Elmersia returned to her human form. *Damn, she's fast.* Since

she'd taken off her belt, her loose clothes hadn't ripped when she transformed—though they were disheveled. A few seconds later, Zagar's headless body thudded to the ground.

“Elmersia is the victor!”

As the mountain people cheered, I silently offered a prayer to Zagar.

With this, Zagar and his mercenaries were finished. There were nothing but small fries left in his regiment, so they'd probably let themselves be assimilated into the capital garrison.

I smiled wanly at Elmersia and said, “Well fought, Lady Elmersia.”

“It was an honor to get revenge for the king with these hands... Not that I've ever met the guy.” The beautiful woman smirked, dropping the formal act almost immediately.

“According to *The Secrets an Heir Must Know*, the werecat tribe are guardians of the royal family's bloodline. Why did you guys decide to serve them?” I asked, curious.

Elmersia grinned and replied, “Because our tribe accompanied Kuwol's first king on his journey to recover all of the artifacts that can create Valkaan.”

Long ago, there were tons of War Gods—also known as Valkaan in Kuwolese—running rampant across the land. Each was the same as what we called “Heroes” and “Demon Lords.” Naturally, there were no stable nations on this continent during that time. A single War God could crush armies hundreds of thousands strong, and there were dozens of them fighting each other every generation. Even if a War God did try to build a country, another would inevitably come and kill them, after which their newly minted country would collapse in a chaotic mess.

That cycle of countries rising and falling in the span of decades pained one of the legendary leaders who lived during that era. It was unclear whether he'd been a human or a demon, but he'd gathered like-minded comrades and started collecting all of the artifacts that created War Gods. He may have been one himself, too, but no one knew for sure. The legends were unclear as well.

Regardless, after decades of fighting and countless sacrifices, he succeeded in confiscating every single War God-producing artifact and eliminating every War God who opposed him. Some of them joined his camp and fought together with him, but most were eradicated. From what I'd read, the war had been intense, but once the battle was over, our "Hero" created a new nation where everyone could live in peace. That nation was, of course, Kuwol, and he became its first king.

"After the war, we werecats returned to our home territory, the source of the Mejire. Since then, we've been keeping watch over the artifacts."

In other words, it was thanks to the mountain people that Kuwol hadn't seen any major strife for centuries. The more I learned about Kuwol's history, the more I realized why everyone was afraid of the royal family's bloodline dying out. That being said, I still had a duty to recover any Hero-making artifacts I found. Judging by what I'd just heard, there were quite a few of them here.

On the other hand, there weren't very many werecats. The tribe's numbers likely didn't even reach 1000. If an army in the thousands marched up here, they wouldn't be able to hold out. It was always possible another ambitious upstart like Zagar might rally the nobles together and raise an army to march on Kayankaka. If the werecats were unable to hold them all back, it was possible some of the artifacts they guarded would get stolen. It was too dangerous to leave them here.

Trying to sound as inoffensive as possible, I asked, "...Are you sure your tribe can protect the artifacts?"

"What do you mean by that, Veight?" Elmersia asked, her smile vanishing instantly. The other werecats gathered around her. I pointed to my Blast Rifle.

"These weapons are a new invention developed by humans in an empire far to the north. If that empire brought tens of thousands of soldiers armed with these to your doorstep, could you stop them?"

"That's..." Elmersia trailed off, and the other werecats shook their heads.

"You couldn't. It's not even worth trying," I said.

"Making even a thousand crossbows is a difficult feat... I don't believe there's

any nation out there that could make that many of these complex weapons.”

I got where these guys were coming from, but they didn’t understand how terrifying humans could be. Back on Earth, the military might human nations had possessed was insane.

Getting somewhat desperate, I said, “That might be true for now, but I guarantee you the humans will find a way someday. Underestimate them and you’ll come to regret it.”

“That’s impossible...”

Looks like they still don’t believe me.

“I agree that individually, they’re powerless, but when they combine their strength, they’re far more dangerous than any Valkaan.”

At that, the elder interjected, “Don’t you think you’re underestimating the power of werecats, Veight?”

“Not at all.” I shook my head, but then decided to provoke them just a little. “But if you underestimate the might of humans, your entire clan will get wiped out. The same thing nearly happened to us werewolves.”

The elder countered with an angle I hadn’t been expecting at all, “Well, that’s hardly surprising. Werewolves are weak, after all.”

“Yeah, werecats are way stronger.”

Excuse me? I mentally fired back. “I’m sorry, what did you just say?”

“I mean, just think about it. Compared to a wolf, a tiger’s a lot stronger, right?” One of the younger werecats said somewhat apologetically.

When I saw his expression, something inside of me snapped. *You’ve got some nerve, punk.* I grinned devilishly. “So you think werewolves are weaker than werecats?”

“Aha, now things are getting fun—I mean, bad.”

Monza, who’d been keeping her distance until now, ran over. The other werewolves sensed something was off as well and started congregating around me. I watched them out of the corner of my eye while thinking of how best to

clear up this little misunderstanding.

“In terms of pure strength, werewolves and werecats are equal. If anything, we’re probably better at hunting in packs than you.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding.”

“Even a pack of wolves can’t take down a tiger.”

You stubborn idiots!

“Hold on, even when we transform, our skeletal structure from the neck down stays mostly human,” I reasoned. “We’re roughly the same size while transformed, too, so what do our abilities have to do with real wolves and tigers?”

“Sorry, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, you’re not making sense!”

Dammit, these guys are demons through and through.

“I see you’re not very smart.” I took off my cape and handed it to Monza. “I’m afraid none of you would stand a chance against a werewolf. In fact, I could take all of you down just by myself.”

“What?!”

The werecats started surrounding me. Some of the werewolves squared off against them and small scuffles started breaking out. *I guess, in the end, might always makes right.* I pointed to the stone arena and shouted, “I demand a Divine Duel for the right to take your Valkaan artifacts and to uphold the honor of the werewolf race! I’ll fight anyone you want me to!”

My werewolves stared at me in shock.

“What the hell, Veight?!”

“What’re you doing, Veight?!”

“Ahaha, the boss’s bad habit is back again.”

“Stop laughing and do something, Monza!”

What are you guys getting so worked up for?

The werecat elder turned to me awkwardly and said, “Veight, Divine Duels aren’t a game. The loser usually has to forfeit their life. And if you’re asking for a Divine Duel to earn the right to remove the Valkaan artifacts, you’ll have to fight more than one person.” Sighing, the elder explained, “The challenger has to prove that they can protect these artifacts better than us. At the very least, you have to prove you can beat three of us at once.”

I smirked and replied, “I won’t even be able to go all-out against just three werecats. I’ll take a hundred of you on at once.”

“A-A hundred?!” Even the mild-mannered elder looked incensed at being underestimated that heavily. “Very well! Your wish is granted, Veight! Everyone, prepare yourselves! Gather our strongest hundred fighters!”

It’s been a while since I’ve had some fun. Seasoned warriors started trickling in from the nearby villages. Elmersia was among them, too. I was surprised to learn that she was the werecat tribe’s strongest fighter.

“I can’t say I understand what’s going through your head right now, Veight, but...” Elmersia muttered hesitantly, and my werewolves around me nodded in agreement.

“You said it.”

“What the hell are you thinking, boss?”

“I mean, yeah, you can probably win, but...”

They were confused for a completely different reason than the werecats. Only Fahn seemed genuinely worried for me.

“Are you absolutely sure you can win, Veight?!” she asked. “You’ll definitely come out of this okay, right?”

Fahn had been calling me “Captain” more frequently ever since I’d gotten married, but she was so flustered she was calling me just Veight again.

“How can I ever apologize to Airia if something happens to you?!”

“Fahn, I never knew you were such a worrywart.”

“Who wouldn’t be worried considering what you’re doing right now!”

I feel like it's been ages since you last got angry at me like this. I gave Fahn a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. Even when he was half-dead, Arshes was way scarier than a hundred werecats."

"The fact that you're comparing them at all means we should be worried, boy!" Jerrick exclaimed, clearly riled up by all this.

Honestly, though, ever since that battle with the Hero who'd slain Friedensrichter, none of the fights I'd gotten into felt even remotely dangerous.

Grinning in anticipation, Monza gave me a thumbs up and said, "I'm counting on you, boss."

"Don't worry, I won't let you down."

"If you die, Veight, I'm bringing you back to life so I can kill you myself."

"O-Okay?"

You're scaring me a little, here.

I stared down 100 werecats in the stone fighting pit. There were so many of them they didn't all fit within the arena even after surrounding me from all sides. Were anyone else in my position, they wouldn't stand a chance.

Elmersia smiled confidently at me and said, "I hear you're a mage. Is that true?"

"Yeah."

Her smile grew wider and she replied, "Well, you see, so am I."

What? Elmersia spread her arms wide, looked up at the full moon, and began chanting an incantation in ancient dynastic.

"Silent light of the moon, bestow victory unto me! Grant me the strength and courage to defeat my foe!"

Oh, this is the same kind of spell as my Blood Moon. She was casting generic strengthening magic on everyone to raise their basic parameters like strength and agility. It was highly effective on races like werewolves and werecats who were already strong individually to begin with. As her prayer spread across the

arena, the werecats began to transform.

“Uraaaaaah!”

“I feel so much stronger!”

“Let’s do thiiiiis!”

The warriors all had black fur with golden stripes. *Uh oh. I might have miscalculated.* They grinned at me and Elmersia asked, “Ready to die?”

“Hold on a second.” I was starting to panic a little. *I should probably apologize ahead of time, right?* I thought, then said, “Sorry, I don’t think I’ll be able to hold back now.”

“Wha—?!”

“You arrogant little shit!”

“Whatever, let’s just kill him!”

The werecats charged at me from all sides, bearing their fangs as they rushed forward. A storm of violence descended upon me. *I just said I won’t be able to hold back, guys. You really all have a death wish, don’t you?* It would be pretty difficult to dodge all the attacks coming from behind, so I decided to blunt the damage by using hardening magic. I was also using magic to bolster my consciousness, so any potential concussions wouldn’t knock me out.

“Holy crap, this guy’s head is harder than steel!”

“Our attacks aren’t doing shit to him!”

I knocked down the guys behind me with a backhand chop, then kicked another out of the ring with a roundhouse kick. There were a hundred werecats, but they couldn’t all fight me at once. Most of them were hanging back, waiting for their turn. Not only that, but their coordination was awful and they didn’t synchronize their attacks at all. Werewolves were a lot more dangerous when they came at you in numbers. They knew how to strike in unison, and also how to split into teams to make use of feints and other misdirection tactics. I took a few light blows here and there, but for the most part, I was mowing these werecats down.

Of course, while this was a serious duel, it wasn’t one to the death. Back

when the demon army was still new, division commanders often had major bouts like this to prove who was superior. One of the greatest things about demons was they didn't hold grudges over fights. Honestly, this melee kind of made me miss those days where I butted heads with Dogg.

"Bwahahahahahahaha!" I let out a maniacal laugh as I reminisced about the good old days. A few of the werecats were so startled they stiffened up for a second, giving me time to beat them to a pulp.

"What's with this guy?!"

"Why's he laughing?!"

"Watch out, he's insane!"

Why do you guys look so creeped out? Don't demons love this kind of stuff? Honestly, I may be part human, but even I enjoy fights like these. In my human form, I wasn't terribly bloodthirsty, but once I transformed, I couldn't help but revel in the thrill of battle.

I used my magic-enhanced fists to knock out one werecat after another. *Man, it feels like I'm back in the good old days when Friedensrichter was still the Demon Lord.*

"Whew, this is fun! Come on, I know you guys can put up a better fight than this!"

The more I got into the fighting, the more the werecats started distancing themselves from me.

"You're the only one having fun here!" a werecat exclaimed.

"This guy's mental!"

"Don't get scared, guys! We've still got the advantage in numbers!"

"Work together to pin him down!"

Two groups of two came at me from either side, so I leapt sideways and preemptively took out the werecats on my right. However, I turned my back long enough for the two on the left to catch up and grab my arms. They also wrapped their legs around mine to trap me in place.

“I’ve got him! Hurry, before...”

I used brute force to fling them over my shoulder before they could finish their sentence. I also kicked the one pinning my legs away. Both of them hit the ground so hard they shattered the flagstones. Fortunately, werecats were sturdy enough that I probably only gave them some light bruises. However, that display of strength was enough to drain the last of the werecats’ fighting spirit. One of them muttered, “Is this guy a Valkaan? Are you secretly Meraldia’s Demon Lord?”

“Nope.” I decided to humor the werecats’ curiosity for a bit to give me a second to catch my breath. I needed at least a few seconds. “I’m just her vice-commander.”



Grinning, I finished catching my breath and let out a massive howl. My full-power Soul Shaker was a force to be reckoned with. Shockwaves of mana rippled outward, and the physical force of the spell bowled over most of the werecats. The stronger ones were able to stay on their feet, but even they staggered backward a little. The stone floor got pulverized to the point where it looked like something out of *Dragon Ball*. The pillars supporting the colosseum shattered as well, and the walls came tumbling down.

I hadn't been sure how effective my Soul Shaker would be on werecats, but it seemed I needn't have worried. It wasn't quite powerful enough to knock literally everyone out, but Soul Shaker wasn't an offensive spell to begin with. Its main purpose was to put the surrounding mana under my control so that I could freely manipulate it. With all the arena's mana now subjugated, I could use the vortex power I'd inherited from Master to absorb it all.

I stripped the 100 werecats of their magical strengthening and turned that mana against them. It felt good to finally be using Soul Shaker for its intended purpose. *Alright, at least I managed to recover all the mana I spent during the fight.* Of the werecats that had been knocked down, half of them managed to stagger to their feet. Despite how haggard they were, they nevertheless raised their fists.

"That's the kind of backbone I want to see from the guardians of these artifacts!" I cheered.

I used an overhead throw to fling the first werecat behind me, then used a combo of other throwing techniques to dispatch the rest. Clouds of dust and gravel filled the air as the falling werecats smashed the pulverized ground even further. Every now and again one of their attacks made it through to me, but their kicks lacked weight, and their punches weren't as sharp as before.

As I continued throwing them all over the place I shouted, "Don't get scared by what I'm doing! A real Valkaan is a thousand times stronger than this!"

"You're asking for the impossible, man!"

"There's no way we can win!"

I'm serious about Heroes being that much stronger than me, though. Looking

around, I realized the only werecat still in the ring was Elmersia. Like any good mage, she'd been desperately chanting this whole time.

"Raging crimson moon, rain thunder down on— Oh, forget it!"

However, it looked like now even she was giving up. *Guess I can't blame her. I did just suck up all the mana she was trying to use.*

To use a more modern analogy, it was like she'd gone to the fridge to take out some pudding, but then I'd snatched it out of her hands the moment she opened the lid. Nothing was more frustrating for a mage than having their mana stolen from under their nose.

Elmersia glared daggers at me. I understood how she felt, but the key to a mage battle was making sure the other side couldn't cast. She slowly walked over, her glare growing in intensity.

"Fine. Let's see how you handle my secret weapon! Spirit Blade!"

Elmersia and I were both masters of strengthening magic, so I could easily read her next move. She stopped a short distance away from me and chanted, *"Claws of my ancestors! Descend unto me and..."*

She raised her claws high.

"Descend unto me..."

She tried it again.

"...Unto me?"

But her spell didn't take hold. So long as she couldn't gather any mana, she was unable to use her trump card. It didn't matter how strong it was.

Elmersia ground her teeth in frustration, which just made things awkward. It was doubly awkward since I was able to cast that same spell incantation-less. Master had drilled it into my head that the only spells that could help a mage in combat were the ones they could cast instantly. More often than not, there wasn't time to chant an incantation on the battlefield.

"Elmersia."

"What?!"

“Is this the spell you were trying to use?”

I swung my claws down and a distant pillar got sliced in half. The top segment slid to the ground with a resounding crash. The spell was extremely powerful and often just instantly killed my foes, which was why I hadn't used it for this fight. The principle behind it was the same thing that had allowed Arshes to use his mana blade. Of course, my version was way weaker than his.

Elmersia took a step backwards and shouted, “How... That's so strong... Yeah, that's right! That's the spell I was trying to use! Got a problem with that?!”

Not really. So please stop glaring at me like that.

The elder, who'd been watching the Divine Duel this whole time, sighed and said, “That's enough, Elmersia. The victor of this duel has long since been decided.”

“Elder...”

“Don't trouble Veight any further.” The elder raised both hands into the air and declared, “This duel is over! The victor is Veight!”

I took quite a few painful blows, but that was a pretty fun fight. I'd like to do this again sometime.

Unfortunately, the time for fun was over. My real work started now. This was my best opportunity to drive my point home.

As the elder walked over I bowed and said, “Thank you for granting me the opportunity to attempt a Divine Duel.”

“Err...uhh... To be blunt, I didn't think you were this strong.”

The elder rubbed his forehead awkwardly while Elmersia asked, “Are you really not a Valkaan, Veight?”

“I'm not, really.” I shook my head and added, “I know I look strong, but I wouldn't last ten seconds against a real one. They'd probably obliterate me with one attack. Not even a hundred of me could match up to one.”

“No way...”

I mean, the calculations prove that real War Gods have more than a hundred times my mana. There's no way I could beat one. The only reason I'd beat Arshes was because Friedensrichter had nearly finished him off. Had he not been on the verge of death, a mere werewolf like me wouldn't have stood a chance. These werecats were custodians of the artifacts that gave birth to War Gods, but they hadn't seen what a real one could do. In that sense, you could say they'd done a good job of safeguarding the artifacts, but that's precisely why they were ignorant to the strength of a true Hero, or Demon Lord.

I told them about the battle I'd witnessed in Grenschtat Castle. I impressed upon them just how unbelievably strong Arshes and Friedensrichter had been.

"If a true War God, a Valkaan, is born, no one will be able to stop them. Not even me. Do you understand now how important the relics you protect are?"

The werecats exchanged silent glances. I had just beaten down 100 of their best warriors. Demons instinctively deferred to those stronger than them. The senior members of the clan frowned, but then eventually nodded to each other.

Seeing that a consensus had been reached, the elder said, "You just defeated a hundred of my clansmen, I no longer have any reason to doubt your strength. I accept that these artifacts are more terrifying than we ever realized." He let out a small sigh. "It pains me to relinquish the duty we've considered an honor for so long, but as you are stronger, we shall do as you wish."

"You have my thanks." I bowed and added, "But the real threat you should be worried about isn't War Gods."

"What is it, then?"

I smiled sadly as I sifted through memories of my past life.

"Humans. There is no race out there more terrifying or more persistent than humans. In a century or two, I guarantee that they'll be the strongest force in the world. Werewolves, werecats, and all the other demon races won't be able to hold a candle to them."

No demon army would stand a chance against a modernized human nation. They would easily be able to make up for the difference in strength with powerful equipment, and their population grew faster than any other intelligent

race. As it was, Blast Rifles were powerful enough to instantly kill werewolves. Our superior strength was no longer an advantage against the people of Rolmund, at the very least. Were any nation to modernize, they would weaponize War God-creating artifacts in far more horrific ways than they had been in the past.

For example, it would be easy enough to modify one of those into a magical bomb with as much destructive force as a nuke, then drop it on a city. Even if they didn't go that far, they could use it as a power source to overcharge tens of thousands of soldiers' Blast Rifles or Blast Canes. There were already certain artifacts like Draulight's Legacy that had been designed as strategic weapons from the outset.

"The demon army is currently researching these artifacts to make sure no more tragedies come about because of them. One of our goals is to find as many of them as we can and seal away their powers."

"I see..." The elder nodded, then beckoned to me. "Very well. I shall guide you to where we keep them."

I followed him out of the temple.

"These ruins are close to a thousand years old, and not a safe place to keep powerful artifacts. That is why we built a new vault at the mountain's peak."

The elder transformed and stretched his back. Despite his age, he looked quite imposing in his transformed state. *He seems pretty strong.* He smiled, baring his fangs.

"Are you feeling up for a short run, Veight? As this is sacred territory, I'm afraid we can't take anyone else with us. It's going to be just you and me."

As he said that, the elder leapt onto the branches of a nearby tree.

"Alright, you heard the man. I'll be back soon, so just hang out here for now," I said to my werewolves, then chased after the elder.

I spotted a number of totems carved into the boulders that were along the path the elder led me down. Only magicians would be able to tell, but those totems were there to create a special barrier. While the totems had been

engraved pretty deep into the boulders, they were quite old, and I could tell they'd been repaired multiple times over the years.

"This is a barrier, isn't it?"

"Yes. It alerts all of the werecats in the mountain whenever any human or demon crosses its threshold. No one alive knows how to make these, so we rely on Elmersia and the other mages to maintain the totems we still have."

Barrier spells were one of the basic ways for mages to protect their research, so most mages in Meraldia knew at least a few. Even I could make simple ones. It seemed the mountain tribes had lost all of their old magical knowledge. I knew it was rude to think this, but the mountain tribe really was too ignorant to be left in charge of a cache of powerful artifacts. They didn't even have a mage specialist who could create new totems if their old ones broke.

Mount Kayankaka's elevation was quite high, and as we neared the peak the trees started going from deciduous to coniferous. There were also far fewer of them, and I could see the night sky clearly from here.

As he leapt from boulder to boulder the elder muttered, "I noticed...that you're looking farther forward than we are. Your concerns are for a future that none of us can even visualize."

"Yeah, I get that a lot. I know it's weird."

"I cannot fathom why it is you can see so far ahead but...perhaps that is why every one of Meraldia's Demon Lords valued you so highly." The elder nodded ponderously to himself. "If you climb this mountain, you can see the land stretch out below you, but the climb itself is quite difficult. At lower heights, the trees block your path, and up here the winds and steep cliffs mean instant death if you don't tread carefully. Moreover, the summit is our sacred sanctuary, and even members of our clan need permission to make this climb."

This is definitely a tall mountain. I bet the view from the top is gorgeous. We're already so high up that this mist might actually just be the inside of a cloud.

The elder added, "Only those who overcome numerous trials and continually hone their abilities can reach the top. If there truly is a sight visible only to

those who've endured such hardships, then I'm certain you're one of the few who can see it."

"It's an honor to hear that, but really, you're overestimating me."

Blushing a little, I glanced behind me. The sky was just beginning to brighten, and I could vaguely make out the scenery below. Numerous streams zigzagged through the forest like snakes, joining up at the source of the Mejire. Though the two vistas were nothing alike, I was reminded of the time I climbed Mount Fuji back on Earth. This really was a spectacular view.

There was a small cave inside one of the cliffs near the summit. It was pretty tiny, and looked like it could be natural. A bunch of weathered animal bones littered the floor, even.

"We've disguised it to look like a crag leopard's nest. No sane Kuwolese person would go near one. They know they'd be eaten alive."

"I see."

Disguising it as a monster nest was some pretty clever camouflage. It was pitch black inside the cave, but to my enhanced werewolf vision, it just looked like a dimly lit room. There was a hidden passage about halfway inside, which led to a sturdy metal door. My guess was the artifacts were stored behind it.

"Go on in, Veight. As the guardian of Kayankaka and the elder of the werecat tribe, I grant you permission to enter this vault."

"Thank you."

I thanked the elder, then pried the door open. The moment I stepped inside, my jaw dropped open. *I figured from the elder's story that there were more than just a few, but there's like a hundred of them here!* They came in all different shapes and sizes. Some were shaped like goblets, others like swords, and yet others like helmets. There were plenty that looked like crystal balls, too.

"...Is this all of them, Elder?"

"Yes. Though most are no longer usable. Our ancestors believed they were too powerful to be controlled, and thus deactivated them."

I bet there were a bunch like Draulight's Legacy that activated on their own.

The elder started rummaging through the pile for the remaining ones that were still working, but personally, I was more interested in the broken ones. Their magic crests were glowing, which confirmed that they were still functional, just in standby mode. I took great care not to touch any of them and started analyzing the magic circuits they contained.

“Veight, the artifacts you’re looking for are... Veight?”

Hold on a sec, I’m on the verge of a breakthrough.

“Elder, this is amazing. The way these artifacts were deactivated was masterful. There wasn’t a single wasteful decision.”

“Uhh...”

I pointed one of the artifacts out to the elder. It was a sword with a small crest glowing in the center of the blade.

“Only two of the magic circles that make up the entire circuit have been erased here. This sword won’t ever activate, but if we wanted to repair it, we could do so easily. Because of the content of the circles surrounding it, there’s only a single potential circle that could complete this circuit.”

“I-I see?”

The elder wasn’t too knowledgeable about magic, which was why he wasn’t as moved as I was. Annoyed by his tepid reaction, I explained, “This proves that your ancestors were extremely skilled mages!”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand magic very well...”

Alright, it’s lecture time.

“The werecats of old destroyed these artifacts in such a way that they would never activate on their own, nor could anyone else abuse them. At the same time, though, they did so with as much precision as possible so that their descendants could still glean valuable knowledge from them.”

With a treasure trove this large, it would be possible to analyze how to recreate these kinds of artifacts.

“Don’t you see how amazing this is? Look! For example, the mana capacity for

all of these is written down in plain language!”

“Uh-huh...”

“We still don’t know exactly how much mana is needed to give birth to a Valkaan, but if we research all of the artifacts stored here, we might be able to find an answer to that question. Or if not, at least some clues!”

Even the artifact with the smallest mana capacity would need to be able to store at least enough mana to create a War God, so we could use that as a baseline.

In order to impress upon the elder the unbelievable value of this hoard, I explained, “This isn’t just a place to seal away relics of the past. It’s a gold mine of information. The knowledge safeguarded here can change the future!”

“It can?”

“Absolutely. Even if we don’t make War Gods, the wisdom we can glean from this is enough to transform society.”

“Oho...” the elder mused, stroking his beard. “Now that sounds quite exciting. But at the same time, that’s a rather heavy responsibility to bear.”

Finally, you understand. After discussing things with the elder, he allowed me to dispatch a surveyor here later to properly catalog everything. *I should probably convince him that the defenses around Mount Kayankaka need to be strengthened too. For starters, we should get an undead army here to protect the artifacts.* While I wanted to do all this to safeguard the room, I also wanted to make sure the werecat tribe would be protected centuries down the road, when humans became much stronger. You could never let your guard down around humans, after all. There was always the possibility that they’d forget their ancient pact and try to eliminate the werecats. Humans were truly, truly, terrifying.

The elder grabbed the only working artifact and carried it outside. As I followed after him, I saw the sun crest over the horizon. The dawn’s early rays illuminated the forest at the northern base of Mount Kayankaka and caused the winding Mejire to scintillate. To the south, I saw the mountain range that

Kayankaka was a part of extending off into the distance. If I had a cell phone, I would have snapped a picture of this stunning sight and posted it online, but in this world, a view like this was reserved for those who could make the climb.

The elder basked in the morning glow for a few minutes, then proffered the orb he was carrying to me. It was about as large as a baseball, translucent, and had numerous magic circuits engraved on its interior. The way they faintly glowed made it look kind of like a snow globe. It really gave off a fantasy vibe.

“This is the last working artifact we have. It is known to us as “Jakarn’s Relic.” According to legend, when our ancestors defeated the final Valkaan, Jakarn, they sealed his powers within this orb.”

Zagar’s grinning face flashed into my mind. Up until the end, he’d continued to call himself a descendant of Jakarn. I could easily imagine just how much he would have loved to get his hands on this. *Thank god we stopped him.* I shook my head to clear him from my thoughts, then reverently accepted the orb with both hands. Following the customs of the mountain people, I held it up high.

“I humbly accept this gift. I swear to you that Meraldia’s demon army will do everything in its power to keep Jakarn’s Relic safe.”

“We put our faith in you, Veight.”

I carefully wrapped the orb up in a cloth sheet to protect it from the elements. Once we got back to the village, I was planning on packing it into a wooden box and having two squads guard it at all times.

As he watched me store the orb the elder asked, “You don’t intend to use it yourself and become a Valkaan?”

“No, there’s no need for that,” I said. *Why does everyone keep asking me that?*

He looked up at the rising sun and said in a surprised voice, “You truly are a strange man... Despite being a demon, you don’t crave power.”

“I’m already strong enough. ‘Content is the philosopher’s stone.’ Those who learn to be satisfied with what they have are the ones who achieve true happiness.”

“Oh, is that one of Meraldia’s sayings?”

“Something like that.”

Pretty sure Lao Tzu was the one who came up with it, but he doesn’t exist in this world. Once you started craving strength, there would be no end to your ambition. Even if you became a War God, next you’d want to fight other War Gods to prove your superiority over them. Kuwol’s history proved that. I wanted the era my kid would live through to be more peaceful than the one I lived through. *Oh yeah, that reminds me...*

“By the way, Elder, why is it that only this artifact is left in working condition? What happened to the mana reserves in the others?”

Smiling, the elder spread his arms wide. “Our ancestors used them to help Kuwol prosper. It’s thanks to those artifacts that this forest has grown as large as it has, and why the Mejire provides such a huge bounty to the land. Because of the constant fighting between the Valkaan, this region used to be a barren wasteland.”

“...I see.”

“However, they wanted to leave at least one in reserve in case someone needed it centuries later, so this is the one that has been passed down from generation to generation,” the elder added.

“Makes sense.”

I nodded as I looked down at the lush forest below. The werecats’ ancestors had poured all the mana stored in these artifacts into the soil to revitalize the desolate land. That reminded me of what Airia had done after becoming a Hero.

“You know, Meraldia’s Demon Lord did something similar. She used most of it to bless our territory.”

“Oho, so she arrived at the same conclusion our ancestors did?”

“Yes. I realize I’m biased since she’s my wife, but she’s a truly wise ruler.”

I smiled proudly as I boasted about her. Hopefully, that would reassure the elder that Jakarn’s Relic really would be in safe hands, though I really just wanted an excuse to talk about Airia. I ended up bragging about her for so long

that it was noon by the time we started heading down.

—The Elder's Reminiscence—

This day was undoubtedly a historical moment for our tribe. A werewolf came to visit us from beyond the sea at the northern tip of the Mejire. The man who introduced himself as Veight was unbelievably strong. He and his soldiers were able to rout a human army ten times their number without losing a single one of their brethren. Normally, a difference in numbers this striking would lead to *some* losses, even for a powerful group of demons, but his tactics were impeccable.

However, even more impressive than his leadership skill was his *power*. He took on 100 of our best warriors and beat them handily. I thought I was hallucinating at first. I had always believed werewolves to be inferior to us werecats, but Veight's strength had been equivalent to the Valkaan of legend. Despite what he said, I still believe that man to be a Valkaan himself. At the very least, I know of no demon stronger than him. Even our greatest mage, Elmersia, was but a novice by comparison. His magic was honed for combat while hers was mostly used for rituals and ceremonies. He came out of that battle practically unscathed.

It was then that I realized we had gotten complacent. After centuries of peace, we'd grown overconfident in our strength and convinced ourselves we were invincible. We no longer have the right to be the guardians of these artifacts.

Veight was unbelievably strong, but according to him, real Valkaan were even stronger. When I heard that, I could hardly contain my surprise. Furthermore, Veight claimed that humans would eventually grow stronger than Valkaan. Supposedly, they would be able to create machines that could fly through the sky and rain fire and death on the land from above. Frankly, I find that hard to believe, but Veight is stronger than us. His strength is reason enough to trust his word. For a demon, strength is necessary to survive long enough to become wise. Our kind is constantly facing hardships that can only be overcome with force. Only the strong are able to be wise.

It is for that reason that we've decided to put our faith in Veight's words and entrust our future to him. From this day onward, our tribe's goal has changed. In order to protect our past, we must forge a new future. We are entering an era where our outdated magic and superior physical prowess will no longer be enough to safeguard our artifacts from those who would use them with ill intentions. If we don't start running down the same path our werewolf counterparts are, we'll be left behind.

To the future generations who will read this, I have one final message: We must join hands with the werewolves of Meraldia to protect our tribe's sanctuary. Veight is not only strong but also a man we can trust. Learn from not only his might but his mercy as well. We must continue pushing forward so that we can stay where we are.

After sorting everything out, me and my werewolves departed the holy land of Mount Kayankaka. Traveling with us were Kumluk and his men, as well as a few werecats who'd volunteered to come along. In deference to their duty as guardians of Jakarn's Relic, I decided to let them be part of the retinue of guards taking the artifact back to Meraldia. Plus, I wanted them to be present when I told the royal family I was moving their artifact. The werecats had a longstanding relationship with the royals, so it'd help to have them around. Among the werecats who were joining us, Elmersia seemed especially excited about the upcoming journey.

"Hey, Veight."

"Yeah?"

"Is the Great Sage Gomoviroa really as amazing a mage as everyone says?"

"I mean, she's my master. She's studied a bunch of different fields of magic, and she's completely mastered necromancy. Oh, and she's been around since the fall of the Old Dynasty. I can't think of anyone who knows more about magic than her."

Master loved to gush about her students, but this was the first time I'd gushed about her. *Honestly, I should do this more often. Telling people how cool she is makes me happy.*

Frowning, Elmersia muttered, "...All our mage training consists of is following

the techniques and formulas our ancestors left behind, but I've heard you guys have ways of studying lost spells and even researching new ones." She let out a long sigh. "I never realized just how useless our magic was in actual combat. It's been so long since we've really had to fight anyone. I wouldn't stand a chance against someone armed with a Blast Rifle."

Blast Rifles could fire long-range light bullets without an incantation, so Elmersia definitely wouldn't be able to cast her spells in time.

"Me and the other shamans of the werecat tribe were thinking of studying under Master Gomoviroa so we could learn how to use more practical magic as well."

The girls standing behind Elmersia nodded emphatically. *Master is about to get a whole slew of new disciples.* Meanwhile, Kumluk looked like he was still in shock.

"The... The captain's really dead, isn't he?"

To Kumluk, Zagar had been more than just his boss—he'd been Kumluk's savior. It was hardly surprising that he was upset.

I nudged my horse over to him and said sympathetically, "Zagar was undoubtedly a legend. He was a genius when it came to warfare, and he had a surprising amount of foresight as well."

Kumluk nodded glumly, and I smiled sadly at him.

"But there were two important things that he failed to understand."

"Really?"

"Yes. The first was his lack of consideration for others."

Not only had he been ruthless towards his enemies, but he'd been just as ruthless to his own allies. To him, other people were nothing more than pawns to be manipulated and sacrificed as necessary.

"The second was his inability to be satisfied with what he had."

His burning ambition had put him in constant opposition with those in power. No one else had wanted a period of strife, but strife was the only way he could advance, so he'd kept trying to stir up trouble. Ultimately, he made everyone in

Kuwol his enemy and self-destructed.

“Zagar certainly had the ability to achieve great things. However, his never-ending thirst for glory made him greedy. It’s fine to want power, but with great power comes great responsibility. If you forget that, you’ll eventually be overthrown.”

“I’ll take your advice to heart...though I’m one of the weaklings on the other side of that equation.” Kumluk smiled weakly and looked up at the sky. “In retrospect, I suppose it was inevitable that the captain would meet a grisly end.”

“Yeah,” I said with a nod. “The royal family has decided not to publicize the fact that the king was killed by a mere mercenary captain, by the way. From what I heard, the palace ministers aren’t too happy about the decision, but the royal family won’t budge.”

“Why?”

“Kuwol’s king is supposed to be a direct descendant of the Moon God. They can’t let the citizens know a commoner was able to kill someone divine... At least, that’s their reasoning.”

It would set a bad precedent to let people know that commoners overthrowing their rulers was possible, so the official story would be that Zagar didn’t kill Pajam the Second, and that he was slain while searching for the king.

“They’re planning on telling everyone that the king was injured while traveling to a different city, and died before he could be treated. As for Zagar, they’re gonna say he tried to raid the mountain tribe’s villages but got killed by the villagers instead.”

“And that’ll put an end to this whole affair?” Kumluk asked sadly.

“Pretty much. We have to do things this way, or you might be executed for the crime of aiding and abetting a king-killer. You were his vice-commander, after all.”

“True... You’ve saved me so many times now. I can’t thank you enough, Veight. I don’t know if I can ever repay you for all that you’ve done, but truly, thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. I helped you because I wanted to.”

I smiled at him and Kumluk finally gave me a genuine smile back.

“I’ve learned far more than I should have about this entire incident. On top of that, I was Zagar’s second. There’s no way I’ll be able to stay in Kuwol now.”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t let it show, but I was grinning on the inside. Kumluk’s next words were exactly what I was expecting.

“...Once all the loose ends are taken care of, would it be alright for me to join the demon army? I wouldn’t mind being made a regular foot soldier, even.”

“What are you talking about? Someone of your caliber deserves to be my vice —”

Kite’s face popped into my head and I suddenly trailed off. *I forgot about that promise.*

“I’d like for you to serve as my aide. I’m sure your military and diplomatic knowledge will be of great use to Meraldia.”

“Thank you.”

Didn’t think I’d be scouting new talent here. It would be a huge diplomatic boon to have someone from Kuwol on my staff.

The trip to and from Mount Kayankaka took about one month in total, and it was fall by the time I returned to Kuwol’s capital. Upon entering the city, Parker greeted me with a smile.

“Welcome back, Veight. The queen safely gave birth to Kuwol’s new prince while you were gone.”

“That’s great news.”

Leaving Parker behind had been the right choice. He had a lot of medical knowledge, so he’d probably been able to help with the delivery.

I made my way into the palace so I could congratulate Queen Fasleen. She’d been feeling under the weather after giving birth, but apparently that was

pretty normal for humans—or so I'd heard, anyway. In my old life, I'd never gotten to see what people were like right after childbirth, and werewolves recovered from labor pretty much instantly. When I reached Fasleen's room, she showed me the newborn baby. He was small enough to fit in my palms, but then that was true for werewolf babies too.

Smiling happily, Fasleen said, "Would you be willing to bless him?"

"Are you sure? I'm not a Mondstrahl believer."

"It's fine. You were the one who got revenge for his father. I'm sure he'll grow up to be a strong ruler if he has the blessing of a true legend like you."

Man, you're making me blush.

"Is it okay if I bless him in the werewolf tradition?"

"Of course."

"Alright, then."

I cradled the baby in my arms and he eagerly grabbed at one of my fingers. Normally, werewolves kissed a newborn baby's lips, but that had the potential to transmit disease, so I opted for kissing his chin instead.

"May you be blessed with strong fangs to rip through your enemies and bountiful prey to feast on."

This was the same blessing adults gave newborn babies back in my village. While not all of those babies had grown up healthy and strong, most had. Had this world's medical knowledge been as advanced as Earth's, they might have all survived.

I handed the baby back to Fasleen, who smiled at me and handed it to her wet nurse.

"I've finally decided on his name. Schmal. It was the name of our family's founder, the one who defeated the Valkaan Jakarn together with his allies."

Ah, I see now. Zagar calling himself Jakarn's son was his way of rebelling against the royal family. And now, the son of the man Zagar had killed was being named after the hero who had slain Jakarn. The symbolism couldn't be more clear.

I watched Schmal wiggle around in his crib for a bit, idly musing about how babies in this world possessed the Moro reflex as well. *Come to think of it, werewolf babies had that reflex, too.* After testing for a few more reflexes, I got shooed away by Schmal's wet nurse.

"Lord Veight, Prince Schmal isn't a toy!"

"It's fine. Lord Veight, I hope you'll be a friend to Schmal once he grows up."

She gave me a slightly worried look as she said that so I nodded reassuringly and replied, "Of course. Meraldia is Kuwol's ally. Schmal has our full support as the rightful heir to Kuwol's throne."

The more Kuwol was indebted to us, the easier it would be to get them to enact pro-Meraldia policies. *Please sell us your sugarcane for cheap.*

The only problem remaining now was figuring out what to do with all the remaining mercenaries. All they were good at was fighting, so it would be hard to find honest work they could do. There was going to be a meeting with all the ministers soon to decide how to handle them, so I needed to come up with some ideas before then. I needed to resolve this problem fast, or I wouldn't be able to make it back in time to see my child be born.

As I was organizing some paperwork in my room in the palace, Fahn walked in.

"Captain Veight, there are messengers from Meraldia here to see you, but..."

"Hm? There shouldn't be anything weird about that, right? Are they people I know?"

Before Fahn could respond, two heads poked out from behind her.

"Ah... Professor!"

"You can't call him that right now, Myurei! We're here as official messengers of the council, remember?"

It was Myurei and Ryuunie, the grandson of Lotz's viceroy and Rolmund's exiled prince. The two of them also happened to be my students. *The heck are you guys doing here?* I put down my pen and got to my feet.

“Kuwol’s political situation is still unstable, you two. Didn’t I say it isn’t safe to come here yet?”

Myurei puffed out his chest and said, “Too bad! The Demon Empress herself told us to come see you!”

“Master...I mean Demon Empress Gomoviroa asked you to come here?”

“Yep!” Ryuunie said with a nod. *What’s going on here?*

“She told us to deliver this to you,” Myurei said, handing me a letter. The outdated handwriting style was indeed Master’s. *I don’t get it. Why’d you send my students to deliver this?* Confused, I unfurled the letter and started reading. The contents included a rather ominous prediction by Mitty, Ryunheit’s resident astrologist and leader of the city’s Mondstrahl church. It said, “There is a single shadow of death hovering over the date of Demon Lord Airia’s delivery.”

A single shadow of death? You mean either Airia or the baby is going to die? No way! Is that all the info you have?! How accurate is that prediction?! And how did you divine it?! Wait, how does the magical theory of divination work anyway?! There was a mountain of questions I wanted to ask, but then I snapped back to my senses and realized no one here had the answers.

“Umm...Professor?” Myurei asked tentatively, looking up at me with a terrified expression. “D-Does the letter contain bad news?”

Oh yeah, these guys probably don’t know what it says. Crap, was I making a scary face? Man, I need to pull it together. I’m these kids’ teacher. Master always acts calm in front of us, I need to learn from her. Even when Master let her emotions show, she never did anything that would scare her disciples. Usually, anyway—I needed to do the same.

I forced a smile on my face and placed a hand on Myurei and Ryuunie’s shoulders. “Yeah, unfortunately. Don’t worry, it’s not like Meraldia’s about to implode or anything.”

The two of them looked relieved as I said that. *Wait, is that the reason Master specifically sent these two here to deliver that letter?* I could easily imagine her saying “If you’re in front of your disciples you won’t lose your cool, right?” if she was here. Seeing that I was calm again, Ryuunie pulled out another letter.

“U-Umm, the Demon Empress told me to give you this letter once you finished reading the first.”

“Thank you.”

Alright, what now? I unfolded the second letter and started reading.

“According to Mitty’s divinations, the baby will be unable to pass through Airia’s birth canal. I can think of a few reasons for that, but what this means is she will be unable to give birth normally. As the Demon Empress, I command you to return immediately and help me think of a solution.”

The baby won’t be able to pass through the birth canal?

“...So we’ll have to do a C-section,” I muttered under my breath.

I glanced over and saw Myurei and Ryuunie looking worriedly at me. In a scared voice, Myurei asked, “Is everything really going to be okay, Professor?”

“Don’t worry. There just might be some complications when Airia gives birth, that’s all.”

It was just like Master to split her letter up into two parts to give me a chance to cool my head. The second one also explained the magical theory behind divination, which was one of the things I wanted to ask. Mitty’s astrology used a combination of astronomy, history, mathematics, and magic to lead her to surprisingly accurate predictions. There were a lot of things she couldn’t get predictions for, but it was rare for any of her predictions to be off.

As I was reading through the details, I felt myself calming down. *I know what I need to do.* Master really knew me way too well. I took a few deep breaths, inwardly thanking her for being so understanding. I organized my thoughts, making sure to not let my emotions cloud my judgment. *Alright, what’s the best way to go about this?* I still needed to meet with the ministers to discuss Kuwol’s future plans. This was probably the only opportunity a Meraldian would have to sit at such an important policy meeting for Kuwol, and also have the right to influence the ministers’ decisions. It was in Meraldia’s best interests that I remain here, but now that I knew my wife was having pregnancy troubles, I couldn’t justify prioritizing anyone or anything else.

Isn’t there anyone I can have sitting in on these meetings in my place? There’s

gotta be someone, right? None of my werewolves were suited for negotiations or politics. Grizz wasn't really trained to handle this kind of stuff either. *Who else...* Just as I was thinking that, Parker barged into the room.

"Hey there Myurei, Ryuunie! Welcome to the sweet land of sugar! Want some sugared chicken gizzard?"

"Why the heck are you walking around with gizzards? And don't just barge into people's rooms without permission. Also, don't corrupt my cute little students. I don't want them learning anything from you."

I rattled off complaints against Parker as a way to let off some steam. He ignored me entirely and took a bag of sugared chicken gizzard out of his pocket.

"You did a good job in delivering those letters! Here's your reward. Go ahead and relax for a bit, Veight and I will take care of things from here."

Myurei and Ryuunie were aware that Parker was one of Master's oldest disciples. His praise clearly meant a lot to them, and they beamed as they took the bag of snacks. They bowed to him, then to me, then left the room. Fahn looked like she wanted to say something, but after seeing Parker's expression, she followed the two kids out.

Once the two of us were alone, I showed Parker the two letters Master had sent me. After reading through them, he nodded firmly.

"This is serious. Master is right, you should head back immediately."

"But there's nothing I can do even if I do go back." I was neither a doctor nor an astrologist. All I was good for was fighting.

Parker strode forward and said confidently, "While you were gone, I spent most of my time with Queen Fasleen's doctors. I was there when she was in labor, too. She has a weak constitution, so I was planning on healing her if anything happened."

What's this all of a sudden? Parker's next words helped clear up my confusion.

"It took half a day, but the prince was born safe and sound. That was the first time I'd seen new life being brought into this world. It was sublime, moving,

overwhelming, and...fleeting.”

Parker feigned a sigh, though no air came out. He couldn't sigh for real anymore, now that he was a skeleton.

“When I was still alive, I spent all my time thinking about how I could escape from death. I was so scared of dying that I never spent any time appreciating the fact that I was alive. That's how I ended up like this.”

Parker took off his gloves and showed me his pale, bony hands. They looked strikingly forlorn.

“...Had I spent any time at all thinking about the creation of life, I might have been able to properly master the necromancer's final test.”

“I kind of get what your point is, but how does that relate to my current problem?”

Parker wagged his white index finger back and forth. “Life is noble, sacred, and beautiful, but it can also be snuffed out at a moment's notice. That holds true for everyone, not just infants.”

I understood he was referring to Airia here. Parker took another step closer and dispelled the illusion he normally cast on his face. The smiling young man vanished, leaving an expressionless skeleton in its place.

“This is way more important than what's good for the demon army, or Meraldia. You need to go back to Airia.”

“But the meeting still—”

“If you make that choice, you'll end up regretting it... Just like I did.”

I could see a boundless darkness within Parker's empty eye sockets. It was rare for Parker to get this serious, and I knew I couldn't just laugh his words off this time.

Seeing how conflicted I looked he added, “I haven't spoken with her much, but I've heard a lot about how skilled Mitty is. She predicted the appearance of a Hero, and she's also the one who advised you to help Friedensrichter.”

“Yeah...you're right. It was thanks to her accurate prediction that we didn't all die.”

Without her foresight, Arshes would have had time to heal his wounds after killing Friedensrichter and would eventually have come back at full strength. Had that happened, we would all have been doomed. It was thanks to her prediction that I was still alive right now. I had every reason to trust her word.

Parker placed a hand on my shoulder. "You've done more than enough for Meraldia and Kuwol as the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander. It's time you put your title aside and do what you have to do as a husband and a father."

"You have a point, but..."

"You saved Bishop Yuhit's life once before with your healing skills, remember? Had you not treated him back then, he'd be dead."

That had happened so long ago now that it was a nostalgic memory.

"You're a lot better at healing people than you might think. Don't forget, it's thanks to you that Amani Wajar was healed as well. Believe it or not, you're a doctor in your own right."

"I don't know about that..."

All of my medical knowledge was trivia I'd absorbed from watching a bunch of medical dramas in my past life. Granted, in this world, that was probably still more knowledge than most people had. Parker put his gloves back on and reapplied the illusion to his face. Now he was back to looking like a handsome dandy.

"Leave all the remaining meetings to me. I've gotten quite fluent at Kuwolese now. Besides..." He grinned at me. "Truth is, I used to be the viceroy of one of Meraldia's southern cities back when I was alive. Surprised? I'm a noble too!"

"Yeah, I know."

"Wait, you *knew*?!"

How many other skeletons out there know about proper decorum?

"The fact that you were able to study necromancy even after falling ill meant you had to be someone wealthy. If you were just a commoner, you wouldn't be able to afford that."

"Point taken. Here, want one of my pointy bones as a prize?"

Parker removed one of his wrist bones and held it out to me with a smile. *Your gags are getting even worse, man. But I gotta admit, for as annoying as you can be, you're a really reliable guy to have around.* I spun Parker's wrist bone like I would a pen, then stuck it back where it belonged.

"If anything, I should be the one giving you a prize. Thanks for everything, Parker."

"You're very welcome."

Smiling, Parker bowed deeply. *God, you can be such a pain sometimes, but alright, I'll go back. Screw that damn prediction. I'll find a way to bend fate to my will and make sure both Airia and my kid survive. I've already thwarted fate once before, no way I'm gonna let myself fail now.*

"Parker, you're in charge of the remaining meetings now. Oh, and one more thing."

"Shoot."

"Let Myurei and Ryuunie sit in on the meetings. It'll be a good learning experience for them. They may still be young, but they're both pretty talented. I'm sure they'll do a good job of keeping you in line."

"Sure. But what do you mean 'keep me in line'?!"

Well, knowing you, there's a 100% chance you'll try to do something crazy.

I called the two kids back, but for some reason, three people showed up.

"It's wonderful to see you again Veight," Mao said, getting down on his right knee, Kuwolese style.

"I didn't know you'd come, too."

"You didn't honestly believe the Demon Empress would send two children here alone, did you? I came here with a retinue of demon knights to keep them safe."

Makes sense. I gestured Myurei and Ryuunie to come closer, then said in a whisper that was purposely loud enough for Mao to hear, "Listen up you two, that old man is a crafty villain. Don't trust him, no matter what you do."

“At least have the decency to whisper it softly enough that I can’t hear you. Also, I’m not old.”

Why is it that all the people who would be a bad influence on these two are the ones staying here?

“You came at the perfect time, Mao. I want you to take part in the meetings with the country’s ministers. You’re Meraldia’s new diplomat.”

“Are you sure you want to give me that responsibility?”

“Parker’s an able politician, but he’s not sly like you. He had too pure of an upbringing.”

“What? So you want me to do all the shady deals?”

Despite his grumbling, I could tell Mao was holding back a smirk. *Don’t get too ahead of yourself now.*

“Diplomacy isn’t about just pretty words and fair deals,” I replied. “However, you better not do anything you wouldn’t want these kids seeing, since they’ll be at the meetings as well.”

“You’re asking for the impossible here. I can’t be crafty *and* wholesome enough for kids at the same time.”

“Well, make the impossible possible. You’re about to become their role model for what a good diplomat is like.”

You can handle it, right?

“Also, please try to steer negotiations in a direction where both Kuwol and Meraldia profit. If you do a good job, I’ll give you exclusive access to part of the sugar trade.”

“I’ll do it,” Mao replied instantly.

I turned to Myurei and Ryuunie and said, “And this is why you can’t trust him. That said, you *can* trust him as long as he stands to profit from helping you somehow, so take a good look at how he handles these negotiations.”

“I can still hear you, you know?”

“If you want me to say nicer things about you, stop trying to bribe everyone

left and right.”

Seriously, if you don't get your act together, I'll have to arrest you eventually.

“Alright. From now on, Parker's in charge here. I need to get ready to go back home.”

I started packing my things as I talked. *Wait for me Airia, I'm coming.*

—The Value of Trust—

After Veight left, Mao cleared his throat and muttered, “Uhh...”

He'd been left here with the exiled prince of an empire, the grandson of his business rival, and a skeleton mage. His merchant's intuition was telling him that he really didn't want to spend any more time than necessary with these guys. Unfortunately, he'd made a promise to Veight. *This, too, is for the sake of business. Just deal with it, Mao.*

“Ryuunie, Myurei.”

“Yes, Mister Mao?”

“What is it, Mister Mao?”

Mao didn't hold any grudges against Ryuunie, but Myurei was the grandson of that blasted Petore. He'd lost track of how much he'd paid in taxes and fines to Lotz at this point. However, Myurei himself was innocent.

“I look forward to working with you two. As Veight's representative, you can count on me to take care of the negotiations, including all the calculations we might need to do to strike accurate deals.”

Ryuunie smiled and said, “I look forward to working with you, too.”

Despite his nervousness, his smile didn't look at all forced. *He's got the backbone of a ruler, that's for sure.* Myurei looked just as nervous, but like Ryuunie he steeled his resolve and held out his right hand.

“I've heard a lot about you from my grandfather, Mister Mao. It'll be a pleasure to work with you.”

“It's an honor to make your acquaintance. I'll do my best to put the future

viceroys of Lotz into my debt.”

Mao shook Myurei’s hands, and the two of them smiled wickedly at each other. *Yep, he’s definitely got his grandfather’s blood in him. I can’t underestimate him.*

Parker chuckled heartily and said, “Veight always knows how to pick the right people for a job. If there’s anything you need help with, you can always turn to me. Turns out, necromancy is pretty useful when it comes to negotiating.”

“...As a means to threaten people?” Mao asked, his gaze narrowing slightly.

Parker casually waved his gloved hand and replied, “No, no, not at all. I can have the spirits lurking in the castle give me information. When I was investigating the region, I called up the old spirits of a place to have them tell me about it. If you befriend them, they’re pretty willing to talk.”

“You can...befriend spirits...?”

Mao shook his head, deciding not to think too hard about it. It would just give him a headache if he did. At the same time, he realized why Veight had wanted him to take part in the negotiations. He was the only adult here with any amount of common sense. Veight was expecting him to set a proper example for Ryuunie and Myurei.

For all your complaining about how I’m a devious, cheating merchant, you sure do put a lot of faith in my conscience. Though, if I’m being honest with myself, I am happy you asked me to do this. It warmed Mao’s heart to know that when all was said and done, Veight really did trust him a great deal.

Parker peered into Mao’s eyes and said, “I thought I might have scared you with my talk of spirits, but here you are smiling. What has you so happy?”

“It’s nothing.”

Mao’s smile turned devious and he said, “I just realized Veight happens to trust me the most. For a merchant, trust is a currency that holds more value than my life. Leave these negotiations to me.”

“Now hold on a moment here. The one Veight trusts the most is *me*. I’ve been his reliable older brother since our disciple days, after all.”

“Actually, I think Professor Veight trusts his students the most. Don’t worry, we’ll do our best to support both of you,” Myurei interjected.

“Myurei, it’s rude to interrupt a conversation between adults.”

Ryuunie tugged on Myurei’s sleeve, but Myurei was determined to prove that he was actually the one Veight trusted the most. Sighing, Mao smiled wryly to everyone.

“Fine, then. How about we have a contest to see who can contribute the most to this upcoming meeting? That should at least prove who lives up to his trust the most, and of course, no trying to sabotage anyone—we’re all on the same side.”

Ryuunie and Myurei nodded solemnly, while Parker grinned and said, “Let’s do such a good job that we knock Veight’s socks off.”

“I sure hope those guys aren’t planning anything weird...”

I was worried about leaving Ryuunie and the others behind with no supervision, but I needed to get back to Meraldia as soon as possible. I chartered a boat to take me and my small collective of guards back to Bahza. Most of the werewolves had stayed behind to protect the kids, so I’d brought only a single squad—Garbert’s, to be specific—with me. *Actually, wait, I don’t remember allowing the formation of a Garbert squad.*

“Listen up, everyone!” Garbert shouted, raising his fist into the air. “All of us here are Veight’s best friends! Now that Veight’s first kid’s about to be born, we’ve gotta be there with him!”

The members of Garbert’s squad, Jerrick, Monza, and Nibert, nodded.

“Yeah!”

“You said it.”

“You’re so cool, bro!”

Now hold on just one blasted second.

“Jerrick, Monza, what happened to your squads?” I asked, confused.

“You know how the Garney brothers have been part of Mary’s squad for the

past few months? Well, we shuffled hers and our squad's members around to fill the numbers for our squads."

"You can't just do that without permission!"

"We had Fahn's permission."

Yeah, but I'm still the commander of this unit. Well, whatever, I guess I'll let it slide. Everyone looks like they're in high spirits.

"We've gotta come with you to help welcome the newest member of our pack!"

"Yeah!"

And how exactly are you guys going to help?

After leaving the other werewolves, Grizz's men, and even the mountain people behind, I made it to Bahza and started searching for the fastest ship in port. The warships Meraldia had sent in would be too slow. Thankfully, Bahza Birakoya was willing to help me out and provide a fast ship to take me back to Lotz.

During the journey back, I pored over my magical texts and explained to Jerrick, "Apparently, Master has been visiting Lotz every day to see if I've come back yet. Once we reach port, I'm going to ask her to use her teleportation magic to take me straight to Ryunheit."

"If she can teleport that far, she should have just come to Kuwol to get you."

I shook my head and replied, "She needs to visit a place in person first to calculate the distance from her current location and the local topography, and so on. If she just teleports somewhere on a whim, she might accidentally kill herself. There actually was a time once where she teleported herself high into the sky and almost died."

"Damn, teleportation magic sounds like a pain in the ass to use."

It would have been nice if Master had had a chance to visit Kuwol, but she'd been busy looking after Airia so she couldn't.

There were a few hiccups along the way, but we were blessed with a good tailwind for most of the trip. In just a few days, we were back and docking at

Lotz. From that point on, everything was a flurry of activity.

Master showed up by the lighthouse just before sunset, and started looking around frantically for me. When she finally spotted me her face lit up and she exclaimed, “Oh, there you are Veight! You’ve grown in the short time you were gone.”

“Uhh, Master, I passed puberty a long time ago.”

“We can catch up later—for now we must return to Ryunheit posthaste. Unfortunately for everyone else, I can only take one person with me, so I’m afraid Monza and the others will have to take the long way.”

Master started molding her mana without waiting for a reply.

“I’ll explain the details of Airia’s complications once we’re in Ryunheit.”

Right as she said that, my surroundings began to twist and warp. The first thing I noticed upon arriving back home was the thick scent of mana in the air. It seemed that the mana Airia had spread throughout the land still lingered. After having spent so much time in Kuwol, I was surprised by how much denser the mana here was. *I can think about that later—right now, Airia takes priority.*

“Master, how’s she doing?”

“Both Airia and the baby are still healthy. Had Mitty not made that prediction, Kite and I would have been completely unaware that there was a problem.” Master folded her arms and let out a sigh. “However, I am unsure whether or not we should tell Airia about the prophecy. Due to how ominous it is, I wanted to hear your opinion before coming to a decision.”

“I’ll tell her. Airia’s a lot tougher than I am, I’m sure she can handle the news. Besides, I came up with a way to save her.” I explained the plan I came up with while sailing back to Lotz. “The demon army hospital has a few unused research labs, right? Inscribe this magic circle into everything in one of those rooms.”

“Is this not...the formula for the death spell? But you’ve weakened it considerably.”

I could tell Master’s academic curiosity was piqued by the disinfection charm I’d learned in Kuwol, but right now saving Airia was more important than

teaching her about the things I'd discovered.

"If the baby won't be able to pass through the birth canal, we'll have to cut open her stomach and take it out."

"Hold on a moment! Cutting the mother's stomach open to remove the baby should be a last resort! If you do that, Airia will most certainly die! You didn't come back here just to kill her, did you?!"

So people don't survive C-sections in this world... There wasn't much time, so I decided to convey only the salient points.

"I'm not a doctor, but I know the biggest dangers of this operation are blood loss and the risk of infection. The magic circle I showed you earlier should help prevent any infections, at the very least."

"Wait. Explain everything, properly, from the beginning. I can't follow your thought process."

Oh yeah, this explanation probably doesn't make any sense, huh? Master floated up and patted my shoulder with a patient smile.

"What is it you are trying to tell me? Do you know of some way to cut open Airia's stomach without killing her?"

"Err...yeah, basically."

"I must say, I've never heard of such a thing in all my years of research. Where exactly did you learn such a technique?"

Damn it, Master's starting to catch on. However, right now, saving Airia was more important than keeping my true identity secret. Besides, Master was one of the few people I didn't mind knowing about my reincarnation.

"In the world I used to live in, there was a medical procedure called a cesarean section. I intend to replicate that in this world."

Those words alone would probably be enough for Master to infer the whole truth about my past, but to my surprise, Master didn't seem fazed at all.

She nodded without hesitation and said, "Understood. That sounds like the safest choice. And you need this magic circle to perform the procedure safely?"

“Ah, yes.”

“Why is it that you need this circle engraved on all the objects in the room, as well as the walls and floor?” Master looked down at my notes, seemingly uninterested in the bombshell I’d just dropped.

I hurriedly explained, “The things that cause infections are tiny living organisms that inhabit every space in the world. They’re too small to see, but we need to purify everything, including our hands, Airia’s skin, and even the air in the room to get rid of them.”

“Very well. In that case, I shall erect a barrier to prevent air from flowing in and out of the room as well. That will be necessary, correct?”

Master added a few corrections to my notes, then cocked her head.

“You mention here that we will need Melaine’s help, but why is that?”

“To prevent Airia from dying of blood loss. Melaine’s hemomancy will help keep Airia’s bleeding to a minimum. We don’t have the means to do blood transfusions in this world, so her aid is required.”

I didn’t know Airia’s blood type, nor did I know of any way to hygienically transfer blood with the technology we had. If she lost too much blood during the C-section, she would undoubtedly die.

“Based on Melaine’s earlier reports, anyone should be able to staunch bleeding with a few simple spells,” I said. “But she’s the only one skilled enough to stop necrosis of the wound while also restricting blood flow.”

“Understood, I will bring her over immediately. It’ll be faster than sending a messenger. You speak with Airia in the meantime.” Master nodded and started chanting the teleportation spell. I could tell her the remaining details of the operation once Melaine was here.

As Master warped away, I dashed over to Airia’s room.

“Airia!”

Her stomach had grown quite large in the time I was gone. It was nice to know that my kid was growing up healthy. *Daddy’s come back from work to visit you.* Airia was sitting on a chair by the window, embroidering our family crest

onto a tiny piece of cloth.

She turned to me with a smile on her face and said, “Welcome home, Veight.”

“Oh, uhh yeah...I guess I’m back. I was able to make it in time to keep my promise,” I replied with a smile. *Thank god for that.* “Are you sure you should be sitting right next to the breeze? Here, have a blanket to keep you warm. Also, shouldn’t you be lying down?”

“Please, Veight, you’re exaggerating. Surely you saw plenty of pregnant women back in your old world.”

Actually, I didn’t... Airia patted her stomach and smiled reassuringly at me.

“I feel just fine—though, our baby’s been quite energetic recently. Every time I eat something tasty, they start kicking my stomach.”

Aww, I wish I could have seen that. Wait, now’s not the time to be gushing over how cute my kid is. I gave Airia a brief overview of how things went in Kuwol, then mentioned Mitty’s prediction.

“According to Mitty’s divination, the birth is going to have a lot of complications. It’s possible we may have to cut your stomach open to get the baby out. Of course, I plan to do everything I can to make sure the operation doesn’t do any lasting harm to you.”

“...Did you just say ‘cut open my stomach’?”

Naturally, even Airia paled at that, so I hurriedly explained, “In my old world, medicine was advanced enough that people regularly performed this procedure if it looked like a natural birth wouldn’t go smoothly. In fact, that was how I was born the first time around, and my mom ended up outliving me.”

Sorry I wasn’t able to give you any grandkids, Mom. Airia smiled, and her shoulders relaxed in relief.

“In that case, please use that procedure to save both me and our child if necessary. So long as you’re with me, I’m not afraid of anything.”

Honestly, I wasn’t all that confident in myself, but with the combined powers of Master and her best disciples, I figured things would end up okay.

Smiling, I said, “Do you remember how we first met?”

“Of course. You broke through the window on the second floor and scared me half to death,” she replied with a chuckle. I scratched my head in embarrassment.

“I bet you never thought we’d eventually be married back then.”

“Indeed.”

“Life really is unpredictable. When I was on my deathbed in my past life, I never even dreamed that I would end up in another world as a werewolf.”

I thought I’d be in for a rough time again in this world, but my life’s been full of so much happiness that it more than makes up for what happened in my last one.

“Anyway, my point is that the future is never set in stone, and I firmly believe that both you and our baby will come out of this alive and healthy. At the very least, I’ll do everything I can to make that happen.”

Airia nodded, then placed a hand on my cheek. “Seeing how resolute you always are helps assuage my own fears.”

“Airia...”

“By the way, Veight. I heard you did some rather reckless things in Kuwol.”

Who told you that?

“A number of Wa’s scouts, including members of Fumino’s squad, are currently in Kuwol. I’ve heard quite a bit about your exploits from her. Including the fact that you dueled a hundred demons all by yourself.”

“Err, well, I was sure I could win that pretty handily. I may have made a few miscalculations, but in the end, I still won without so much as a scratch on me...”

Oh god, why. Still smiling, Airia tightly gripped my hand. *Okay, I give up.*

“I’m sorry... It’s just how I am. I couldn’t fix it even if I tried.”

“I know.” Chuckling, Airia patted her stomach again. “You’re going to have it rough with a father like this.”

Hey now, that’s just not true.

A few days after my arrival, Airia went into labor. In Kuwol, the big meeting was probably happening right about now, too. Had it not been for Mitty's prophecy, I would probably be in a heated debate with the kingdom's ministers. *I really dodged a bullet there.*

I turned back to Mitty, who'd come to assist with the birth as a midwife. She was wearing the white coat I'd provided for her and had her hair held back by a kerchief.

"You're always here when we need you most, Mitty."

"That is the job of an astrologist, you know," she replied with a smile. I never imagined protecting Mitty and the other Mondstrahl believers back when I'd first conquered Ryunheit would pay off like this. *What goes around comes around, I guess.* Master, Melaine, Kite, Lacy, and the deputy head maid Isabelle were all here as well to help Airia.

Worried, Isabelle asked, "Will the seven of us really be enough? Shouldn't we call for more people?"

Isabelle had received a decently advanced education, but she knew even less about medicine than I did. I needed to word my explanation carefully here.

"It's best to have only specialists here," I replied. "The more people we call, the easier it will be to accidentally transmit disease to Airia. We all carry pathogens with us at all times, even if we don't realize it."

I was far from an expert on infections, but I at least knew how to take precautions against bacteria.

I turned to everyone else and explained, "Don't take those gloves off until the operation's over. Also, try to avoid touching anything unnecessary. If you do end up touching something, be sure to use the purification spell on the gloves immediately." They nodded nervously, and I added, "Master is going to be the one making the incision and performing the operation. Mitty, you have experience as a midwife so you can assist her. Kite, use your epoch magic to keep a close eye on the baby's position, as well as Airia's current condition. Lacy, you project Kite's measurements on the wall for everyone to see. Both of

you remember the organ anatomy I taught you, right?”

Kite nodded and confirmed, “Lacy and I spent the last few days memorizing everything.”

“It was a real shock to learn that was what the inside of my stomach is like...” Lacy muttered, rubbing her abdomen. *I literally just told you not to touch things with those gloves on.* I decided to save warning her for the next time she did it and turned to Melaine.

“Melaine, you’re in charge of keeping the bleeding down. Make sure there’s enough blood flowing to the wound that it doesn’t undergo necrosis. Once the baby’s safely out, I’ll close up the wound.”

We would be cutting open the womb as well, so I would have to heal that first. I went over the steps with everyone one more time, as well as what to do in case something unexpected occurred.

“Airia still has eight hundred Kites of mana. She isn’t able to control it all that well herself, but I can use my strengthening magic to direct it towards life preservation.”

To a mage, Airia had the life force of 800 people, but even so, she could still die easily if we weren’t careful. Mana was like someone’s savings: unless they withdrew them and used them for some kind of purpose, they were useless. Moreover, Airia was neither a mage nor a werewolf.

“Isabelle, your job will be to give Airia moral support. We’ll be too busy to chat, but talking to her and keeping her spirits up will be of vital importance.”

“Understood, sir.”

Isabelle nodded resolutely, reaffirming her resolve. I put on the white robe that would serve as my operating gown and activated the magic circuit embroidered on it to sterilize it again just in case. Everyone else followed suit.

I forced a smile to try and reassure everyone and said, “Don’t worry, we’ll be done by sunset. By this time tomorrow, we’ll be welcoming the newest member of the Aindorf family.”

There was no guarantee that would be the case, but we were all here to make

sure things went well. Airia was waiting for us in the operating room. Monza and my other friends were standing guard outside. As we walked in, the white-robed maids who'd been attending Airia until now bowed and exited the room. Airia looked like she was in pain, but when she spotted me she smiled.

"I only just went into labor this morning, aren't you rushing things a little, Veight? I've heard some people take as long as a day to give birth."

"It's better to have the operation over with before you get exhausted. If we're going to have to do the C-section either way, it's better to do it now rather than after you've been struggling for hours."

I kept my tone light, but in truth, I was still feeling conflicted. No matter how accurate Mitty's divinations were, even she couldn't predict things with 100% accuracy. It was still possible we were putting Airia in unnecessary danger, which was why I decided to wait and see for the morning, at least. Now it was afternoon, and it didn't look like Airia had made any progress at all. If we performed the operation while Airia was tired, her life would be in more danger. This wasn't 21st-century Japan, and I wasn't a doctor. That being said, I was a mage. That was the one trump card I had up my sleeve.

Airia's expression grew serious when she saw the look on my face. "If you end up having to choose between me or the baby, please save our child."

"Airia, I..."

She forced a smile through the pain. "...Of course I would love it if you could save us both, Veight."

"That's the plan."

I'll make sure everything goes perfectly.

I lifted Airia's shirt up and started to cast an anesthesia spell on her stomach. As I did so, I thought back to my duel with Schmevinsky back in Rolmund. He'd used a sword enchanted to inflict severe pain on whoever it cut, so I'd anesthetized myself ahead of time. Of course, this time it was my wife and kid's life on the line, not mine. I couldn't afford to make any mistakes. I disinfected Airia's skin with alcohol, then started giving instructions.

“Melaine, get your blood magic ready. Master, prepare the mana scalpel.”

“I’m ready.”

“Likewise.”

Melaine and Master nodded solemnly. Master extended her finger and a tiny blade of pure mana shot out of it. Her control over mana was far greater than mine, and she was able to make a much smaller blade than I could. It had no thickness whatsoever, enhancing its sharpness. Moreover, it was made of pure energy, so it was naturally sterile. The only potential problem would come from misadjustment of the blade’s power output, but Master was far too skilled to make such a mistake.

“Kite, Lacy, guide Master to the position of the womb.”

“Okay.”

The two of them answered in unison, and started casting. Kite relayed the information he received to Lacy, who used illusion magic to project a mapping of it overhead. This same combination worked wonders back when I’d built a snow fortress in Rolmund to keep Woroy in check. Meanwhile, Mitty taught Master all the things she’d learned about women’s wombs during her years as a midwife. She also helped Master find the correct position to make the incision.

Once everything was ready, Master said, “Here I go.”

Everyone nodded in reply, and she slowly drove her scalpel into Airia’s stomach.

“By the spirits vested in me, like the ebb and flow of a tide, retract the passage of blood!” Melaine chanted, preventing the cut from bleeding.

As the cut went deeper, I could see the subcutaneous fat beneath the skin, and then the abdominal muscles underneath that. *Good, there’s barely any blood.* I’d prepared healing magic in case it was necessary, but to my relief, it wasn’t. However, the real trial was yet to come. Sweat beaded on Master’s forehead as she expanded her mana scalpel, enlarging the incision. In order to prevent infection, she couldn’t touch Airia’s body directly. The safest way to both deepen and widen the cut would be to adjust the output of mana to reshape her scalpel.

“Mrrrr...”

Master’s childlike body was exactly what allowed her to perform such fine-tuned adjustments. My fingers were far too big to manage a feat like that. All I could do was pray that Master succeeded.

“...Does it hurt, Airia?”

“No, I’m fine. It does feel a little hot and itchy, but other than that, nothing.”

Airia was white as a sheet from nerves, but she nevertheless put on a brave smile. Isabelle tightly gripped her hand, looking even paler than Airia.

“Don’t worry, everything will be just fine. I’m about to become a mother, which is going to be a far greater ordeal than this,” Airia said lightly, trying to encourage her maid.

“My lady...”

There were tears in Isabelle’s eyes. I almost felt like crying myself. *I guess we won’t have to worry about Airia’s mental state at least.* I poured as much strengthening magic into Airia as I could, boosting her immune system to the max. Airia still possessed a lot of mana herself, so the spells were highly effective.

“Master, try your best not to cut any of Airia’s other organs.”

“Mmm... I know.”

“And don’t touch anything with your hands. If you must move something, use telekinesis.”

“I said *I know*. All you’re doing is distracting me.”

Look, I’m just worried, okay? Master masterfully used telekinesis to push Airia’s womb up, making it easier to cut. She’d already made the necessary incisions through the fat and muscles, so all that was left was to cut the womb’s membrane.

Kite, who’d been using epoch magic this entire time, said in a nervous voice, “Demon Empress, please shorten the blade’s length by half a mioro, and move your incision three mioro to the right.”

“Understood.”

At long last, Master began cutting into the womb. I was too busy focusing on Airia’s vitals, so I wasn’t able to watch the whole process. I kept pre-casting spells to have ready just in case something went wrong. However, I did clearly see the moment Master lifted our baby out of Airia’s stomach. Mitty hurriedly patted the baby a few times to wake them up, and before long the baby let out a long wail. Their lungs had started functioning automatically now that they were no longer receiving oxygen from the placenta. Our baby was able to keep themselves alive all on their own now.

In an uncharacteristically excited voice, Master shouted, “She’s been born! She’s alive! It’s a girl!”

A girl! We have a daughter! Our baby’s a girl! I resisted the temptation to shout in joy and looked at Airia.

“Our baby’s safe now, Airia. We have a daughter!”

“Yes!”

“Just focus on yourself now. Mitty, Isabelle, take care of the baby for us.”

The midwife and the maid would definitely be able to handle taking care of a baby for a few hours. We mages needed to concentrate on closing up Airia.

The healing process turned out to be quite the ordeal.

“We need to take out the placenta. Sorry Mitty, but where exactly does that start and end?!”

“Give me a moment, I’m coming. Isabelle, give the baby her bath.”

“Of course! Wait, you want me to do it?!”

“Melaine, let a little bit of blood start flowing! I won’t be able to close the wounds up otherwise!”

“It’s hard to fine-tune this spell! You’ll need a workaround!”

“Lacy, keep projecting the current status of the womb! I need to heal everything, including the womb incision!”

“O-Okay!”

“Master, are you sure you have the correct position for the bladder?!”

“Huh?! Umm...Kite, is this the right spot?”

“Yes it is, I’ll record it for future reference!”

I bet the post-op of a C-section in modern-day Japan isn’t this crazy.

It took until sunset for us medically-inexperienced mages to finish the operation. We’d started around noon so the whole thing took quite a few hours. After checking up on Airia’s condition, Kite absorbed some mana from a nearby candlestick. The stick was a magical item that stored mana for mages to take at a later time. From the looks of it, he was completely drained.

“She’s fine... Everything’s good...”

“You’re...absolutely, one-hundred-percent sure, right?”

“Yeah, the only problem now is how tired we all are...”

If you can crack jokes like that then I think we’re good. I’d expected the operation to be a draining process, so I’d requisitioned a number of these candlesticks from the demon army ahead of time. Everyone just needed to absorb enough mana that they weren’t running on empty, and we’d be fine. There was a huge pile of drained magic items on the ground in front of us already. I’d used up two of Master’s Thousand Souls Helmets myself. Blasting magic off without a care in the world was a lot less exhausting than healing like this that required impeccable micro-control. It was like the way a car used up ridiculous amounts of gas if you floored the accelerator while also pressing down on the brakes.

Airia herself was asleep now, and Lacy, who was the first person who got to rest, was also sleeping while leaning against the wall.

“Everything’s fine, yeah? It’s okay for Airia to sleep, right?”

“I dunno, but if something happens wake me...” Kite trailed off, slumping to the ground. Fortunately, his head landed on Lacy’s stomach so he didn’t hurt himself. Neither him falling on her nor his loud snoring seemed to wake her up. Both of them were fast asleep.

It's gotten pretty quiet now, huh? Turning around, I saw Master and Melaine asleep in each other's arms. Neither of their bodies actually needed sleep, so this was quite a rare sight. Mitty and Isabelle were both down for the count, too. Both of them were resting against our baby's crib and sleeping quietly. But if everyone else was asleep, it meant I couldn't rest.

I need to at least stay awake until someone else shows up to nurse Airia. Just as I thought that, the wall in front of me turned into the ceiling. *Did I just fall?* As I tried to struggle back to my feet, I saw a figure out of the corner of my eye. *Who's that?* When I got up, the figure turned to look at me. *No way! That large frame, those narrow lizard-like eyes... Is that you Friedensrichter?! Am I dreaming?! This has to be a dream. The dead can't come back to life. This is either a dream or an illusion. There's no other explanation. But even so...that's good enough for me.*

"...My Lord!" I exclaimed.

The original Demon Lord, Friedensrichter, put a finger to his lips.

"Shh, you'll wake the baby," he said. Then he smiled, his lips curving in a way only dragonkin's lips did. Unable to hold myself back, I ran over to Friedensrichter.

How could you die and leave us behind like that? Do you know how hard it was to keep your dream going? We fought and agonized and suffered for it. There was so much I wanted to say and so much I wanted to ask, but I couldn't even think of where to start.

Still smiling, Friedensrichter nodded and said, "You don't need to say anything. I know it all. I've been by your side this whole time."

Ah, now I get it. I finally understand. It all makes sense now. I understand the meaning of life, death, and reincarnation. I know why we live, and where we go when we die. There was no reason to be sad. I can't believe I spent so long agonizing over something so simple. I smiled to myself, and Friedensrichter smiled back.

"Thank you for inheriting my will, my dear vice-commander. I'm sorry for putting you through so much."

I could tell I was crying. Friedensrichter walked over to my daughter's crib and gently patted her head. Eyes still closed, she grabbed one of his fingers. Her tiny hand clasped around the finger that was thicker than her arm.

"Your daughter is one lucky girl. She'll get to live in the era of peace you built," Friedensrichter said with a smile. Then he whispered, "May her life be full of happiness."

Once he was done blessing her, he turned back to me.

"Now that I've seen the birth of your first child, I have no regrets. It's only fitting that the birth of a new life be crowned by the passing of an old one." As he said that, Friedensrichter started walking away.

"Wait! Please, wait! Where are you going?!"

With his back still turned to me, he tilted his head and said, "...Surely you must know by now?"

It was true that I understood now, but even so, that didn't make this parting any less painful.

"Please stay for just a while longer! Keep watching over us until my daughter's an adult, at least!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that... My next battlefield awaits," he said solemnly.

It was at that moment that I realized Friedensrichter no longer looked like a dragonkin. He had the appearance of a human. Though he wasn't particularly tall, his back was ramrod straight. He was wearing an old military uniform, replete with epaulettes and an officer's cap. There was also a saber at his waist.



He looks just like... Wait, is that what he looked like in his past life?!

“Please! At least let me see your face! And tell me what your original name was!”

As he walked towards the light, Friedensrichter said in a playful voice, “My true name is Friedensrichter, and my calling always was and always will be to act as an arbiter of peace.” After a brief pause, he added, “Veight. I’m sure we shall eventually meet again in this never-ending cycle of reincarnation. And when we do...” He lazily raised a hand into the air. “Will you be my vice-commander again?”

He sounded so happy as he said that.

“My Lord!”

I realized my own shout had woken me up. *So that was a dream after all... I hadn’t even noticed I’d fallen asleep.* There weren’t any windows in this room so I couldn’t tell what time it was, but I was the only one remaining here. It seemed everyone else had woken up and left before me, including Airia and my daughter. *Wow, I can’t believe you all abandoned me.*

I slowly turned to one side. It seemed I’d been using one of Master’s drained Thousand Souls Helmets as a pillow. It was enchanted with necromancy that allowed the wearer to see and hear visions of spirits that were close to them. Right now, Ryunheit was inundated with the mana Airia had released. Moreover, the whirlwind of spells we’d cast here while treating Airia had caused the flow of mana to become quite convoluted. There were also the numerous death spells we’d engraved onto everything in the room, as well as Master’s barrier. Any kind of magical miracle was possible in a situation like this. *But...was that really what I think it was?* Before I could dwell on it any further, Monza walked into the room with a yawn.

“Fwaaaaah. Ah, morning, boss.”

“Morning. How long have I been out?”

“It’s the next day already,” Monza replied with a grin.

“How’s Airia? And my daughter?”

“They’re both perfectly fine. Everyone else who also helped out with the surgery is sleeping in their own beds.”

Thank God. Really, thank God.

Monza placed her hands behind her head and looked down at me as I sighed in relief. “Oh yeah. I got a question.”

“What’s up?”

“Were there any other human guys in the operating room yesterday aside from Kite?”

“Nope.”

“That’s weird...” Monza cocked her head quizzically. She was flexible enough to tilt her head so far that it looked painful.

“Why?”

“Well, I thought I saw a guy leaving the room last night, but Jerrick and the Garneys say they didn’t see anything.”

Spare me the ghost stories, please. Actually, wait...

“Was that guy wearing a fancy cap and a nobleman’s suit? Oh, and did he have a sword at his waist?”

“Yeah, he did! I only caught a glimpse of him so I can’t be sure, but that sounds right.” Monza grinned. “So he *was* someone you knew! Can’t believe I got worried over nothing. I was kinda surprised at first, since he hid his presence so well I couldn’t even smell him.”

I figured. Hmm...so that’s how it is. I jumped to my feet and shook my head to clear my thoughts. That was neither a dream nor an illusion I saw when I was half asleep. The ultimate proof of that was that I had no idea what the secrets of life, death, and reincarnation were. It was a pretty common story for mages to stumble across some grand truth in their dreams, then forget all about it when they woke up. In fact, I’d had similar experiences before.

Either way, my mind hadn’t been working right when I saw that vision. I

decided to treat everything as just a dream. I felt like if I didn't, I would end up crying. *You were such an awkward person, you know that? Also, you were way too selfish. The next time I see you, I'm going to complain until your ears fall off—which means I better do a good job here so I don't have any right to get scolded by you instead. I can't wait to see you again.*

"Alright, time to think of a name for my new daughter."

"You should probably hurry if you wanna do that. Our lovely Demon Empress is debating whether we should name her Kyupete or Shuporin right now."

"Hey, I never gave her permission to name our kid. Who does she think she is, our baby's godparent?"

Master, your naming sense is terrible. Are you still so mad about the name you were given that you're trying to drag other people down with you?

"Guess I better stop her fast. Where is everyone?"

"Second floor."

"Alright, let's get going."

I shrugged off my white robe and walked out into the hallway. *No one gets to name my daughter without me.*

Ultimately, we decided to name our daughter Friede. The decision was unanimous between me and Airia, though there was of course a very tough uphill battle in convincing Master to let us name her that. *Sorry, but I don't want any of the "cute"-sounding names from the Old Dynasty that you came up with.*

Friede was a proper name that had been given to other members of the Aindorf family in the past, and it was also the first bit of Friedensrichter's name. When I saw the list of candidates in the Aindorf family register, I knew this would have to be our daughter's name. Hopefully, that meant she'd grow up to be at least half as wise and virtuous as our first Demon Lord had been.

Two days after Friede was born, I visited Airia's hospital room again to boost

her immune system once more. The spell I was using was actually a detoxification spell, but the poisons people put on weapons that it was designed to resist were often just infected substances, so it had immunity-enhancing effects. Airia herself was in top form. *Guess I don't have anything to worry about since she's the Demon Lord.* Granted, according to Kite's latest checkup, her mana capacity had gone down by 10 Kites. Apparently, our healing wasn't quite enough, and her body had needed to expend that much mana to keep her alive. In other words, if we tried something similar on any other pregnant woman, they would without a doubt die. *We'll need to research this some more if we want to make it a commonplace procedure.* I momentarily pushed those thoughts from my mind and joined Airia in staring at our daughter.

"She's the daughter of the third Demon Lord, was brought into this world by the second, and is named after the first..." I muttered absently, and Airia smiled.

"She's no common girl, that's for sure. She's blessed."

"That's one way to look at it, I guess."

I'd be fine with her just being a normal girl, too, but now I finally realized what it was Mitty had divined. "The shadow of death" that she'd witnessed was actually Friedensrichter's spirit. I wasn't sure if it was really his ghost that had been there that night, but I definitely spoke with him in some form or another. As I recounted the story to Airia, I suddenly realized something worrying.

"...I've heard that prophecies have the power to influence reality in such a way that they always come to pass. If something bad has been prophesied, trying to escape from that fate will only drive you closer towards it."

There was no way to prove that theory since it wasn't a hypothesis you could repeatedly test.

"Which means maybe you might have been able to give birth normally, too..." Of course, there was no way to be sure about what the prophecy had meant. In the end, though, Friede was born safe and sound, and Airia survived as well.

She patted her stomach, which had been perfectly healed, and smiled softly. "As you can see, I'm perfectly fine, so you don't need to worry. Besides, who

knows what might have happened if I remained in labor for the rest of the day.”

“That does make me feel a little better.”

I got to my feet, still looking down at our newborn daughter. She was red, kind of wrinkly, and very small.

“I always wondered why in the language of my old world the word for babies was ‘red child,’ but now I understand. Babies really are pretty red.”

“‘Red child’ you say? That has a rather cute ring to it. Especially when you say it,” Airia said with a chuckle.

Friede had my black hair, and a mixture of my features and Airia’s. Black hair was a dominant gene while blond was recessive, so unfortunately my hair color had won out. It was a bit of a shame, but it looked like Friede would grow up to be just as beautiful as her mother at least. She’d only inherited the good parts of my face, and taken the rest from Airia. *Bet the boys will be all over you once you’re older.*

Smiling, I grabbed Friede’s tiny hand. Even though she was asleep, she wrapped her tiny fingers around one of mine.



“It’s nice to finally meet you, Friede. This is my first time being a father, so go easy on me, okay?”

Friede smiled, her eyes still closed. *Man, baby smiles are so cute. Oh yeah, does she have the Moro reflex? She does, right? Werewolf babies all did, and even Kuwol’s crown prince did, so it’s probably normal for babies in this world to have it.* Chances were, both humans and werewolves had evolved from the primates of this world.

I glanced back at Airia, and she flashed me a knowing smile. “You’re thinking about something from your past life, aren’t you?”

How could you tell?

“I can’t hide anything from you, huh?”

I awkwardly cleared my throat, trying to think of how to explain my thoughts to Airia. *Do I start by explaining the genetics of why newborns resemble their parents? It feels like a kind of dry talk to have, considering the mood.* As I was thinking, Friede opened her eyes and began to cry. There was something oddly frail about her voice. Parker was right, new life really was fragile. Though, Friede’s crying still sounded cute to me.

Airia and I smiled gently at each other, but then Friede’s voice got a few dozen decibels louder.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Are all newborns this loud?! It felt like my innards were being bombarded with sound waves.

“Kyaa!”

“It’s alright, I got you!”

Airia staggered backwards, and I hurriedly grabbed her from behind. I realized a second later that Friede’s shout had been laced with mana. Since the mana hadn’t been shaped into any physical phenomenon, the room wasn’t damaged in any way. Airia and I were unhurt as well, but our daughter had basically just used Soul Shaker without even transforming. *Does this mean she inherited the ability to use my ultimate spell?!*

The surprises didn't stop there, either. The mana in the room was now spiraling around Friede, and it had the distinct properties of mana that was being manipulated by a demon. Not only that, but her body was absorbing the surrounding mana. After she sucked in a small amount, Friede's voice grew softer and her crying sounded more like a normal baby's again.

"That's Master's vortex power..."

I'd never heard of a baby that could absorb mana before.

"Friede...are you okay? You're not hurt, are you?" Airia cradled Friede in her arms, and she immediately stopped crying. She bent her arms and legs, curling up into the fetal position. Right now she looked just like a normal baby, but she was anything but normal.

I looked over at Airia and nodded.

"I'll call Master over. Don't let anyone into the room in the meantime. If a normal person heard that cry, they'd be immobilized for a while."

"Of course. Oh, are you hungry?"

Airia looked down at Friede and uncovered her breast. Friede started sucking happily, remaining perfectly calm. It seemed Airia already knew how to pacify our daughter. From the looks of things, she wouldn't fire off another Soul Shaker anytime soon, at least.

I walked into the hallway and told the maids I needed to see the Demon Empress as soon as possible. They all split up and started looking for her immediately. Just then, Monza came running up to me.

"Boss, the werecats made it to Meraldia! They caused a huge scene at Beluza's port, and there are seven people who got injured."

Why'd they go to Beluza instead of Lotz? Did they mess up charting their course?

"Also, everyone in Beluza seems to love Elmersia and her friends. They're fawning over them so much they can't leave the city."

Oh yeah, I forgot Beluza's residents were like this. You know those werecats beat up seven of your fellow citizens, right? Granted, Beluza's sailors were the

kind of people who loved a good brawl, so they'd probably been enamored by the werecats' strength.

"Shouldn't you go get them before they cause more trouble, boss?"

"I don't have time for that right now. It turns out my daughter's just like me."

Monza cocked her head. "That's a good thing, isn't it? Shouldn't you be happy about that?"

Not quite. Before I could explain the situation to her, Kurtz walked over.

"I've put together an investigation team to head to Kuwol's Kayankaka region. However, I can't find a ship willing to carry all the equipment we'll need to take with us. Furthermore, Kite has been complaining about how he doesn't want to go..."

When it rains, it pours, huh. To top things off, Ryunheit's garrison commander, Wengen, showed up as well.

"Lord Veight, a group of mushroom creatures is causing a ruckus in the city's new district! They call themselves 'fungoids,' but they're spreading their spores all over people's houses and stores."

Oh, they finally made it here from the forest.

"To fungoids, lumber, freshly butchered meat, and even books are just 'corpses.' Spreading their seedbeds to the corpses of living things is their way of showing respect to them. They don't mean any harm by what they're doing, they just don't understand our culture, Wengen."

That being said, they needed to be stopped before they converted half the city into their nest. *Man, the domestic and international situation's finally calmed down and my daughter's safely been born, but I still can't catch a break. I guess this is my life now.* Being the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander meant constantly dealing with ordinary problems like these. Forever.

Sighing, I organized a priority list in my head. Friede took precedence of course, but at least all of these problems were a piece of cake compared to the crises I'd faced before.

"Alright, I'll take care of everything. But first, we need to find Master. There's

something of the utmost importance I need to discuss with her.”

My job as a boring, plain old vice-commander continued for quite some time after that. But I never dreamed of Friedensrichter again after that night Friede was born.

※ *Veight uses the word “genes” here, but the common terminology these days is “alleles.” However, in the time period Veight is from, people still used “genes” instead.*

The Four Heroes of Meraldia at Kuwol's Grand Conference

Parker changed into his formal uniform and cast an illusion over his face, transforming the horrifying white skull into the features of a handsome young man. As always, he was going with the looks he'd had when he was still alive.

"I have something important I need to discuss with you before we attend the meeting," he said to Ryuunie and Myurei, who both straightened their backs and looked earnestly at him. *I like your attitudes*, he thought before continuing, "Veight is on good terms with the leaders of all of Meraldia's neighboring nations. Not only has he shown them all just how powerful he is, but he's done a lot to help them as well. I'm sure you've heard the stories."

"Only a few, but yes," Ryuunie said with a nod.

"In other words, it's thanks to Veight that diplomacy with our neighbors is going so well. Without him, we don't have any leverage."

Now that Veight had returned home, there was no Meraldian left in Kuwol with any real influence over the kingdom's ministers. But even so, someone had to handle negotiations.

"One of the topics of today's meeting is the sugar trade between Meraldia and Kuwol. It's something that will have a huge impact on the kingdom's finances, as well as the circulation of goods within Meraldia. Veight isn't here, but the ministers will still be expecting us to represent Meraldia. We have to secure the conditions we want or we'll be letting everyone down."

"I-I'm starting to feel nervous..." Myurei muttered with a gulp. He knew a fair bit about goods trading so he understood just how difficult a task awaited them.

Parker smiled reassuringly and said, "Worry not. I'm sure if the four of us work together, we can accomplish just as much as Veight would have."

"Do you really think so?" Mao, who was organizing a sheaf of documents,

asked.

Parker looked over at him and said with a straight face, “If we can’t handle a problem as simple as this, then our nation has no future. The Meraldian Federation is too big for Veight to solve all of its problems on his own. As it is, he’ll have his hands full taking care of Ryunheit.”

There was a reason the old Senate had appointed viceroys to each city rather than trying to govern the region themselves. They’d even gone so far as to restrict trade despite knowing it was going against the times to narrow the scope of their jurisdiction.

“From here on out, we can’t just rely on Veight for everything. Besides, we need to prove to Kuwol that Meraldia has plenty of other young talent at its disposal.”

Ryuunie nodded resolutely and replied, “I-I’ll do my best.”

“Likewise,” Myurei added.

Parker and Mao both smiled at the two innocent yet determined young boys.

“Don’t worry, Mao and I will be here to assist you.”

“You can leave anything involving math to me. Also, I’ll take care of any ‘shady dealings’ as well. Veight’s already branded me as an evil merchant, I may as well live up to the reputation.” Mao tucked his documents under his arm and bowed gracefully to the two boys. “Now then, shall we be off?”

And so, the first “Grand Kuwol Conference” began. The members present on the Kuwol side were all big names who had immense influence over national affairs. There were a number of nobles who’d traveled quite a ways to be here as well. Birakoya Bahza, Powani Karfal, Amani Wajar, and Valkel, Lord Peshmet’s representative, were the main ones. Naturally, the palace ministers such as the master of ceremonies, the grand chamberlain, and the chief shaman were all present as well. The elder of the mountain tribes was present too, as was Queen Fasleen.

Meanwhile, situated in one small section of the room’s large circular table were Meraldia’s four diplomats.

“T-This isn’t good, Mister Mao. I’m scared we might not get a chance to say anything at all,” Myurei mumbled with a stiff expression.

Mao, who was sitting in the chair behind him, shook his head and replied, “You need to project confidence. People will judge you based on your attitude.”

“I-I see...”

Myurei turned back to the table, but now Ryuunie glanced back and asked, “I’m from Rolmund. Is it really okay for me to speak on Meraldia’s behalf?”

Parker smiled reassuringly and replied, “I’m not sure if you noticed, but your entourage consists of a demon and a man from Wa. The only true-blooded Meraldian here is Myurei.”

Meraldia’s mixed population was one of its drawbacks, but it was also one of its strengths.

“The people here only know what Kuwol is like. This is your chance to show them how Meraldia does things. Don’t worry, I’ll back you up if anything happens,” Parker added.

“I-If you say so.”

Ryuunie looked forward again.

The meeting began with a recap of Kuwol’s current situation. Powani Karfal, who was serving as this meeting’s chair, started off by saying, “The passing of His Majesty Pajam the Second brought much turmoil to every region of Kuwol.”

Strictly speaking, that wasn’t the truth since Pajam the Second had basically been completely isolated from politics. It was Zagar’s rebellion that had caused all this turmoil. However, the nobles had all unilaterally decided to wipe Zagar’s involvement from the public record, so they were all pretending like he had nothing to do with this.

“We must act swiftly if we are to restore order. Both the royal family’s coffers and the various nobles’ finances are in dire straits. We need to resume trade with Meraldia immediately if we are to avert a financial crisis.”

Even if there hadn’t been much actual fighting, the coastal and river nobles

had ostensibly been at war. Meraldia had supported the coastal nobles, which technically had put them in opposition with the river nobles. However, Lord Karfal owed Veight a large debt, so he was willing to side with Meraldia despite being one of the river nobles.

Parker whispered all of this background information to Ryuunie and Myurei, who nodded emphatically.

“...Our teacher really is amazing.”

“So this is what he meant about turning enemies into allies through diplomacy. Maybe this won’t be so hard after all,” Myurei said with a grin.

Mao shook his head and replied, “Sorry, but I’m afraid things aren’t that simple. Soon enough, this is going to devolve into an unsightly slugfest with everyone prioritizing their own interests. Stay sharp—the true battle is yet to come.”

It only took a few minutes for Mao’s words to come true.

“Without our ports, you wouldn’t be able to send your sugar anywhere! Not to Meraldia, and certainly not to Wa!” one of the coastal nobles shouted, red-faced.

One of the river nobles countered, “That may be, but your port fees are still too high!”

“*We’re* the ones actually growing sugarcane!”

“The more you charge us, the higher we’ll have to price our sugar to make a profit! You know Meraldia won’t like that!”

Another coastal noble jumped into the fray and shouted, “You already surrendered to our armies! If you had any pride as warriors, you would accept the victor’s conditions!”

“This is a discussion about trade—a warrior’s pride has no place here!”

A few of the nobles were so heated that they looked ready to draw their weapons at any second. Naturally, their aides were keeping them in check, but there was no telling what would happen if the argument got any more heated.

Myurei sighed and said, "This is no way for grownups to act. Where's their dignity?"

"It's because they're adults that they're so desperate," Parker said with a grin. "I wouldn't look down on them if I were you."

"What do you mean by that?"

Parker's expression grew serious and he replied, "They all have a responsibility to the people they govern to put their priorities first and foremost. Which, of course, means they're less concerned about what the best solution is, and more interested in the solution that will bring them the most profit."

"But then..." Myurei trailed off.

Mao chimed in with, "This isn't a classroom, Master Myurei. Finding a compromise everyone can accept is more important than chasing vague ideals like justice or truth." Sighing, he added, "That being said, principles are still important. Your grandfather may be harsh, but he's known far and wide for being a fair ruler and someone you can trust...though, he's definitely a stingy old coot."

"I see."

Myurei nodded, absorbing that knowledge. Meanwhile, the debate between the nobles had taken an interesting turn.

"Here, look! These are the prices we'll have to charge for our sugar if we pay your *usurious* port fees! There's no way anyone will buy it!"

"Oh, shut your trap! Why don't you go ask Meraldia's representatives over there whether or not people will buy sugar at that price, huh?!"

Everyone's eyes darted over to Ryuunie and Myurei, who were indeed Meraldia's representatives for this meeting. Lord Karfal gave the two boys a pitying look, but then asked, "...What is Meraldia's opinion on the matter?"

Myurei and Ryuunie exchanged a quick glance, then Myurei got to his feet. He was a bit older than Ryuunie, and he was also a Meraldian native, which was why he thought he needed to take the lead here.

“M-Meraldia is hoping to profit from the sugar trade as well. If the prices are too high we won’t be able to import it.”

Immediately one of the river nobles shouted, “See! We won’t be able to sell anything! If Meraldia won’t buy our sugar, we may as well go bankrupt!”

“But if we don’t recoup our war expenditures somehow, our cities will go bankrupt!”

“We weren’t able to trade at all during the civil war, so we’re already deep in the red!”

“We should just ask Lord Veight what he thinks directly!”

The moment they had their answer, Kuwol’s nobles started ignoring Myurei again. He looked around for a few seconds, then awkwardly sat back down and hung his head.

“If Professor Veight were here, he would have done a way better job than me.”

“Veight certainly did a lot to help everyone here. They feel indebted to him, so of course they wouldn’t be able to yell at him like this. You did well, though. You held your ground and you told them where Meraldia stands on the issue.”

Parker smiled softly at Myurei, but he then folded his arms and lapsed into thought. It was clear reaching a compromise here wouldn’t be easy.

“This is quite the pickle. Everyone’s so focused on profits they’re losing sight of the big picture,” he mused.

Ryuunie looked up resolutely and said, “In that case, let me handle this.”

“H-Huh? Ryuunie?!”

Myurei looked concerned, but Ryuunie ignored him and got to his feet.

“Excuse me! May I have permission to speak? I am Rolmund’s former prince, Ryuunie Bolshevik Doneiks Rolmund!”

The meeting room fell silent almost immediately, then was soon followed by many of the nobles whispering frantically to each other.

“...Meraldia is harboring members of the Rolmund imperial family?”

“This must be part of Lord Veight’s plan.”

“Agreed...”

Hearing this, Ryuunie raised his voice. “You’re forgetting what’s important! Right now we should be focusing on how to protect Prince Schmal and the royal family! I lost my father to a civil war and was exiled from my home! But it is thanks to Lord Veight that I now have protection!”

Everyone’s attention was focused on Ryuunie, but they didn’t look happy at all.

“Here in Kuwol, the only people who can protect Prince Schmal are you nobles! I’m begging you, please put your discussion about profits and interests aside for now and put the royal family first!” After saying his piece, Ryuunie sat back down.

Myurei patted him on the back and muttered, “You’re amazing, you know that?”

“Th-Thanks... But I don’t think they’re too happy about what I said.”

Indeed, most of the nobles were sighing and shaking their heads.

“Hmm, I’m not quite sure what to say.”

“After all, everyone knows that ‘protecting the royal family’ is just an excuse to hold this meeting...”

Ryuunie slumped as he listened to the nobles’ condescending voices. Parker shook his head and said, “It’s just how things are. Everyone’s more worried about the immediate problems they face. Ideals can’t fill your belly. Well, not that actual food can fill my belly either.”

Parker’s sorry attempt at a joke didn’t lighten Ryuunie’s spirits at all.

“You’re right... If we could just talk through everything, civil wars wouldn’t happen in the first place.”

“Huh?! Err, well, yes...”

Parker slumped as well, and this time Mao stepped in with a rueful smile.

“Why don’t you let me handle this? I’m not much of an idealist, but I do know

how to handle mundane problems.”

Mao got to his feet and swept his gaze across the room, gathering everyone’s attention on him.

“My name is Mao, and I am one of Meraldia’s diplomats. I would like to offer a realistic proposal as an addendum to Prince Ryuunie’s words. Naturally, this proposal brings with it the potential for profit.”

“Profit...you say?”

The nobles stared at Mao with mild suspicion, but he didn’t seem to mind. Amani Wajar stood up and asked, “You are one of Meraldia’s foremost merchants, are you not, Sir Mao?”

Well, this will certainly make convincing everyone easier, Mao thought with a faint smile.

As Mao collected his thoughts Amani waved cheerfully to Parker, and he gave a small wave back. Amani’s complexion was much better than the last time Parker had seen her, and the niacin deficiency rashes were gone. *She’s quite cute now that she isn’t sickly...* he thought absently.

“I heard you were born in Wa, but that you have connections everywhere, including in Rolmund. Please, tell us what this proposal might be.”

Wajar was one of the most important inland cities, and Amani had quite a bit of influence with the river nobles. Now that she’d stood up for Mao, none of them could speak out against him.

“Thank you.” Mao bowed deeply to Amani. “I realize that this meeting was called to discuss practical affairs, and that it was improper to call attention to the pretense when we all understand it is a facade, but I implore you all to consider Prince Ryuunie’s words more carefully.”

Mao spoke smoothly, drawing on his years of experience as a traveling merchant.

“His Majesty Pajam the Second passed away under dubious circumstances, and his heir Prince Schmal has only just been born. Were the neighboring nations to learn that the nobles who support Kuwol are more concerned with

lining their pockets than securing the stability of the new regime—what would they think?”

The palace’s official statement was that Pajam the Second had died by falling off his horse, but everyone in this room knew that he’d been assassinated by Zagar. Kuwol had also just come out of a civil war, and it was obvious to everyone that the nation was greatly weakened. The nobles glared at Mao with unbridled hostility, but he continued, unfazed.

“Meraldia is, of course, Kuwol’s ally and will do everything in its power to assist you, but we need to gain from this alliance as well.” Grinning, Mao ended his speech there.

The nobles looked awkwardly at each other. Mao did have a point about how they couldn’t afford to be infighting right now.

“If the larger nomad tribes struck now, we’d be in trouble...”

“All they have to do is capture one city next to the Mejire, and our supply routes will be completely cut off.”

“Considering how unstable the kingdom is currently, they may really try and attack.”

After making sure the nobles had been sufficiently shaken, Mao said, “I have no doubt the nomad tribes that roam this land are dangerous, but there’s a far more dangerous adversary you must worry about.”

“And who would that be?” Amani asked in a tone that made it clear she knew the answer.

“Your own people,” Mao replied simply.

“Our...people?”

“Yes. I hope you have not forgotten that Zagar and all of his mercenaries were the kingdom’s subjects. What do you think drove those common people to commit such barbaric acts?”

Mao purposely avoided explicitly mentioning Pajam’s murder. In order to properly bury the truth, it was important that no one said it out loud. Nevertheless, the nobles fully understood what Mao was getting at.

“...I do not mean to disparage our own people, but something like that will never happen again.”

“Something that has happened once before can easily occur a second or third time. In fact, most of the mercenary company Zagar led is still intact. Not only that, but they’re still here in Encaraga.”

Zagar himself was dead, but it was easily possible for another ambitious man like Zagar to attempt something similar. Mao spoke quickly, not giving the nobles a chance to argue back.

“Don’t you understand? The reason this tragedy occurred is not because a scoundrel like Zagar existed. The current state of Kuwol’s society is the root cause. The ills of the common people serve as fertile soil to breed revolution. So long as you don’t address the core issue, this tragedy will repeat over and over again.”

One of the nobles opened their mouths to argue, but Birakoya Bahza cut them off.

“Please wait, everyone. Let Sir Mao finish what he has to say. I think it will prove very valuable advice.”

Birakoya smiled at Parker as she extended a helping hand to Mao. *I guess this is her way of paying us back?* Parker thought, smiling back at her. Things were going better than expected, thanks to all the groundwork Veight had laid by helping everyone out.

Mao bowed to Birakoya, then continued his speech, “Now that you’ve experienced a civil war for yourselves, surely you understand just how terrifying the common people can be when they’re hungry, penniless, and fed up with being trampled on? I was once in their position, so I can understand their anger quite well. The reason I live in Meraldia now is because my former employer framed me for his crimes, forcing me to flee my home.”

The room went quiet. After a few seconds, Lord Karfal nodded solemnly. He, too, had been chased out of his city by Zagar and forced to wander the wilderness for a short while with his family. He looked over at Parker, who nodded silently. It seemed Karfal wanted to repay his debts here as well.

Upon receiving confirmation, Lord Karfal raised his hand and said, “My apologies for speaking so frequently when I’m supposed to be this meeting’s mediator, but I understand Sir Mao’s words quite well myself. If we focus solely on our own profits...we will be inviting another calamity.”

Mao nodded in agreement.

“Lord Powani is absolutely correct. Were all of Kuwol’s people law-abiding, tax-paying citizens who respected the royal family and the nobles who support it, the kingdom would be at peace. I believe the best way to make that possible is to vastly expand sugarcane cultivation and increase the amount of sugar in circulation. That will make the common people wealthier as well, and if they have a stable lifestyle, they won’t feel compelled to revolt.”

One of the nobles folded his arms and harrumphed loudly. “You just want to be able to buy cheap sugar in bulk, don’t you?”

Mao grinned wickedly, his nature as a merchant coming to the forefront. “Perhaps. But it’s not a bad deal for you either, now, is it? Meraldians aren’t particularly fond of meji, but they love sugar. Even if prices decrease, you’ll more than make up the difference with the increased sell-through quantity.”

“Will we really stand to profit from this?” the noble asked suspiciously.

Mao pulled out the documents he’d been organizing earlier and said, “According to Lord Veight’s calculations, Meraldia’s sugar consumption is projected to hit an explosive new high. He’s confident enough that he’s willing to buy ten times the sugar next year as he did this year.”

“...D-Did you just say *ten* times?!”

Mao scratched his head awkwardly and said, “To be honest, I can hardly believe it myself... However, Veight seems certain that the demand for sweets and confectionaries will rise exponentially.”

Sugar was used as a medicine and for regular cooking as well, but Veight’s insistence was that sweets production would drive demand up. Of course, baked goods and confectionaries used far more sugar than medicine or regular dishes, so if his predictions were true, consumption would indeed go up by as much as 10 times.

Mao cocked his head and questioned, “Can people really eat that much sugar?”

“Err, I’m not sure we’re the ones you should be asking.” The nobles exchanged glances with each other. “But if Lord Veight says Meraldia will want that much sugar, then demand most likely will rise.”

“Besides, it’s only Meraldia that stands to lose out if they can’t actually use all the sugar they buy.”

“If they actually take all the sugar we grow, we may as well expand our plantations.”

In the end, one of the nobles turned to Mao.

“Will you really buy ten times as much sugar next year?”

“Lord Veight has said he wants to import that much, and the council has already set aside the budget for it. However, we would like to negotiate the price down a little, considering the large quantity we’ll be buying.”

The nobles exchanged glances again so Mao added, “Even if you sell at a discounted price, you’ll still get to inject a large amount of foreign currency into your economy. Plus, this will be a good chance for Kuwol to start importing Meraldia’s luxury goods.”

That seemed to convince the nobles.

“You have a point. If we start importing Meraldian goods and sell them domestically, we will be able to increase our profits that way as well.”

“Indeed. A small price drop on sugar will still net us more rewards in the long run.”

In a passionate voice, Mao stated, “Precisely! I’m sure the people of Kuwol will find great value in our exports. We can sell you dragonscale gems from Rolmund, magical tools designed by the demon army, intricate glass and silverwork pieces, and even high-quality iron from Wa!”

“Oho...”

Goods that were commonplace on Meraldia’s continent were quite valuable in Kuwol. Buying cheaply and selling at a markup was the basis of business, but

the profit margins of imported goods like these would be astronomical.

While everyone was slowly being won over by Mao's arguments, Valkel rose to his feet and said, "Well then, this is quite an intriguing proposition you have for us! My master, Lord Peshmet, was already considering adding a new large sugarcane plantation to his territory and giving it to me, so this works out quite well for us. I would love nothing more than for Meraldia to buy all of my sugar! As Lord Peshmet's representative, I give you my word that our city will take part in this deal!"

It appeared that Valkel had become quite the celebrity after receiving a letter from Veight's name.

"It's fine if the other cities aren't interested, that will just mean more profits for us. I'm sure my master will be quite pleased to learn that we have a monopoly on this deal, ahahahah!"

Valkel grinned at Parker as he said that. *It feels like half the people at this meeting are indebted to us. Even when you're not here, you're still helping us out, Veight,* Parker thought with a wry smile as he bowed to Valkel. That convinced the other nobles to throw away any remaining hesitation, and everyone started clamoring to join in on the deal.

"Now, now, hold on a moment. We need to do this fairly so that everyone, including the citizens, prospers from our agreement."

"O-Of course, we can't leave them out either..."

After a great deal of debating minutiae, the first Grand Kuwol Conference came to an end. Meraldia's four representatives were currently resting in their room.

"Your way of doing things is insane too, but completely in the opposite way of Veight's," Parker said sullenly.

Mao coolly replied, "What's the problem? If there's already a contract in place, Kuwol will be able to expand their sugar production without having to worry about anything."

"Signing an advance contract for the purchase of sugar is fine, but you went

and inserted that clause about Meraldia getting preference when buying on the international market. At a ridiculously discounted rate, at that!”

Mao looked unmoved by Parker’s complaints.

“We aren’t running a charity here, you know. Meraldia’s pledging to buy an inordinate amount of sugar. Considering the risk we’re taking on, it’s only fair that we get a few perks out of the deal, too.”

“We got way more than just *a few* perks here!”

Ryuunie and Myurei sighed, ignoring Parker and Mao’s debate.

“We were completely useless, weren’t we?”

“I wasn’t able to do even a fraction of what my dad or grandpa do when they negotiate with the Kuwolese...”

Upon hearing that Parker and Mao cut their argument short and exchanged smiles.

“What are you saying? You two did great.”

“Indeed. This was your first time at the negotiating table, but you were both able to state your position clearly and concisely. Well done.”

Myurei looked up, unconvinced. “Did we actually help at all?”

“Absolutely. I have faith that you will make for a great councilman in the future. I’m confident you’ll keep Meraldia’s trade going strong even decades from now.”

Myurei looked back at Ryuunie, his expression still glum.

“If you say so...”

“But in the end, it feels like Professor Veight’s popularity carried the entire negotiation.”

Even the inexperienced boys were able to tell that the majority of Kuwol’s leadership felt an affinity towards Meraldia thanks to Veight. That was indeed the biggest reason why the debate got resolved so quickly.

Parker smiled sadly at the two of them and said, “I suppose that’s true. Everyone’s trust in Veight was what ultimately decided things.”

Of course, knowing him, I bet my little brother doesn't think he accomplished anything at all here.

With his smile growing bigger, Parker followed up himself, saying, "You know, even if Veight created this opportunity for us, we're the ones who seized it. I'm sure he'd say the same thing if he was here."

"Oh, absolutely," Mao added.

Eventually, the report Parker wrote on how things went made its way across the sea and over to Rynheit.

"Hah, I knew they could do it," Veight said with a smile as he read the letter, Friede resting on his lap.

"It looks like negotiations with Kuwol went well. I guess everyone really didn't need me there. I'm going to have to get used to relying on other people more often from now on."

Airia smiled and replied, "You really should. Normally a large-scale conference like this would take much longer to resolve. I'm sure the reason things went so smoothly is because of all the trust you built up while you were there."

Veight watched Friede play with his finger and said, "You think so? But even if I created the opportunity for them, they're the ones who seized it."

"Yes, yes, of course."

Vice-Commander Kumluk's Heroes

My name is Kumluk. I used to hold titles such as "Vice-Captain of Bahza's mercenary company" or "Haluam, the porcelain merchant's son" but right now I'm just Kumluk. I no longer have a home in Kuwol, so I've decided to sail north to Meraldia. Veight, the vice-commander to the Meraldian Demon Lord, has helped me out on numerous occasions, and this time is no exception. However, before I leave to join him, I want to leave a written account here of the two heroes in my life: Zagar and Lord Veight.

I owe a great deal to Zagar, the man who led Bahza's mercenary company. Without him, I would not have been able to make it as a mercenary. I realize he betrayed his comrades and assassinated the king, but even so, I can't help but feel grateful to him. Zagar was brave, decisive, wise, hardworking, and most of all, ambitious. To me, he was undoubtedly a Hero. Had he been incompetent, he wouldn't have managed to kill the king. Many people dream of doing impossible deeds, but he was someone who actually did them. Though, I suspect no one living in Kuwol other than him would even dream of slaying the king.

Meraldians probably don't understand just how sacred Kuwol's king is to us. It is for that reason that I think it would be a shame for Zagar's name to be wiped from the public record. The things he did may not have all been morally just, but they were lofty. His achievements should go down in history for all to see. His cowardice should go down in history for all to see. I think once I reach Meraldia I will write a book chronicling the life of this wicked Hero. I'm sure I will be allowed to publish the truth in a different country.

In hindsight, I think the driving force behind Zagar's action was rage. He was angry at many different things, I feel. When I first met him, he was angry at the treatment mercenaries received in Kuwolese society. That's why I and so many other mercenaries put our faith in him. We believed he was a captain who fought alongside us, rather than a faceless employer.

Eventually, his rage shifted towards society itself, and then towards the nobles and royals who stood at the top of that society. During that shift, he stopped caring about the mercenaries under him and began working towards a more selfish goal—though I suspect the selfishness he eventually showed was his true nature. He never felt guilty about the atrocities he committed, nor did he himself think he was changing.

However, I believe it would be wrong of me or any other mercenary to condemn him. We entrusted our hopeless lives to him because we couldn't bear to take responsibility for ourselves. We selfishly expected him to solve all of our problems for us. Our lives were given to him of our own will and became the kindling that fueled the fire of his ambition. If anything, we're the ones that created the monster Zagar eventually became. It is difficult to blame him for using us since we were using him just the same. The relationship between us and Zagar was simply one of mutual benefit.

By that logic, a thousandth of the blame for the king's murder lies with me. Back then, my job was to keep an eye on Lord Veight. Zagar was terribly afraid of what he might do, and wanted him under constant watch. Thinking back on it now, it's obvious that Zagar wanted to make sure Veight didn't get in the way of his plan to kill the king—which means I unwittingly aided Zagar in his plot. In the same way that you can thin blood with water but never make it disappear, I can justify my sin but it will never go away.

That being said, I have no way of atoning for my sins. The most I can do is accurately record the truth behind the civil war and leave it as a warning for future generations.

With regards to just what kind of personality Zagar had, Lord Veight—that is Veight Von Aindorf—had a rather insightful comment about that: “Zagar was a genius when it came to warfare, and he had a surprising amount of foresight as well. However, he lacked consideration for others, and did not know how to be satisfied with what he had.”

Consideration for others, and the ability to be satisfied with what you have—it's true that Zagar lacked both of those. The only time he showed kindness was when it was a calculated move to benefit him. Generosity was a currency used

to buy the help of others. Of course, I myself didn't realize this until much later. As for his ambition, even when I was oblivious and working under him, I could tell it was bottomless. Zagar was a man who didn't know when to quit.

He was the kind of person that would keep fighting until he was the ruler of Kuwol—no, of the entire world. He could run out of enemies and he'd still keep fighting something. To him, the act of taking from others through combat was what defined his life. Ultimately, his path of plunder died the moment he made an enemy out of someone stronger than him, and that someone was Veight Von Aindorf, the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander.

At first glance, Zagar and Lord Veight might seem like polar opposites. Zagar loved violence and was a self-centered narcissist, while Lord Veight eschews violence and is kind to all. I guarantee you, everyone who met him in Kuwol would say the same, regardless of their station in life. If you ask me, though, the two have a surprising number of things in common. Both of them have excellent foresight and knowledge to set up strategies for the long-term. They are also both decisive and act quickly when they know what they want to do. Moreover, they both understand how to win over the hearts of others. You could say they're charismatic. They know when people want practical solutions, and when they want idealistic speeches.

What's truly surprising to me, though, is that both of them are exceedingly cautious. Zagar was a peerless warrior, but was concerned about even the most trifling of hiccups in his plans, and always prepared backup plans for everything he did. And despite how bold Lord Veight may seem, he's cut from the same cloth. According to Lord Veight, the reason Zagar seemed so confident was actually because he lacked self-confidence. In order to hide his low self-esteem, he had played the part of a confident leader—or so Lord Veight says. This is why I think those two Heroes, who seem like complete opposites at first glance, are actually quite similar.

Ultimately, however, Zagar was unable to match up to Lord Veight in any respect—and that wasn't because Lord Veight is the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, or a werewolf, or even a mage. The biggest difference separating these two is that Lord Veight is aware of his own weakness, and he doesn't run

from it. In doing so, he's conquered his weakness in the truest sense. It's why he can unveil his plans to unrelated people like me, and why he doesn't try to bluster the way Zagar did. He's one of the few people I would call a truly good man.

So, I mentioned how Lord Veight is quite similar to Zagar but different in a few fundamental ways. As someone who used to be Zagar's second-in-command, I'm very curious what kind of future Lord Veight wants to build. Will Veight's methods be able to create a world where the weak and oppressed can live in peace? Or is not even a man as great as him capable of such a miracle? For now, at least, it appears as though things are going well under his leadership. Most great legends fail to raise capable successors, so once they die, things tend to fall apart. But in Lord Veight's case, those around him are constantly being influenced by his ideas and growing along with him.

I heard that two of his students who traveled here from Meraldia were able to handle the Grand Kuwol Conference in his place, which is proof enough of that. Lord Veight is not only a skilled warrior and politician, but also a good teacher. If the world Lord Veight is aiming for—a world where no one will have to suffer and everyone can be happy—is truly a possibility, then the day it comes will be the day Zagar's delusions are destroyed for good. The very specter of ambition will fade from this world, then. I hope that Lord Veight truly can show me such a world.

Overall, I think there is one important lesson I have learned from this ordeal: I should never put my life in another's hands. I've decided to work for Lord Veight now, but this time around I plan to take responsibility for my own life, rather than leave it up to him. Not only is it dangerous to entrust my life to another, but it's being disrespectful to them. In Bahza, there's a custom known as "Peshunga." During festivals and banquets, people group up into pairs, and one pair closes their eyes while the other guides their hands so they can eat. According to Lord Veight, there's a similar custom in Wa as well. I hear it's called "Nininbaori" there.

At any rate, in Bahza there's a saying that goes "Peshunga porridge is spilled

porridge.” No matter how close two people are, guiding someone who has their eyes closed is pretty difficult. The meaning of the saying is if you want to try to entrust everything to someone else, you should be prepared for failure. I remember my father and grandfather often repeated the saying to me. This is why nobles often try to take care of their most important business by themselves. Though, I suppose in His Majesty Pajam the Second’s case, following that advice got him assassinated. Thinking back on it now, I’ve been doing Peshunga my whole life. I was borrowing Zagar’s help and trying to have him feed me—not that he had any intention of helping me. It’s only natural my life would be full of failures considering the way I lived so far. I was a fool.

This time around, I’ll be the one holding the porridge spoon. It’s kind of pathetic how I only realized what my father and grandfather were telling me after so many years, but even Lord Veight says it’s never too late to change yourself. Apparently, there’s a bishop in Meraldia who turned over a new leaf recently despite being quite old. He used to hate demons, but now is one of the biggest proponents of coexistence. Not only that, but he has demon believers coming to his church. I hope I can change the way he has. If I can, I feel like I will finally be able to become myself—or rather, I’ll be able to return to being myself.

The weather’s quite nice today. It’s the perfect day to set sail. The perfect day to take a new step forward. I don’t know who may pick up this letter later, but if anyone does end up reading this, let us see Meraldia’s brilliant future together. I’m looking forward to this long, long journey.

Afterword

Hello everyone, Hyougetsu here.

It's been three years since the first volume of *Der Werwolf* was published. The series covered a pretty big chunk of Veight's life, but we've finally reached the "happily ever after" conclusion. I know this is a sudden change of topic, but if you look through history's list of great figures, you'll notice most of them failed to raise good successors. No matter how good someone is at war or politics, there's no guarantee they'll also be a good parent. (That's hardly surprising, since parenting is a totally different skill set.) However, the titular hero Veight doesn't need to worry about that. He'll be a wonderful father, and he knows how to teach people other than his own kids, too. I hope, anyway. The people he teaches will go on to lead Meraldia to even greater peace and prosperity. I hope, anyway.

In the web novel, everything up to volume 11 is the "main story" and everything after is extra content. I plan to write up until around 15 years past the end of the main story, at which point Meraldia and the surrounding nations will be stable enough that Veight won't need to do anything at all. Of course, these extra stories will still feature Veight running around from place to place, but the tone is going to be pretty different. They're also going to have a pretty heavy focus on his daughter, Friede.

As a result, I decided to take my editor up on his offer, and swap up the artists for the extra volumes. My new illustrator is going to be Teshima-sensei. He's just as skilled as Nishi(E)da-sensei, but his art has a much more lighthearted vibe to it. I feel as though a style like this is more fitting now that Meraldia is at peace.

While this will be the end of my collaboration with Nishi(E)da-sensei, I'm honestly grateful for all that he's done these past three years. His art really brought the story of this humble vice-commander to life. Thank you so very much! Only you could have drawn such an imposing version of werewolf Veight

and Demon Lord Friedensrichter, while also giving us such beautiful images of triumph against adversity. I honestly don't think I could have made it this far without you. I can't thank you enough for sticking with me this long.

Of course, I'll be relying just as much on Teshima-sensei for drawing alluring but more lighthearted images from now on. Friede's going to be growing up quite a bit throughout the extra volumes, so I'm looking forward to seeing her go from young girl to teenager. I'll be counting on you, Teshima-sensei.

Incidentally, my second son was born last year. My experiences with him were a good reference for writing the chapter of Friede's birth, and I'll probably be using my oldest daughter as a reference for Friede in her childhood years. She was only a year old when I first started writing, but she's five now. There'll be plenty of scenes with five-year-old Friede, so I'm recording a lot of what she does in case I need it later. Naturally, I also plan to write about ten-year-old and fifteen-year-old Friede as well, so it'd be nice if my daughter grows up faster than usual. That probably won't happen, though, so I'll have to rely on the memories of my time as a cram school teacher. (I used to teach middle school Japanese and science before I became a writer.)

The extra stories up on the web novel version are pretty short and rather truncated, so I'm hoping to expand on them a bit for the published volumes.

May we meet again in volume 12 in the chronicles of the Black Werewolf King.



Since this is
my last chance,
I decided to draw
a sexy Gomovira.

Thank you for sticking
with me for so long!
-Nishi(E)da



My final
afterword.

These are some
rough drafts I had
for the werewolves.



Congratulations on
the release of volume 11! 83

At this rate, I'll never get the manga
caught up to the novels, but I'll try my best...

Great job bringing peace to
Meraldia, Veight!



#A3E L4K2 ©
Kosumi Yuuichi

Bonus Short Story

From Demon Lord to Demon Lord

My dear friend Gomoviroa,

I am writing this letter to you on the eve of my duel with the Hero. There are a number of things I wish to speak to you about regarding the future of the demon army. This will be a rather long-winded letter, but please bear with me.

All organizations are created with a goal in mind. This holds true for both human organizations and demon ones. People naturally flock together to hunt for food, to better protect themselves, to raise their children, and so on. The demon army is an organization that was created to secure a safe living space for the various demon races. Humans refused to recognize our rights, so we ultimately resorted to violence to win them. We used our superior power to force humans to accept our demands.

Of course, none of this is a revelation to you. I've only stated the obvious. What isn't obvious is that organizations have a tendency to become a goal in their own right. I know you've been away from society a long time so I'll be direct: Organizations eventually forget the purpose for which they were formed and prioritize extending their own lifespan instead. They become a twisted shell of their former selves, and occasionally even work against their original goal. I strongly believe that a good organization must always be reevaluating itself and rearranging personnel to ensure that it is moving in the right direction. I've seen far too many collectives stagnate and wither away because they forgot their purpose.

The demon army now has a strong position within human society. We've conquered many cities, and though the current situation is far from ideal, we are coexisting for now. Honestly, we've achieved a surprising amount. In fact, you could say that we've achieved our initial goal. Of course, the fighting is far

from over. If we lay down our arms now, the human institutions still antagonistic towards demons, like the Senate, will annihilate us. We cannot afford to relinquish our military might. War is a necessary evil that we must embrace to fully realize our ideals.

However, there will come a time when our war ends. A time where we've either defeated our enemies or converted them to allies. When that happens, the demon army will have to change. It will need to transform from an organization that values only military prowess, to one that knows how to rule fairly and protect its territory. There are many demons within our ranks that only understand fighting, like our departed friend Tiverit. Our kind does not value those who use their words to solve problems rather than their fists. But now that so many of the more militant demons have died in battle, we have a rare opportunity to reform the demon army. I want to leave this organization in the right hands—to make sure this opportunity isn't wasted.

In truth, I've always been looking for a chance to retire, and I think now is a good time. I'm the kind of person who is only useful on the battlefield. I kill, intimidate, and use fear tactics to build walls protecting demons from humans. It's all I ever learned and it's all I know. But there is someone in the demon army who's been using a different approach to secure our place in human society. I am of course referring to your disciple, Veight. Like me, he slays his foes and uses intimidation and coercion when necessary. But he doesn't build walls or create rifts with his methods. In fact, he does the exact opposite—he tears down the walls between our two species and turns yesterday's enemy into today's friend. There are few demons like this. But you may be surprised to hear that the same is true among humans. One must be extremely thoughtful and patient to get others to trust you. It's a rare skill that takes both innate talent and a great deal of effort to cultivate.

Veight is both a powerful warrior and a skilled statesman who can change up his tactics on a dime to adapt to the situation. He's the kind of Champion we need. I'm sure many demons, yourself included, find it strange that someone like him exists. His way of thinking is too far removed from a normal demon's. He values peaceful coexistence and open dialogue. He even shows respect to humans much weaker than him. However, I know why it is that such actions

come so naturally to Veight. It's a secret that I'd rather not divulge without his consent though, so I'll tell you some other time.

Regardless, I believe Veight is the one best suited to be the next Demon Lord. I would have absolutely no regrets in leaving the demon army in his hands. He knows better than anyone the burdens a leader must bear. However, I know that he's too kindhearted to make the hard choices a ruler must. If I make him my successor, I know somewhere down the line his gentle nature will lead him to make the wrong decisions. I cannot in good conscience ask him to take up my mantle. If I defeat the Hero, I'll put off choosing a successor until a better candidate appears. For that reason, I absolutely must win this upcoming duel. However, at some point, I will need to find a replacement. Someone who can build a peaceful nation, unlike me.

— Friedensrichter

"And there you have it—the Demon Lord's letter. Combined with what I've learned from my investigation of Wa's Great Torii of the Divine, I believe that both you and him were reincarnated here from a different world," Master said as she finished reading the will Friedensrichter had left her.

"I see," I replied, scratching my head. *So you knew all along, huh? I guess I should have expected that.*

Master looked up at me and said in a reproachful voice, "Why did you both think you needed to hide this from me? Am I not trustworthy to you?"

"Sorry. It's just that you know more than anyone about life and death, so I was worried..." I admitted. *Worried that you'd get fired up to do some crazy research experiments.*

Master chuckled and replied, "Fear not. I intend to start by experimenting with animals first. I'll engrave a special necromantic crest on the brains of a hundred rats, and from there I'll see if those crests reappear after..."

"See, this is why I didn't want to tell you."

I knew I made the right call.

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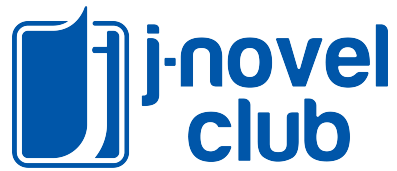
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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 11

by Hyougetsu

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