

“So,” Franky begins, rubbing the side of his head as he stares at the assorted beverages on Aodean’s paper-ridden messy desk, “Bo-Quasi summoned a magic floating knight-thing that single handedly massacred Shival’s army.”

“And [King],” Aodean adds. He takes a sip of his current alcoholic beverage, some sort of cocktail. He frowns and smacks his lips. He grabs a nearby paper and pen and writes down *too much mint*, before adding it to one of the many unmarked piles.

“Right... he also committed regicide while murdering tens of thousands of [Soldiers]. I- damn. I’m not sure how I should feel about that.”

“Simple! You feel bad about those who died and then get over it. It’s war, deaths happen.”

Franky frowns. “He didn’t offer any chance to surrender or back down. That was a slaughter.”

The [Prime Minister] chuckles. “I like you Franky. You’re a good friend, a nice guy. But you’re too nice.” He sips a different drink. “Your friend stopped an aggressive army from entering a city, slaughtering and raping the residents, and then killing their royalty while mounting their heads on pikes.”

Franky shakes his head. “That doesn’t make what he did right.”

Aodean rolls his eyes. “Look, you’ve read about the World Wars, right?”

Franky nods slowly.

“Well, one fact that they gloss over is that in war, ninety percent of casualties are civilians. The fact that Quasi killed an entire army of [Soldiers] while only fifty civilians died is a miraculous victory in my book.”

Aodean sips his drink again. He nods, grabs another paper and writes down more notes before moving it to one of several disorganized piles.

“Look, I know war is bad, but couldn’t he have killed, I don’t know, the leaders? He didn’t have to kill everyone.”

“He did,” a man interrupts from the corner of the room. Franky shifts his head to look at the normally silent bodyguard. If memory serves Franky right, the man’s name is Aferous.

“Your friend is making a statement. By massacring an entire army, he is telling the world to never put him in such a position. A small price to pay for less death in the future.”

“Huh.” Aodean taps his chin. “That makes sense.”

Franky frowns. "I'm not so sure it does."

"Oh, it does. Quasi's showing off the nuke in his back pocket. He's telling the world to not fuck about with him. Like being named, without being Named.. At least I don't think he is Named."

Franky still doesn't like the answer, even if it makes sense. He can already imagine having a conversation with Quasi who will convince him using cold hard logic that would make him into a villain if he doesn't agree.

"Fine, whatever. I'll ask him when he returns."

"If he returns." Aodean counters.

"What?"

"Reports say your friend is going north. Doesn't look like he's coming back."

Franky groans.

"Of course he wouldn't. I finally learn he's here, talk with him, and, ugh." He shakes his head. "I just want to thank him and to apologize for not believing all his crazy stories."

Aodean is only half listening as he mixes the mint alcoholic beverage with another. He takes a sip and almost gags.

"Augh, that's fucking nasty... The dwarves will love it," he quickly writes something down.

"Are you even listening?"

"Barely. Something about you wanting to suck your friend's dick."

"Aodean!"

The Australian rolls his eyes. "Look, stop caring about what your friend is doing. If what you say is true, he's as old as dirt and knows his shit. We're busy and he's not our problem."

Aodean grabs a stack of stapled papers and shoves the sheaf at Franky.

"The new guildhall is being constructed and we have hundreds of would-be members applying." He chuckles, though it sounds more like a giggle. "We even have two fucking Named who wants to join."

"Who?"

He nods. "Calidi the **Scorching Star**," and "Darius, The **Unbroken Bulwark**."

"I've heard of Calidi, but who is Darius?"

"A retired veteran Mercenary. Looks like he's coming out of retirement with a bunch of others."

"That's surprising," Franky voices as he flips pages, revealing names, levels, and classes.

"Not really. The Adventurer's Guild is all about helping people and exploring the unknown. The Mercenary's Guild doesn't work in locations that aren't well documented, nor does the Diver's Guild enter unknown dungeons. They are more than happy with keeping the status quo."

"So... what? People want new experiences?"

"People want to level," he corrects, "and as I'm sure you know, not knowing what's coming makes it easier to level."

"And more dangerous," Franky points out, remembering his time with the elves and how, at random intervals, they threw him into countless dungeons filled with all manner of monsters without giving him the slightest warning or tiniest bit of detail.

"It's good that we're getting veterans. They can keep the newbies alive while they grow."

Franky leans back into the chair, staring at the applications.

He pauses when he arrives at a very confusing name.

"Gun Widow?" he reads, raising an eyebrow when he gets to the description.

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The tent flap is tossed to the side, letting the dusk's light into the candle lit tent. Harry looks up from his logbook and towards the disturbance to find a richly dressed masked man, casually strolling over. The two guards on either side of the desk stare stupidly at each other, not remembering Harry's explicit orders that no one was to enter without his permission.

With a push of aura, he informs his two incompetent guards that the man entering is uninvited.

Immediately, the two draw a battleaxe and a greatsword respectively. They brandish them at the masked man, who stops several feet from the desk but only inches from the weapons.

Which confuses the two guards, unsure if they should actually do... anything.

Harry sighs in exasperation. His skills inform him that the masked man is not weak, and that the two idiots aren't his match.

He waves his hand, the guards step back.

Harry glares at the masked man. "Who are you?"

The man swiftly and fluidly grabs his tall hat then bows, hat to his chest.

"I am Bone, the leader of the mercenary team Merry Marrows."

Harry perks up. "Ah, you are here for employment?"

Bone quickly shakes his head. "I am not so pressed for means that I would sell my time or talents to such a blackguard as yourself. Nay, I merely need some information.

He frowns. "What information?"

The masked man reaches into his robe and withdraws a bulging pouch, from which he extracts a crimson crystal the length of his pinky. Harry stares at the crystal, then at the bag. His eyes follow the man's hand as the man replaces the bag beneath his robe, then Harry's eyes snap back to the crystal. He shivers as the depth of the masked man's wealth sinks in.

Bone returns the bag back into his robes, but still holds the red crystal. Payment for information... probably. Now, the question is, what does he want to know?

"Well, I'm in a bit of a rush to get north, and I don't know the geography too well. Considering this caravan of yours is not ready to move, I am ready to travel through the passes on my own. Unfortunately, as I have been told, bandit activity has gotten quite dangerous, so I am here to prevail upon you for information."

He steps forward and places the red crystal on Harry's desk. "I would like to buy your recommendation for the safest but swift route through the passes for a single carriage."

Harry blanches, then smiles. He stands up and walks to a dresser. He opens it, revealing several dozen maps. He quickly finds the one he is looking for. He returns to his seat and unfurls the map, upon which a red line weaves through daunting contours.

"This is arguably my fastest route, but the terrain is too rough to travel quickly with a large caravan. A single carriage should go unnoticed," he explains.

The masked man nods. He slides the red crystal toward Harry and takes the map.

"Thank you. It's been a pleasure doing business with you."

The man tips his hat, turns around and walks out of the tent in the same relaxed manner with which he had entered.

Harry watches him leave, and even goes so far as to wait five minutes before he turns to one of his guards.

“Get my father. I need to speak with him.”

The guard nods and runs out. Harry waits, pleased with himself.

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Ever since the Assassin’s Guild in Camelot was destroyed, the [Gentlemen] have been able to return to business as usual. The expected retaliation has yet to come, as it seems the guild hall’s destruction has slowed operation further than expected.

Regardless, a threat could arrive anytime, which is why they are once again sitting outside in the front yard and playing poker.

Five individuals sit around a table, each carefully observing the others while trying to give no indication of what their hands hold.

But one individual holds the upper barrel, if you will.

“I fold,” a [Gentleman] exclaims.

Two others mimic the man, folding as well.

Now, only two are left, they stare at each other respectfully and with no malice, merely a healthy sense of competition.

The [Gentleman] places down his hand, revealing his cards.

“Straight Flush,” he says without a drop of smugness.

Then his opponent moves its barrel quickly and with exceptional precision, flipping the cards face-down on the table face-up. A Royal Flush.

The [Gentlemen] all sigh in their seventh consecutive defeat. They watch as the barrel shifts forward and drags the pot towards its side.

“I must say, Gun Widow, your skill in poker is truly unrivaled. I’m quite surprised you learned to play only recently, and from [Guards] no less.”

Gun sways its barrel in acknowledgment and what feels like a shrug. The undead spider tank finds the game enjoyable, albeit too easy.

“Well, regardless, that was quite a game. I thought I beat you, but you had a Royal Flush of all things. Impressive, really. Do you plan to continue your winning streak if you join the Adventurer’s Guild?”

Gun Widow wiggles, explaining that it will try, but cannot make any promises as its main intent is to see the world. Gun feels it is in its best interest to learn and experience as much as possible. It believes the Adventurer’s Guild will be its best bet.

The [Gentlemen] nod, smiling and accepting the undead murder-tank’s bravery and sense of purpose.

“Well, until then, let us continue our games,” a [Gentleman] adds, picking up all the cards and starting to shuffle.

They nod, smiling, ignoring the cold breeze caressing their naked bodies.