

03

Der Werwolf

Der Werwolf:

The Annals of Veight

— Unification of the South —

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ill. Nishi(E)da







Character

Veight

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



Gomoviroa

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



Airia Luft Aindorf

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

I turned around and saw Firnir staring at me.

“Hmm. Master, huh?”

I don't like the sound of that one bit. I better stop her before she gets any funny ideas.

“We're both fellow disciples, so I can't be your master.”

“You're right! Good point, Vaito!”

Why're you so happy about that!? Shatina turned to Firnir and said, “That may be true, but *I* am Master Veight's first disciple, Lady Firnir.”

“Gwah!? Damn, that does sound nice...”

“You are more than welcome to become his second, of course.”

“Oh, that's not a bad idea.”

Please stop making yourself into my disciple. Shatina and Firnir's strange rivalry was ruining the solemnity of the ceremony. The other viceroys were all grinning now too. This felt more like a gathering of friends than a dignified ritual. *I guess it's up to me to discipline our problem children.*

“You two children stop bickering and get along now.”

Firnir and Shatina turned to me and said simultaneously, “We're not children!”

Riiiiight.

The ceremony concluded, and Zaria now had a new viceroy. With this, all eight southern cities had viceroys. Though two of them were demons. Finally, with all of the preliminary formalities were out of the way, Airia could make her proclamation.

“I hereby declare that our eight cities, along with the demon army, are now part of a new nation, the Meraldian Commonwealth!”

The eight viceroys all signed the document Airia presented. Once they were done, I signed as the demon army's representative. With this, the southern half of the Meraldian continent had officially become its own nation. A nation where

demons would be able to live in peace.

Airia then explained what kind of government this new nation would have. In order to fight the unified Senate, we needed to be just as unified.

“Henceforth, the viceroys of each city will also be councilors on the Meraldian Commonwealth’s governing council, and together we will decide this nation’s laws and policies. All motions will need Her Majesty the Demon Lord’s approval before they will be implemented, and similarly, the demon army’s policies will be reviewed by us before approval.”

What was most important was communication. Master’s policy was to make decisions only after consulting with her human counterparts. Incidentally, the one who’d come up with this model of government was the old Demon Lord. To be honest, Master wasn’t a very good politician, so this was probably for the best. However, there was just one thing about this new council that didn’t sit well with me.

“Lady Airia, why must I be on this council as well?”

“The council needs someone to represent the demons’ interests.”

Melaine and Firnir were representing the people of Bernheinen and Thuvan respectively. In other words, they couldn’t speak for demons as a whole. Their position demanded they put the interests of their citizens first, and I was planning on making sure they did. Though, of course, that meant the demons needed their own representative. Since Master was ostensibly the demon with the most authority in this new nation, it fell to her aide—me—to represent her and her interests in the commonwealth’s newly formed council.

That much I understood. However...

“Could you please stop giving me so many responsibilities? I want to remain a simple vice-commander.”

Airia grinned in response.

“Within the demon army, you will of course be nothing more than the Demon Lord’s vice-commander. But outside of the army, we would like you to be one of our councilors.”

“If you insist...”

Looks like there's no getting out of this one.

“All members of the council, regardless of whether they own land or not, shall be granted the title of Baron. Baron Veight, I hope you will work together with us to bring prosperity to Meraldia's southern cities.”

“Fine...”

How did it come to this? I just wanted to live a quiet life with my friends. How come the harder I work, the more work I get?

Guardians of the Labyrinth

The labyrinth city of Zaria had two labyrinths to its name, one upper one lower. At least, that's what most people thought. But in reality, there was one more. One only I, viceroy of Zaria, had been informed of.

"Whoa... this is awesome," the kentauros general, Firnir, muttered in awe. Her voice echoed through the underground chamber until eventually the darkness swallowed it up. This was Zaria's third labyrinth, the underground maze.

"Zaria was actually founded atop the ruins of an ancient city."

I lit a lamp to banish the darkness, and handed a second one to Firnir.

"Make sure you do not lose this. There are no other sources of light down here, so if we lose these two lamps, we'll be stranded in darkness."

"Gotcha. Wait, but then what am I gonna do about my spear and shield... Oh wait, I know."

Foolish girl, don't hang your lamp from your spearhead!

"What are you doing!? If you have to fight anyone with that spear, one thrust will shatter the lamp!"

Firnir turned back to me with a worried frown.

"Wait, there's enemies down here?"

"There might be."

To be honest, I wasn't sure myself.

Together with Firnir, I continued down the long stone pathway.

"Originally, there was just a permanent camp built near these ruins, but that camp grew until it became the city of Zaria. In truth, my ancestors who built this town had wanted to settle further north, but they couldn't explore any further

so they built here.”

My father told me that before he died. I will never hear his kind voice or hold his gentle hands again. But I can’t continue to dwell on that fact.

“The upper layers of the ruins are used by the residents as graveyards or warehouses. So we should be safe here at least.”

While people didn’t come here often, this floor was still technically developed land.

“The problem is we don’t know what lies deeper in the ruins. No one has delved that far down before... Or if they have, they haven’t returned.”

“What the heck, that’s terrifying!”

Firnir shrunk back a little. For how tough she looked, she sure scared easily.

“Sh-Shatina, don’t you think we should bring some guards with us if it’s this dangerous?”

“Master Veight showed me how powerful demons can be in enclosed spaces. Firnir, you’re a demon as well, aren’t you?”

Among the kentauros, Firnir was lauded as a Champion. I was certain she could handle any threat that might show up. But to my surprise, Firnir shook her head, her legs trembling.

“Please don’t put me in the same category as Vaito! He’s on a totally different level! He’s the strongest demon in the demon army! And it’s only werewolves who are good at fighting in enclosed spaces!”

“So where do you rank, Firnir?”

“W-Well... I’m a kentauros, so we like the open plains. But I’m pretty strong still, really!”

“Really?”

“If I can get a running start, I can trample anything. It’s just a little hard to run in tight spaces like this.”

She’s surprisingly timid, considering how eager she was to explore when I told her about these ruins.

“You aren’t having second thoughts, are you Firnir?”

“Of course not!”

In order to show just how not scared she was, Firnir raised her spear, the lamp still dangling from the tip.

“I’m one of the demon army’s greatest generals, Firnir of the Swift Gale! The Champion who captured Thuvan and became its viceroy!”

“Didn’t Master Veight do most of the work that battle?”

“Maybe so! But I was still the commander of the siege! I mean sure, Vaito might have blown open the gates and forced the garrison commander to surrender, but still!”

I tried to calm Firnir down, as she was starting to become hysterical.

“Shall we head back? I’m nowhere near as good with a blade as my soldiers are, and it seems like you’re not confident you can handle this either.”

Firnir turned to me, tears in her eyes.

“I’ll be fine! I’m the Demon Lord’s disciple, I won’t lose my nerve that easily! Let’s go!”

“Are you sure?”

I’m starting to think it might be better if we went back.

After talking it over, we decided to map out the first strata of the ruins, then head back. The upper floors should be safe. Besides, mapping out the top floor will come in handy when we eventually do explore the entire ruins.

“So why are we exploring this place anyway?”

“I told you when we came down here, remember? We need to investigate the ruins so we can figure out where to put walls and buildings. We can’t build on top of hollow cavities, or the ground underneath will collapse.”

Now that Zaria had declared independence from the Meraldian Federation, it was free to expand as it pleased. We could build new walls and houses wherever we wished. But before we did, we had to make sure the ground was

solid enough to build foundations on. Which was why I was inspecting these underground ruins beneath the city.

“Though, originally I had planned on hiring someone else to survey these ruins...”

Unfortunately, when I’d told Firnir, who’d come to visit, about my plans, she’d ended up convincing me to investigate them together with her. In secret, of course. *This girl really doesn’t think before she acts, does she? Though I guess it is a little exciting to be exploring underground ruins with just the two of us.* We just had to finish exploring before our aides realized we were missing, and they would be none the wiser.

The ruins’ buildings were all composed of very sturdy stone, so Zaria usually harvested its building materials from down here. There were no quarries in the region, so we could only use as much stone was down here. That was why most upper floors were made with brick, which was more common.

“How long does this passage go on for?” Firnir grumbled. To be honest, I was beginning to get annoyed by its length as well. We were measuring distance in footsteps, and were using a large piece of parchment to record the map, but these ruins were larger than I’d anticipated. Judging by the numerous branching corridors, these ruins spanned the entire length of the city.

“This is more than amateurs like us can handle,” I sighed. Considering the scale of these ruins, I’d need to hire a full team of surveyors to map them out. “Let’s head back, Firnir.”

“Yeah, I’m getting tired of doing this anyway. Oh, by the way, you can just call me Fir.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Whyyy!?”

Though we both agreed to turn back, we continued walking forward. Eventually, we went so far that my charcoal pen reached the edge of the parchment, and I ran out of room to keep drawing. I turned to Firnir and asked, “By the way, where are we?”

“You don’t know?”

It seemed we were lost.

“Like I *said!*” Firnir poked the map. “The more tired you get, the smaller your steps become! That’s something every soldier knows!”

“Well, I’m not a soldier...”

It appeared marking distance in steps had led to a greater margin of error than I’d expected. Because of that, the map I’d made was inaccurate and we no longer knew which passages were where.

“Even if we only go off by a step every hundred steps, that’s still a pretty big gap.”

“I know.”

I nodded, ashamed of my mistake. Firnir sighed and added, “You realize we’ve probably walked more than ten thousand steps right?”

“I know.”

Meaning my most recent measurements were at least off by a hundred steps. And since we’d been getting more tired the further we went, the mismeasurements were probably worse for the more recent additions to the map.

“I see, so you can’t use footsteps as a unit of measurement for maps... I’m sorry.”

While I was sorry, there was something nagging at me.

“But why did you push all the mapmaking onto me in the first place, Firnir?”

“Cause I’m really bad at this kinda stuff.”

You can’t be serious.

“Important tasks like these are supposed to be checked over by multiple people to make sure no mistakes have been made!”

“I’m only your guard! I’m doing my job just fine!”

“What job!? There are no enemies down here!”

“Yes, there is!”

“No, there isn’t!”

“There definitely is!”

We continued walking as we argued. But after a few steps, I felt the ground crumble underneath me.

It seemed I’d momentarily blacked out from the fall.

“Owww...”

I heard Firnir groan through the darkness. Red and purple lights danced at the edge of my vision. *Thank goodness, it seems she’s safe too.*

“Oof...”

I struggled to my feet and examined my surroundings. A faint light shone underneath my feet, but aside from that, there was just darkness.

“What happened to our lamps?”

“They broke.”

Firnir’s voice came from right next to me. It seemed the light at my feet was the dying glow of our lamps. The oil that had spilled out from them was still burning.

“Oh no, the fire’s going out! We need something that can burn, now!”

“On it!”

Firnir pulled off her shirt and handed it to me.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Yeah, now hurry up!”

“A-Alright... if you say so.”

I suppose I am the only one who can see her. Impressed by her decisiveness, I dipped her cotton shirt into the puddle of oil. It caught fire immediately. *Thank goodness it’s cotton, my hemp clothes wouldn’t burn that easily.*

“But I can’t carry it like this.”

I wrapped the burning shirt around my scabbard, making a makeshift torch. It wouldn’t last too long, but we needed to keep this fire burning or we’d be blind. I then collected the broken lamp’s wick and transferred the flame onto it. Firnir glanced up and muttered, “We fell a long way...”

I raised the torch overhead, but its light wasn’t able to reach the ceiling.

“I’m amazed I wasn’t hurt worse from a fall like that.”

As I muttered that, I realized something. I’d fallen a good story or more. If I’d actually landed on the stone floor, I should have broken a few bones at least. I looked over at Firnir, who smiled.

“Nice to see you’re not hurt.”

Did she save me? Firnir said nothing more and silently started gathering our scattered belongings.

“This is a pretty big room, so we might find something that could help us.”

“Ah, hey!? If you move around too much—”

Firnir clopped off, and I hurriedly jogged after her.

There were two exits in the room we’d fallen into. Both were pitch dark, and I couldn’t make out what lay beyond them. *Let’s leave exploring for later.* While the room we were in had no staircase, there were plenty of wooden splinters and broken boards everywhere. From what I could tell, they’d originally been pieces of furniture. But now they were just dried out shattered chunks of wood. *Wait, did these break our fall?*

“These look like they’ll burn.”

“Wait, you want to set these on fire!?”

I hadn’t even considered burning the things we found in the ruins. What if they were precious artifacts?

“What are we going to do if it turns out they were important relics? We might get cursed, or worse...”

Firnir gave me a reassuring smile and started gathering up broken pieces of wood.

“We can worry about that if it actually happens. Right, now we’ve gotta hurry, or the fire’s gonna go out.”

She had a point. Her shirt was close to burning up completely. After debating it for a few seconds, I came to a decision.

“Our safety takes top priority right now. Let’s burn this wood.”

“You got it.”

Firnir took out her hatchet and chopped the wood into cylinder-shaped pieces. She then stuck the ends of the cylinders together, creating a radial pattern that spiraled outward.

“What the heck’s with that shape? Don’t you think that’s a weird way to organize the wood?”

Firnir set fire to a stick in the center and said, “Just watch. This is how kentauros do things.”

Firnir’s fire started out tiny. Among the sticks she’d laid out, only the ones in the center caught fire.

“Hmm, I might have made it too strong.”

Firnir pulled out one of the few burning sticks. With a significant portion of its fuel gone, the fire grew even weaker. I was starting to grow a little irritated at how small she was keeping it, but Firnir just nodded in satisfaction. She beckoned to me and said, “This should be good. I’m kinda tired, so let’s rest for a bit.”

“A-Alright...”

The fire wasn’t too hot, but still large enough to light up our surroundings. Firnir continued adjusting the position of the sticks to regulate the fire.

“It’s not that cold down here, and we’re not cooking anything, so we don’t need to make the fire big yet. This is how kentauros make the most of the wood they have.”

“I see... I get it now.”

She had a point, we didn't need a fire any stronger than this if we were just going to rest. When I realized that, I felt a little embarrassed.

“You're absolutely right, Firnir. There's a limit to how much wood we have. I'm sorry for doubting you. I would have just wasted all of our precious light.”

As I'd been born the daughter of a viceroy, I'd never once had to worry about saving firewood. I'd never even realized other people would want to use it efficiently to make the most of what little they had. The firelight illuminated Firnir's open smile, and I felt even worse for being so foolish.

“Firnir, did you collect your own firewood before you became viceroy?”

“Yep. I used to burn anything I could get my hands on actually! When you're living on the plains, kindling's hard to come by.”

Though she smiled so cheerfully, I could tell from that statement alone that she must have had a much harder life than me. In fact, compared to her, I was just a sheltered little girl who didn't know anything. Feeling useless, I started digging through my pack. I fished out a crushed loaf of bread. It had actually been flat to begin with, so the fall hadn't altered its shape much.

“You haven't eaten anything since we came down here, right? Would you like some bread?”

“Yeah, thanks!”

“Hey wait, don't eat it all! What kind of person even does that!?”

Firnir, who'd just taken a huge bite out of the bread and was about to take another, tilted her head quizzically.

“Thish washn't jusht for me?”

“It was for the both of us, dummy! Give me half!”

I'd forgotten kentauros ate way more than people. I guess it made sense, since they were as big as horses. *Even if I have the right knowledge, unless I utilize it, I won't be able to do everything perfectly like Master does...*

“I’m glad the air isn’t super musty or anything.”

After finishing her half of the bread, Firnir took a few small sips of our precious water supply and flashed me a smile. *I’m amazed she can smile in a situation like this.*

“Should it be?”

“Yeah. Generally, air that’s been trapped underground for ages smells musty. It’s bad for your body, so it’s better not to spend too much time in places like that, like caverns or mine shafts.”

“I see...”

“In some places, the air’s been stagnant for so long that a single breath can kill you. That’s what my clan head told me.”

I ate through half of my own portion of bread and wrapped the remainder up in a clean cloth before putting it in my bag.

“By clan head, do you mean your father?”

“Nope, I’m the clan priestess, so the head can’t be my dad.”

Firnir folded her legs underneath her and rearranged her pattern of sticks.

“I was born with more mana than usual. That’s why I’m stronger and faster than the other kentauros. And it’s why I’m our priestess.”

“Priestess?”

I had heard that even though she was around my age, she was the leader of the kentauros race. *I guess in kentauros society, the priestess holds the most power.*

“So you worked your way up to the top by proving yourself. Unlike me, who just inherited her father’s position.”

“We’re not actually that different, you know.”

Firnir shook her head and pushed a few of the longer sticks together.

“I wasn’t doing anything with my talent, so the clan head started getting annoyed. Then before I knew it, he’d started forcing me to learn martial arts, strategy, and everything in between. Then when I finished his training course

from hell, he made me become the Great Sage Gomoviroa's disciple."

"Gomoviroa is... the Demon Lord, correct?"

I hadn't met her myself, but apparently she was Master Veight's master. He'd said that her powers were so great they rivaled the gods'. Firnir smiled bitterly.

"Yeah, but the problem is, I can't use magic at all! I'm too dumb to master any of it!"

"Seriously?"

"Still, she taught me how to read and do numbers. Kentauros don't have a written language, so I'm one of the few literate kentauros out there!"

"I-I see... It seems you went through quite a lot."

Even if that didn't sound impressive to me, it must have been hard for her to learn. As I thought that, I absentmindedly muttered, "You're amazing, Firnir."

"Huh? Wh-Where'd that come from!?"

"Oh... don't worry about it."

I took off my sword belt and laid down atop my cloak.

"I'm going to take a short nap."

Sleeping would refresh my thoughts and help me think clearly. At least, Master Veight said sleep was good for that. Right now, it was important for me to regain my composure. And sleep would help with that.

"I won't sleep for long, don't worry. Once I get up we can start searching for a way out."

"Sounds good. I'll keep a lookout while you sleep."

"There's no one here, so I doubt that's necessary."

Despite my protests, Firnir didn't put her spear down.

"It's better to keep watch, just in case. Besides, it's a habit of mine."

"If you say so... In that case, I'll sleep first and go on watch when I wake up so you can rest. Good night, Firnir."

"Mhmm. Night, Shatina."

* * * *

—Firnir's Light—

After Shatina fell asleep, I moved some sticks to trim the fire. Firewood's a precious resource, after all. If we ran out of things to burn, we'd never make it out.

But you know, I'm amazed Shatina can sleep in a situation like this. I heard that Meraldia assassinated her dad and tried to kill her too, but she got away with Vaito's help. Seeing how calm she is, I can see how she managed that. I could never be so calm in a crisis like this.

Even though Shatina's not a good fighter, she knows a lot. Plus she's really diligent and has a strong sense of responsibility. She gets angry easily, but I think that's because of how much she cares about others. In a way, she kinda reminds me of Vaito. Meanwhile I still just rush in without thinking.

I'm pretty sure the floor crumbled because I was too heavy. While kentauros aren't as heavy as horses, they're still heavier than people. If I'd remembered that back then, could I have done something to prevent this predicament? Well, I guess it doesn't matter now.

At least I managed to catch Shatina when she fell. Thanks to that I hurt my leg, but... I'll probably be fine after a little rest. No wait, I can't just think baseless things like that. How do I become wiser, like Vaito? Maybe I should ask Shatina when she wakes up, she thinks before she acts. But first... I need to protect her until she does.

* * * *

"Shatina, get up!"

I'm roused from my slumber by Firnir's firm voice. While she was perhaps overly energetic at times, I knew she wasn't the type of person to wake someone for no reason. *This must be an emergency.*

"Wh-What's wrong!?"

I scrambled to my feet and belted on my sword. Meanwhile, Firnir gathered

our things and explained, “We need to move. Something’s closing in on us.”

“What!? Who!?”

“I don’t know.”

Firnir’s expression was grim. She didn’t look anything like her usual, cheerful self. She picked up a makeshift torch she’d made by wrapping sticks together with a string made from the remnants of her shirt. She must have done that while I was asleep.

“Shatina, hold on to this for me.”

“Understood.”

I lit the torch using the campfire. In the distance, I heard a strange sound.

“lite... Avec...”

It sounded like a voice, but not one belonging to a human. There was a chilling quality to it, like the sound of wind blowing through the trees at night.

“Firnir, what *is* that?”

“No clue. But I think it’s best if we never find out.”

Firnir slung our packs over her shoulder and beckoned to me.

“Let’s get out of here before we run into whoever that voice belongs to. I think my leg’s healed now, so we should be able to go fast.”

“Healed? Does that mean it was hurt before?”

“Oops.”

Firnir made a face that made it clear she hadn’t intended to let that slip. But then she smiled awkwardly and said, “Kentauros’ legs get hurt easily. I just landed badly when we fell. But I’m good now, it doesn’t even hurt.”

I felt a twinge of guilt as she smiled at me. As I was now, all I could do was sit there while Firnir protected me.

“I’m... sorry.”

“Huh!? There’s nothing you need to apologize for, Shatina! Come on, let’s go!”

“A-Alright...”

Still feeling guilty, I nevertheless hurried after Firnir.

“lite... Avec...”

I heard that same voice again, but this time from further away. Whatever it was, we were outpacing it.

“This is a weird place,” Firnir said. She was examining the walls around us as we jogged away from the voice. “Look, there’s all these carvings on the walls. They’re all really elaborate, too.”

“You’re right.”

I stopped for a moment and took a closer look at the walls.

“These look like they were made by the old dynasty. If they’re real, they must be centuries old.”

“Now I’m worried they might collapse...”

“I feel like we have more important things to be worrying about right now!” I shouted. Firnir cocked her head and asked, “What could be scarier than a cave-in?”

“The old dynasty was responsible for conducting all manner of strange magical experiments. I heard they even tried to give birth to a strange species that was a cross between man and beast.”

“You realize I’m half-human half-beast too, right?”

“Th-That’s not what I mean.”

Firnir didn’t seem to understand what I meant when I said “give birth to.” But as I opened my mouth to explain, I realized how embarrassing it would be to say that out loud and stopped myself.

“Umm... they also researched how to raise the dead, and how to curse lands with plague. They were very dangerous people.”

“Really?”

“You’re the disciple of the Great Sage, aren’t you!? Why don’t you know

this!?”

“Huh, you’re right. Why don’t I know this?”

How would I know!?

“Regardless, we should hurry. If the creature emitting that strange sound is one of the old dynasty’s creations, it’s likely dangerous.”

“If you’re saying that, it probably is. Got it, I’ll be careful!”

Firnir flashed me a confident grin. Had it been Master Veight smiling at me, it likely would have assuaged my fears, but I couldn’t say the same for Firnir. That being said, if it weren’t for her I would likely have lost my wits long ago.

“Let’s go. We may as well see how far this corridor goes.”

After a long distance, the passageway turned to the right, and then again to the right after another long trek.

“These carvings are really smooth.”

I hadn’t noticed it before, but Firnir was right. The details of the carvings were fuzzy, the ridges and grooves smoothed out. Human faces especially had been eroded to the point of being indistinguishable from one another.

“It’s like they took sandpaper to the carvings, but kept sanding them for too long.”

I wasn’t sure how that observation would help us in our current situation though. I tried to get a closer look to see if maybe there was some clue I’d missed, but stopped when I heard a faint voice in the distance.

“lite... Avec...”

Whirling around, I saw only darkness behind me. It seemed the owner of the voice was still far away.

“L-Let’s go, Firnir.”

“Yeah.”

After a while, the passage once again turned to the right. Worried, I muttered, “Was that turn at a right angle?”

“What’s a right angle?”

“Uhh... actually, never mind, it’s fine.”

I should have known better than to ask Firnir. When it came to architecture and geometry, I knew far more than her. I was, after all, the viceroy of the labyrinth city. By my estimation, all three turns had been right angles. And this passage seemed to go straight.

“Firnir, stop for a second.”

“What? Something wrong?”

Firnir came to a halt and turned around.

“Shouldn’t we hurry? Won’t it be bad if we stop here?”

“I know, but hold on a moment. We just turned right three times, didn’t we? Meaning...”

I pulled out the parchment I’d been using to draw a map and pointed to its corners. Firnir gave me a puzzled look, but after I’d pointed to the third corner, realization dawned on her.

“We’re going in a circle!?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

I folded up the map and glanced back. We hadn’t heard the voice in a while.

“Of course, it’s also possible this is a square-shaped spiral if the distance between each turn isn’t uniform. In that case, we wouldn’t really be going in circles, but I have no way of measuring the distance.”

“Umm, so what should we do?”

Firnir was being surprisingly hesitant. Unfortunately, I didn’t know what to do either. If this really was a square, then we’d just be retracing our steps over and over. But in that case, there was no point in turning back either. However, if this was a spiral, then we’d eventually end up *somewhere*. After saying as much to Firnir, I pointed forward.

“Either way, we have no choice but to hope this is a spiral and keep going.”

“I see.”

Firnir nodded, then grinned again.

“If it’s not a spiral, then I’ll fight whatever’s chasing us. Don’t worry, I know I look unreliable but I am still Firnir the Swift Gale, General of the demon army.”

Though our situation was still precarious, her words reassured me. I had no one else to rely on, of course, but even so, she seemed dazzlingly dependable. Firnir readied her spear and peered into the darkness.

“Alright, be ready to fight at any time! Both flanks, be wary of ambushes from the sides!”

“We don’t have any flanks...”

“Think of yourself as a one-person army. That’s how I see myself too.”

“Very well.”

But even so, I don’t think it’s possible for us to be ambushed from the sides. Since there are only walls on either side of us.

We continued down the straight path, the walls occasionally glinting in the torchlight.

“You can’t hear the voice anymore either, right?”

Firnir turned around and strained her ears. I wiped a bead of sweat off my brow and nodded.

“No, I can’t. At the very least, it doesn’t seem like it’s catching up to us.”

All of the patterns on the wall looked unfamiliar. I couldn’t be certain, but it didn’t seem like we were going in a circle. Feeling somewhat relieved, I stopped to study the carvings some more.

“It looks like this stretch of wall depicts an army of undead sieging a castle.”

“Whoa, you’re right. Those skeletons look just like the ones Master summons.”

“By master, you mean the Demon Lord?”

Something about that statement nagged at me, but I was too focused on the wall to give it much thought. The undead appeared to be led by a warrior

wearing a crown. He held aloft a massive claymore in one hand, and in the other a shield with an engraving of a tower on it. Behind his army lay the smoldering ruins of numerous towns and castles. To be honest, the scene wasn't very pleasant. But as the story progressed along the wall, a great number of magicians appeared and sealed the undead army underground. They then burned the warrior who summoned them alive, and finally the last part of the mural depicted his grave.

"I guess that's the story of how a tyrant met his end?"

Firnir nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, I think so. Do you think maybe that voice belongs to the tyrant they killed?"

"It just might."

Since he'd been leading an army of undead, I assumed he'd been a necromancer. And I'd heard that powerful necromancers oftentimes turned immortal.

"Maybe they couldn't actually kill him, and instead just sealed him here."

"If that's true, he's not someone we can handle."

It would be nice if the owner of the voice wasn't hostile toward us, but considering the story the mural told, I didn't have much hope.

"These carvings might give us some clues as to what we're up against. Let's see if we can find anything... Huh?"

The corridor came to an abrupt end, leading into a spacious room.

"Isn't this room..." Firnir trailed off. I didn't like the look of this one bit. The center of the room was covered in scorch marks, traces of a recent campfire.

"Oh no..."

Firnir and I both groaned in despair.

"It was one big square..."

As I'd feared, it was a loop. There was no exit. We'd been trapped inside this floor. Together with some strange creature.

“lite... Avec...”

This time, the voice came from close by.

“Fir!”

“On it!”

I transferred the torch to my left hand and drew my sword with my right. Firnir moved protectively in front of me and lowered her spear.

“I am a General of the demon army, Firnir of Swift Gale! Whoever you are, if you have even a shred of honor, I demand you name yourself!”

Her sharp voice cut through the darkness like a knife. I never knew she was this brave. A harsh scraping sound, like that of rusted iron grinding against itself, reached my ears.

“lite... Avec...”

When the creature ambled into the torchlight, I nearly screamed. It was wearing rusted brown armor, and carrying a shattered sword. In its free hand, it held a chipped shield with a tower pattern engraved on it. And on its head was a broken crown. But most terrifying of all, its face was nothing but bones.

“Eek!” I nearly dropped the torch, but caught it at the last second. “F-Fir!”

“This looks like an undead soldier, but the fact that it can speak means it’s not normal!” Firnir shouted as she kept the skeleton at bay with her spear.

“Who are you!? If you possess intelligence, then speak! If you refuse to name yourself, I will strike you down!”

The skeleton warrior fell silent. After a moment it raised its shattered sword and said, “Vaw Moona Yuni Dei!”

“Wh-What? Is that your name?”

Firnir faltered, so I screamed from behind her, “Idiot, it’s obviously angry!”

“Huh!? Oh, s-sorry!”

“What point is there in apologizing to a corpse!?”

The fact that the skeleton could speak, but not in words that either of us

could understand, seemed to have left Firnir at a loss. Heedless of our confusion, the skeleton warrior raised its shield and yelled, “EEMAGENCE!”

The skeleton’s rotted shield emitted a strange noise. *What’s it trying to do?* Firnir was the first to realize what was happening.

“Shatina, we’ve got twenty more enemies coming from the front!”

A group of skeleton soldiers, these only equipped with weapons, appeared from behind the one with the crown. These were smaller than the first, so I assumed that one was special. The skeleton soldiers pointed their swords and spears at us.

“Dieeee!”

Firnir’s spear shot out. Normally spears were ineffective against the undead, but her thrusts hit as hard as a warhammer. Her thrust shattered the skull of the skeleton closest to her.

“I’ll kill you allllll!”

Firnir swept her spear to the side, mowing down an entire row of skeletons. *She’s strong. Really strong.* I’d heard that undead warriors were about as skilled as the average living soldier, but Firnir was sweeping them aside like they were nothing. But no matter how many she defeated, the enemy’s number continued to grow.

“Fir, fall back to the hallway! At this rate, you’ll be surrounded!”

“G-Good point!”

Firnir cut down the skeletons closest to her, then wheeled around and galloped for the corridor. I hurriedly ran after her. The passageway was just wide enough for an adult to lie down. The ceiling was low as well, making it difficult to swing a spear around.

“Fir, can you fight here?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not a spearman, I’m a warrior!”

Firnir smiled and patted the hatchet strapped to her waist.

“Though I guess I’m best with a spear!”

“Sorry.”

I worried I might have led her to a more disadvantageous spot. Still, at least she wouldn't have to worry as much about protecting me. They wouldn't be able to circle around her in such an enclosed space.

Wait, circle around? I turned, looking at the dark passage behind me. The corridor was an enclosed square, with a single room at this spot.

“Fir!”

“What is it this time!?” Fir shouted, smashing the shields and skulls of any skeletons that got too close. She didn't have the leeway to turn around.

“Let's run to the corner! This is a closed loop, meaning the two passageways leading out of this room are connected!”

“Oh yeah!”

Firnir wheeled around and held her hand out to me.

“Climb on!”

“On where!?”

“Onto my back!”

I assumed she meant the horse part of her back. It was small, but still large enough to accommodate a single rider. *It feels wrong to ride on a friend's back, but I suppose now's not the time to be worrying about whether it's disrespectful or not.*

“Very well! And sorry!”

I'd been trained in horseback riding, so I had no trouble jumping onto Firnir's back. There was no saddle, or stirrups, or reins though, so it was hard to keep my balance.

“U-Umm, Fir...”

“I'll carry the torch, you just hang on tight.”

Firnir took the torch from me and I sheathed my sword. I then wrapped both arms around her stomach.

“Hyaah!? That tickles!”

“S-Sorry!”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Hang on, I’m gonna dash!”

Firnir sped up and galloped down the corridor. Unable to keep up, the skeleton soldiers soon disappeared from sight. I breathed a sigh of relief, glad we finally had some time to regroup.

“Let’s set up a defensive formation at the corner. Even if the enemy has ranged weapons, they won’t be able to hit us if we duck behind the wall. And if they try to circle around us, they’ll hit us from the flank instead of from behind, so they’ll be easier to deal with.”

“Makes sense. I knew I could count on you, Shatina.”

I didn’t really feel like I deserved Firnir’s praise, since I was just following Master Veight’s advice. He was the one who’d taught me, “Always try to bring the fight into terrain that’s advantageous for you.” According to him, location alone could change the outcome of a battle. *Since I’m bad at fighting, I should at least do the strategizing for us.* I wanted to protect Firnir the same way she was protecting me. I wanted to be able to prove to her that I wasn’t dead weight.

Once we reached the corner, we could finally rest for a bit. I got off Firnir’s back, took the torch from her, and drew my sword.

“If they come around from the side, I’ll let you know.”

“Gotcha. I’ll focus on fighting... and try to whittle down their numbers.”

Though she gave me a smile, I knew why Firnir had hesitated to say that second part. Were their numbers something we could whittle down in the first place? The enemy was clearly a mage, and they seemed capable of summoning as many undead as they wanted. No matter how strong Firnir was, her stamina wasn’t bottomless. She couldn’t last against an endless wave of skeletons. However, there was no time to think of a different strategy. This was the only option left to us.

The skeletons finally appeared, marching double-file through the corridor. They'd put their spearmen in front to guard the back line.

"Don't think you can beat me in a spear fight!"

Firnir brandished her own spear, taking on four spearmen at once. *I know I keep saying this, but she really is strong!*

"RYAAAAAAH!"

Sparks danced through the dark corridor as Firnir smashed the skeletons around her. Not only was she effectively using a spear in this enclosed space, she was doing so without relying on her greatest asset—her speed. The terrain was against her, but Firnir continued burying the skeletons with ease. The mass of skeletons melted before her wrath.

"If you want to beat me, you'll need to bring out a famous general! These foot soldiers can't even scratch me!"

Despite her boasts, I could tell that Firnir was slowly growing tired. The skeletons' assault was endless. *Is she going to be okay fighting for this long?* Worried, I squinted down the corridor, trying to see how many skeletons were left. They were more stubborn than I thought.

If they'd sent a force to circle around it would still take quite some time for it to arrive, but I didn't think we'd be able to annihilate the army coming from the front in that time. And because of how big Firnir was, it took time for her to turn. Exhausted as she was, I doubted she'd be able to fight on two fronts.

In that case, should I scout out our rear? No, we only have one torch, I can't leave on my own. Calm down. Think. There has to be a better strategy than this. Remember Master Veight's teachings.

First of all, it's obvious this battle will be drawn out. If we keep fighting here, we'll likely be pincered soon. In which case, it would be better if we moved before that happens. But where to? The only direction we can go is behind us. And if there are enemies waiting for us to our rear, then... We'd be dead for sure from the impending pincer from staying put. I can't think of a perfect strategy for this situation, so we're just going to have to take a gamble.

“Fir!”

Making up my mind, I called out to my friend.

“At this rate, we’ll be caught in a pincer attack! We have to retreat!”

“That’s fine, but what if there’s enemies behind us too!?”

“Then we’ll run right through them! You can handle that, right Fir!?”

I knew how unfair it was of me to ask this much of Firnir, but I did anyway. I had no other choice.

“We’ll barrel right through all these foot soldiers and head back to the room we started in! I’m guessing that skeleton general didn’t leave too many guards to protect himself! If we hit him with a surprise attack, we might be able to defeat him!”

If we defeated the skeletons’ general, hopefully the foot soldiers would vanish. Firnir pushed back the skeletons’ spears and shouted, “Climb on!”

“Okay!”

I once again straddled Firnir’s back, and she galloped into the darkness. As I’d feared, the enemies’ flanking force had gotten quite close. We ran into them after only a few minutes of dashing. Fortunately, they hadn’t raised their weapons yet.

“Fir!”

“Leave it to me! I’ll show you what I can do when I gallop full speed!”

Firnir tucked her spear under her armpit and sent up.

“Swift Gale!”

Firnir accelerated so fast I nearly fell off.

Firnir was no ordinary kentauros. She had a special power known as Swift Gale. All it did was make her faster than any other kentauros. However, because she wrapped herself in a veil of mana to accelerate to herself to such speeds, no one could stop her once she started charging. Her entire body

became a weapon, and anything she hit got blown apart. It was for this reason she was known as Firnir the Swift Gale.

“F-Fir, how long can you keep this up?”

Firnir responded without slowing down in the slightest.

“No clue!”

“You don’t know?”

“Don’t worry, I know I can keep it up long enough to do a full lap at least! Hang on tight, I’m about to round the corner!”

Unlike the skeletons we’d been fighting before, these didn’t raise their weapons. It seemed they could only follow simple commands and lacked the ability to adapt to changes in their situation. Furthermore, the flanking unit was smaller than the main one, and it didn’t take us long to dash through all of them. I was worried this plan wouldn’t work, but it seemed we managed to break through the ambush squad without incident. All we had to do now was follow this corridor back to the room, and kill the skeleton general.

“Alright, let’s do thiiiiis!”

Firnir charged into the room we’d started in. It was empty save for the skeleton warrior with the busted crown. *Perfect, everything’s going according to plan.* I leapt off Firnir’s back, took the torch from her, and drew my sword.

“Fir, be careful! He’s calling his skeletons back!”

“I know!”

Firnir raised her spear and charged toward the skeleton king.

“Take this!”

She swung her spear down. The skeleton king casually raised his broken sword and parried. Sparks flew as the two weapons clashed. Despite the force behind Firnir’s blow, the king’s sword didn’t budge an inch.

“Whoa, this guy’s tough...”

I could barely follow that last exchange, but it seemed Firnir had been able to grasp the extent of her enemy's strength during it.

"Shatina, this guy's a skilled fighter! Don't get close to him!"

"U-Understood!"

Firnir rained down a flurry of fierce blows, but the skeleton king easily blocked them all with his sword and shield. On the other hand, when he counterattacked, Firnir was forced to back up.

"Wha!? Damn you!"

Firnir met the skeleton king's sword with her spear, and the two struggled back and forth. As their battle continued, I started to hear sounds in the distance. Looking around, I saw that the skeleton foot soldiers were starting to pouring through the room's two entrances.

"Fir, they're here!"

"N-No way! Alright, get over here!"

Still trading blows with the skeleton king, Firnir slowly moved to one corner of the room. I hurried after her and hid behind her back. In seconds, the room was nearly full of undead soldiers. And that wasn't all. Every time the skeleton king raised his shield, he summoned another undead warrior from the darkness.

"Fir, he keeps summoning more!"

"I know, but what do you want me to do about it!?"

It was taking everything she had just to fend him off.

"Shatina, what should I do? How do I get us out of this!?"

"U-Umm..."

How could we turn this situation around?

"I can't think of anything..."

Firnir was the only one of us who could fight. And even her full strength wasn't enough to defeat the skeleton king. Now that we'd been surrounded by his soldiers, we couldn't run either. My own strength wasn't sufficient to break through the encirclement.

“Ngh!”

One of the skeleton king’s blows finally connected, and Firnir staggered backward. His rusted sword didn’t look too strong, but it was apparently powerful enough to drive Firnir to her knees.

“Wh-What the... It’s absorbing my power... I can’t...”

“Fir!”

Still desperately swinging her spear, Firnir turned to me and smiled.

“Run...”

“Idiot!”

I dropped into a stance and covered Firnir. I knew what I was doing was pointless. We were both dead. But if I was going to die anyway, I at least wanted to die protecting my friend. There was nothing more shameful than dying cowering behind someone. I swung my sword wildly and shouted, “My name is Shatina Yewm Stahl, Viceroy of Zaria! If you want to kill my friend, you’ll have to get through me first!”

A second later, something unbelievable happened.

“AWOOOOOOOO!”

A bestial roar shook the air and sent the skeletons flying. A werewolf blacker than night shot out of the darkness and punched the skeleton king.

“Outta my way!”

With just that one blow, he crushed the skeleton king’s armor and shattered its bones. Its broken pieces of rusted armor flew through the air and slammed into the wall. Ignoring the rest of the skeletons, the werewolf turned to us and sighed.

“Don’t worry me so much.”

“Master!” I shouted in joy. But a second later I stiffened up. “Why’re you here!?”

Veight eyed the skeleton soldiers, which hadn’t disappeared with their king’s death, and said, “I’ll explain later. First, let’s get rid of these skeletons. Master,

where are you?”

“I’m right here, boy. Don’t rush me.”

A young girl floated down from the ceiling. She swung her staff and chanted, “Rest, lifeless bones. The banquet has ended, and the peace of the afterlife beckons. Still thy bloodlust and sleep forevermore.”

The skeleton warriors filling the room vanished. *Is that what necromancy looks like?* The girl turned to me and smiled.

“I am the Demon Lord Gomoviroa. Thank you for taking care of my disciple, Veight.”

She’s the Demon Lord!? Next to me, Master Veight grumbled, “I’m the one taking care of her, Master.”

Afterward, the Demon Lord created a number of floating lights and healed Firnir.

“Your mana has been drained. Any normal demon would have lost their life after being hit by that cursed sword. You did well to survive.”

Firnir blushed and said, “I was so focused on protecting Shatina that I didn’t even notice!”

“Indeed, friendship is a wonderful thing.”

Master Veight muttered, “That doesn’t sound nearly as impressive coming from an antisocial loner like you, Master.”

“Must you be so cantankerous?”

The Demon Lord began to sulk. Master Veight awkwardly scratched his head and turned to me.

“We got a message that you two had gone missing, so I asked the Demon Lord to bring us to you.”

“But even if the messenger had gone by horse, they shouldn’t have reached Ryunheit so fast...”

Master smiled ruefully at me.

“It’s easy to lose track of time when you’re underground. You might not have realized this, but it’s been three days since you disappeared.”

“Three days!?” Firnir shouted.

“I thought it’d only been half a day at most.”

“That’s the scary thing about being underground.”

Master manipulated one of the lights the Demon Lord had created and had it follow him as he walked into the corridor.

“It looks like this place is exactly what you predicted it to be, Master... Master?”

“Surely you have no need of an antisocial loner such as myself.”

The Demon Lord pouted, looking more like a little girl than a ruler. I’d heard she’d lived for hundreds of years, so I was surprised to see that she was this immature.

“Master, stop sulking. You’re the only one qualified to explain this.”

Sighing, the Demon Lord began to talk. Despite her outward reluctance, she seemed happy to explain.

“These ruins are likely the resting place of the undead lord, Ugsfortis. During the last days of the old dynasty, he traveled to the faraway land of Ezakenow and defeated the double-headed tyrants Epero and Viata...”

“You know what, maybe I’ll explain after all.”

Master hurriedly butt in and said, “Basically, this is the grave of a necromancer tyrant who lived long ago. He was a pitiful man who failed to become either a Hero or a Demon Lord.”

Master picked up one of the skeleton king’s gauntlets.

“He was famous for his ability to expertly command vast hordes of undead, but in the end, he wasn’t able to achieve much. Not only did he fail to unlock the final mysteries of necromancy, but his brutal ways earned him the hatred of his people.”

“I almost feel sorry for him.”

He'd had talent, but no one had recognized it. However, Master shook his head.

"You reap what you sow. He grew conceited, oppressed his own people, and suffered for it. You would do well to learn from his story, Shatina."

"Me?"

"Yep. I understand you're in a hurry to prove yourself, but if you keep overextending yourself, you might end up like him."

Master examined the carvings on the walls, then told me more about the necromancer king. Apparently this tomb had been built as a monument to his life. The carvings on the walls were his biography. The reason the corridor had been built as one big loop was to seal his soul here for all eternity. It seemed the people of his time had truly hated him.

"After Ugsfortis was buried alive down here, he used necromancy on himself to transform into an immortal demon. But the magic he used cursed him to be bound to this place forever, and he wandered the looping corridor for eons, tracing the events of his life over and over. He was likely clinging to the memories of his past."

Master showed me the skeleton king's gauntlet. The metal around the fingers and palm had been completely worn away. *So the reason the carvings are so smooth is because he dragged his hand across the walls for centuries?* The words he'd repeated over and over "lite Avec" meant "My will has not yet faded" in the sorcerers' language. With his soul trapped in his rotted body, he'd had no choice but to keep repeating those words, or he would have lost his mind completely.

He'd spent centuries here in the darkness, all alone. The thought sent a shiver down my spine.

"I'll be careful not to end up like him."

"Great, that's what I want to hear."

Master smiled and patted my head. While he wasn't my father, it still felt nice to be patted by him.

Still smiling, Master heaved a weary sigh.

“I’ll let you off the hook this time since it turned out to be a valuable lesson, but don’t do anything reckless like this again.”

“I-I won’t. I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“As long as you understand. A viceroy has many responsibilities. You cannot just go off on your own... and...”

Master trailed off, and turned back to the Demon Lord.

“Umm, Master? Is there something you want to say to me?”

“I wonder, is there?” The Demon Lord giggled, then cleared her throat. “At any rate, let us return. This entire incident only occurred because these ruins were secured with unnecessary safety devices. Fear not. Despite what my foolish disciple might say, this was not your fault, Shatina.”

Master nodded and pointed to the hole in the ceiling.

“The people who sealed the skeleton king away feared he might reawaken, and so set a pitfall trap on the floor above. It’s set to only activate when someone with large quantities of mana steps on it.”

“Wait, doesn’t that mean it’s my fault!? If I hadn’t tagged along, none of this would have happened!?”

“Well... I suppose not.”

I hurriedly came to Firnir’s defense.

“B-But if Fir hadn’t been with me, I wouldn’t have survived down here! Besides, thanks to that I learned about what lies underneath Zaria and she helped eliminate a potential threat! You don’t have to feel bad, Fir! As viceroy, I guarantee that you did the right thing!”

“Uhh, i-if you say so.” Firnir looked surprised, but her shock quickly gave way to joy. “Thank you, Shatina. Also, it looks like you’re calling me Fir after all!”

“H-Huh?”

Wait, she’s right. When did I start doing that? Master Veight and the Demon Lord exchanged glances.

“It’s nice to see demons and humans getting along.”

“That it is. Scenes like this give me hope for future generations.” The Demon Lord grinned and raised her staff. “Now then, let us return to the surface and have some tea. These old bones are tired after rushing here so quickly.”

“Ah, yes! I promise I’ll serve you the best tea Zaria has to offer!”

Zaria’s pride is on the line here!

“Let’s go home, Fir.”

“Okay!”

I squeezed Fir’s hand, and the Demon Lord teleported us to the surface.



Afterword

Hello everyone, it's Hyougetsu. It's quite a relief to meet you again this volume. It's thanks to you readers that the southern independence arc was able to be published. The demon army's conquest is progressing quite smoothly, I'd say.

Volume three's a bit of a slow volume, but I felt like Veight and the others needed a break after all the nonstop action of the previous volumes. Though I guess it wasn't much of a break since Veight still got into a bunch of fights, but for him, it's all in a day's work. Compared to fighting the Hero, assassins and sea monsters are nothing. Incidentally, the Island Kraken was based off the winged argonaut, which is a species of octopus that actually exists. Of course, real winged argonauts are nowhere near as big.

Now then, I that's suppose enough explaining of this volume's events. After all, they're explained much better in the volume itself. Instead, I think I'll talk about things I had to watch out for during the writing process, since that's something you won't read about in the volume.

Most of the creatures and culture I've introduced so far are based on real-world creatures and cultures, but have been modified slightly to fit the setting. For example, everyone in Meraldia uses the base ten system, but that's because like humans on earth, humans here have ten fingers and ten toes. I imagine so long as that's true, base ten would be the natural choice for humans.

Creatures function in a similar manner. Their weight, size, and other traits are restricted by their ecology and the availability of food, just like on earth. As a result, you get a lot of creatures similar to ones you'd find on earth. On the other hand, I spent a very long time thinking about kentauros anatomy. After all, if they're half-human half-horse, then where do their stomachs lie? If any of my readers happen to be kentauros, please tell me about your anatomy.

Moving on, this volume got published a lot faster than the second one did. But because of how fast I'm updating the web version, we haven't gotten any

closer to catching up. I'm hoping to keep up the pace when it comes to updating the web novel, so I imagine the published version won't catch up for a while. If I put out a volume a month maybe we'll get closer, but I'm pretty sure doing so would work my poor editor Lord Fusanon to death. I like him alive, so I think I'll stick to this slower release pace.

Besides, as always, my editor has been a huge help. Thank you so much for everything. The fact that I can publish even this fast is all thanks to him. I'd also like to thank Nishi(E)da-sensei for his wonderful drawings. He does a great job at drawing the girls, but more importantly, he does a wonderful job of drawing the guys as well. He can do everything from handsome pretty boys to burly pirates, and it never ceases to amaze me. Also, there's a manga version of Der Werwolf now, drawn by Terada Isaza-sensei. I'd like to thank him and everyone else at the manga department for all their hard work. Incidentally, you can read the manga for free on the Earth Star Comics site. To be honest, I look forward to the updates every month on the 26th, too. I'm a little nervous that my work's gotten this popular but I'll keep doing my best for all you readers out there. I hope you'll continue to support Veight through his many struggles. May we meet again in volume four.





Movi-chan didn't get too
many images this volume so
I drew her a bunch here.

Nishi(E)da

Bonus Short Story

I sighed as I contemplated the task Veight asked of me.

“Why must you ask me of all people?”

“Sorry, Melaine, but you’re the only one I can count on for this.”

“Oh really?”

Ufufufu, I suppose if you need me that badly I can do it. As Master’s oldest disciple, I guess it’s my job to look after my juniors.

“Ho there, Melaine. So you’re taking part in this exorcism as well?”

“Parker...it’s been a while since I last saw you. You seem to be doing well.”

Parker’s skull clacked as he laughed and said, “Hahaha, indeed. My complexion has never been better.”

“If you say so.”

I pointedly ignored his attempt at another pun about how dead he was.

Veight had asked Parker and me to assist him in a large-scale exorcism. He wanted to us to clear out the ruins underneath Zaria and eliminate any lingering spirits or skeletons. It wasn’t a particularly difficult job, but the ruins were quite large, so it was time-consuming. Master could have done it all on her own, but it was faster and safer if we all worked together. That much I understood. What I didn’t understand was why I had to be paired up with Parker while Veight got to go with Master.

“My, you seem rather dissatisfied with having me as your partner, Melaine.”

“Who wouldn’t be...”

We climbed down the stairs to our assigned floor and began exorcizing spirits. The lower floors of the ruins were filled with rooms, and each room had at least

one undead to cleanse.

Some rooms were filled with skeletons who'd been summoned then left to rot, others with fragmented spirits who'd been experimented on in horrible ways, yet others with corpses who'd been possessed by wandering ghosts, and even some rooms with desiccated zombies wandering around.

"I guess this is what happens to a necromancer's domain when it's left alone for three hundred years... Stay still, you stupid thing! Sealing Prayer!"

I used my magic to exorcize the ghost out of a shambling corpse. All necromancers knew how to exorcize spirits. With how often they dealt with the dead, it was the first, fundamental skill every aspiring necromancer learned.

"With how many spirits there are down here, I can see why Veight wanted them taken care of."

Parker walked over to me after clearing an entire corridor of spirits. As always, he was able to exorcize swathes of undead with just a snap of his bony fingers. Even though we were both using the same magic, his was far more effective.

"Seems to me like you could have handled this on your own."

Parker smiled in response and said, "I could perhaps have completed the job on my own, but Veight insisted we go in pairs of two. You know how cautious he is."

"There's such a thing as being too cautious."

I sighed in exasperation. That being said, it was an ironclad rule of necromancers to perform exorcisms in groups of two or larger. Undead creatures possessed wills, and a moment's lapse in concentration could see a necromancer possessed by the spirits they came to exorcize.

"But now I just feel useless... Oh, here's one."

I dispelled the sorcery keeping a skeleton bound to this world, and it fell to the ground in a clatter of bones. Skeletons were easy to exorcize since all one had to do was remove the spirit from the bones, and the spirit would pass on by itself. Sadly, zombies were harder to eliminate. Those needed to have their

spirits separated, then their original bodies destroyed.

After a few minutes of mindless exorcizing, I realized we'd cleared the floor of spirits. At least, I didn't sense any more.

"By my count, I believe I exorcized forty-one spirits."

Even though it wasn't hot down here, Parker was fanning himself with his hat.

"I took care of twenty-seven. I guess I really am no match for someone who's crossed the final threshold."

The gap in ability between us always frustrated me. Like Master, Parker was a master necromancer who'd crossed the final threshold. Even though I'd become Master's disciple first, I still hadn't reached that level. However, Parker didn't seem the least bit proud of his achievement.

He shrugged his shoulders and said, "I made a mistake crossing the final threshold when I did. There's no turning back for me now, but you still have a future ahead of you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're the one who'll succeed Master, not any of us. I guarantee it."

It's been a long time since I heard him talk seriously.

"I no longer have many possibilities left open to me. I can no longer improve my necromancy, so I have no choice but to branch out into other fields of magic."

"But you're already so skilled at necromancy, isn't that enough? You took care of those spirits in no time."

"Hahaha, well I have crossed the final threshold still! Until you do too, no matter how hard you try you'll never be able to reach my level!"

Maybe I should exorcize him too... I turned to Parker, who was still laughing, and launched an exorcism seal behind him.

"Whoa!"

"Don't let your guard down. It looks like there's still some spirits left."

Parker turned around and watched the spirit vanish through his empty eye sockets.

“Ahh, thank you... See, even a master such as myself needs your help from time to time.”

Yeah, right. I know you left yourself open on purpose back there. When you do things like that it just makes me feel even worse. Even though I'm Master's oldest disciple...

“Oh yes, I found something interesting while I was exorcizing this floor.”

Parker cheerfully fished through his pockets and held something out to me. It was a broken fragment of a crown.

“What's this?”

Parker smiled and said proudly, “Part of the undead lord Ugsfortis' crown! We can use this as a medium to summon his spirit.”

“Isn't that the tyrant who was sealed down here!? Why on earth would you want to summon him!?”

“Well you see, Master and I have been working on this experiment together...”

“You're trying to develop some weird undead creature with Master again, aren't you!? Don't you dare!”

In retrospect, maybe there was still meaning in me being Master's first disciple. *I need the authority to keep these two troublemakers in line.*



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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 3

by Hyougetsu

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