



13

Hyougetsu
ill. Nari Teshima

Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight

— The Two Princesses —





Character



Veight

A Japanese man who was reincarnated as a werewolf. He's both the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander and a Meraldian Commonwealth Councilor.

Eriede

Veight and Airia's daughter. She can't transform, but possesses a werewolf's physical abilities.



Shirin

Friede's longtime friend, and Baltze and Shure's son.



Yuhette

Friede's longtime friend, and Bishop Yuhit's granddaughter.



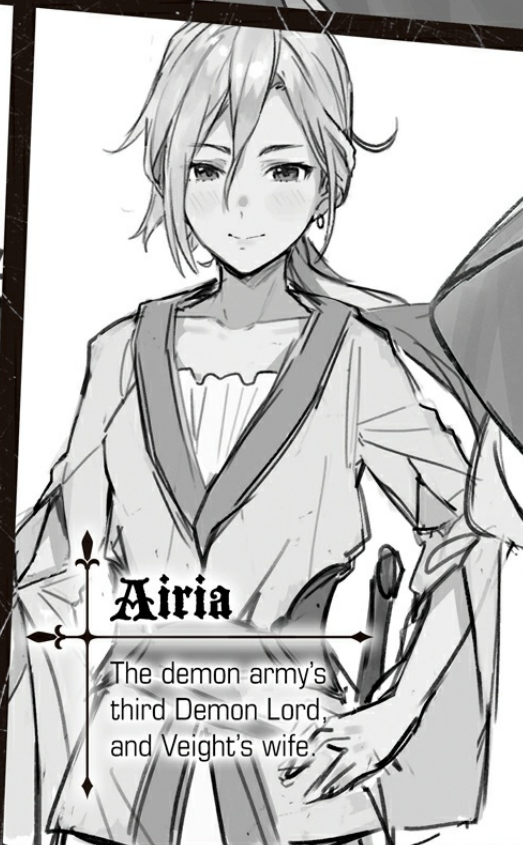
Ryuunie

A Meraldian Commonwealth Councilor, and an exiled prince from Rolmund.



Woroy

The man who built up Doneiks city from nothing. He's an exiled prince from Rolmund.



Airia

The demon army's third Demon Lord, and Veight's wife.



— *The Story So Far* —

Meraldia was now at peace, having forged amicable relationships with the surrounding countries of Wa, Rolmund, and Kuwol. Despite this, however, Veight was still as busy as always—devoting most of his time to raising his daughter, Friede, together with Airia.

Work was never too far away either, especially for a living legend such as himself. First, Kuwol asked for his help to resolve nomadic disputes, and now, Wa was requesting aid for their investigation into the Windswept Dunes. All the while, his daughter continues to grow.

Friede has her mother's wits and looks, and her father's strength and decisiveness. Before long, she graduated from Meraldia University's elementary course, and went on a short field trip to Meraldia's newest city, Doneiks. Soon after, she found herself included in the delegation to Rolmund, together with her friends Yuhette and Shirin, at the request of Empress Eleora!

The story so far

U

E

I

W

E

I

W

E

I

W



Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Characters](#)

[Map](#)

[The Story So Far](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Short Story](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter 13

The Meraldian Commonwealth and the Rolmund Empire agreed to a technological exchange, opening the door to formal negotiations between the two nations. Friede was chosen to go with the diplomatic delegation to Rolmund, and was eagerly awaiting the day of their departure.

“You’re really gonna go to Rommand?” Ryucco, the demon army’s chief technician, asked her as he idly munched on a carrot.

“Yep. I’m going to *Rolmund*.” Friede casually corrected Ryucco’s mispronunciation, but the lagomorph didn’t seem to notice.

He skillfully disassembled a small Blast Rifle, made a few adjustments, and reassembled it just as quickly.

“Here, it’s got the firepower you asked for. Give it a test shot.”

“Thanks, Ryucco.”

Friede took aim at a small target that had been set up on an empty lot near Doneiks’s arena. Her Blast Rifle was small enough that it was more like a Blast Pistol.

“Take that!” She pulled the trigger, and a blinding bullet of light shot out of the muzzle. “Whoa! What the?!”

Friede shut her eyes in surprise, and heard a soft *thump* as the bullet hit the target.

After a few seconds, she slowly opened her eyes and saw that the target had been blown to pieces. The smell of burning wood reached her moments after.

“Damn, that blasted straight through that tower shield. It was even reinforced with iron plates. Hey, how many plates did that shot pierce?” Ryucco asked in amazement, and a group of canine techs went over to the target to check.

“Four plates, sir!”

“It didn’t pierce the fifth plate, but it snapped in half!”

“There’re cracks in the sixth one too!”

“The first two plates were shattered in so many pieces there’s nothing left of them!”

One canine ran over to Ryucco, took off his goggles, and pointed to a few figures on his clipboard. “We got some really good measurements here! Look at this, Ryucco, it’s amazing!”

Ryucco whistled appreciatively as he stared at the numbers. “That one shot had 7.4 kites worth of magic in it? You’d need a cadre of destruction mages to get that kinda output normally. No wonder you obliterated that shield.”

“Umm, isn’t this weapon a little overkill?” Friede asked hesitantly, and Ryucco shrugged his shoulders.

“You might need this kind of firepower when you’re up against a bunched army, but you definitely don’t need it for a regular shoot-out. Lemme see that.” Ryucco took the Blast Rifle from Friede and started tinkering with it. “I’ll just set a limit on its maximum firepower and... Wait, what should I do with the excess mana output? Eh, screw it. I’ll divert it here and increase its capacity.”

He substituted out a few parts, then handed the pistol back to Friede.

“Here, this should do it. Keep the output setting on minimum unless you need heavy firepower. It’ll shoot 0.2 kite bullets, which is the demon army Blast Rifle standard.”

“Of course, that’s still enough to kill a normal human, so be careful,” one of the canines added, his tail wagging excitedly.

“As long as you’re shooting within its effective range, that’s still powerful enough to blow off someone’s head or arm, even if they’re wearing armor,” another said.

“Yikes,” Friede said with a shiver as she stared at the weapon in her hands.

Ryucco started cleaning up his tools and took out another vegetable stick to munch on.

“You don’t have as much mana as Veight, but you’ve still got a heck of a lot,” he said. “Honestly, this pistol’s meant to be more of a tool to help you get rid of

your excess mana than a proper weapon.”

“If I store up too much mana, I’ll turn into a Valkaan, right? Don’t worry, I’ll be careful.”

Friede looked over the pistol one last time, then holstered it. “All right, one last test shot?” she asked.

“Yep, go for it.”

“Kay.”

The canines brought out a new target, and Friede got into a quick-draw stance. She sucked in a deep breath and touched the pistol’s grip.

“Here I go!”

After she was done testing her new gun, Friede ate lunch with the canines. They’d made roast duck sandwiches for everyone. When he saw what was for lunch, Ryucco started angrily stomping on the ground.

“Why do you guys have to stick meat in everything?!”

“Cause meat’s tasty?”

“How many times do I have to tell you I prefer vegetables?!”

Friede fished out a sandwich that looked different from the rest and handed it to Ryucco. “Here, they have vegetable sandwiches too.”

“Oh, good. You guys did remember. It’s not like I can’t eat meat, but vegetables are just so much better.”

Ryucco sat down next to Friede and took a big bite out of his sandwich. Before long, the topic of conversation naturally turned towards Friede’s upcoming trip to Rolmund.

“Watch out for Empress Eleora. She’s one hell of a schemer. She’s got a few soft spots though.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Oh, and she knows her stuff when it comes to magic and research. Though, she ain’t as good as me.”

“Doesn’t...that mean she’s not that amazing?” Friede asked with a smile, and Ryucco sniffed dismissively.

“Oh, she’s amazing all right, just not as much as Veight.”

“Okay...”

I’m not sure that actually told me anything concrete about what Eleora’s like.

Some time later, Friede and her companions set out for Krauhen, where the members of the delegation would be meeting up before going to Rolmund. There was supposed to be a large number of researchers, mages, and students in the delegation, so they wouldn’t feel out of place. Veight and a few other members of the werewolf squad would serve as Friede’s bodyguards during the trip.

Inside the carriage, Friede smiled and said, “You’re such a worrywart, dad.”

“I’m not worried, I’m just going with you to see you off as mom’s—as the Demon Lord’s representative,” Veight said, folding his arms and looking out the window. He had a habit of doing that whenever he was making excuses. “The council’s expecting a lot from this delegation. Meraldia and Rolmund have different political structures and different cultures, but that’s precisely why we need to deepen our ties and avoid conflict.”

“I don’t get the complicated political stuff, but basically we just have to become friends, right?”

“Well...basically, yeah. Make sure you mind your manners though,” Veight said with a small smile, then leaned closer to Friede. “Oh yeah, it’s cold up there, so remember to pile on the blankets when you sleep.”

“Hm? But I always sleep under a lot of blankets.”

“Yeah, and by the time you wake up you’ve kicked them all off. The last thing you want is to catch a cold in a foreign country. Oh, and they have different foods than us, but don’t overeat just because everything looks novel. They’ll be serving a lot of deer and beef, but leave some for the rest of your friends, okay?”

“Wait, beef?! Wow, we almost never get beef in Ryunheit!”

“That’s exactly the kind of thing you shouldn’t say when you’re over there. People might make assumptions on Meraldia’s financial situation based on our eating habits.” Veight let out a small sigh. “Cows need more food to raise than other livestock, which is why beef is more expensive than other kinds of—”

“Hey, dad, how do they cook their beef in Rolmund?”

“Hm? Well, it’s been a while, so I don’t remember too well. I think they had a lot of stews and wine-glazed steaks, and stuff?”

“How could you forget something so important?!” she protested. *You’ve got such a good memory for everything else, how could you forget about all the delicious foreign food you ate?*

Veight gave Friede a placating smile and said, “There was a lot going on when I was there. I didn’t exactly have time to savor my meals... Oh, but that does remind me.” Talking about food had jogged Veight’s memory. “You know how in northern Meraldia they put melted cheese on a lot of dishes? Well, that style of cuisine comes from Rolmund, so you’ll see it there too.”

“Sweet! I love cheese!”

“Just remember, don’t overeat.”

“Okay!”

It was clear from her tone that she was ready to eat an entire cow each meal.

Friede and Veight ended up talking about Rolmund cuisine for the rest of the journey to Krauchen. As this would be the first official exchange between Rolmund and Meraldia, Kurtz, the head engineer of the demon army and Veight’s longtime friend, was chosen to be the delegation’s leader.

“Our mission is to set the foundations for an alliance with Rolmund,” Kurtz said to the gathered members of the delegation in his customary calm, measured tone. “However, we are not diplomats. We do not possess the education and training that formal diplomats would. Rolmund is not expecting diplomacy from us either. We simply need to comport ourselves in a manner befitting researchers and engineers. In other words...” He cleared his throat.

“All that’s expected from us is to learn from Rolmund’s leading scholars, my fellow academics.”

The members of the delegation grinned and nodded emphatically.

The Holy Empire of Rolmund covered as much territory as the Meraldian Commonwealth but had a much bigger population, which consisted predominantly of humans.

“Because of the cold, mountainous climate, there are only a few places in Rolmund suitable for cultivating crops. The reason Rolmund invaded Meraldia in the past was because the empire was in desperate need of more arable land,” Kurtz explained to the group as they rode up Rolmund’s main highway in a carriage. History wasn’t Friede’s strongest subject, but she did remember learning about this in class before.

Kurtz turned to her as he continued his speech.

“Your father, Veight, was the one who stopped their invasion. He defeated the commander of the invading army, Eleora, at the battle of Ryunheit, and took her captive.”

“Wait, the same Eleora who’s now an empress?” Friede asked.

“Correct.”

Friede sighed and muttered, “Is there any major accomplishment that *wasn’t* yours, dad?”

Kurtz chuckled at that and replied, “With the exception of one person, that’s how everyone in Meraldia feels.”

“Who’s that one person?”

“Veight himself. It honestly gets exasperating at times.” He looked out the window and added, “After that, he won Eleora over to his side and got her to work for him. He caused quite a scene in Rolmund, and after a series of rather fascinating events, installed Eleora as its empress.”

“Uncle, what exactly do you mean when you say ‘he caused quite a scene’?” Shirin asked, curious. Their lessons hadn’t covered recent Rolmund history yet.

Kurtz wiped the lens of his glasses and turned to his nephew. “I only read the reports, so I’m afraid I only have a basic understanding of what happened. But apparently, Veight is known in Rolmund as the Astral Fencer. He also earned himself the moniker ‘Lord of Crimson Snow Keep.’”

“How many nicknames does my dad have?” Friede asked in amazement. Kurtz summarized the events that happened during Veight’s visit, starting with the death of Bahazoff the fourth, then going on to talk about the Doneiks Rebellion, and the heretic Lord Bolshevik’s secret plot. Some of that had been covered in Friede and the others’ lessons, but not Veight’s involvement.

Once he was done, Kurtz finished up by saying, “Ultimately, though, it would be best to ask the people of Rolmund on any specifics you’re curious about.”

Friede muttered, “I will, but I get the feeling I’m not going to like some of the answers...”

The carriage rattled on as they headed towards the capital.

The delegation safely arrived in Rolmund’s capital city of Originia.

“This city used to be called Schwerin, because until recently, it was Prince Ashley’s Schwerin family that held the throne,” Lieutenant Lenkov explained as he greeted Kurtz and the others. He was now a member of the royal guard, and it was his squad that had escorted the delegation from Fort Novesk to the capital. He had a slender build and was nearing middle age, but it was clear from the way he carried himself that he had years of experience on the battlefield.

“But once Empress Eleora took the throne, the Originia family became guardians of the capital, so its name was changed.”

Shirin looked up at him with respect and asked, “I read that Empress Eleora’s mage corps took on all the most dangerous missions during her rise to power. You were part of that corps too, weren’t you, Sir Lenkov?”

Lenkov smiled ruefully and pulled his cap low over his head. “It was not us who did the most for our empress, young dragonkin. It was the man you all know so well.” He let out a small sigh before adding, “It’s quite humbling, owing

a debt to a man who works for a country we may one day have to fight.”

“I...hope we never go to war. Rolmund is the birthplace of the Sonnenlicht Order; I wouldn’t want to fight fellow believers,” Yuhette said in a worried voice.

In a solemn tone, Lenkov replied, “I did say ‘may,’ not will. We aren’t enemies right now—it’s just that the only nation Rolmund might ever find itself at war with is Meraldia, considering the continent’s geography. Besides, we have sworn fealty to Empress Eleora, and our only duty is to protect her and our homeland. It was she who ordered us to escort you here, so she also believes mutual cooperation will be to both nations’ benefit. Besides...” Lenkov scratched his head awkwardly. “I don’t want to fight Meraldia ever again either. So I hope we can work together to make sure that never happens.”

“Yes, of course!” Friede said excitedly. “Though...I’m not sure what we can do to help,” she added after a moment’s hesitation.

The nobles whose territories Friede and the others had passed through on their way to the capital had welcomed the delegation with open arms, and the nobles in Originia were no different. But while the group was glad for the dinner invitations and parties, the constant stream of socializing in a foreign land had left them exhausted. By the time they reached the palace, the children were at their limits.

“W-We can relax now, right?” Shirin groaned.

Natalia, their guide and Rolmund’s grand chamberlain, smiled. “Yes, you can. Feel free to take a short nap, or if you’d prefer a light meal, I can have something brought up from the kitchens.”

“Talking formally for so long gets so tiring...” Friede said, collapsing on a nearby sofa.

“Everyone is just pleased to see you, that’s all. Some of our nobles only began to believe the Black Werewolf King no longer meant them harm after you arrived.”

“What on earth did my dad do here?”

Natalia walked over to Friede, and asked, “Is your father doing well?”

“Yes. His fashion sense is atrocious, and he never brushes his hair properly, but other than that, he’s doing great.”

Natalia smiled. “I see he hasn’t changed at all.”

“Huh?” Friede asked, getting up into a sitting position.

Natalia bowed to the children and said, “Now then, I must get going. Someone will come by to visit you later—I do hope you get along with them.”

“Who?” Yuhette asked, but Natalia just chuckled and shook her head.

“I’m afraid that’s a state secret.”

Is that supposed to be a Rolmundian joke? Friede thought blearily.

The room the kids were in was about as large as a Meraldia University classroom, and decorated with jewels and precious metals. The other members of the delegation had all been given their own rooms as well.

Friede stared absently up at the ceiling and muttered, “That chandelier is using magical lights instead of candles. I wonder how much something like that costs...”

“It’s not just the chandelier. That fireplace is built out of dragonscale marble. One of those stones could buy a hundred Blast Rifles,” Shirin said, staring at it in awe.

Yuhette reclined in an armchair and stared intently at the wall. “This fresco on the wall depicts the entire story of Saint Zahakt’s Penitence. I’ve never seen a painting so detailed or so vivid... It’s the kind of thing you might see in loro Lange’s cathedral.”

As the kids marveled at the treasure trove of a room they’d been assigned, they heard a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Shirin said, and the door swung open. Everyone turned to see a young girl about Friede’s age walk in. She was wearing expensive clothes, and her eyes shone with a fierce strength.

“Umm... Are you part of the Meraldian delegation?” she asked, speaking in Meraldian rather than Rolmundian. The two languages were rather similar, but there were distinct differences in pitch and accent that made it clear when one was speaking one or the other.

As Friede and the others thought about how to respond, the girl furrowed her brow and cocked her head.

“Was my pronunciation off? I thought I practiced it enough. You can understand me, right?”

“Oh, uh, yes we can. I’m Friede. Friede Aindorf,” Friede said with a nod, and the girl smiled.

“Good, that’s a relief. My name is Micha. Micha Wikran Originia Rolmund. My apologies for arriving late.”

Friede and the others exchanged glances.

“Who?” Friede asked her friends.

“Well...she has the Originia surname, so she must be part of the imperial family,” Shirin replied. “I feel like I’ve heard the name Wikran somewhere before too...”

“You two could have at least memorized the names of Rolmund’s royalty,” Yuhette said. “This girl is Empress Eleora’s niece. I believe she’s second in line for the throne.”

“No, I’m *first*! Mother relinquished her claim, so I’m first in line!” Micha said indignantly, and then pointed at Friede. “You’re a princess too, aren’t you?! If you’re royalty, you should at least know the names of your neighboring nations’ royalty!”



“I’m a princess?”

“You’re Demon Lord Airia’s daughter, right? That makes you a princess!”

“It does?” Friede turned to confer with her two friends again.

“Friede, are you a princess?” Shirin asked.

“I dunno.”

“You are the Demon Lord’s daughter, Friede, so I suppose that would make you a princess, but...”

Their conversation seemed to irritate Micha even further.

“Do you have no self-awareness? How will you negotiate with other royalty if you’re like this?”

“‘Negotiate with other royalty’?” Friede parroted dumbly.

Tired of shouting, Micha sighed and said, “Eventually, I’ll inherit the throne, and you’ll be the next Demon Lord.”

Friede gave her a confused look. “I don’t think I’m going to be Demon Lord though.”

Micha stared at her in shock. She glanced around to make sure no one else was nearby, then sidled closer to Friede. She grabbed Friede’s arm and asked in a serious tone, “What do you mean? You’re a princess, but you don’t have the right to inherit the throne?”

“I-I think so, yes?”

Micha’s expression grew more serious, and she asked, “Don’t tell me you’re here because you were exiled?”

“Huh?”

Now it was Friede’s turn to be surprised, but Micha didn’t seem to notice.

“Don’t worry, this happens all the time. You’ll be fine. I swear on the name of the royal family that I, Micha Wikran Originia Rolmund, will protect you and your retainers.” Micha nodded solemnly, managing to look regal despite her youth. “There’s nothing to fear. You’re safe here.”

Flustered, Friede shouted, “Wait, hold on! I haven’t been exiled!”

Though Friede seemed to be panicking, Yuhette quickly realized what was going on and smiled to herself.

“Ah, I see where the misunderstanding is now. Don’t worry, Lady Micha.”

“What do you mean?” Micha asked, turning to Yuhette.

Choosing her words carefully, Yuhette said, “In Meraldia, the position of Demon Lord isn’t hereditary. It’s different from Rolmund. That’s why Friede doesn’t comport herself like a princess.”

“Then why is the Demon Lord called a *Lord*?! I thought nobility and royalty were decided by birth?!”

“Well, it was originally humans who started calling a leader of a large group of demons a Demon Lord, so...” Friede trailed off apologetically.

Micha scrutinized everyone’s expressions. After a few seconds, she organized her thoughts and asked, “In other words, you are the Demon Lord’s daughter, but that doesn’t guarantee you’ll be the next Demon Lord?”

“Yes. Mo—The Demon Lord and the Demon Empress both say the next Demon Lord should be whoever has the ability and the desire to serve, as well as a good head on their shoulders.”

At present, Friede had no desire to become a Demon Lord.

Micha sighed and said, “I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions. It’s a bit disappointing to learn you won’t be the next leader of Meraldia, but I only have myself to blame for getting my hopes up without learning about your customs. It makes sense that different countries would have different forms of succession for their rulers.”

“Oh, uh, it’s fine. If anything, I should be apologizing, I think.”

Micha’s right, I need to act more like the noble I am. I have no right to laugh at dad for doing the things he does... Just then there was another knock on the door and an older man’s voice could be heard from the other side.

“So this is where you were, Micha. Lady Friede, may I enter?”

“Oh, sure.”

A middle-aged man walked into the room. He was well-dressed, muscular, and had a friendly smile on his face. He looked like the ideal Rolmundian gentleman. Bowing, he introduced himself.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Lekomya Hinokentus Wikran.”

At that, all three of them remembered where they’d heard the name Wikran before.

“Archduke Lekomya! You’re the empress’s brother-in-law!”

“Now I remember! The Wikran family is Archduke Lekomya’s family! Friede, where are your manners?! Introduce yourself!”

Friede hurriedly straightened her back and bowed her head to Lekomya.

“It is a nonner—er, an honor to meet you. My name is Friede Aindorf. These are my best friends, Yuhette and Shirin.”

“I appreciate the formal introduction, but you can relax. I’ve only recently become an archduke, and I’m nowhere near as important as my title would have you think.”

Lekomya smiled reassuringly, and Micha pouted at him.

“Why are you acting so humble, father? You’re the leader of the Fourteen Imperial Generals who protect Empress Eleora!”

Lekomya shifted awkwardly at that.

“Micha, my sweet daughter. I’ve told you not to use that title before, remember?”

“B-But why?”

“It’s embarrassing to parade it around in front of Lord Veight’s daughter as if it has any real significance.”

His gentlemanly mannerisms were gone, and he seemed oddly nervous after mentioning Veight.

“I feel like we’ve seen this sight a thousand times before, Yuhette.”

“That we have, Shirin.”

Friede’s two friends turned to her, and she awkwardly scratched her head. But at the same time, her curiosity had been piqued, so she wormed her way into the conversation.

“Say, Lady Micha. Archduke Lekomya is Rolmund’s greatest general, right?”

Micha nodded emphatically, shouting, “That’s right! When Empress Eleora was still sixth in line for the throne and it didn’t seem like she would ever hold political power, there were fourteen nobles who chose to support her! And it was my father who brought them all together!”

That got Shirin’s interest as well.

“I’ve heard the stories. He was the one who slew the enemy general in single combat during the Doneiks Rebellion, wasn’t he? I also read that he contributed significantly to North Rolmund’s irrigation and agricultural infrastructure, and led an expedition to the furthest northern reaches of the empire. He also stymied an assassination attempt on the empress, didn’t he? I heard that was when he fell in love with her younger sister. Your father is a true hero.”

“E-Exactly! Father is Rolmund’s greatest treasure! He’s a living legend!” Micha exclaimed, her eyes sparkling.

Lekomya placed a hand on his daughter’s shoulder and pulled her back a little. “Stop it, Micha. Please.”

“But I want to tell them about how amazing you are.”

“There’s no need. Lady Friede’s father is the legendary Astral Fencer. The stories of my exploits must pale in comparison to the things she’s heard about him.” Sweat was beading on Lekomya’s forehead, and it looked like he was panicking for some inexplicable reason. “I’m sorry, my daughter gets excited easily. Let’s talk again later sometime.”

Lekomya bowed to the three children, then dragged his daughter out of the room. Friede and her friends exchanged glances.

“What was all that about?”

“No clue. I wanted to hear more about Lekomya’s heroic deeds though; it’s a

shame he left so quickly,” Shirin said with a wistful sigh. “He worked his way up from a landless noble to archduke through his actions alone. He’s one of the greatest men alive. Little wonder minstrels sing his stories even in Meraldia.”

“But he looked like he was panicking for some reason...”

None of them knew about what Veight had accomplished here before they’d been born, so their confusion was only natural.

The next day, Friede was summoned for an audience with Eleora.

“Why just me, Professor Kurtz?” she asked.

Kurtz was the leader of their delegation and the demon army’s chief engineer, but to the kids, he was their university professor first and foremost.

With his usual calm, Kurtz replied, “The empress wishes to speak with you one-on-one, Friede.”

“But...why?”

The two of them were waiting in a spacious reception room, and Friede’s voice echoed off the wall multiple times.

“I have my hunches, though they are ultimately just hunches. Moreover, regardless of which of my hypotheses is correct, I think it’s for the best that I don’t share my speculations with you.”

Friede nodded, accepting Kurtz’s logic. But while she accepted it, she didn’t fully understand it. Shirin and Yuhette were in the waiting room as well, but Shirin was examining a Blast Cane replica in a corner of the room, and Yuhette was engrossed in an old Sonnenlicht scripture.

“Umm, guys, could I get a little support here?” Friede asked.

“You’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, I’m not worried.”

Her two friends clearly didn’t care about her plight. Giving up on getting any help from them, Friede sat down and started snacking on the sweets laid out on the marble table. They were dyed with fruit juice, making the tray look like it

was full of sparkling multicolored jewels. As she was agonizing over which color to try next, Natalia came in to call her to the throne room.

“This way, Lady Friede.”

“Ugh, I’m so nervous.”

Eleora Kastoniev Originia Rolmund was one of Rolmund’s most famous rulers. Everyone had heard the stories about how despite being sixth in line for the throne, she’d outwitted her competition and made her way to becoming empress. She had the overwhelming support of her people, regardless of what caste they belonged to. Commoners, nobles, clergy, scholars, and soldiers alike approved of her rule. Eleora was lenient to heretics and demons, so she had their support too.

But in Meraldia, she had left a very different impression. Back when she’d been just a princess, she’d been ordered to lead the invasion on Meraldia, which she did. But though the invasion had been an imperial decree, she’d been given very few soldiers to work with, and her invasion had ultimately ended in failure when she’d been captured by the Black Werewolf King. Those who knew her story in Meraldia looked at her with pity. She was seen as a tragic heroine who’d been at the mercy of circumstances beyond her control. The plays Forne had written contributed to that image as well, since that was exactly how they portrayed her.

All of that ran through Friede’s mind as she came face-to-face with Empress Eleora.

“My name is Friede Aindorf. It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty.” Friede had practiced this particular greeting a dozen times now, so she was able to say it without tripping on her words. It helped that she’d picked the shortest greeting she could get away with without seeming rude.

“Welcome, Lady Friede. I am Eleora Kastoniev Originia Rolmund. I’m glad I finally had the chance to meet you. You may be seated.”

Eleora was sitting at a table, and she motioned for Friede to sit as well. Friede hesitated, unsure of whether or not it was polite to sit in the presence of an empress, and Eleora smiled at her.

“This is a private chat, not an official audience. There’s no need to worry about decorum.”

Eleora was more affable than Friede had been expecting, which put the young girl at ease. Of course, Eleora was still beautiful and imposing, but she at least seemed like someone Friede could get along with. Friede took her seat and timidly looked up at the legendary empress. Eleora was smiling gently, but she still looked a little intimidating.



“You look just like your father. Especially your eyes.”

“Th-Thank you very much!” Friede said reflexively, and Eleora nodded.

“I see you respect your father.”

“Yes! Well, mostly.”

“Oh, just mostly?”

“There are some bad habits he has that I wish he’d fix... Like not fixing his messy hair.”

Eleora chuckled at that, as if recalling an old memory. “I see. Well, it’s clear he raised you with love. I lost my own father at a young age, so I’m a little jealous.”

A hint of sadness tinged Eleora’s smile. There was something poignant about the way she expressed herself, and Friede realized she was feeling sad for her too. But at the same time, she was awed by this woman in front of her.

“Err, umm...”

She wanted to do something to ease Eleora’s sadness, but as she’d never lost a father, she couldn’t think of what to say. Still, she felt like she had to say something, even if she didn’t have the right words. *I thought I’d matured a little over this trip, but I guess I’m still hopeless.* Veight had taught her to default to either “thanks” or “I’m sorry” when she didn’t know what to say, and Friede decided to follow that advice.

“Thank you very much. And umm...I’m sorry for your loss.”

She wasn’t sure which was right for this situation, so she went with both.

Eleora shook her head and said, “It’s fine, you don’t need to worry so much about what you say. It was my fault for bringing up such a heavy topic. Forgive me.”

“No, umm, you really don’t need to apologize.”

Now Friede felt bad because she thought she’d said the wrong thing. Suddenly, Eleora changed the topic.

“You’re a polite, wise young girl, Friede. I hope we can become friends. Do you feel the same way?”

“Huh?! Ah, yes! I would love to be your friend! I-I-It would be a true honor!” Friede nodded over and over as she stammered.

Smiling gracefully, Eleora said, “I’d like it if you visited Rolmund more often. To make your trips easier, I was thinking of providing a mansion, or perhaps even a plot of land for you.”

“What?”

Flabbergasted, Friede wasn’t able to say anything more before Eleora added, “Meraldia has offered us some of their land for an embassy, you know. It’s only fair that Rolmund reciprocates. Oh, but if you are to hold land, you will need the peerage. It would be exceedingly rude of us to offer you a lower title, such as baron or knight. Hmm. Ah, I know, would you like to be a Count?”

“H-Hold on a second.”

Things were moving so fast Friede couldn’t keep up.

Eleora grinned and said, “Don’t worry. The imperial family will take care of managing your estate. You can think of it as having a villa in Rolmund, nothing more.”

Friede almost nodded on reflex. But then she remembered what her dad had told her over and over. Plus, her werewolf nose had picked up on a peculiar scent.

Friede immediately replied, “I am truly humbled by your offer, but I am afraid I cannot ac-acquie— Umm, it’s fine, I don’t need it!”

She shook her head, making her refusal clear. It was a bit scary turning down a gift from an empress, but she knew she couldn’t say yes.

“Even if you have me beheaded, I can’t take your gift!”

“Oh?” To Friede’s surprise, Eleora’s grin grew even wider. “Would you be willing to tell me why, Friede Aindorf?”

“That’s because, umm...my dad always says, ‘Be wary when someone offers you a gift and asks for nothing in return. That means they’re hiding their true intentions.’”

Veight had often told her that with a frown whenever Mao had given her a

new toy, some fashionable accessory, or even some candy. He'd explained that only true friends offered gifts for free, and the daughter of a Demon Lord would encounter many people masquerading as such, when in reality they just wanted something from her.

"I don't know why you're offering me such a lavish gift, but there has to be some reason behind your actions! Umm, sorry for being suspicious of you!"

Eleora still intimidated her, so Friede finished off by apologizing. She was now thinking about how heavy the guard around the palace was, and how she would manage to escape back to Meraldia without getting killed.

Still grinning, Eleora got up and walked over to Friede. Friede stiffened up involuntarily, but she didn't smell any hostility from Eleora. *In fact, I think...*

"Splendid. That was wonderful, Friede. That's exactly the response you should have given. Well done."

Eleora knelt down to look into Friede's trembling eyes. She nodded approvingly at the young girl.

"Hahahaha! Even now the Black Werewolf King still manages to one-up me! Amazing!"

"Huh? Umm, Your Majesty?"

Friede had no idea what was going on. Finding her reaction adorable, Eleora patted her head and ruffled her hair.

"Be proud of yourself, Friede. You gave the correct answer. Though you're still a child, you managed to win against the temptation of wealth and power."

"What do you mean?" Friede still couldn't grasp what Eleora was talking about.

Still patting Friede's head, Eleora explained, "When it comes to titles and land, the one doing the gifting gets to be in a position of power, and the one doing the receiving becomes subordinate to them. Had you accepted my gifts, you would have become beholden to me." She idly twirled some of Friede's hair around her fingers. "Imagine what would have happened if Rolmund's empress made the daughter of Meraldia's Demon Lord into her subject. If nothing else,

diplomacy between our two nations would have gotten a lot more complicated.”

“Oh, I see... I get it now.” Friede had once again forgotten that her status as the Demon Lord’s daughter meant something to other people.

Eleora smoothed over the parts of Friede’s hair that she’d messed up, then returned to her seat.

“I heard that Veight’s been putting in a lot of effort in raising the new generation of leaders. I figured he’d be pretty thorough with your education too, so I just wanted to see how much he’d already taught you.”

“So, this was a test.”

“Yes. I put you in a position where it would be difficult for you to refuse. All the idle small talk I made before making my proposal was to make it harder for you to say no.” Eleora chuckled to herself, looking like a kid who’d been caught pulling a prank. “Friede, you resemble your father in more ways than just your appearance. You share the Black Werewolf King’s spirit as well.”

“Th-Thank you.”

Friede still wasn’t sure *why* Eleora had tested her, but she was happy to be told she was like her dad. And Veight had taught her to thank people who praised her.

Eleora rang the bell resting on the table in front of her, and a maid rolled a tea cart into the room. There were a number of baked sweets and rare fruits resting on a tray next to two steaming teacups.

“All right, that’s enough stressful conversation.” Eleora smiled reassuringly at Friede. “As an apology for testing you, and as a gift to Meraldia’s future leader, I present to you the best sweets Rolmund has to offer. I hope you’ll be willing to partake of them together with me, Friede.”

“Of course!”

While Friede was enjoying tea time with Eleora, Shirin had been summoned to the palace armory.

“What do you think, Master Shirin?” a white-haired gentleman asked Shirin as

he opened the door to the armory. His name was Borsche, and he was the principal of Rolmund's military academy. He'd called Shirin over to show him Rolmund's latest model of Blast Canes. Though Shirin wasn't a mage, he still had a vested interest in magic technology.

"They're amazing, Sir Borsche."

To an amateur, it looked like there was a row of identical canes lined up against the wall, but Shirin could pick out the minute differences in each one.

"I imagine these are for cavalry, or perhaps scouts?"

"Correct. Well spotted."

Shirin nodded and explained, "I could tell because the cane barrels are shorter than usual. Crossbows meant to be used by cavalry are smaller than the standard, and I imagine the same holds true of your Blast Canes."

"Good thinking. These canes have been treated with a special magic circle that dampens the glow of the bullets to prevent them from startling horses or alerting enemies when fired. I'm afraid I can't share the specifics since the details are classified." Borsche gave Shirin a playful wink.

For a while, they toured the armory, examining the different kinds of Blast Canes, but after some time, Borsche grabbed two specific ones and brought them over to a nearby workbench.

"You plan on becoming an officer in the Meraldian army one day, correct?"

"Yes, Sir Borsche. That's what I'm studying for."

"Good. Every nation needs brave men to defend her. I have a question for you, young soldier." Borsche turned to look Shirin in the eyes. "Both Meraldia and Rolmund believe that future wars will be fought with magic weapons rather than swords and spears. When you become a general, what kinds of Blast Canes will you give your men? What part of their functionality will you prioritize?"

"That's a tough question..." Shirin muttered, mulling it over. While he was thinking, Borsche pointed to one with the longer barrel.

"Firepower, perhaps?" Borsche asked. "This is a Norlinskar Cane, issued to our elite snipers and heavy infantry. Thanks to its increased firepower, it can take

down an armored warhorse in one shot.” Smiling ruefully, he added, “But because of how much the output has been overclocked, these canes are prone to breaking down. Plus, they’re quite heavy and unwieldy.”

He pointed to the other, shorter cane.

“Do you consider accuracy the most important parameter? This is a modified Rolmund Blast Cane Mk IV. It’s a radically different design from the Mk III—which is currently standard issue for foot soldiers—and very few have been produced so far.” Borsche picked the weapon up. “Both the Mk III and Mk IV are designed with mass-production in mind, but this particular modified version was made specifically for the Imperial Guard. It’s expensive and difficult to manufacture, but highly accurate. Its effective range is quite long too, and it has enough firepower to kill a man in one shot.”

He stared at Shirin, gauging the young dragonkin’s reaction.

“These are both good, practical weapons. Which one would you choose to defend your homeland?”

Shirin looked from one cane to the other. After a few minutes, he shook his head and turned his back to Borsche.

“If it was me, I would pick this one.” He picked up a plain-looking cane that had been lying unceremoniously on one of the weapon racks. Borsche narrowed his eyes.

“Why? That’s an old Mk III, the basic standard issue. Its only redeeming feature is that it’s sturdy, but it pales in comparison to these new versions by any other metric. Are you sure this is the one you would choose?”

“Yes. The fact that it doesn’t break easily means I can trust it. It doesn’t matter how powerful a gun is—if it breaks down, it’s nothing more than a stick.” Shirin nodded and added, “Besides, the fact that most of your soldiers use them means that your generals also believe this version is the most reliable. You’ve also probably spent more time figuring out how to get the most value out of this weapon than any of the modern prototype models.”

Once Shirin got started talking about military affairs, he went on forever. But since Friede, Yuhette, and the other girls didn’t share his interest, he rarely had

people he could discuss the topic with.

“Meraldia hasn’t gone through as many large-scale campaigns involving these Blast Canes as Rolmund, so we have little battle data to go off of. The Mk III has remained in use over multiple rebellions, meaning it’s survived the stress test of real battle and proven itself superior.” Realizing he was droning on, Shirin suddenly cut himself off. “Forgive me, I didn’t mean to give a lecture.”

“No need to apologize, Master Shirin. You show a lot of promise.” Borsche laid a hand on Shirin’s shoulder. He then sat down in front of the workbench and let out a long sigh. “About a decade ago, I went on an expedition to Meraldia. Back then, Meraldia had no sign of magic weapons, and they weren’t mining magesteel, so logistics were a nightmare. We also had to recover our fallen comrades’ weapons so that knowledge of them wouldn’t leak to the enemy.”

Borsche stroked his white beard and reminisced about the time he’d been Eleora’s adjutant.

“In hostile territory, every tiny screw and gear is valuable. One asset the Mk III has over the other models is that all of its component parts are made to be identical. You can swap out the stock or muzzle or barrel from one Mk III and fit it onto another with just a little fine-tuning.”

The industrial revolution still hadn’t come to this world, so perfect standardization was impossible. Every Mk III had minor differences in part size, length, and weight, but the discrepancies were small enough that some quick, easy engineering could get rid of them. Like Meraldia, Rolmund had started looking into standardizing the equipment its military used.

“I’m surprised the parts are interchangeable, Sir Borsche.”

“I’m impressed you already understand the value of that, young man.” Borsche smiled and added, “Empress Eleora learned these lessons the hard way, during her invasion of Meraldia. When you’re fighting on home ground, you have enough supplies that you don’t have these logistical concerns.” He fondly patted the cane resting on the workbench. “In war, you should always expect the unexpected. Chances are, none of your plans will work out the way you intend... Indeed, you might even run into a situation where you’re stuck

deep in enemy territory for years on end without any hope of resupply.”

Borsche let out a long sigh.

“The most important quality for a weapon isn’t firepower or range, but durability and adaptability. Fortunately, it seems you already knew that without me having to tell you.” He smiled at Shirin. “You’re still young and inexperienced, but you’re cautious and have a mind to think things over before making decisions. You’ll make for a fine commander someday. The soldiers who serve under you will be lucky indeed.”

“Thank you, Sir Borsche.”

“You’ve been blessed with a good teacher. I’m surprised Meraldia has instructors who understand the importance of interchangeable parts. Who taught you about that?”

“Professor Veight. It was during a lecture on logistics and organization.”

“I see... I suppose that was a foolish question—I should have known it would be him.” Borsche gave Shirin a knowing smile. “But I’m sure Lord Veight isn’t your only capable teacher, now is he?”

“Yes, there are others.” Baltze, Kurtz, and Gomoviroa’s faces popped into Shirin’s mind.

“I’m looking forward to seeing how Meraldia develops in the future. Preferably as an ally.” Borsche got to his feet and patted Shirin on the back. “As a sign of our two countries’ friendship, how about I show you some more of Rolmund’s weapons? Of course, I can only show you what I’m authorized to, but that still includes quite a few interesting things.”

“Thank you very much!”

At around the same time, Yuhette was sitting alone in the waiting room. Kurtz had gone off somewhere as well, and Friede and Shirin were in their respective meetings.

She traced her fingers over the sacred Sonnenlicht symbol on the scripture she’d been reading and looked out the window. After a few seconds, Natalia walked into the room. She was with a middle-aged woman this time. The

woman was wearing a nun's habit and looked like a high-ranking member of the Sonnenlicht Order.

"Lady Yuhette, this is Cardinal Kushmer, my teacher."

The older woman smiled at Yuhette and said, "Hello there. If you have some time, I'd like to chat."

Few things surprised Yuhette, but she had not expected to meet a Sonnenlicht cardinal here. That was the highest rank in the Sonnenlicht Order, and here in Rolmund, the order held far more political power than in Meraldia. There were only eight cardinals within the empire, and they were respected almost as much as the empress herself. Meanwhile, Yuhette was just a priestess-in-training.

She hurriedly got to her feet and bowed in a formal Sonnenlicht greeting.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Cardinal Kushmer. I am Yuhette, an apprentice priestess studying under Archbishop Yuhit in Rynheit's Sonnenlicht temple."

Her grandfather had taught her proper manners, and she knew the most important part about a good Sonnenlicht greeting was conveying that you were happy to meet the other party. Granted, Yuhette was really feeling more nervous than happy at the moment.

Kushmer walked over and touched Yuhette's shoulders, then her head. That was how high-ranking priests blessed lower-ranking clergy in the Rolmund sect of Sonnenlicht. Kushmer's touch was so gentle that, for a moment, Yuhette felt like it was her mother stroking her hair, not a stranger.

"You may sit, Lady Yuhette. The pleasure is all mine."

"Thank you, Cardinal Kushmer."

Yuhette waited until after Kushmer had sat down before taking her seat. Kushmer looked down at the scripture in Yuhette's hands and gave her a questioning look.

"That scripture is called *The Virtues*. It contains the guidelines that every member of the clergy should live their life by. But I thought this particular

scripture never made its way over to Meraldia?”

“It didn’t, Cardinal. In Meraldia we have *The Divine Record*, which serves the same function,” Yuhette replied smoothly. She was more used to dealing with important people than Friede or Shirin. The Sonnenlicht Order served different roles in Meraldia and Rolmund. Because of that, their scriptures and teachings diverged a significant amount.

“Do you have any questions about the way our scriptures are written?” Kushmer asked. “I’m curious what impression you get, as a Meraldian.”

A nervous shiver ran through Yuhette. If she couldn’t think of a good question to ask, the cardinal would think her understanding of the scriptures was shallow.

“Well...I do have a few.” Yuhette hurriedly flipped through the pages. In truth, there had been a few things she found strange. She pointed to one of the passages and said, “Here, it’s written that ‘faithful clergy have no need to learn magic.’”

“Haha, and I suppose you find that strange?”

“Yes. Magic has the power to help people. It can heal illness and injury, and predict disasters ahead of time. Why would you tell your followers not to learn it?”

Kushmer traced over the lines Yuhette was pointing to with her finger. “This section of the scripture is a remnant from the old republic. Back when Rolmund was still a republic, it was only clergy and nobility that were literate—meaning only members of those two classes could learn to be mages. At the time, most of Rolmund’s mages were also priests.”

“In that case, the people would have seen the priests and bishops as special, wouldn’t they? Now I really don’t understand why you would tell people they don’t need to learn magic.”

Kushmer chuckled to herself. “Think about it like this. What would happen if a mage who wasn’t a noble or a priest showed up?”

Yuhette turned the question over in her mind, then suddenly looked up at Kushmer. “People would be confused. If the only mages were priests, people

would think magic was a blessing granted directly by God, and they would worship any mage, even if they weren't a priest."

"Correct. Well reasoned," Kushmer replied with an approving nod. "If you had to go to the temple to get cured, people would think the healing itself was a miracle from above. But one does not need to serve God to use magic."

Kushmer fiddled with the insignia on her robe and looked down. "Heretics and rebels can use magic just as well as anyone else. It would cause quite a stir if someone who didn't follow God's teachings could still use 'God's blessing.'"

"I see..."

Yuhette had heard that unlike in Meraldia, the Sonnenlicht Order in Rolmund had spent centuries fighting heretics. The religion had spread in a very different environment.

Kushmer added, "But there's one even more important reason for this passage's existence. Clergy should not be required to use healing magic. That's not what should be expected from them. Do you understand what I mean?"

"U-Umm..." This was a much tougher question. Yuhette wasn't sure what the right answer was.

She idly rubbed her cheeks as she thought, then looked up again as a sudden realization hit her. *It's not for others to decide which answer is correct. The correct answer is the one you come to yourself and can fully believe in. I should give Cardinal Kushmer my answer, not the one I think she wants.*

"Grandfa—I mean my teacher, Archbishop Yuhit, once told me that God's teachings existed to save the people who had been abandoned by everyone else."

Cardinal Kushmer smiled quietly at Yuhette. Mind racing, Yuhette hurried to explain her reasoning.

"If you're sick or hurt, you can ask a doctor or a mage to heal you. But some people get hurt in ways that magic or medicine can't fix. My teacher believes a priest's true calling is to help 'heal' those people."

"You're absolutely correct. If medicine can heal you, see a doctor. If magic can heal you, visit a mage. Our job begins when people face problems that human

wisdom and ingenuity cannot solve.” Kushmer took the insignia off of her robe. “The teachings of Sonnenlicht are different in Meraldia and Rolmund, but those differences are like the differences between the rising and setting sun. Though they come at different times and burn in different colors, they are still the same sun.”

Kushmer got to her feet and walked over to Yuhette.

“Apprentice Priestess Yuhette of Ryunheit Temple. I recognize you as a devoted servant of God.”

She offered her insignia to Yuhette, who bowed reverently, allowing Kushmer to fasten it to the collar of her cloak.

In a gentle voice, Kushmer said, “You’re young, even for an apprentice—here in Rolmund we call them acolytes—but you’re wise beyond your years. You’ve learned well, and more importantly, you’ve learned to think well. You will face many obstacles yet in your path to becoming a priestess, but I know you will persevere. May the sun bless you on your journey, Yuhette.”

“Thank you very much, Cardinal Kushmer.” Smiling, Yuhette nodded to the cardinal.

The Lily Knight Hall was a section of the palace that had been granted to nobles who’d first supported Eleora upon her return from Meraldia. Archduke Lekomya let out a long sigh in the hall’s sunny, spacious common room.

“This is going to be rough...” he muttered, and the other people at the table nodded. “To think Lord Veight’s daughter would be part of the first delegation from Meraldia...”

“I heard that Her Majesty specifically requested for her to come, and Meraldia acquiesced,” Lord Pieti, one of Lekomya’s friends, said. A decade ago he’d been a landless, low-ranking noble, but now he was a count with a large plot of land.

Lekomya rested his cheeks in his hands and said, “She did. Our empress is quite obsessed with Veight’s daughter.”

“Do you think she regrets not marrying him herself?”

“No, nothing like that. I suspect she wants to see just how good a job Lord

Veight has done in raising the children of today. It's important to know what kinds of people Meraldia's future rulers will be before deciding on long-term policy."

Lekomya's friends nodded in agreement, then sighed.

"But still, it's going to be nerve-wracking meeting her face-to-face..." Pieti muttered.

"Don't be like that. It won't do to have our Astral Tactician be afraid of a little girl."

"I told you before, I don't like that nickname, Mister Unbreakable General." Pieti folded his arms and muttered, "This is all Lord Veight's fault. If he hadn't tried so hard to hide his achievements, we wouldn't have to feel so bad about our titles."

"It wasn't like he had much of a choice. If the public found out that a Meraldian was almost single-handedly responsible for winning the throne for Empress Eleora, her reputation would plummet. Lord Veight knew that as well."

"Still, he didn't have to go and credit all of his deeds to us."

Lekomya and his friends, the Fourteen Imperial Generals, all gave each other uneasy looks.

"Back during the Doneiks Rebellion, we were only able to push so far into North Rolmund because Lord Veight was our rearguard."

"Not only did he protect our rear, but he even managed to take Prince Woroy captive and conquer Creech Castle. I don't even want to take credit for a feat like that, people will expect too much of me."

After Bahazoff the fourth had died, the Doneiks family had started a rebellion to take the throne. The family's second son, Prince Woroy, had taken a contingent of elite soldiers and holed up in Creech Castle, which was close to the capital.

"In fact, the entire reason Prince Woroy decided to hold the castle instead of riding forth to capture the capital was because of Lord Veight."

"Yeah. If Lord Veight hadn't retaken Sveniki Castle as fast as he did, then

Woroy would have used it as a staging point to invade and take the capital for sure.”

It was only because the war had been drawn into a stalemate that Eleora had been able to take her army and march north into Doneiks territory to strike a decisive blow against Prince Ivan. But had Veight and his troops not managed to keep Woroy pinned at Creech Castle, he would have pincerred Eleora’s invading army from behind and torn it to shreds. With just 7,000 men, Veight had managed to not only keep Woroy’s 25,000 men holed up and unable to reinforce Ivan, but he’d also managed to eventually capture Woroy and Creech Castle. Without his decisive victory, the Doneiks family would never have fallen. Simply hiding his involvement would make people question how exactly Eleora had managed to win despite the overwhelming odds against her.

“I can’t believe he was willing to let someone else take the credit for capturing a prince so easily.”

“I can. That man seems wholly unconcerned with status and fame.”

“Yes, but he cares so little that it’s actually a problem...” Lekomya muttered, and his friends nodded again. The low-ranking nobles that Eleora had recruited to her faction back then had all been poor but loyal. They knew that they owed their current wealth and power to Veight and Eleora’s generosity.

Lekomya swept his gaze over the table and said, “Lord Veight accomplished so much, then went home without a care in the world, as if to say such feats weren’t even worth remembering. There was no way we could just sit back and take it easy after that.”

“Yeah. No matter how reliable he’d been, he’s a Meraldian general. We couldn’t let him outshine us Rolmund nobles forever.”

“Thinking back on it now, perhaps Lord Veight acted that way precisely to spur us to work harder. He’s always thinking ten steps ahead.”

They were overestimating him, but to the Fourteen Imperial Generals, Veight was basically a god.

“Plus, after seeing how humble he’d been about his own accomplishments, it made it harder for us to ask for our rewards once the battle was over.”

“Tell me about it. We worked so hard, but we couldn’t even bring ourselves to ask for a single village.”

“Yes, but if we’d asked Eleora to make us all counts, it probably would have come back to bite us. Do you know how many nobles end up assassinated by their jealous peers when they rise up the ranks too quickly?” Lekomya said, and everyone nodded in agreement again. “Instead, we followed in his example and tried to be model nobles. Honest, courteous, and humble.”

“Well, seeing as we hadn’t accomplished even a fraction of what he had, we couldn’t exactly act cocky anyway.”

After Veight had left, it was these 14 men who’d supported the Rolmund Empire through a rocky transition period. Their own accomplishments were numerous enough that no one doubted their capabilities. But none of them could find it in them to be proud of what they’d done.

Lord Shawch gave Lekomya a wan smile and said, “And then before we knew it, everyone was calling us the Fourteen Imperial Generals and Originia’s saviors.”

“I won’t deny that we’ve done a lot for Rolmund, but every time someone calls me by that grandiose title, Lord Veight’s smile flashes through my mind.”

“Yeah, me too.” Lord Mottemo said with a self-deprecating chuckle.

“You know, Lord Veight’s legitimately proud of us. He sends me letters from time to time congratulating me on what I’ve done.”

“I keep all the letters he’s sent us locked up in my safe. They’re family heirlooms at this point. How many nobles can claim they’ve gotten a personal letter from *the* Black Werewolf King?”

“He is Meraldia’s hero after all. I imagine a thousand years from now, he’ll be known in history books as the Father of the Commonwealth.”

Despite everyone’s constant sighing, all the generals were smiling.

“That was a fun winter.”

“You can say that again. Though I almost died a dozen times during the rebellion.”

“Us lowly nobles who no one had even heard of got a chance to make our names in a rebellion big enough to go down in history. What more could you ask for?”

“It really was a thrilling time. We were finally given the opportunity to prove our worth through our deeds.” Lekomya scratched his head as he said that. “Though I suppose it’s thanks to Lord Veight that we had that opportunity at all.” His friends nodded, smiling wryly.

Just then, the door to the room opened and Empress Eleora walked in. The nobles got to their feet in unison and bowed to her. She gave them all a casual wave, and they sat back down.

“How many times do I have to tell you there’s no need to stand on ceremony with me in this room?”

“We bow because we want to, Your Majesty,” Lekomya said with a laugh. Eleora sat down at their table, and they turned their chairs to face her.

“How was Lady Friede, Your Majesty?” Lekomya asked her.

“Do you even have to ask? She looks like a defenseless little girl, but she’s sharp as a tack. I have no doubt she’ll accomplish great things in the future.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief at that.

“So exactly like we expected.”

“I have to say, that’s kind of a relief. It would have been stranger and far more worrying if Lord Veight had somehow failed in raising his daughter.”

Eleora nodded in agreement. “Had Friede been a foolish girl, it would have been quite a problem for us.”

“Don’t tell me you would have invaded Meraldia again just over that?” one of the nobles asked, and Eleora shook her head.

“No, nothing so drastic. Meraldia has people from many different cultures living within it. Northern Meraldians, southern Meraldians, and demons all have their own customs and values. Keeping them united isn’t easy.” Eleora closed her eyes and organized her thoughts. “It will take...someone with exceptional skill to keep the various factions in Meraldia from turning against each other.

Their diversity is their strength, but also their weakness.”

She paused to take a deep breath.

“History has shown that often when a great leader dies, the empire they built dies with them. I was worried that if Meraldia’s future leaders were not up to the task of continuing Veight’s work, the nation might fall into civil war.” Eleora opened her eyes and smiled at Lekomya. “Fortunately, it seems we won’t have to worry about that. Friede isn’t the only young Meraldian who shows promise.”

She went on to explain what she’d heard about Shirin and Yuhette.

“Everyone who spoke with members of the Meraldian delegation mentioned how insightful the children were. From what I’ve heard, they’re as knowledgeable and wise as our own academy’s top students. Plus, they have an educational foundation in a wide variety of subjects.”

“Then I suppose we don’t have to worry about the Meraldian Commonwealth falling apart in the future. Meaning Rolmund will benefit greatly from forging a lasting alliance with Meraldia,” Lekomya said happily.

“Precisely. Or so I believe, anyway. What do you all think?”

The other generals exchanged glances, then smiled at Eleora.

“It’s as you say, Your Majesty.”

“Besides, I wouldn’t want to fight any country that has Lord Veight’s help.”

“It would be best if we could forge a lasting peace with our neighbors.”

Eleora returned their smiles. “Splendid. With that settled, all that remains is to eliminate our opposition... The Hunters have found their prey.”

The nobles’ expressions turned grim. They got to their feet, looking far more imposing than would have seemed possible considering how they’d been lounging around a second ago.

“What are your orders, Your Majesty?” they asked in unison.

After her audience with Eleora was over, Friede found herself face to face with her niece, Micha.

“Father interrupted us yesterday, but today you’re free to talk, right?”

“Even if I wasn’t, you’d stick around anyway, wouldn’t you?”

“Yep,” Micha said with a nod, and Friede resigned the thought of getting any rest. After that, Micha talked Friede’s ear off.

“So then, my aunt came up with a way for slaves to become tenant farmers. In other words, a way for them to become free. Farmers need to pay yearly taxes though, and most slaves don’t even seem to want to become tenant farmers.”

“I-I see...”

“Do you think what my aunt did was necessary? I’m not sure myself.”

“Well...”

This was Micha’s true nature. She was a studious girl, and was burning with questions regarding the things she didn’t understand. She also had her own hypotheses, but she liked hearing other people’s reasoning as well. Most of her interest lay in politics, military affairs, and economics. Friede was pretty well-read for her age too, but her specialties were magic and science. She found politics and economics too complicated to be interesting. But while she didn’t fully grasp the scope of Micha’s questions, she was never one to back down from a challenge.

“Hmm...” She closed her eyes and tried to work her way through Micha’s question.

After a while, she opened her eyes and explained the answer she’d come to.

“On the surface, it might look like what she did was pointless, but if you ask me, it was pretty important.”

“Why’s that?” Micha asked, leaning forward.

Friede cocked her head to one side and said, “It’s hard to get motivated to do work someone else is forcing on you, isn’t it? Like, it’s no fun.”

“It’s...no fun?” Micha blinked in surprise. She hadn’t considered it from that angle.

Argh, I need to word this better, or she'll think I'm an idiot, Friede thought, and hurriedly added, "If you're not motivated to do the work you're doing, you won't do a good job, or try as hard. For example, with farmwork, the more effort you put in, the more fertile your fields are. So if you're going to get someone to plow for you, they should be able to reap the benefits of their hard work. That way, they'll be more motivated."

Micha considered that for a few minutes, then replied, "Now that you mention it...you do have a point."

"Right?!"

Phew. I made it out of that without looking dumb. Friede heaved a sigh of relief. Unfortunately, her trials were only just beginning.

"So if farmers become more motivated, we'll be able to get greater yields from the same amount of land. It's one way of solving our food problems," Micha mused.

"Yep, yep."

"But won't that cause the class system to fall apart? Isn't society more stable because slaves stay slaves, nobles stay nobles, and commoners stay commoners?"

"Uhh..."

Friede had been hoping they could move on to a simpler, more girly topic, but Micha continued to grill her about Meraldia's class system, its food culture, and its agricultural techniques. Eventually, Friede couldn't take it anymore.

"C-Can't we do something else? Like, I dunno, get some exercise?"

"Oh, is that what you'd rather do?" Micha asked, a little disappointed. She'd been enjoying her Q&A time with Friede. But then she smiled, got to her feet, and held a hand out to Friede. "If that's what you want, I know just the place for you. Come on, come with me."

"Where are we going?"

Micha led Friede to the palace's parade grounds. The imperial guards used it to train whenever they weren't on duty. There was a shooting range in one

corner of the grounds where people could practice shooting Blast Canes. Friede thought the guards would be surprised to see Micha there, but they just saluted and greeted her like she came here all the time. *She probably does.*

Micha took a Blast Cane from the guardsman on duty at the shooting range and flashed Friede a smile.

“You were carrying a Blast Cane with you when you rode into the capital, weren’t you? You know, that tiny one on your waist?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I took it off when we got to the palace, and I haven’t worn it again since... How do you even know about that?”

“Agk!” Micha gulped and looked away, realizing she said something she shouldn’t have.

Friede brought her face closer to Micha’s and asked, “Did you see me before I got to the palace?”

“N-No, an imperial princess wouldn’t dare sneak out of the castle to catch a glimpse of the delegation from Meraldia...”

Friede didn’t even need to sniff Micha’s scent to know she was lying. She looked into Micha’s eyes for a few seconds, then laughed to herself.

“Well, it’s fine, I don’t mind. Anyway, those are the targets we’re going to be shooting, right?”

“Yes. Feel free to aim for any of them. Those over there are half a bowshot away, the standard distance from which Rolmund infantry fires their first volley. And the ones way over there are for heavy infantry with bigger guns.”

The targets were human-shaped, but their right sides were cut off. Usually, that was the section of the body protected by a tower shield, which in a real battle hitting that would basically be the same as a miss.

Micha hefted her Blast Cane and chanted a small incantation to pour mana into it. “I’m not a mage, but I’ve learned how to shoot. Watch.”

She raised the weapon to her shoulder and took aim with practiced movements. She took a deep breath to steady herself, then pulled the trigger. A ball of light shot out, hitting the target square in the chest. Archers tried to

avoid the chest since it was the most heavily armored part of a soldier, but plate mail barely even slowed down a bullet from a Blast Cane. For a gunman, the torso was the best spot to aim for, since it was the largest target on a human body, and the one that moved the least.

Micha turned her back to the destroyed target and smiled at Friede. “What do you think?”

“Wow, nice shot!” Friede exclaimed, clapping. She truly was impressed by Micha’s impeccable aim. “I’m awful at actually hitting my targets, so I envy your steady aim.”

“Hehe, I actually passed the same exam imperial snipers have to take. But I only scored high enough to be fourth class.”

Friede didn’t know how hard that exam was, but she figured it had to be pretty tough if Micha only scored high enough to be fourth class.

Micha handed her cane to Friede and said, “Rolmund’s Blast Canes are top of the line, and they’re pretty easy to use. You wanna give it a shot?”

“Ah, sure.” Friede gingerly took the cane, a worried look flitting across her face. “I hope I don’t break it...” she muttered.

“It’s military-grade, you know? A weapon designed for war won’t break that easily. It can handle a pretty large mana capacity too,” Micha said with a reassuring smile, but Friede didn’t look reassured.

“If you say so... Sorry in advance if I break it.”

“On the off chance that you do, don’t worry. I’m sure one of our technicians will be able to fix it.”

“I see. All right, I’ll give it a shot.”

Relieved, Friede raised the cane and took aim.

“Hmm...” She wasn’t confident she could hit a target that far out. Tasks that required precision were not her forte. *Oh, I know what I can do.*

The Blast Cane seemed to have a pretty large mana capacity, and Rolmund was the initial birthplace of the Meraldian Blast Rifle.

Careful to keep the flow of mana under control, Friede released the mana she had stored up. With all the magic training she'd had, controlling her mana was like second nature to her now. Once she'd put enough into the cane, she took aim as best she could and fired. A booming explosion of light filled the parade ground, and the nearby buildings shook.

"Aaaah!" Micha's scream was swallowed up by the sound of the explosion.

"What happened?!" one of the guards shouted.

"Protect the princess!"

Heedless of the danger to their own lives, the imperial guards ran towards Micha. Meanwhile, Friede looked utterly dejected.

"The Blast Ri—I mean the Blast Cane broke. No...I broke it." She looked down at the remnants of the Blast Cane lying on the floor. The barrel was so melted and twisted that it looked unrecognizable. Smoke wafted up from the end of the muzzle. Micha, who'd been knocked onto her butt, stared at it in shock. When the guards reached her, they did too.

"I-It broke?!"

"No, I'm the one who broke it. I'm sorry. I got carried away and put 20 kites of mana into it..."

Rolmund didn't use kites as a unit of measurement though, so no one understood what Friede meant. Still shocked, Micha and the guards turned to see what had happened to the target Friede had aimed at. All of the targets in the shooting range had been blasted to pieces. Shards of wood were embedded deep in the mud wall that protected the rest of the parade ground from stray bullets out of the shooting range.

"Wha..."

"She even destroyed the targets set up for the snipers..." the guard captain muttered, and Friede bowed her head in apology.

"I-I'm terribly sorry. Should I take this to the technician to get it—"

"You think that can be fixed?!" Micha shouted, pointing to the melted husk of the Blast Cane.

Micha had known Friede wasn't a typical girl before Friede had even stepped foot into the capital. After all, she was the daughter of the legendary Astral Fencer. Micha had heard enough stories of Veight's heroics from her aunt that she knew Friede would be special as well. But she hadn't realized just how special Friede would be.

Why does she have so much mana? Is it because she carries the blood of a werewolf? It wasn't just her mana capacity either; Friede had an unbelievable amount of stamina as well. She's on a totally different level from us humans. Is there anyone in the Empire who could beat her in a head-to-head fight?

One thing Micha had begun to notice, though, was that it wasn't Friede's strength that made her amazing. It was the fact that she didn't boast about said strength. Furthermore, she didn't try to hide her weaknesses either. Friede made it clear to Micha that politics and economics weren't her strong suit, but she was still willing to engage in those discussions.

If it was me, I would have avoided those topics like the plague. Friede's very...accepting, I guess. She takes things as they come. But personally, I wouldn't be relaxed enough to do that if I was out in a foreign land. I'd be worried about maintaining my image and acting dignified as befitting a princess. I wouldn't be able to act naturally like Friede does. She doesn't care about her image at all, but it's not like she's looking down on people who do. Plus, she freely admits when she doesn't know something, and she does her best to learn more about it. She's...radiant, in a way.

Is this what a real leader looks like? Then again, she also does some pretty silly things from time to time. Like right now, she's bowing her head to the Imperial Guard despite them being commoners, and she's a princess. Of course, it's important for nobles to apologize to commoners when they do something wrong, but you have to go about it the proper way. Then again, it wouldn't feel right to see Friede giving a formal noble's apology with a casual smile. Yeah, she's definitely real weird. I don't know how I should act around her.

At around the same time, far to the south in the demon capital Rynheit, one man was preparing for a long journey.

“And with that, the werewolves are authorized to mobilize,” I said, leaning forward over my bedside table and signing the memo. “Vodd and his friends are too old to go on extended expeditions, so I’ll just send the younger men. Ten squads should be enough, anyway.”

I crawled back into my bed, my friends’ faces flitting through my mind. “Everyone’s gotten on in age now,” I muttered, and Airia sat up to give me a reproachful look.

“You say that like you haven’t aged a bit. We’ve both gotten older too, you know?”

“Well, I have for sure. I died pretty early on in my past life, so I guess I’ve actually lived longer in this one now.”

And if you combine the two lives, I’m basically a grandpa.

“But you still look as young as you did on the day I burst through your window,” I said.

Airia blushed and gave me an embarrassed smile. “It only looks that way to you because our room is dark. My skin isn’t as supple as it used to be. Whenever I look at Friede I’m reminded of how old I’ve gotten.”

“You always say that, but I honestly can’t see any difference...”

That wasn’t flattery; I really couldn’t tell that she’d aged.

“Maybe it’s because of all the mana I possess,” she mused.

“Could be,” I said, sitting up as well. “We still don’t fully understand how mana affects people, but we do know it can prolong life spans. Stored mana can erase fatigue and heal illnesses as well.”

The demon army was actively conducting a variety of mana-related experiments on monsters to try and learn more. To a commoner, the experiments probably sounded inhumane—the kind of stereotypical thing villainous demons would do—but they were necessary for the advancement of science. Fortunately, there was a large supply of monsters in the demon forest that we could capture.

I stroked Airia’s cheek, then my own. “It’s true that skin sags with age, but

neither of us look as old as we really are. My guess is our mana is keeping us young. It's the same way with monsters. The more mana a monster has, the longer its natural lifespan."

Suddenly, I realized I'd gotten off-track from what I'd originally been trying to say. I lay back down and muttered, "Anyway, umm...my point is you're still beautiful. Extremely beautiful."

"Thanks," Airia said with a wry smile. *I hope this means I've matured a little compared to before.*

She snuggled up close to me, and we looked up at the ceiling together.

After a few seconds, Airia muttered, "You'll be going again, won't you?"

"It's a top secret mission this time, and it's imperative I return as soon as possible. If I make it back after the diplomatic delegation, Friede'll figure out what I've done."

"If you're going all the way to Rolmund anyway, why not meet her?" Airia gave me a confused look. "You haven't seen Eleora or your other friends in Rolmund in a long time either."

"It'd be nice to tour Rolmund's restaurants with Friede, but I can't. She's doing her best to become independent. It'd ruin everything if I showed up in the middle of her trip."

Eventually, Friede would have to leave home and forge her own path in life. In this world, you were considered an adult in your teens, so for her, that time might come sooner than I would like. The best thing I could do was let her grow on her own so she'd be ready to face the challenges of independence.

"I do want to see whether or not North Rolmund's recovered, but eventually I'll have to go for an official visit anyway, so I'll be able to check then."

"I see... I suppose that's fair. I'll keep your mission a secret from Friede then."

"That's for the best, yeah. There's no need for a mere student to know about the council's secret dealings."

Sometimes keeping my public and private life separate ended up proving difficult, but I knew I needed to do it or the Commonwealth Council would end

up going the way of the old Senate.

“Still, won’t it be lonely? You won’t ever be able to tell Friede that you were protecting her from the shadows.”

“It’s better if she doesn’t know,” I replied, waving away Airia’s concerns. “Parents are like a stepping stool for their children. They need to be sturdy and steadfast, so the kids don’t fall. But eventually, they have to leave the picture, so their kids can reach new heights all on their own.”

You couldn’t take a stepping stool with you everywhere. While it was important to rely on one at the start, eventually you had to learn to get where you wanted to go without one.

“My job is to leave a solid foundation for Friede to jump off of. But she should keep her gaze focused ahead, instead of at her feet.”

“That’s such a *you* thing to say,” Airia said with a smile.

Besides, this is a mission for the council, not for Friede, I thought. Of course, I’d been given free rein in choosing the personnel for the mission, so I was still mixing private and public affairs a little bit.

“If Friede ever becomes a mother, she’ll naturally come to realize all the things we did for her. It was only after I became a parent that I understood how much my mom went through to raise me,” I said.

“That’s certainly true. I feel like I understand my father...and even my mother a little more now that I’m one myself.”

It’s sad how by the time you want to repay your parents for everything they’ve done for you, a lot of the time they’re already gone.

“Hopefully, Friede grows up quickly so I can retire soon. I really want to spend the rest of my days studying the ecology of the demon forest, and exploring the ruins of the old dynasty. Oh, and I want to help Master out with her magic research.”

Airia gave me a pointed look and asked, “Do you really think you’ll be able to retire that easily?”

“I guess not, huh?”

“You’re not getting away from the Demon Lord just like that.”

What a scary Demon Lord. It hadn’t even been 20 years since the start of the Meraldian Commonwealth. Many problems instigated by the old regime still remained. It would probably take another 20 years before the nation was stable enough for me to retire. I’d need to live for quite a long time if I didn’t want all the work I’d put in to go to waste. *Screw it, guess I’m living to 100 after all.*

We chatted for a bit longer, but eventually the conversation petered out.

“If we were responsible adults, we would go to sleep now, but...” I said with a smile, and Airia blushed. My smile grew wider. “Wow, I don’t even have to finish my sentence.”

Airia leaned her head against my chest and murmured, “I can easily tell what you’re thinking by the way you smell.”

“Since when did you become a werewolf?”

“Since I married one.”

She blew out the lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

The next morning, I left Rynheit with 40 of my werewolves. We reached Krauhen in a few days, and took the secret tunnel north that led to Rolmund. The tunnel exited out into Fort Novesk, where a slew of familiar faces greeted me.

“Ya sure got handsome in the ten years since I last saw you,” Volka, the leader of Rolmund’s werewolves, said with a grin on her wrinkled face.

“I didn’t think you’d still be alive, Volka.”

“Bah, I won’t kick the bucket that easily. Can’t let these young’uns outdo me just yet.”

At your age, I really think you’d be better off retired... Sadly, we didn’t have time to catch up, as this mission was time-sensitive, and we had plans to discuss.

“No matter how many times we crush ’em, more idiots keep popping up.”

“They keep trying because they believe they actually have a chance of succeeding. Either their intel or their analysis is wrong, but either way, they’re sorely mistaken.”

“And that’s why I said they’re a lot of idiots.”

“Agreed.”

Rolmund’s werewolves had become Eleora’s personal secret service, and over the past 10 years, they’d grown into one of the world’s best spy forces. I’d read the reports they’d sent over for the current operation, and their efficacy scared even me. If I had to fight them again, I wasn’t sure I could win.

“I came here to help you guys with your hunt, but from the looks of it, these guys would have been dead meat without me.”

Volka and her men had already gathered more than enough information and drafted a meticulous plan. All that was left for us to do was help carry it out. In the previous wars I’d fought, I’d only come out ahead because my intelligence had always been superior to my foe’s. But at this point, it was safe to say Rolmund’s intelligence service was as skilled as Meraldia’s, if not more. Any conflict between our two nations would be pretty evenly matched.

Seeing my expression, Volka grinned. “Nice to know even the fabled Black Werewolf King thinks we’re doing a good job. Still, it’d be nice to have your help grilling this ‘dead meat.’”

“Got it. I’ll char them good for you.”

It’s been a long time since I last went on a hunt. I should take it slowly, just in case.

A group of soldiers of unknown affiliation were camped out in the southern forests of West Rolmund, in Kastoniev territory.

“Has the delegation arrived?” one of the soldiers asked. Judging by how the other soldier saluted, he was of higher rank.

“No words from our scouts yet, sir.”

A few of the more heavily armed soldiers exchanged glances.

“That’s odd. According to our intel, they should be passing through here

today.”

“The sun’s going to set soon. If they were coming today, they would have passed through here a long time ago.”

“Did they slip past us somehow?”

“They might just be spending an extra night at Fort Novesk. Remember, our target is a civilian carriage. I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s not moving on an exact schedule.”

Though these men bore no insignias or crests that could identify them, it was obvious by their expensive plate mail that they were nobles. A short distance away, 100 men with Blast Canes waited at the ready in the dim evening glow. There wasn’t a single campfire despite the chill.

“It’s dangerous to remain any longer. There’s no telling when a lumberjack or a huntsman might pass through here. It’s only a matter of time before Lord Kastoniev learns of our location.”

“No risk is too great for a mission this important. If we can assassinate the Meraldian delegation, it’ll be a huge blow to Eleora’s reputation. Lord Kastoniev will be held responsible as well, since the assassination will have happened on his territory.” The commanding officer’s expression was grim. “Besides, we can’t turn back now. We have express orders to kill at least one member of the delegation.”

“We could kill a dozen of them if any of them actually showed up...”

“Yes, these Blast Canes can easily make short work of a few carriages. Don’t forget how much time and effort it took to procure these tools, and men skilled enough to use them.”

“I know. But if our target doesn’t appear, no amount of snipers can help us.”

An uneasy silence fell over the camp, and just as full night fell, a scout came running over.

“They’re here! I saw a carriage flying Meraldia’s flag!”

“Finally.”

The soldiers breathed a collective sigh of relief. They were so eager to be out

of here that they forgot to ask the scout for further details.

“Gunners, at the ready!”

The gunmen hurriedly formed into rows, and began marching towards the highway in formation. A row of carriages rolled down the highway, lamps hanging from their wagons. The Meraldian Commonwealth’s flag fluttered in the cold breeze on all of them.

“Half-circle formation!” the commander called out, and the gunmen fanned out to the left and right, hiding behind trees or in bushes.

“The lead carriage is your primary target. The one at the end of the train is your secondary target. We must ensure they can’t flee in either direction.”

“Should we aim for the horses?”

“With wagons that big, it’s easier to aim for the carriages themselves. As long as you shoot the wheels, the horses won’t be able to pull them away.”

The commander waited until the carriages were in range, then shouted, “Fire!”

Countless bullets of light shot through the night. There were so many of them, it looked like it was high noon in that short section of the highway. They slammed into the carriages with explosive force, shattering the wooden frames and wheels. Panicking, the horses and the coachmen tried to run.

“Keep shooting! Don’t let up!”

“Are you sure? Shouldn’t we at least confirm who we’ve killed before—”

“It doesn’t matter who we got. So long as these carriages are flying Meraldia’s flag, anyone dead inside them is worth something to us. Ignore the stragglers, we don’t have much time.”

Before long, all the carriages had been reduced to smoldering piles of wood, and almost all the horses had been slain. It looked like a group of giants had trampled over the travelers.

“Cease fire!” the commander shouted, and the deluge of bullets stopped.

The camouflaged nobles nodded to each other. The stench of charred wood

and fresh blood filled the air.

“A perfect rout.”

“I suppose we should at least inspect the bodies before retrieving them.”

Just then, one of the soldiers shouted, “C-Captain! There’s someone in there who’s still alive!”

“What?!”

The nobles turned around, staring in disbelief at the wreckage. A single man was standing among the burning piles of wood. He looked completely unhurt. Though he was alone and looked unarmed, the nobles didn’t hesitate.

“Kill him,” the commander ordered, and a volley of bullets hurtled towards the man.

That amount of firepower was overkill for a single human. But as the bullets neared the man, they blinked out of existence instead of exploding. He stepped out of the barrage unharmed.

“Wh-What the...”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but keep shooting!”

Upon discovering bullets didn’t work, the logical thing to do would be to order the knights to draw their swords and engage, but the commander’s instincts told him getting close to that man would be a mistake.

“Call the cavalry over!”

A ripple of fear ran through the soldiers, but they continued shooting as ordered. This time, a dozen or so actually connected, but the man brushed them off like they were nothing.

“Damned terrorists,” he growled in an intimidating voice. Before anyone could reply, he transformed.

“What is that?!”

“A-A werewolf?!”

The man had turned into a large black werewolf, and was now rushing towards the line of gunmen. In an angry voice, he howled, “If you’re so eager to

kill others, then you have no right to complain about someone killing you!”

“Hey, don’t stop! Keep shooting!”

The gunmen dumped all of their remaining mana into their rifles and fired. The bullets swirled around the werewolf in a whirlwind of light before being absorbed into him. None of them so much as singed his fur.

“Our Blast Canes aren’t working?!”

“Retreat! What’s taking our cavalry so long?!”

Before the commander could take a single step, the werewolf bared his fangs and let out an explosive howl. A pure shock wave of sound tore through the soldiers.

“Ngh?!”

The soldiers cowered in fear, but then a second later they collapsed to the ground, blood pouring from their eyes and noses.

“Wha—” the commander muttered, unaware that the soldiers around him were dying in droves.

He himself had only barely survived the sound shock wave, and he crawled across the ground, trying to reach safety. The howl had blinded him somehow, and he didn’t know which direction his allies were in. *Where did that monster go?* Just as he thought that, he heard footsteps approaching him. A wolf’s footsteps. He steeled himself for death, but then the earth began to rumble. *The cavalry’s here!* he thought, squeezing out the last of his strength to try and reach them. Still blind, he waved at what he believed was his cavalry, and died.

“We’ve taken care of the cavalry. That should be all of them, Lord Veight,” one of the young werewolves from Volka’s pack said as he sliced through the rebel commander’s throat.

I canceled my transformation and looked around. Though I felt bad about the slaughter, these men were terrorists who’d been planning on attacking Meraldia’s diplomatic delegation. Even if I’d captured them alive, Eleora would have just ordered them executed.

My werewolves started congregating around me. They’d been keeping an eye

on the surroundings to make sure no innocents got wrapped up in the fight, or saw anything they weren't supposed to. A few of them had also served as the carriage drivers. They shook their heads as they looked around at the wreckage and the corpses.

"Blegh, what a mess."

"Who blew up that carriage? Was it the boss?"

"Nah, the wood's all burnt, so it was probably the Blast Canes. Can't believe you got out of that without a scratch on you, Veight."

I mean, those things can't hurt me, be it a Rolmund or Meraldian one. I also had used arrow-deflecting magic, so I was pretty well outfitted against ranged attacks.

Volka sauntered over to me, a group of young apprentices trailing behind her.

"The hell happened? Did you use magic or something to kill 'em?"

I shook my head and replied, "A werewolf's howl originally had the power to kill. I just enhanced it with a bit of extra mana."

Werewolf howls were like debuffs that just happened to be potentially fatal. And I'd been honing my Soul Shaker for decades now. Of course, to get Soul Shaker to this level, you needed to study both necromancy and strengthening magic. You also needed a comprehensive understanding of human biology, so you could tune your howl to a wavelength that was fatal to human ears. Basically, this was a skill only I could use. And even if I could explain the underlying principles to someone else, they wouldn't be able to truly master it. At best, I'd be able to write a paper describing the theory behind it.

Actually, I guess a half-werewolf like Friede might be able to learn this skill...though I don't think I'd want to teach it to her. I put that out of my mind for now and focused on the problem at hand.

"All right, let's bury the bodies," I said, and Volka shrugged.

"Do they even deserve a burial? They tried to kill your daughter and comrades—in an underhanded ambush, no less. Scum like these should be fed to the buzzards."

She had a point. Nonetheless, I replied, “Corpses can’t cause anyone any harm. Plus, I don’t want to leave them out here for someone to discover. It’ll just cause problems for Lord Kastoniev.”

Rolmundians were superstitious, so they might start thinking his lands were cursed or something. Just then, a human messenger galloped over to us on horseback.

“Lord Veight, Lady Volka, I come bearing a report! Her Majesty Eleora has begun marching on the estates of the traitors Count Olfsei and Baron Banya!”

Volka chuckled when she heard that. “Looks like we’ve won. That was easier than hunting a boar.”

To werewolves, boars were considered elementary prey, but the saying probably sounded weirder to humans, since boars were an actual threat to them.

“I can’t believe there are still nobles who think they can beat Eleora.”

“They’ve spent so much time lording over their tiny domains that they misjudge their strength. Rolmund’s been at peace for so long they’ve forgotten how dangerous the empress is.”

You call putting down rebellions every few years “at peace”? This is why Rolmund’s such a scary country.

“But hey, more rebels is a good thing for us since it means Eleora can add more land to her family’s holdings,” Volka added.

There were so many nobles in Rolmund that Eleora actually preferred some of them rebelling against her on occasion so she could cull their numbers. *I see even under her rule this empire’s as violent as always.*

“Anyway, with this, Meraldia’s delegation should be safe enough. I’ll be counting on you to guard them when they start making their way back, Volka.”

“You have my word. But you sure you wanna go home so soon? Not even gonna meet with Eleora?”

“I’d like to, but I don’t want anyone to find out that I’m in Rolmund,” I replied. *Especially not my daughter.* “I’ll just go back and return to my paperwork like a

boring ol' vice-commander."

"Yeah, 'boring,'" Volka said with a sardonic smile. "Well, I guess our lives have gotten pretty boring since the rebellion too. It's nice finally being able to relax."

As she turned to leave, one of the young boys standing behind Volka spoke up. "U-Umm, Commander General Veight, sir!"

"I'm not actually a general, you know? My nicknames have a lot of titles attached to them, that's all."

"M-M-M-My apologies, Lord Councilor Veight?!"

"That makes me sound way too important. You can just call me Veight, honestly."

The young boy nodded enthusiastically and said, "Umm, my name is Joshua! Great-grandmother has told me the stories of your battles in Rolmund!"

Wait, this kid is Volka's great-grandson?

"I want to be the world's strongest werewolf, just like you! Please make me your disciple! I'll do my best to learn magic and fighting and everything else!"

"Whoa, hold your horses. You're part of Rolmund's werewolf pack, aren't you? That makes you one of Eleora's men." It'd be a diplomatic problem if I took him home with me.

Volka snickered and said, "He's still an apprentice, so he hasn't formally joined the squad that reports to Eleora. Technically, he's a civie. He's been pining for Meraldia since he learned how to talk."

"Quit grinning and help me out here. Your great-grandson's going to run off to Meraldia if you don't do something."

"It's high time he left the nest anyway. He's free to choose which pack he wants to run with." Volka really didn't seem to care where her great-grandson went. She added, "There's a few other young'uns who want to go train in Meraldia. Mind taking them too? You can think of it as part of our cultural exchange with you guys."

"Mrrrgh..." I grunted. *When you put it like that, I can't really argue back.*

Joshua looked me in the eyes and raised a fist into the air. “I want to be a legendary hero so I can protect great-grandma when she gets too old to fight!”

“Mrrrrrrrrgh.”

Dammit, what now? I could tell Volka really wanted me to take these kids in. *You’re too soft on your great-grandkids, you know that?* Unfortunately, I didn’t have the time to argue her down, but maybe I could scare her great-grandson off.

“Just so you know...my training’s going to be tough.”

“That’s fine!”

“You won’t have your friends and family to rely on in a foreign land. Are you still sure you want to come?”

“Absolutely! Great-grandma said that’ll help make me stronger!”

Crap, you’re hell-bent on sending them off to learn in Meraldia, aren’t you?
Fine. You win.

“All right. But you’re going to have to learn academic subjects and magic on top of learning how to fight.”

“Of course, Master!”

Oh god, the time’s finally come where people are calling me “Master.” I’m not sure I’m ready for this. And so, I headed back to Meraldia with one extra werewolf in tow. *It feels like I’ve become a full-time teacher since I helped bring peace to Meraldia...*

“I understand how significant it is that I can meet with you again here in Rolmund, which used to hunt down all demons who entered its borders,” Kurtz said, lowering himself into a sofa. “However, I am neither a politician nor a priest, so I cannot say I personally am terribly moved. I’m afraid I’m an engineer and a scholar through and through.”

Eleora smiled at him and replied, “The way you speak reminds me so much of my old self. It’s embarrassing.”

“I must admit, you have become a lot more...human since I last saw you, Your Majesty,” Kurtz said bluntly.

“Ahahaha.” Eleora’s laughter echoed through the tiny parlor. She nodded and said, “It wasn’t easy. I used to be an ignorant girl who only cared about theories and hypotheses. But I soon learned you couldn’t navigate the intricate landscape of human society with just logic and academic knowledge.”

“Humans are very illogical creatures, it’s true. Or rather, it would be more apt to say that they often let their emotions rule them.”

“Indeed. But it’s pointless to pontificate on whether that aspect of our nature is good or bad. For better or worse, I am human, and I need to live in human society.”

When she’d been Veight’s captive, Eleora had gotten to know Kurtz and the other engineers in the demon army. She’d found their logical nature to her liking, and had become good friends with all of them. Which was why she could speak so frankly with Kurtz despite seeing him for the first time in a decade.

Curious, Kurtz asked, “So now that you’ve learned to navigate the ‘intricate landscape of human society,’ how do you find it?”

“Honestly, dealing with other people all the time is tiring. But it’s also a lot of fun.” Smiling, Eleora took a sip of her black tea. “Still, I think I’d prefer to be born a dragonkin in my next life. A life dedicated to research in the demon army sounds perfect for someone like me.”

“If you do get reincarnated as a dragonkin, I’ll be sure to look after your tutelage. It will be an honor to train you into a master academic, as you are in this life.”

Kurtz nodded solemnly, and it was hard to tell if he was joking or not. Eleora still had trouble reading dragonkin expressions. *I know Veight said they could be quite expressive once you learned to spot the subtle changes in their expression, but he spent a lot more time with them than I have...*

“By the way, Sir Kurtz, I think I can hazard a guess, but why did you ask for a private audience?”

“Feel free to hazard that guess.”

“It’s related to the Doneiks family, isn’t it? I know how kindhearted your Black Werewolf King is. He probably wanted you to ask for Woroy and Ryuunie’s

sakes.”

Kurtz nodded. “Indeed, Your Majesty.”

“I’ll get this out of the way first, but I’m afraid I cannot rescind their exile. It was only by exiling them that I could get their crime of rebellion forgiven. Not even the empress has the authority to overturn the rule of law.”

“I am aware,” Kurtz replied with a nod. “However, the two of them are influential members of Meraldia’s government now. It’s possible they may have to travel to Rolmund for official business.”

“I figured you’d say that,” Eleora said with an impish grin. “It’s true that if they were to come as official Meraldian delegates, I wouldn’t be able to turn them away. If, during their visit, they said they would like to see North Rolmund, I would have to acquiesce, of course. It wouldn’t do to refuse a request from a Meraldian diplomat.”

In truth, Eleora would be well within her rights to refuse them, but she was fond of Ryuunie and Woroy. Though they’d fought on opposite sides during the rebellion, they were still her relatives. Over ten years had passed since the Doneiks Rebellion too, so she didn’t see the problem in making a few concessions for them.

“The imperial family has confiscated all of the Doneiks family’s assets and land, which means it is up to my discretion whether or not a Meraldian diplomat is allowed to visit the region, or perhaps buy some property there.”

“That’s very generous of you, Your Majesty.”

“I’m not doing this out of generosity, I’m doing this because it’s one of the few ways I can pay Veight back.”

Dragonkin were wise, but they didn’t understand the subtleties of human society.

Kurtz adjusted his glasses and nodded. “Still, thank you. I’m sure Veight will be glad to hear the good news.”

“I owe Veight a massive debt. And it’s one I can’t repay in public because it will bring some unfortunate truths to light. So instead, I’m repaying it bit by bit

under the table by doing things like this.” Eleora took another sip of tea. “Veight has already discovered why North Rolmund’s agricultural production was declining year after year. I’m a novice when it comes to agricultural science, so I never would have guessed that the water quality of the rivers would affect the soil.”

“It certainly was a brilliant deduction. I’ve heard that the nutrients deposited by the Mejire River are what make the southern nation of Kuwol so fertile as well. It seems rivers play an even bigger part in agriculture than we realized.”

“Hmm, fascinating. I wish I could leave the throne behind and go to Kuwol to investigate.” Eleora was half-joking, but still. “The problem is that while the late Lord Doneiks’s waterworks project impacted river quality, it also helped prevent flooding in much of the region. If we return the river to its original flow path, the villages will flood once more.”

“It sounds like a rather difficult situation.”

“Indeed. For now, the empire has been providing fertilizer to North Rolmund free of charge to help keep its annual yields steady.”

Eleora was currently trying to find a way to keep the river in North Rolmund from flooding while allowing it to go down its original route, but it was a massive engineering project that would take a few years to complete.

“We’ve also started planting knight lilies everywhere people are tilling soil. Not only do they improve soil fertility, but we know that if they flower blue in spring, the land is safe to plant on.”

“I see, so you’re using them as a litmus test.”

“That’s another idea we got from Veight. They’re so ubiquitous now that farmers have taken to calling Knight Lilies the ‘knights of the field.’ If possible, I’d like it if you could send a team of agricultural inspectors to see if there are any other improvements we can make. It won’t do if the team is comprised solely of Meraldians, so be sure to include a few members who *know North Rolmund quite well.*”

That was Eleora’s way of unofficially inviting Ryuunie and Woroy back to Rolmund. Kurtz nodded and replied, “Thank you for the invitation. Lord Woroy

and Ryuunie will be most overjoyed.”

“Oh, you don’t call him ‘Lord Ryuunie’?”

“Right now he is my pupil. It would be strange for me to refer to him as ‘Lord Ryuunie.’ But of course, as his teacher, it’s only natural to do what I can for him.”

“Naturally. Remember, you are neither a politician nor a diplomat, and this is not a formal negotiation between Meraldia and Rolmund. We’re simply discussing private affairs that have no bearing whatsoever on international politics.”

“Correct. And because this is just a private discussion, had you refused my request, it would have had no negative impact on diplomatic relations between our countries.”

“So this was all part of Veight’s calculations, huh?”

“He does his best to give everyone as much freedom as possible. But he’s also one of Ryuunie’s teachers, so I’m sure he would like it if his pupil could return home.”

Eleora smiled at that. “Nice to know Ryuunie’s well-loved in Meraldia as well.”

“Absolutely. Everyone has nothing but praise for him.”

“I see. As far as the imperial family is concerned, his father is seen as a rebel who nearly toppled the Empire, but it’s good to know he still taught his son well.”

Trust in the Doneiks family still ran deep in North Rolmund, but even the family’s staunchest defenders didn’t think kindly of the late Prince Ivan. His rebellion had destroyed the Doneiks family and its supporters after all. Fortunately, it seemed Ryuunie had inherited his father’s will, and was flourishing in Meraldia.

“I can only hope my niece has even an ounce of his wisdom...” Eleora muttered.

“Do you have no intention of marrying, then?”

Another human would have hesitated to ask something so personal, but

dragonkin were known for their bluntness. Questions were simply questions, nothing more. There was no judgment or cultural baggage or mind games attached; they simply asked things out of curiosity.

Eleora scratched her head awkwardly and said, “I’m not terribly interested in being a wife—or a mother, for that matter. Being empress is taxing enough as it is, and I have no intention of delegating my responsibilities to others. I wouldn’t be able to handle the extra effort family life would require.”

“I see. As a fellow bachelor, I can understand that.”

“Besides, if I died in childbirth, the Empire would fall into chaos. Getting pregnant is just too much of a risk.”

“There was quite a stir when our Demon Lord had complications with her birth, so I can’t say your fears are unfounded.”

“Fortunately for her, she had the greatest vice-commander in the world by her side. I’m envious.” Eleora rested her chin on her hands and pouted.

After a brief silence, Kurtz cocked his head and asked, “Was that last question rude? I’ve been trying to learn more about human customs.”

“Definitely. I wouldn’t recommend asking anyone else that. And since you had the gall to ask, I guess I’ll send that question right back at you. Why aren’t *you* married, Kurtz?”

“Because I can already tell that I’d neglect my wife and kids to focus on my research. Just like you, family life isn’t for me.”

The two of them fell silent again, but it was a comfortable silence.

After a while, Eleora said, “We’re probably better off being a doting aunt and uncle to our nieces and nephews, huh?”

“Now those are words of wisdom.”

“Hahahahaha.” Eleora laughed heartily, while Kurtz’s lips curled up almost imperceptibly. But for a dragonkin, that was as good as raucous laughter.

Just then, a loud explosion rocked the palace.

“Hm?” Kurtz muttered.

“That explosion was laced with mana,” Eleora said in a surprised voice.

“So it was.”

The two of them went over to the window and looked down at the courtyard. Micha and Friede were sitting on the ground, a single Blast Cane in their hands. The two girls stared at it dumbfounded for a second before coming to their senses and wildly looking around. They then looked up and saw Eleora and Kurtz.

“Oh, hello, auntie! Sorry, this was my fault! I noticed something wrong with Friede’s shooting posture at the range, so I was trying to help her fix it!”

“No, it’s my fault! I ended up accidentally channeling too much mana again!”

Both girls tried to cover for each other, and then got mad when the other did it.

“You stay quiet, Friede! This is *my* house, so we’ll get off lighter if we make it my fault!”

“But that’s wrong, Micha! A future empress shouldn’t be lying to people!”

“Sometimes a leader has to do the wrong thing for the right reasons!”

“If not even the empress is fair and forthright, how will the people trust any of their leaders?!”

Kurtz stared calmly down at the two girls.

“I see Lady Micha has been teaching our Friede how to shoot.”

“Yep. And it looks like Micha forgot to switch on the safety, and Friede instinctively poured too much mana into the rifle.”

A group of imperial guards silently formed around Eleora, on alert because of the explosion. Eleora turned to them and said, “That was almost certainly a Blast Cane misfire. See if Micha and Friede are injured, and if they aren’t, please bring the two of them here. I’m going to give them a nice long lecture on weapon safety.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Once they were gone, Eleora sighed. “They’re almost adults, so I wish they’d act with a bit more prudence. I guess when it comes to childcare specifically, the Eleora-Veight alliance still pales in comparison to the Doneiks forces.”

“Agreed. When we return home, I will need to assign Friede supplementary lessons,” Kurtz said with a nod, sighing to himself. “She takes after her father in both the good and the bad.”

“Phew. I thought that was going to go a lot worse,” Micha said, and she and Friede both let out sighs of relief.

“It’s not every day you get scolded by the empress of a neighboring country,” Friede said with a weak smile.

“It shouldn’t happen any day, let alone every day,” Micha replied in a tired voice, but then a second later her expression brightened up. “You know, you got really lucky. Normally, your whole family would be executed for a stunt like that.”

“Really? I guess we should be thanking my luck then.”

“Seriously?”

“I’m kidding.”

The two girls meticulously checked over the safeties of their armaments as they walked through the backyard.

“But you know, Micha...”

“What?”

“During that lecture, Her Majesty taught us how to properly maintain our weapons and aim and all that, right?”

“Yeah. It felt like her lecture went on for hours...”

“In that case, wasn’t this a good thing? I mean, she’s the inventor of the Blast Cane, right? So we got a personal lesson on how to use them from their inventor.” Smiling, Friede patted the pistol holstered at her hip. “Unlike arrows, the light bullets don’t fall from gravity, so it’s important to always aim a little upwards when firing in an open space. When you think about it, that’s obvious, but Her Majesty must have been really smart to figure it out on her own.”

“I suppose... I never imagined the safety feature was this important either. I always thought shooting accurately was all that mattered.”

The two of them were still children, so they hadn't realized the value of the safety feature. But thanks to Eleora's lecture, they had a better understanding of their weapons now.

“Hey, Micha, what do you wanna do now? Won't we get yelled at if we keep wandering around the palace?”

“Fear not. Having accidentally put my guest in an uncomfortable spot, it's the host's duty to make up for it, and I know just the thing.”

Micha smiled confidently, climbing up the walls of the palace and slipping through the fence meant to keep people from falling off.

“See, if you're small enough, you can fit through the bars here. I'll give you a tour of the whole capital city.”

“But we'll get scolded again if we leave!” Friede said in protest, but she still jumped up and followed after Micha.

“Ehehehe, I don't even care if they scold us anymore... Rolmund's sweets are the best.”

“See, what did I tell you?”

Micha had taken Friede on a tour around all of Originia's best sweets shops. They were all famous enough that their goods were in high demand within the palace as well.

“You can't eat them while they're fresh in the palace. Well, sometimes the pastry chefs get called in to bake for the nobles or the empress personally, but usually you can't get them fresh.”

Micha split a baumkuchen with Friede, who gobbled it down with gusto.

“But Micha—err, I mean Misia, is it really okay to go out in the city like this?”

“Of course it's fine. I'm Misia the apprentice maid, it makes sense that I'd go out on errands.”

“Dressed like that?”

Micha’s dress was styled after the imperial army’s officer uniform, and it was clear that she belonged to a rich noble family.

The young waitress who brought the two girls their tea smiled at Friede and said, “‘Apprentice Maid Misia’ comes here once a month. Don’t worry; it’s quite safe.”

“Hey, telling other people about the private lives of the imperial family is a violation of special imperial law forty-three, article two!” Misia exclaimed.

Friede gave her an exasperated look and said, “But you aren’t a member of the imperial family, you’re an apprentice maid.”

The waitress chuckled and bowed to the two girls. “Precisely. Now would you like to try our newest item, Miss Apprentice Maid?”

“Y-Yes, please,” Micha said with a nod. It was clear to Friede that the people here knew her true identity, but continued pretending like the façade hadn’t been blown for Micha’s sake.

Is it really okay to be burdening the people of this restaurant with the responsibility of making sure nothing happens to you? Friede mused.

“Hey, Micha.”

“I told you, call me Misia when we’re out.”

“Well, that doesn’t really matter at this point. Anyway, aren’t you causing problems for the people who work here by coming without guards? Is it even okay for a princess to walk around the city by herself like this?” Friede thought back to the time she’d tried to take on a bunch of bad guys all by herself.

Micha took a sip of her tea and waved her hand dismissively.

“Don’t worry, the empress and my father both know I do this, and they don’t mind. I make sure to pay for what I eat, and I do actually have guards nearby.” She pointed out of the window with her fork. “Granny Volka’s people patrol the three main districts around the palace. They’re the imperial family’s elite spies, and they’re just like your father. You probably can’t spot them because they’re good at staying discreet, but they’re out there.”

“You mean they’re werewolves?”

“Yep. See, we’re safe.”

In that case, we probably are fine here. The conversation moved on to the topic of food, and the two girls excitedly discussed their favorite sweet toppings.

“Now then, how about we stop by a perfume store on our way back?”

Friede shook her head and replied, “I’m still too young for perfume. Besides, my nose is sensitive, so I don’t like places with too many different smells.”

Micha smiled and said, “If you don’t want any, how about you buy some as a present for your mother? It’s pretty fun smelling different types of perfume, you know.”

“Well...I guess that’s not a bad idea.”

By nature, werewolves had an obsession with new and unfamiliar scents. And getting a souvenir for Airia did seem like a good idea to Friede.

The two of them went out onto the main street and entered a large store. A group of uniformed employees came out to greet the two girls, and “Apprentice Maid Misia” talked to them like they were her subjects. Friede couldn’t help but sigh as she watched the imperial manner in which Micha comported herself.

“You could at least *try* to act more like a servant,” she muttered to herself. Though Friede had a better understanding of the games adults played now. Everyone pretended like Micha was Misia even when she didn’t act like it, so that they would have plausible deniability if anything happened. They knew the empress had guards patrolling the main streets outside the palace as well, and they knew that having a princess be a regular at their store would bring them prestige. It was a win-win situation for everyone.

So Friede stopped worrying too much about Micha’s flimsy façade, and focused on smelling the different perfumes. There were a variety of floral, fruity, herbal, and earthy scents. The plant-based perfumes smelled nice to Friede, but they didn’t trigger that primal werewolf part of her brain in any way. There was one specific scent that did excite her though. It was a sharp, sweet perfume sitting in the corner of the shop.

“Excuse me, but what scent is this?” Friede asked one of the store clerks.

“It’s ice tiger essence, miss. It’s made by refining the intestines of the legendary Ice Tiger monster and is quite rare. However...”

“However, what?”

The store clerk smiled at Friede. “The truth is, these days the perfume is made from Sea Tiger intestines instead of Ice Tiger. There are so few Ice Tigers left in Rolmund that you’ll be lucky to even find one some years. Sea Tigers are similar enough that their scent isn’t much different. They’re ferocious beasts that live in the ocean.”

“I guess that’s why they’re the tigers of the sea?”

Had Veight been present, he would have realized the creatures the clerk was referring to as Sea Tigers were similar to the sea hares back on Earth, but Friede had no such knowledge.

“Yes. They live only in the frigid seas to the north. I’ve never seen one myself, but I hear they don’t look very much like actual tigers. At this store, we only import the very best Sea Tigers slain by huntsmen in North Rolmund for our perfumes.”

While the two of them were talking, an oddly dressed man descended from the second floor of the shop. He didn’t look like he belonged here at all.

“If you wanna know about Sea Tigers, you should talk to me, Meraldian missy.”

He had a long beard, looked to be in his 40s, and was wearing a fur cape. There was a machete belted at his waist, and a heavy leather bag slung over his shoulder. His face was covered in scars. From his appearance, he looked like a commoner from some rural village, but there was something about the way he held himself and the way he talked that invoked a feeling of an upper-class upbringing.

Panicking, the store clerk ran up to him and said, “Ah, you can’t just come out into the shop, Mr. Karankov! We’ve talked about this before!”

“Oh, what’s the big deal? I just wanna tell her about Karankov, the Sea Tiger

hunter. It'll be a story she can tell her folks back home."

Karankov made his way to Friede, deftly weaving between the display cases.

"Fine, do whatever you want." The store clerk sighed to herself. "It's not like we can kick you out, since our perfumer will throw a fit if we lose your business."

"Mr. Karankov's the only one who manages to bring Sea Tiger intestines that don't have the usual fishy smell..." another clerk muttered. From the sound of it, the employees were used to this Karankov fellow's eccentric behavior.

He plopped himself down on a chair and started regaling Friede with his tale: "So, Sea Tigers are these fiends that live in the frozen seas to the north. They hide between cracks in the ice, waiting for unsuspecting prey to walk by. Once they've found their mark, they leap out and drag them into the freezing water."

"Yikes," Friede said with a shiver, and Karankov laughed.

"There's no land animal that can beat a Sea Tiger in the water. But they've got one big weakness."

"What's that?"

"They gotta get on land to catch their prey. And they're way slower on the ground. So the way to lure them out is to wrap some animal skins around a pole and wave it over ice cracks."

"Ah!"

"I see you've figured it out already. That's right, the dumb brute'll bite the stick and you can pull it up. They're stubborn as all hell, so they'll jump up onto land to try and drag the bait back in. Once you've got them on the ice, all it takes is one good hit to the stomach with a harpoon and they're down."

Karankov made a throwing motion with his hands. "But it's not like they're totally defenseless out of the water. They know how to slide around on the ice, and they're as big as bears. If they manage to hit you with their fins or tail, they'll send you flying."

"They sound like tough prey to bring down!"

"You bet. Also, if you wanna get good-quality intestines, you can't stab them

there. You can't use poison either, it'll ruin their organs. If they start thrashing about, you gotta aim for the heart, which is up and to the right of the stomach, here. It's not easy, though, which is why you wanna go for the stomach first."

Karankov went on to explain that Sea Tiger pelts, blubber, meat, and bones were already sold for a pretty high price, so most hunters didn't bother to make sure the intestines remained intact. "If you do manage to harvest the intestines, though, they make for good medicine and perfume. The guys here actually let me have the Ice Tiger perfume that doesn't sell, which is nice since you don't get to take too many baths when you're hunting."

"Hmm, but this perfume doesn't— Huh?"

While she was talking, Friede noticed that Karankov was giving off the distinctive scent of a liar. The smell was faint, and there was no hostility in it. Humans often smelled like this when they were trying to hide something about their true feelings or personality. Whatever it was, the man in front of her was hiding something. The smell of a lie actually smelled a lot like the perfume made from Sea Tigers did, which was why it had taken her so long to notice. Friede was curious what he was hiding from her, but she knew just asking straight up wouldn't get her any answers, so she decided to be discreet about it.

"It sounds like a tough life, hunting Sea Tigers."

"Well, yes, the sea is a harsh mistress. Whether that's a sea of ice or a sea of people." Karankov flashed her a grin. Something in his tone shifted subtly when he said that, but Friede couldn't quite place it.

Before she could puzzle out the difference, Karankov added, "It's nice to get a present for your mum, but don't forget to get something for your dad too. Here, take this."

Karankov handed her an animal bone and what looked like a leathery rope.

"That's a Sea Tiger bone and dried Sea Tiger intestine. You can boil it to make medicine, but knowing that man, he'll probably dissect it and study it."

"Oh yeah, he probably would... But wait, how do you know what my dad's like, mister?"

Karankov's expression and tone shifted again as he said, "Well you see, Lord

Veight helped me out of a very tight spot in the past. If you tell him you met a man by the name of Karankov, he'll know who you're talking about."

"I feel like everywhere I go there are people my dad knows. It doesn't even feel like I'm in a foreign country right now," Friede said with a sigh, and Karankov laughed.

"It must be tough being the daughter of the continent's greatest legend. What's your name, miss?"

"Friede. Friede Aindorf. Also, wait, how do you know I'm Veight's daughter?"

Karankov lowered his voice and whispered, "If a girl with a Meraldian accent is hanging out with the crown princess, she's probably someone of high standing. Also, your kind eyes, striking black hair, and the way you carry yourself all remind me of him. Anyone who knows Lord Veight and doesn't recognize you immediately has ice for eyes."

Karankov's rough voice had become more refined, more posh. The way he sat had changed as well, and Friede would have to be both blind and deaf not to figure out that he was a nobleman in disguise.

Before she could ask who he really was though, Karankov got to his feet and said, "Now then, it's about time I returned to hunting beasts on the icy seas! My beautiful wife and three cute sons are waiting for me at home too! I'm going to need to train them up to be better hunters than me!"

"U-Umm—"

If a nobleman was making his living hunting on the northern seas, he was almost certainly an exiled lord. Friede knew she had to be careful about what she said, but if he really was an old friend of her father's, she felt like she had to speak up.

However, Karankov just shook his head at her and said, "I'm having the time of my life right now. Everyone around me's a friend, and I don't have to worry about getting stabbed in the back. The only people I have to protect now are my family, and I'm free to live my life however I please."

"O-Okay?"

“You probably don’t understand just how liberating it is to be free to choose your own path yet, but you will someday.” Karankov gave her a gentle smile.



“It’s all thanks to your dad that I have what I do right now. When you get home, tell him this: ‘The fox of Karankov is living peacefully with his wife and kids beneath the shimmering stars of the north. Thank you for everything.’”

“I will,” Friede said with a solemn nod. She didn’t understand the meaning behind the words, but she could tell they were important.

Just then, Micha called out to her from another part of the store. “Friede, does this aoyashis perfume smell like the actual fruit? I heard they only grow in Meraldia.”

“Wait, I love aoyashis, let me come smell it!”

Friede turned back to say goodbye to Karankov before running off, but he was nowhere to be found.

“Aaaaah.”

Friede collapsed on her bed with a content sigh. The bed in her guest room was massive, and she could roll over five times before getting from one end to the other. She opted to roll over just three and a half times before turning around and rolling back to her original position though.

“Aaaaaaaaah.”

This time there was a bit of lethargy mixed in with her sigh.

“I’m so boooooored.”

She’d told herself she wouldn’t utter those words aloud while in Rolmund, but she couldn’t help herself.

A few days earlier, they’d gotten a letter from home telling them to remain in Rolmund for a little while longer and mingle with the local nobles, so their departure had been postponed. There was a flurry of activity in the palace as well, and Eleora had left the capital on urgent business. Her absence was why Friede had nothing to do. The other members of the delegation were taking this opportunity to get to know Rolmund and its people better.

The principal of Rolmund’s military academy had taken a liking to Shirin, and he was currently taking lessons there. He’d left early in the morning today and

likely wouldn't return until late at night. Yuhette was traveling to Wiron Library, which apparently housed a lot of important documents of the Sonnenlicht faith. It also had a lot of newer books as well, and Yuhette was looking forward to spending some time there reading. Which left Friede alone with nothing to do.

I wish I could practice my shooting, or my hand-to-hand combat skills, but... After the explosion the other day, Kurtz had told her to refrain from messing with magic tools while in Rolmund. She thought back to the conversation she'd had with him.

"Friede, why must you always blow everything up?"

"But professor, this is the first time I've blown anything up..."

"Oh, so it is. Sorry, my mistake. You just remind me so much of your father that I accidentally conflated his sins with yours."

Gazing up at the ceiling Friede thought, *What kinds of stuff did you blow up here, dad?* She couldn't imagine her mild-mannered father blowing up anything. For a while, Friede just rolled around her bed sighing to herself, which helped alleviate the boredom a little.

As boring as this is, I know it's probably a bad idea to cause a scene right now. All the activity in the palace, plus the fact that Meraldia had asked them to delay their return, made it obvious that something was afoot. Friede had a vague inkling that causing a stir right now would only make everyone's lives more difficult, so she was lying low.

As she was rolling around, she heard a knock at her door. But it was from her side parlor door instead of the main door that connected to the hallway. As an honored guest of the palace, her guest room came with a separate parlor. There was even a room to house any servants she might have brought, and a storage room.

"Coming!"

She hurried over to the door and pulled it open to find Micha on the other side.

Micha gave Friede a worried look and asked, "Friede, are you bored?"

“Extremely,” Friede said bluntly, and Micha chuckled.

“I thought so. Shirin and Yuhette are both gone, and you look like a snowman at the start of spring.”

“I look like I’m melting?” Friede had been trying not to wear her heart on her sleeve, but she clearly hadn’t been doing a very good job of it.

Micha sauntered into the room and put a book on top of the table. It wasn’t very big, but it hit the table with a heavy thud. Friede’s curiosity was instantly piqued.

“What’s this? You didn’t come here to show me an ordinary book, right?”

“Correct. This is an extremely rare book. But its contents are a secret for now, since I want to surprise you.”

Micha theatrically opened the book. The sentences on the first page read like Sonnenlicht scripture. At a glance, it looked like a perfectly normal book. But Micha’s expression told Friede there was something special about it.

Gulping, Friede stared intently at the tome. Micha started flipping through the pages with a grin on her face.

“What do you think? Looks perfectly normal, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s not, isn’t it?”

“I mean, yes, but... You have no sense of drama, do you?”

As they talked, Friede suddenly realized what was off about the book.

“There’s something weird about that book’s pages.” Friede pointed to the edge of the pages. For a normal hardcover book, when it was closed the edges of the pages formed a gentle curve. This book’s pages did the same thing, but unlike with a regular book, that curve didn’t change shape as Micha flipped through the book. It was as if something more than simple book binding was affixing the pages in place.

“Can you even flip all of this book’s pages?”

“How are you so sharp?!” Micha groaned, but then her face lit up in a smile.

“Anyway, good eye, Friede. This looks like a plain old book, but it’s actually a

box. Only the first ten pages or so are actual pages.”

Micha dexterously fiddled with the book-box revealing how it worked to Friede. After a few seconds, Friede realized what the book really was.

“Is that a Blast Cane?!” she exclaimed, and Micha puffed her chest out proudly.

“Yep. This is Aunt Eleora’s secret weapon, the Blast Grimoire. And this is Blast Grimoire #28.”

“There are twenty-eight of these...”

“Whenever something bad happens, auntie starts making magic tools instead of dealing with the problem. She gets really into it, and she won’t respond no matter how loudly you yell her name. She actually gets kind of scary when she’s designing magic tools. Like her eyes start to shine, and there’s this creepy smile on her face.”

“Whoa, that’s terrifying!”

Friede couldn’t fathom the kind, calm Eleora tinkering with machines while looking like a mad scientist. *I guess there’s more to people than meets the eye.*

As Micha inspected the machinery of the Blast Grimoire she explained, “Apparently Aunt Eleora started researching how to compact a Blast Cane’s machinery and stuff it into a book back when she was just a princess. The current Blast Grimoires are a lot more reliable and even smaller than the early prototypes she made back then.”

“Wow, this is even smaller than my pistol. I’d never guess it’s a weapon at first glance. Is it meant for assassination?”

Even Friede was a little put off by this weapon. But Micha smiled and shook her head.

“No way. The opposite, actually. Auntie made it to defend herself against assassins. She doesn’t really need it anymore though, and she only makes more because it’s a hobby of hers.”

“Making complex machines like this is her hobby?!”

“I think it’s weird too, don’t worry...” Micha said with a sigh. “This is a

prototype that's meant to be as strong as a regular Blast Cane despite being much smaller. Unfortunately, you only get one shot with it before it breaks. Auntie said something about how the firing mechanism severs the magic circle connected to the magesteel, or something, but I don't remember the details."

Micha wasn't especially interested in magical engineering.

"By the way, this is a highly classified state secret. Don't let any other Rolmundian know about its existence, okay?"

"Wait, why are you leaking state secrets to me?! I'm the Demon Lord's daughter!"

"Yeah, but you looked so bored," Micha said with a grin, and Friede sighed.

"You can't just go around doing that."

"It's fine. Auntie even said sharing secrets is how you become friends with someone."

"Couldn't you have picked a secret that was less important to national defense?"

Friede sighed again, but in truth, she was happy that Micha was looking out for her. She had a huge interest in Blast Canes and their derivatives, and this certainly was a fascinating take on them. Plus, the fact that Micha had been willing to share state secrets with her meant that Micha trusted her. That was what made her the happiest of all.

Friede looked up at Micha and said, "How about we share some secrets that *won't* get us in trouble with your aunt next?"

"Sounds good. Let's go for a walk outside the palace while we talk."

"That might get us in trouble too but, eh, screw it."

Smiling, Friede changed into her outdoor clothes.

The pair once again made their way to the sweets shop.

"Wow, it's so cute!"

"And delicious!"

They were once again sampling the newest concoctions of the head pastry chef.

“This powdered sugar looks so fancy, and it tastes good too!” Friede exclaimed.

“It’s modeled after the powdery first snow of winter. The red and yellow fruits underneath represent the fallen leaves of autumn and—hey, are you listening to me?”

Friede nodded absently in response, her gaze fixated on the dessert in front of her. Her fork trembled as she agonized over what section to try next.

“I’m listening, I’m listening. That part over there is mega tasty.”

“You’re not supposed to eat the fallen leaves. You’re not listening at all, are you?”

The two of them washed down the delectable desserts with high-quality black tea. As they were waiting for the next sweet to be brought in, Micha muttered sadly, “It’s only because my aunt is the empress that I can afford luxuries like this...”

“Where’d that come from?” Friede asked with a puzzled look. Micha gave her a forlorn smile and said, “Oh, it’s nothing. I was just thinking I’m only allowed this lavish lifestyle because of the achievements of my aunt, my father, and the other nobles.”

“That’s true.”

Friede could tell it was time for a serious discussion, so she washed away the lingering sweetness on her tongue with another sip of tea. She could smell the conflicted feelings coming off of Micha.

Micha picked up her own porcelain teacup and swirled the tea inside.

“I get to live better than any other child in the empire, but I haven’t done a single thing to earn it. Of course, I’m doing my best with my studies, but I’m not actually supporting the empire like my father is.”

“You’re still a student, so that’s only to be expected, isn’t it?” Friede started working her brain on overdrive so she could keep up with what Micha was

saying. “Even my dad, who everyone calls the Astral Fencer and the Black Werewolf King, just did normal kid things when he was younger, I’m pretty sure...”

Micha shook her head and replied, “Didn’t you know? Your father was a child prodigy. Aunt Eleora heard that from the werewolves in his squad. Even though no one taught him, he was able to figure out mathematics and astronomy all on his own.”

Come to think of it, one of dad’s friends did mention that...I think. Everyone had nothing but praise for Veight, and Friede couldn’t keep track of all the stories they’d told about him. Realizing this particular approach wasn’t working, Friede changed tack.

“Sure, but most people aren’t like my dad. I mean, the empress must have been a normal child, right?”

Micha sighed and said, “When she was our age, her wet nurse tried to assassinate her. Auntie captured her instead, and tortured her for information, then executed her and everyone involved in the assassination plot. She wasn’t much different from your father.”

“Whoa! She sounds strong!”

Friede had read that Eleora had been an exceptionally competent woman since before she became empress, but wasn’t aware that she’d been exceptionally competent even as a kid.

Friede hung her head and muttered, “I guess the really awesome people are awesome from the start...”

“So it seems.” Micha looked out the window, smiling sadly. “Eventually, the day might come where I ascend the throne and become empress, but I’m not sure I’ll be able to achieve even a fraction of what my aunt has. She’s just that much better a person than I am. No amount of studying is going to bridge that gap.”

Friede wanted to say that wasn’t true, but she had nothing to back that up with so she stayed quiet. Empty words wouldn’t help Micha.

Micha turned back to Friede and said in a serious voice, “We’ll always be

friends, right? No matter what happens to me or Rolmund, we'll stay friends?"

"Of course!" Friede replied instantly. "I don't know what kind of job I'll be doing in the future, but I promise if anything happens, I'll come save you, Micha. Even if Rolmund and Meraldia go to war, I'll be on your side!"

"Are you really sure you should be making promises like that?" Micha asked with a sad smile, but Friede had made her decision.

"I'm sure. Dad always makes promises that are hard to keep, but he does it anyway. And I'm his daughter, so of course I'll do the same."

Friede was slowly beginning to realize just how many people her dad had saved by agreeing on a whim to help them, and how he carried through with his promises because it was the right thing to do. It wouldn't be easy making promises like this, but this was what Friede wanted. Doing her best to help people no matter how hard it got suited her more than letting them struggle alone. At least this way, she wouldn't live a life full of regret.

Her father's face flashed through her mind, and Friede thumped her chest reassuringly.

"If you're ever in trouble, come to Meraldia. I'll ask my dad to figure something out if I can't."

Dad's so popular that I could probably help her escape as far as Kuwol if I had to. No political opponents would chase Micha all the way across the Sea of Solitude. Though, I guess if dad has to get involved, he'll find a way to solve the problem and make everything better while he's at it... And the council probably won't be happy if Rolmund gets any stronger than it already is. Friede smiled, imagining the look on the councilors' faces if Veight went and helped Rolmund solve another problem.

Micha squeezed Friede's hand and said, "Thank you, Friede. It's reassuring to know I have someone like you on my side. You really do live up to your father's name, you know that?"

Friede was happy to hear that, but there was one thing she needed to set the record straight on. "Thanks, but please don't praise me by comparing me to my dad. I'm me, no one else."

“But you’re the one who claimed you were his daughter five seconds ago.”

“Oh yeah, I guess I did,” Friede said, awkwardly scratching her head.

“But you do have a point. I don’t trust you because you’re the Astral Fencer’s daughter. I trust you because I know *you*, Friede.”

“Thanks. Ehehe.” Friede looked away, blushing slightly. “You know, my dad and Empress Eleora had to work together to fix Rolmund. I bet if we combine our strengths we’ll be able to do amazing things too. So let’s promise to always be on the same side.”

“Of course. I promise.”

The two of them left the sweets shop and started heading back to the palace. Micha had cheered up considerably, and she was still holding Friede’s hand while they walked.

“I knew consulting with a fellow princess was the right call,” she said.

Friede gave her a playful grin and said, “You mean consulting with a fellow apprentice maid, right?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah! Totally!” Micha said hurriedly, realizing she’d forgotten about her façade.

Is she really going to be okay? Well, I guess if the empress’s werewolf squad is guarding us, we’ll be fine. According to Micha, even if they couldn’t see them, Volka’s boys were keeping an eye on her. *If they transformed, I’d be able to pick them out by smell, but... Huh?* Friede came to a halt as she picked out a strange noise among the bustle of the city. It was just barely within her audible range, meaning a regular human wouldn’t have noticed it.

“A dog whistle?” Friede muttered to herself, then turned to her companion. “Misia.”

“What is it?”

“What does three short bursts then two long bursts on a dog whistle signal?”

As if she’d memorized the answer beforehand, Micha replied, “Well, we don’t use dog whistles, but that’s the alert signaling there’s an emergency. All the

officers in the imperial army know it. Why do you ask?”

There was no reason to be giving regular dogs a military signal, meaning someone was communicating with Volka’s werewolves.

“It looks like something’s hap— Huh?” Micha turned around mid-sentence and headed into a side alley. There was a man crouched on the ground in front of her.

“What’s wrong? Should I call for help?” she asked.

“Waah, Micha?! You can’t just go into an alley, it’s dangerous!” Friede shouted, forgetting momentarily to use her false name. But Micha didn’t seem to mind, and she gently rubbed the back of the man who looked to be some kind of merchant.

“I can’t just ignore someone who needs help. You’re the same way, aren’t you?”

“I guess so.”

But a princess traveling incognito needs to be more careful. As Friede walked over to Micha, she caught a whiff of hostility.

“Get away from that man right now! He’s dangerous!”

“What?!” Micha asked in surprise, and the man suddenly got to his feet and thrust his hand into his pocket.

Is he gonna pull out a knife?! Friede was unarmed, meaning she had less reach than the man if he had a weapon. She dashed forward, planning to close the distance in one go and seal his movements with a preemptive strike. But it wasn’t a knife the man pulled out of his pocket. Whatever it was, it made Friede’s vision go red.

“Waaah?!”

Her eyes and nose burned.

It took a second for Friede to realize she’d been exposed to some kind of toxic powder. Because the attack happened so suddenly, she’d dodged a hair too late, and a tiny bit of it had gotten on her face. If she’d inhaled all of it, she probably would have been knocked out.

“Friede, run!” Micha shouted.

“Uwaaaaah!”

Even if she wanted to, Friede couldn’t run. Her eyes had been blinded, and her sense of smell wasn’t working right. She couldn’t even sense the man’s bloodlust. Only her hearing was unaffected, so she tried to use sound to get her bearings.

Focusing on her ears, she heard the faint *swish* of a knife being drawn from a leather sheath. *This isn’t good.*

“Oh come on! Just go!”

Unfortunately, Friede didn’t have enough training to fight effectively in this situation. If she could transform, a mere knife wouldn’t have been able to touch her, but Friede’s body was that of a plain human’s. “*Even a hero who’s won a hundred battles will die if they lose a single time.*” That was one of her father’s pet sayings. If she tried to fight as she was now, she’d almost certainly die. If she died, she wouldn’t be able to do anything to help Micha, and she’d never get to see her mother again.

“I’m sorry, Micha!” she shouted, and used her werewolf-enhanced leg power to jump away. Something smacked into her head at the apex of her leap, but she was sturdy enough to shrug it off. She grabbed onto whatever she’d jumped into, then kicked off higher into the air. Friede landed on her back, but the impact was lighter than she expected.

“Yeowch!”

The moment she landed, she started rolling off the slanted surface, so she hurriedly found something to grab on to. Judging by how steep the slant was, Friede surmised she was on a roof, and not the street. All of Rolmund’s roofs were slanted to make sure snow didn’t pile up on them. It seemed like she’d escaped the lion’s den for now, and she let out a sigh of relief. But just then, her eyes started burning again.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow...” They hurt too much to open.

Carefully, she chanted the detoxification spell to get rid of the toxins in her eyes. The spell didn’t work on poisons derived from inorganic sources like ore,

but fortunately, it seemed this particular one was organic. The pain began to recede, and Friede focused her attention on her nose to see if anyone was around. She could smell two people she didn't know nearby, both female.

If they're girls, that means they're not the man from before. One of them spoke to her in Rolmundian.

"You're...Friede, right? Are you okay?"

"Don't worry. We're part of the werewolf squad that works for the empire," the other said.

Thank goodness, they're allies. Relief overcame Friede, and the tension drained from her body. Fortunately, she could open her eyes a little now. They were still tearing up, but she could see two beautiful older women through her blurry vision.

"I'm Nasha, Elder Volka's grandniece. And this is my little sister Misha."

"It's nice to meet you. You know, your father kicked my butt once."

Seriously, is there anyone in this city who doesn't know dad?

Nasha glanced down frequently as she spoke, seemingly checking on something on the ground. "It looks like you're okay. Where's Princess Micha? I don't see her anywhere?"

So that guy was after Micha. But was he an assassin, or a kidnapper? Mildly panicked, Friede replied, "I don't know. Someone attacked me with this powder, and I couldn't see anything..."

"I'm impressed you managed to jump away after being ambushed like that. But then again, I guess you are the Astral Fencer's daughter!" the younger sister, Misha, exclaimed.

"Regardless, I'm glad you're safe. We got tricked by that dog whistle earlier and ended up going to the next district over. We realized it was a diversion pretty quickly, but by the time we returned, the princess's scent was gone. Fortunately, we saw you on the rooftop, and headed over."

The fact that Micha's scent was gone was odd. Veight had taught Friede that a werewolf's sense of smell had evolved specifically to hunt humans. In other

words, it should be impossible for a werewolf to lose someone's scent.

Nasha's expression grew grim, and she said, "We need to hurry. Friede, I'll take you back to the palace and report to our superiors. Misha, you stay here and search for the princess."

"Ah, I'll help look for her too!" Friede said, rubbing her still blurry eyes.

Ummm, where am I? The first thing Micha noticed when she regained consciousness was that it was cold. Her memories came back to her in bits and pieces, and she soon remembered that she'd been kidnapped by a mysterious man. She couldn't tell how long she'd been out for, but all of her joints hurt. Her wrists were tied up, and she was lying on a cold stone floor. Wherever she was, she wasn't getting out any time soon.

What should I do... Is Friede all right? The last thing she could recall before being knocked out was Friede jumping away while covering her eyes. *I doubt she's been killed, but I hope she hasn't gone permanently blind.* Micha couldn't help but worry about Friede, lost and alone in a foreign country, even though she knew she should be worrying about herself more right now.

She took a look around the room she was in, but it was too dark to see much. Sounds didn't seem to echo much though, meaning she was in a small space. Straining her eyes, she was at least able to make out that the walls and floor were made entirely of stone. There were no windows, but there was a ventilation shaft in the ceiling. Whatever room it connected to must have been lit, since a bit of light was spilling through it. Judging by the design, this was a storage room of some kind rather than a bedroom. Metal shelves lined the walls, and all of the shelves were locked with sturdy doors.

Hm? Is it just me or does something smell nice... She sniffed, trying to catch the scent, but she couldn't make out what it was. Still, it felt like she'd smelled something sweet for a moment there earlier.

The door leading outside was made of thick iron, and was of course locked. *I'm scared... Are these people going to kill me? Well, I won't let them. I'm Micha, daughter of the great Lord Lekomya, and the niece of the empress herself.* Determined not to give in to her fear, Micha started thinking about what she could do. If she gave up, her chances of being rescued would only go down.

Fortunately, all of Micha's stuff was still there. Since her hands were tied, she couldn't reach into her pocket for her Blast Grimoire, but its reassuring weight was present. *Why did they bother to tie me up? Wouldn't they think that door would be enough to keep a little girl locked in? Ah, what if...* A few possibilities came to Micha. *They don't want me trying to make a break for it the moment they open the door. Meaning I'm not far from help, and there aren't too many people guarding me...I hope.* The fact that they hadn't searched all of her belongings lent credence to the assumption that they were low on both manpower and time. If they had the time, they would have definitely examined her possessions and confiscated anything dangerous.

If they haven't killed me even though they're in a hurry, they must have a very pressing reason to keep me alive. Probably to use me as bargaining leverage. But against whom? Micha didn't have enough information to make any decisive conclusions, so all she could do was speculate. Her unease grew as she considered the various fates that might await her.

Dad... Auntie... Eventually, she realized imagining worse and worse possibilities wasn't actually helping her.

Just then, she heard a voice from the other side of the door. "I suggest you stop worrying so much." It was a man's voice, and he had a West Rolmund accent.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Who knows?" he replied in a nonchalant voice. For a moment, Micha considered shooting him with her Blast Grimoire, but her wrists were still tied up. Even if they weren't, her Blast Grimoire wasn't strong enough to shoot through such a thick door.

It's reckless to fight him. I'm better off trying to get whatever information I can instead. If I keep him talking, he might let his identity slip. With her decision made, Micha said, "I wouldn't have to worry if you would let me out of here."

"No can do. Though I suppose it wouldn't do to leave you so scared that you bite your own tongue and kill yourself. If there's anything you want to know, ask. I'll answer if I can."

That confirms they want me alive at least. Assuming this man is telling the

truth, I don't have to worry about being killed, for the moment. There wasn't much more Micha could ask regarding her safety, so she decided to switch topics.

"Where am I?"

"Can't tell you that one."

"I should have known."

Micha took the refusal in stride. Had they been far from Originia, the man might have been more willing to answer. Meaning they were still close to where she'd been kidnapped, and somewhere in the capital. Micha couldn't be sure of course, but she'd be willing to bet on it.

"Hey, I'm getting hungry."

"Oh, come on, it's not even dinner time yet. Besides, I know you were stuffing your face full of pastries—whoops, wasn't supposed to mention that." The man realized what Micha was trying to do, and quickly shut his mouth. "I really can't let my guard down around you, can I? Not a princess for nothing, I guess."

"What do you mean?"

Micha tried playing dumb. She'd already figured out roughly how much time had passed since she'd been kidnapped. *They took me around noon, so not much time has passed. That proves I can't be too far from the palace. And I guess it would be too risky for them to try and smuggle me out of the capital anyway.* Guards would almost certainly stop an unfamiliar carriage heading out of the city with undeclared luggage. And if they found out it was the crown princess being smuggled out, no amount of bribes would be able to keep their mouths shut. Furthermore, Micha was certain the werewolves and the Imperial Guard were already combing the streets for her. It was only a matter of time before she was rescued.

Or will I? These guys kidnapped an imperial princess. There's no way they didn't plan this out meticulously. Maybe this place is in a blind spot that the guards won't search. Micha didn't know how exactly it was a blind spot, but she now knew what she needed to do. *If I can just find a way to alert people to where I am, they'll come save me. I need to take things carefully and wait for an*

opportunity. Micha was under no illusion that she could escape on her own. I wish I could transform into a werewolf. But since I can't, I'll stick to getting as much information as I can.

"So, what do I do now?"

"Nothing. You just sit tight until the adults are done talking, then you'll be returned to the palace. We won't touch a hair on your head, don't worry."

The man didn't sound like he was lying, but Micha wasn't gullible enough to believe him that easily.

"What happened to the girl who was with me?"

"Oh, that slippery little girl. You don't need to worry about her either, she got away. I'm not that great at fighting. If she hadn't run away, I'd have been the one in trouble."

I guess that means he's the same person who kidnapped me then. Unless he's trying to trick me about that too, but I doubt it. His accent's definitely West Rolmundian. And from how he speaks, he's probably the servant of a noble. He talks like a peasant, but there's a trace of refinement in his words. If I had to profile him, I'd say he's a butler working for a West Rolmund noble. So long as she kept him talking, he'd keep giving away more about himself.

But before she could say anything more the man said, "Don't probe too hard into my identity, missy. It won't end well for either of us."

"If you say so."

I guess I'm not being as subtle as I thought. I shouldn't underestimate anyone clever enough to kidnap a princess. Micha decided not to do anything risky for now. *Even auntie got captured by Meraldia when she was younger. It's not over for me yet.* The fear wasn't gone, but Micha had a better handle on her emotions now.



At around that same time, Friede and the others were looking high and low for Micha. The entire Imperial Guard had been mobilized to help with the search. They'd set up temporary checkpoints and were investigating anyone who looked even remotely suspicious. Friede went back to explore the alleyway Micha had been kidnapped in, but she couldn't find any trace of her. *It's like her scent has been erased from here...* The scent of the man who'd attacked her had vanished as well.

All she'd been able to find was the powder the man had thrown at her. It was still a clue, so she'd bottled what was left before the wind blew it away. She had to be careful not to touch it directly since if even a little got on her finger it became extremely itchy. *Is it even possible to erase a human's scent?* Without a smell to follow, werewolves wouldn't be particularly useful in the search. Friede explained what she'd found to Nasha and her sister, and the two of them were also at a loss.

"How did they manage to erase Micha's scent?" Nasha asked, shrugging her shoulders.

"I don't know. It shouldn't be possible. Maybe they used some kind of magic," Misha mused.

"If they'd used magic, there would be traces of mana in the air, but I don't sense that either. Besides, if they could use magic to hide perfectly, they wouldn't have used such a roundabout method to capture Micha."

"Good point. You're pretty smart, you know that?" Misha said, nodding in agreement. "The truth is, the imperial family is actually in the middle of putting down a rebellion started by a powerful noble. All of the other werewolves are taking part in the battle, and it's only us three sisters who were left here to guard the princess. Normally, she'd have a much bigger entourage."

"And since we rotate our shifts, there are only two of us on duty at any given time. Our eldest sister just went to sleep after staying up all night," Nasha added, scratching her head. "This is pretty bad. Empress Eleora is out subjugating the rebels, and Lord Lekomya is too busy to bother right now. There's no one to rely on, and it doesn't look like we're very reliable ourselves..."

Friede mulled this new information over in her mind. *A rebellion started by an influential noble. The lack of guards protecting Micha. And a mysterious kidnapper. If all of these are linked, then Micha's in real danger!*

"Nasha, this might be linked to the rebellion."

"You think so too?" Nasha folded her arms, and another woman came over to join the group. She bore a striking resemblance to Nasha and Misha, and looked pretty tired.

Misha shouted, "Masha!"

"How could you let the princess get kidnapped?!" the woman named Masha shouted, grabbing Nasha and Misha by the lapels and shaking them.

"S-Someone blew the emergency signal on a dog whistle!"

"Even on guard duty we're not supposed to ignore it!"

"We didn't go very far, and Friede was with the princess, so we thought..."

"Friede's our guest! How can you expect her to act as one of the princess's guards?! Bah, enough excuses!" Masha kicked her two sisters' legs out from under them and they tumbled to the stone floor.

"Gyaaaaaaah!"

She then turned to Friede. "I'm sorry for putting you in danger. Don't mind what my idiot of a sister said, this isn't your fault."

"O-Okay..."

The women in Meraldia's werewolf squad were pretty tough, but Friede hadn't expected the ones here to be just as tough. A little overwhelmed, she nodded.

Scratching her head the same way Nasha had, Masha said, "Dammit, I'll probably have to ask that guy for help if we wanna find the princess."

"Which guy?"

"Hm? Oh, I've just got a friend who's good at tracking and stuff."

Masha smiled and shook the bottle of red powder that she'd taken from Friede.

Masha waited for her tracker friend in a perfume shop near the palace.

“It’s been, what, six years? Long time no see, Masha.” To Friede’s surprise, the friend she was waiting for was Karankov. He wasn’t even pretending to be a country bumpkin anymore, and slid into his chair with all the poise of a noble.

Masha bowed to him, then scratched her head awkwardly before saying, “I guess it has been about that long, Lord Sha—I mean, Lord Karankov.”

“I can tell by how agitated the Imperial Guard is that something serious must have happened.”

“Well, you see...” Masha explained how Micha had been kidnapped, and showed Karankov the bottle of powder. “This is the powder I was talking about.”

“Hmm.” Karankov opened the bottle and took a cautious whiff, frowning as a few minute particles reached his eyes.

“This is...potent stuff. It’s the powder you find in maryweed fruit, which grows in the south. The fruit splits when touched, and releases this powder to spread its seeds. The herbivores that get caught in the plant’s trap get stunned, making them easy prey for wolves, and then the fruit’s seeds spread through the wolves’ feces.

“Huh...” Masha muttered, impressed. Karankov blinked a few times to get the powder out of his eyes, then gently wiped his fingers with a wet cloth.

“It makes for a unique, stimulating perfume so there are specialists who go out to gather maryweed fruit, but it’s hard to harvest the fruit without breaking it, and they mess up quite frequently. They wear eyepatches on the job so that if they do mess up, powder only gets in one eye.”

“Is it actually valuable enough to harvest despite the risks?”

“Oh yes, even a tiny bottle of powder sells for a fortune.”

Still, Masha couldn’t fathom risking your eyesight for money.

“Properly extracted and packaged maryweed powder is too expensive to be used as a weapon. If you just want to blind someone all you need to do is throw some broken glass at them. Even sand will work. Using the powder in a fight is

an utter waste.”

“Then, does that mean...?” Masha trailed off, not wanting to voice the unfortunate conclusion she’d come to, and Karankov nodded in affirmation.

“Yes, whoever’s behind this is quite rich. A noble with enough money to keep a personal perfumer on retainer.”

“Do you think Count Olfsei and Baron Banya are behind this then? They’re the ones who started the current rebellion.”

“Yes, and if I had to say, it’s more likely to be the Olfsei family than the Banya family. They recruit a lot of poisoners, bringing them in under the guise of perfumers. No one finds it suspicious when perfumers mix strange ingredients together, so it’s the perfect cover,” Karankov explained, folding his arms. “It’s possible they evaded werewolf pursuit by using houndsbane perfume. It’s a difficult perfume to make that needs to be custom-tailored to each person using it, but it allows a person to erase their scent.”

“Oh, I didn’t even know something like that existed...” Masha said, amazed, and Karankov smiled at her.

“I haven’t seen it with my own eyes, I just heard that the late Lord Doneiks used to keep a supply for himself. There was a time assassins had set hunting dogs on him, and he’d wanted to make sure he’d never get caught by the same trick again. Anyway...” Karankov got to his feet and started stroking his beard. “Masha, you go report to Her Majesty. I’ll get in touch with my perfumer contacts in the meantime.”

“Why your perfumer contacts?”

“Because while houndsbane erases a person’s scent, it leaves its own unique scent behind that can be tracked. Plus, using expensive tools to hide your tracks leaves behind a different kind of evidence that makes it easy to pinpoint someone’s identity.” Smiling, Karankov added, “I’ll also ask a few other acquaintances of mine to see if they can help. We’ll rescue Princess Micha no matter what it takes. After all, this is another way I can repay my debt to him.”

“Who do you mean?”

“Oh, you know. The man I owe a great deal to.” Karankov gave Masha a

mysterious smile. “It’s been a while, but this really feels like old times, doesn’t it?”

“It really does, Lord Sha—I mean, Lord Karankov!”

A castle burned in the light of the setting sun. Count Olfsei’s beloved Keenika Keep was dyed red on the outside by the sunlight, and red on the inside by the flames. The castle stood atop a precipitous cliff, and was considered the sturdiest fortification in West Rolmund, but it had fallen a mere two days after being besieged.

“Well, Your Majesty? My werewolves are quite something, wouldn’t you say?” Volka said with a grin.

Eleora grinned back at her and replied, “Oh, yes. Cliffs and walls can’t stop werewolves, and humans are powerless against them in confined spaces like castle corridors. But you went a bit overboard here.” Eleora brushed her bangs aside, her cloak flapping in the wind. “You crushed this rebellion before rumors of it even had time to spread. Of course, it wouldn’t do to struggle against mere rebels, but if you suppress it this fast, other dissenters won’t have time to hear about it and come out of the woodwork.”

Volka just shrugged and said, “Eh, what’s the big deal? This way, more rumors of your unparalleled might will spread instead! People will talk about how Keenika Keep fell the moment you stepped on the battlefield.”

Eleora had indeed only arrived this morning with her army. The werewolves had made their move the night before, and by the time she’d reached the castle, the gates had been shattered. With the gates broken and Eleora here to raise morale, the regular army had made short work of the rebels. Every soldier knew that if he performed well, Eleora would reward him handsomely.

Sighing, Eleora said, “Fortifications are built to keep other humans out, but they’re not even an obstacle to demons. I didn’t do anything at all. Besides, it was Veight who first used tactics like these.”

Eleora didn’t feel any of the satisfaction that usually came from winning a battle.

“You say that, but it was your incredible tactics that truly led us to victory,”

her aide Borsche said, narrowing his eyes.

He was ostensibly retired, but any time Eleora headed to the battlefield, he went right back to active duty. He was a worrywart by nature, and he could never leave Eleora alone.

“These rebels tried to tarnish your reputation by attacking the Meraldian delegation. They thought this would be a political battle, not a military one,” Borsche added, stroking his beard. Even now, he was still Eleora’s trusted military advisor. “But you mobilized the army immediately, ensuring this wouldn’t become a political battle. The rebels were scattered before they had time to prepare their defenses, and were crushed one by one.”

“All right, I suppose I can give myself a *little* credit,” Eleora said with a faint smile, looking up at the burning Keenika Keep. “Count Olfsei himself committed suicide, but his family fled and are in hiding. It’ll take forever to capture all of the mountain forts and secret villas they’ve sequestered themselves in. Publicly announce that any who surrender will be spared.”

“Guess that means this war’s over. Are you going back to the capital?” Volka asked.

“Not yet, there’s still Baron Banya to deal with. Lord Mottemo captured his castle, but the baron managed to escape during its fall. He’s still hiding somewhere.”

“Sounds like a problem. But don’t worry, my werewolves’ll find him for you. I’ll get fifty of my best trackers to hunt him down.”

“Thanks. I’ll take command of the army here,” Eleora said with a nod, patting her trusty Blast Grimoire. “I haven’t fired a Blast Cane in years, but every now and again it’s good to fight on the front lines to keep my reflexes sharp.”

“We won’t be fit to call ourselves soldiers if we let you get in a situation where you have to fight personally, Your Majesty,” Borsche said with a rueful smile.

A few seconds later, Volka turned around.

“Well, if it isn’t Masha. I thought I left you back in the capital to guard Princess Micha. What happened?”

Masha sprinted over to Volka as fast as she could, shouting, “B-Bad news! Princess Micha has been kidnapped!”

“What?!” Eleora shouted.

After Masha had finished explaining the situation, Eleora nodded.

“This must be one of Count Olfsei’s plots. He failed to harm the Meraldian delegation, so he conspired to kidnap the crown princess instead. That would work just as well to smear my reputation. Even if he ultimately failed, if word got out that the princess had been kidnapped for even a moment, it would be enough.”

Count Olfsei’s plan to attack the Meraldian delegation had been unsuccessful, but he had managed to capture Micha. Word of that could not be allowed to get out. Moreover, if anything happened to Micha, it would be a huge blow to the imperial family. But most important of all, Eleora truly loved her niece.

She squeezed her Blast Grimoire and smiled at Masha. The Empress needed to appear calm at all times. Unfortunately, her smile was so terrifying that Masha shrunk back in fear.

“I-I-I-I-I’m terribly sorry! The kidnappers used a dog whistle to blow the emergency signal and distract us. They’d clearly planned everything out ahead of time!”

“I’m not mad at you.”

“But your expression’s so, so—” Eleora placed a hand gently on Masha’s cheek, surprising her. She took a deep breath to calm herself. Once Masha was sure she was in control of her emotions, she continued, “Considering the powder the kidnapper used on Friede, it’s almost certain Count Olfsei was behind this. I’d heard rumors about houndsbane perfume, but I never suspected it actually existed.”

Even if it wasn’t as perfect as the stories claimed, the fact remained that someone had indeed managed to create a perfume that erased a person’s scent said a lot about the tenacity of Rolmundians. They pulled out all the stops when it came to plotting against each other. And it was Eleora’s job to herd them

together. She thought furiously, considering her options.

“I imagine the kidnappers don’t know their master is dead yet.”

Even the fastest horse would take a day or two to reach the capital from here.

Eleora kneaded her forehead and murmured, “The count’s already dead. I have no way of knowing how his men will act when they learn that. But Baron Banya is still on the loose. I can’t afford to return to the capital now.”

Rebellions needed to be thoroughly put down or the survivors would rise up again. Eleora had learned that from experience. If she left Banya alone, he’d slowly gather his strength, and strike again when another faction decided to revolt, and the imperial family was at its weakest. Eleora *needed* to be thorough with her purge.

“Tell Lord Lekomya to search for Micha. The werewolves and I will set out after Baron Banya.”

“There are only a few werewolves in the capital right now. Are you sure about this, Your Majesty?” Volka asked in a worried voice.

Calmly, Eleora replied, “There’s no other choice. If we give Baron Banya even a few days he’ll regroup and attack again. We can’t let our guard down until we’ve seized all of his lands, castles, and soldiers. I am the empress before I am Micha’s aunt.” She squeezed her Blast Grimoire again and added, “But if those rebels put so much as a scratch on Micha, then I’ll make them rue the day they were born.”

“Please stop making that terrifying expression!” Masha exclaimed, cowering.

Meanwhile, Micha strained her ears, trying to hear the whispered argument going on outside her room.

“...Are you sure?!”

“Not so loud! I’ve already... In progress... Immediately...”

“Wait, but then... The plan?”

All of the vital details were spoken too softly for her to hear, but Micha listened as hard as she could. The man she’d been talking to earlier seemed to be speaking with several other men. She couldn’t tell exactly how many they

were, but she knew there were multiple of them.

“Anyway, lie low until we have more to report. I can’t imagine Keenika Keep will fall that easily,” one of the men said, speaking a little louder than the others.

Micha was able to hear everything he said. *Keenika Keep is...that one famous castle somewhere in West Rolmund...right? I wish I’d paid more attention to my studies.* The name rang a bell, so Micha was sure it belonged to some influential noble at least. *He said “it won’t fall that easily,” meaning it’s under attack by someone. But who? Auntie?* Only the empress had the right to freely wage war within Rolmund. And most of the time, she did so to put down a rebellion. *If auntie is attacking Keenika Keep, that means the noble who owns it started a rebellion, right? Is the reason these people kidnapped me because... Wait, it all makes sense now!* Micha lightly clapped her hands together. *They kidnapped me to stop auntie from attacking them! Right?* Her deduction was only slightly off, but there was no one around to tell her that.

There was one other person who was quite worried about Micha.

“Micha...” Archduke Lekomya muttered, staring at the report on his desk.

He was sitting in his office within his mansion in the capital. He’d been a loyal follower of Eleora since before she’d become empress, and he’d accomplished numerous heroic deeds in the years since. Many people in Rolmund considered him a living legend. Right now he was married to Eleora’s younger sister, and wielded considerable authority within the empire. But that also meant he had a lot of enemies, and now he’d just learned his daughter Micha had been kidnapped.

In front of him, the messenger who’d brought the kidnapper’s demands cowered.

“M-My Lord...”

“It’s fine, I know you’re not involved. You were just being used.”

The messenger was a merchant who’d simply been entrusted to deliver a present to Archduke Lekomya by one of his customers. It was only after the present had been delivered that he’d realized a ransom letter had been

included with it. The letter consisted of only two sentences.

“Do you want what matters to you most? Then give up everything else.”
Lekomya figured what that meant was that if he wanted Micha back alive, he had to give these men his full cooperation. After examining the color of the ink and the quality of the paper, Lekomya analyzed the letter’s handwriting. Every letter was beautifully penned, and it had clearly been written by a professional scribe.

The kidnappers must have gotten a third party to write this letter. They’re exceedingly cautious. He suspected the reason for the letter’s brevity was to prevent him from getting any useful information out of it. Even if he did manage to track down the scribe that wrote this, that person likely didn’t know anything more than the words they’d written.

“I have a few more questions about the man who handed you this letter.”

“O-Of course, My Lord!”

The merchant straightened his back, and Lekomya started with the most pertinent question.

“You mentioned that he was wearing a deerskin cap, correct?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. I believe it was giant deerskin, not the regular variety. It was a strange cap, to be honest. There were these tassels dangling from it, and...”

“I see. Thank you very much.”

Hats like those were popular in West Rolmund, where they served as ceremonial caps. Lekomya recalled that Count Olfsei in particular had been fond of such hats. Few people wore them outside of West Rolmund, and they weren’t sold anywhere in the capital. *It’s easy to tell a man’s origin by the way he dresses. But the kidnappers must have known that as well, so this man must have purposely dressed this way to inform me of his birthplace.*

Lekomya thought to himself. He folded his arms, sinking deeper into his thoughts.

First, they tried to attack Meraldia’s delegation. Now, they’ve kidnapped Micha. They’re clearly trying to settle things with skullduggery, but Eleora’s

already got their leaders cornered. They must not know that or they wouldn't have bothered to go through with the kidnapping. I'll have to take advantage of their lack of information if I'm to navigate my way through this mess. I can't afford to tell them anything they don't already know. Lekomya would do anything to get his beloved daughter back.

In as gentle a voice as he could manage, he said to the hapless merchant, "Would you mind staying here for a while longer? I need to be completely sure of your innocence."

"O-Of course. It would be my pleasure, My Lord!" the merchant said with an emphatic nod.

"Ugh..." Friede groaned, covering her eyes with a damp cloth. An imperial mage had seen to her healing, so her eyesight was fine. But she still had some lingering pain.

While she was groaning to herself, Archduke Lekomya came into her room.

"How are you feeling, Friede?"

"Ah, good evening, Lord Lekomya!" Friede hurriedly got to her feet and bowed. As she did, the wet cloth over her eyes plopped to the ground right at Lekomya's feet.

Panicking, Friede bowed again in apology.

"Ah, I'm so sorry about that!"

"I see you're feeling just fine," Lekomya said with a playful smile, and picked up the cloth, handing it to a nearby nurse.

"I'm terribly sorry for what happened. It's an unacceptable failure on our part that anyone from the Meraldian delegation was exposed to danger..." Lekomya let out a long sigh. "We owe Lord Veight an immeasurable debt, but instead of repaying it, we instead almost let his daughter come to harm. Please, forgive me."

"You don't need to apologize! If I'd just done a better job of protecting Micha, then..." Friede trailed off, shaking her head vigorously.

"You aren't Micha's bodyguard. It wouldn't be fair to expect you to protect

her. I'm just glad you weren't kidnapped as well."

"Lord Lekomya..." Friede knew how much Lekomya loved his daughter. Yet, despite her being kidnapped, here he was apologizing to someone he'd only met a few days ago. Her chest tightened as she thought about how heavily the shackles of duty must be weighing down on him right now.

"I'll help with the search for Micha!"

"I'm afraid I can't allow that. It wouldn't do to endanger your life any further. This is Rolmund's problem; a guest such as yourself shouldn't have to worry about it."

Lekomya's tone was gentle but firm. As a father himself, he knew how worried Veight would be if Friede risked her life to help. He couldn't allow it, both for personal and political reasons. Friede picked up on that as well, and realized there was no convincing him. *I guess that means I'll have to sneak out and look for her on my own.*

"You aren't planning on sneaking out to look for her on your own, are you?"

"D-Definitely not!"

Lekomya hadn't worked his way up to being leader of the Fourteen Imperial Generals without learning how to read people, and Friede was like an open book to him. But even so, Friede was determined to find Micha.

"If I learn anything new, I'll be sure to tell you as soon as possible. But please rest here until dinner at least," Lekomya said as he left the room.

Once he was gone Friede immediately began thinking of how to sneak out of the palace. Unfortunately, she was currently in Lekomya's office, which was only a few doors down from the empress's. It was one of the most heavily guarded areas of the palace. *There's no way I'll make it down the hallway...so what about the window? The garden probably isn't as well guarded.* Lekomya's office was on the second floor, so she'd be able to cover a lot of distance with her first jump.

As she prepared to make her escape, Friede suddenly heard a knock on her window.

“Mind if I come in, Astral Fencer’s daughter?”

“Huh?”

Even though this was the second floor, a well-dressed young man was standing outside the window.

“Who are you?”

Friede opened the window, and the young man slipped inside. His abnormal strength and agility marked him as a demon, even though he looked human. He flashed Friede a handsome smile and straightened his tuxedo, which vaguely resembled that of a butler’s.

“It’s a myth that we can only enter buildings we’ve been invited into, but I thought it would be polite to ask regardless. Besides, I don’t want Lady Shallier scolding me again.”

“Only enter buildings you’ve been invited into?”

Oh yeah, I heard people used to believe that about vampires. It’s not true, of course.

“Are you a demon then?”

“Yes, a proud member of the vampire race. The name’s Thuka.” He gave a polite bow. “You’re Friede, right? I can smell werewolf blood in you... Your father’s blood.”

“Yep. Am I going to meet a single person here who *doesn’t* know my dad?”

“I wouldn’t bet on it. Half the people in this country have some kind of connection to him. Anyway, I finally have a chance to repay my debt to him, and there’s no way I’m letting it slip past me.”

“Dad did something for you too, then?”

Thuka ignored Friede’s question and asked, “Would finding Micha’s location count as repaying our debts?”

“Absolutely!” Friede exclaimed.

“It wasn’t just werewolves who used to make their living hunting humans, you

know? Vampires have their own tricks for tracking prey down,” Thuka explained as he led Friede down one of the capital’s back alleys. The main street that cut through this district was bustling with stalls, but the alleys contained only deserted warehouses.

“Werewolves track by smell, but vampires use a different sense.”

“Which one?”

“Honestly, for the longest time, we didn’t know. We thought we could just sense the presence of people, but then some mages discovered we actually track the unique mana wavelengths that belong to humans.” Thuka turned around a corner, leading Friede even deeper into the maze of alleys. “The vampires of Rolmund pledged their service to Empress Eleora, and are under her personal protection. We’ve met with her and her close family a few times now, and have memorized their particular wavelengths.”

Curious, Friede asked, “You don’t have to suck their blood to decipher their wavelengths?”

Thuka turned to her, looking rather miffed by her question. “You guys can still tell humans apart by smell even though you don’t eat them, right? It’s the same thing.”

“That makes sense. I’m sorry I asked.”

“It’s fine, I can’t blame you for being wary. But just so you know, this is a secret known only to vampires, so please don’t go spreading it around.” He started walking again, leading Friede to a nondescript building. She sniffed at the air, and instantly noticed the smell.

“There’s a bunch of scents here. Blegh! Way too many of them!”

“That’s because it’s a perfume warehouse, and most of the perfumes stored here are animal-based. They’ll mess with a werewolf’s sense of smell.” Thuka gave Friede a faint smile and added, “But since vampires don’t rely on scent, such camouflage won’t work on us. Well, do you respect us a bit more now, werewolf girl?”

“Yeah, loads more!”

Surprised by her honest enthusiasm, Thuka took a half step backwards.

“O-Oh. You’re pretty forthright.”

“You think so?”

“I guess it makes sense considering who your father is. Anyway, I’ve repaid my debt now.” He turned around and took a step back towards the main street. “My brother’s already gone to report Micha’s location to the werewolves left in the capital. Even if you don’t do anything, Micha will be rescued soon. So remember, I did this as a favor to you, and not for her.”

“Thank you, Mister Thuka!”

“You really are a strange one. But I like you. Hopefully we’ll meet again, Friede.” Thuka gave Friede a casual wave and walked out of the alley. Friede turned back to the iron warehouse door.

“Now then...”

The door looked too sturdy to break down, but Friede was confident she could find a window or a ventilation shaft to sneak in through. There weren’t any lookouts, so she wouldn’t even have to be stealthy.

She folded her arms and looked up hesitantly at the building. *Should I really do this?* She was on foreign soil, solely here as an official member of the Meraldian delegation. Micha was her friend, but she was also Rolmund’s crown princess. Friede knew getting involved now could have political repercussions.

Should I leave this to Rolmund’s werewolves then? Friede didn’t even know how many kidnappers were inside this warehouse, or how they were keeping Micha locked up. She knew from experience that charging in alone could lead to disastrous results. *If something happens, dad won’t be around to save me this time. If you want to rescue someone, you need to ensure your own safety first.* And right now, Friede wasn’t confident she’d be safe if she went in.

Let’s just keep an eye on things for now. The best thing she could do for Micha right now was stake out the warehouse, and tell the Rolmund werewolves everything she learned when they arrived.

Friede lithely climbed up the wall of an adjacent warehouse, then leapt over

to a ventilation shaft jutting out of the perfume warehouse. It had iron grilles to keep people out, but she could still see inside it. *Uh-oh*. Because it was a warehouse, Friede had expected the building to be one big open space, but that wasn't the case. The room she was looking into was no bigger than a shop's storage closet. If this room was anything to go by, the warehouse's layout wasn't much different from a regular house.

Come to think of it, I guess a single bottle of perfume lasts a long time. You'd only need a few shelves to hold a hundred bottles or so, and that'd be enough for a store. All of the shelves were locked with thick metal doors, so she couldn't actually see any of the perfume. *Micha's not in here...is she? I'd die if I was stuck in a cramped place like this.* There was only one door in the room, which presumably led to the hallway. Most likely there were multiple other rooms identical to this one.

Hmm... Try as she might, Friede couldn't sniff out Micha's scent. All the perfume smells were getting in the way. If she could transform, she might be able to tell the subtle differences apart, since that would enhance her senses.

Problem is, I can't transform... Angrily poking at her own nose, Friede let out a small sigh. *A werewolf's weapon isn't just her nose though. My ears are super sensitive too.* The perfumes couldn't mess with her sense of hearing. There was a lot of background noise in the city, but Friede figured if she used magic to enhance her hearing, she'd be able to focus on the noises in the warehouse.

She cast the spell just as her dad had taught her and strained her ears. *Let's see here...* She could make out the muffled sounds of people talking inside. There were three of them, and they were all adult men.

"Do we have any new orders?"

"Nothing yet. They're probably struggling to hold the castle. We're trying to push forward with the negotiations, but..."

"No way the imperial family just sits tight and waits for negotiations to conclude. At this rate, it's only a matter of time before one of their search parties finds us."

"Don't worry. This warehouse isn't officially affiliated with the Olfsei family. We should have a few days of leeway at least. More importantly, keep an eye

on the princess. If she commits suicide, we're dead."

Sorry, but we've already found you. Friede smiled proudly, even though it was the vampires who'd found Micha. *Anyway, it looks like Micha's still safe for now. If they kidnapped her to use as leverage in negotiations, then they won't try to kill her unless talks break down. It's probably best to wait for Rolmund's werewolves to get here.* Even a small squad of werewolves could easily take control of a building this size.

Friede waited and waited, but Rolmund's werewolves didn't come. Eventually, the sun began to set. *I'm hungry...* Friede took a quick break to buy some bread from a nearby stall and chewed thoughtfully on it as she went back to her stakeout. She wanted to check back with the palace to see how the rescue plan was coming along, but she was worried the kidnappers might try to move Micha while she was gone, so she couldn't leave for more than a minute or two at a time.

What's taking them so long... If she had a dog whistle she'd be able to contact the other werewolves, but unfortunately, she didn't. Plus, considering the kidnappers had used dog whistles earlier, they'd likely suspect any message coming via whistle. Friede couldn't transform, so communicating via howls wasn't possible. Granted, even if she could, the kidnappers would definitely take notice of wolf howls in the middle of the city.

I wish I could use magic to contact people like Granny Movi. Friede had heard that Gomoviroa was developing a tool that would allow everyone to do just that, but since she didn't have it in her hands right now, it didn't matter.

While she waited, the conversation inside started taking a dark turn.

"Any response from Archduke Lekomya?"

"Not yet. The merchant we gave the blackmail letter to hasn't left the archduke's manor."

"Do you think Lekomya thought he was one of us and tortured him for information?"

"He may have just executed the merchant on the spot. The man may look soft, but he's merciless to his enemies. It's hard to say what might have

happened.”

The conversation died down for a bit, but then someone muttered, “So in the end...we still know nothing?”

“Pretty much. So what do you wanna do?”

“If imperial soldiers find us, we won’t be able to hold this building. I doubt we’ll be able to escape either. The count told us to dispose of the hostage and flee if we think it’s necessary.”

What?! Friede felt a chill run down her spine. She never imagined a Rolmundian noble would dare kill someone from the imperial family. *But then again, they’re starting revolts all the time, aren’t they? If they’re willing to kill political enemies on the battlefield, why would they shy away from assassinating them? Wh-Wh-What should I do?* At this point, Rolmund’s werewolves still hadn’t arrived.

Friede had no way of knowing it, but they were still combing the city since the vampires’ report hadn’t reached them yet. They were desperately trying to figure out where Micha might have gone before her trail went completely cold. Friede had held out this long believing they were coming, but she couldn’t wait any longer. She recalled the promise she’d made Micha earlier today.

“I promise if anything happens I’ll come save you, Micha. Even if Rolmund and Meraldia go to war, I’ll be on your side!” There was no way she was going to break that promise. If Micha died because of Friede’s indecision, she knew she’d regret it for the rest of her life.

I’m coming, Micha. Making up her mind, Friede did some quick calculations regarding her strength compared to her enemies’. Her eyes still stung a little from the maryweed powder, so her eyesight wasn’t as sharp as normal. Moreover, since she’d snuck out of the palace, she was unarmed. Meanwhile, it was hard to get a good picture of how many enemies were inside, and what weapons they had.

This is really reckless... She’d been taught never to pick a fight she couldn’t win. However, she surmised that there couldn’t be more than a few people inside, since this building wasn’t really designed to hide ambushers. *Maybe I can’t win in a head-on fight, but I bet I could beat them if this was a “hunt.”*

Werewolves were hunters by nature, not warriors. They camouflage themselves as humans, and strike from above or behind without warning. Friede thought as hard as she could to come up with a plan of attack.

The easiest thing to do would be to make some noise to distract the enemies, then rescue Micha...but that's dangerous. The kidnappers would only be distracted for a short while by the diversion, and they'd be on high alert once they realized what was happening. They might even try to kill Micha before Friede got to her. *In which case, my best bet is a stealth approach. Rolmund is cold, so the rooms are made small and airtight to keep heat in. I should be able to stay out of sight, and small noises will probably go unnoticed.* Friede still cast a silencing spell on herself just in case, muting sounds made close to her body. It was a very handy spell for sneaking into places.

I heard dad used this spell when he protected Zaria from the Senate. Friede reassured herself, remembering what she'd seen from the Black Werewolf King plays. *If I just do what dad did, I'll be fine...* She jumped up onto the roof of the warehouse, landing without a sound.

At around the same time, Micha was beginning to realize her life was in danger. The talking on the other side of the door was getting more heated, and she occasionally heard the sounds of scraping metal. There were a number of armed men outside her door now.

"Can we escape through the sewers?"

"No. Ever since those gladiators led by Draulight escaped, all the sewer exits leading out of the city were boarded up tight."

"Tch, so we won't be able to take the hostage with us. Fine, let's kill her and get out of here. If it's just us, we should be able to escape."

The kidnappers couldn't smuggle Micha out without getting spotted, but since their identities weren't known, they could still slip away if they didn't have her. Fortunately, it seemed the kidnappers were reluctant to kill her.

"No, wait. It'd be easy enough to kill her, but that'll limit our options. Let's think about this carefully. This is a crown princess we've got here. We slit her throat, and we'll be hunted for the rest of our days."

“Yeah, Empress Eleora’s tenacity is infamous. She’ll chase us to the frozen seas of the north and beyond if we hurt her kin.”

Aunt Eleora definitely can be persistent when she wants to... The people of Rolmund were lucky that Eleora kept her almost obsessive tenacity focused on politics and research, and not anything else.

Realizing that the situation could take a turn for the worse at any moment, Micha struggled harder to undo her bonds. Unfortunately, the thick rope was tied tight, and she could neither loosen nor cut through it.

If I could just get my hands free I’d be able to dispose of these hoodlums with auntie’s Blast Grimoire. Of course, she knew in reality that would be impossible. *It only has one shot, so it won’t be much help...* She needed someone to come rescue her.

Sighing, Micha looked up at the ceiling, and her eyes met Friede’s.

“Wha—” she reflexively shouted, before hurriedly shutting her mouth.

Friede grinned at her through the grilled vent. *Friede’s here to rescue me! I’ll be all right now! She’s super strong!* Micha had been about to give up, but now her fighting spirit was back. There was hope for her yet.

Just then, one of the kidnappers shouted through the door, “Hey, what’s with the commotion, princess?”

Micha hurriedly started coughing and said, “It’s... It’s too cold in here.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s kinda chilly. Hold on, I’ll bring you a blanket.”

Crap! Micha looked back up, but Friede was already gone. She was relieved that Friede wouldn’t get spotted, but it was also a little disheartening to have her rescuer vanish. The door swung open and a man in West Rolmundian formal dress walked in. This was the first time she’d gotten a good look at her kidnapper. He had a short sword sheathed at his waist, but Micha clamped down on her fear and tried to sound defiant.

“Where’s my blanket?”

“Sorry, this is all we’ve got,” the man said, throwing a rough jute bag at her feet. It must have held perfume ingredients originally, since it had a sweet scent

to it.

Reminding herself that Friede was here now, Micha steeled her resolve and said, "This will do, but I can't put it on with my hands tied."

"Good luck."

"My wrists are getting sore too. Can't you untie me for a few seconds at least? I won't try anything stupid. There's no way I'd be able to escape, and even if I could, I don't know where I am."

In truth, Micha had a pretty good idea of where she was, but she was trying her best to play the part of the ignorant princess.

The man narrowed his eyes at her. "What are you plotting?"

"I have my pride as a princess to uphold. I won't do something as unsightly as struggle." Micha put as much haughtiness into her voice as she could muster and waited to see how the man responded.

He thought about it for a few seconds, then sighed.

"Well, it'd be pretty pathetic if I was scared of a single little girl." He undid Micha's bonds, and she did her best to keep the elation off of her face.

"Thank you. You're a kind man."

"Heh, don't mention it."

Though he was a kidnapper, he was still happy to receive praise. Micha knew now wasn't the time to make a move, so she kept up the act and wrapped the bag around herself, shivering slightly.

"Phew..."

"If you're that cold, I'll bring you some hot water later. It wouldn't do to have anything happen to our hostage."

"I'd like that."

Inwardly, she was disappointed that all he was offering was some water, but she wasn't planning on taking his charity anyway. After all, Friede was coming for her.

Once the man had left, Micha took stock of her possessions. Her Blast

Grimoire was still safe. She pulled off the safety—which was shaped exactly like a bookmark—so that she could fire it at any time. The problem was, there were multiple enemies. When the man had opened the door earlier, she'd seen three others in the corridor. It was possible there were more of them in the building too.

Micha wasn't a mage, so she couldn't recharge the Blast Grimoire once it had fired. One shot was all she was going to get. *The kidnappers think I'm unarmed. That's the one advantage I have over them. I just hope Friede can take care of the rest.* She looked back up and saw that the grille covering the ventilation shaft was slightly warped. Something with a lot of power was clearly hitting it as the bars got bent further and further out of shape. Impacts that strong should have been making a lot of noise, but for some reason, they were totally silent. *She must be using magic.*

After a few more seconds of smacking, Friede finally succeeded in getting the grille out. She hurriedly grabbed it as it began to fall. *Will it make a noise if it falls still?* Micha thought to herself, spreading her bag out on the floor to help muffle the sound. Friede waited a moment for her to get clear, then dropped the grille. Micha wrapped it up in the bag and moved it to a corner of the room while Friede dropped down.

"Friede!" Micha shouted, but no noise came out. Still grinning, Friede pantomimed to her.

"You're using magic to erase noises around you?"

"Yep, that's right."

"Wow, that's convenient."

"Not right now it isn't."

The two of them chuckled to each other after using gestures and expression changes to pantomime that conversation out. *Friede really did come for me. She kept her promise.* Micha's respect for Friede went up a thousandfold.

Overcome by emotion, she hugged Friede. *"Thanks for coming to rescue me! I love you, Friede!"*

"What?! Whoa?!" After she'd had her fill of hugging, Micha released Friede

and looked her over.

“So, how are we getting out of here?”

“Well, about that...” With a series of odd gestures, Friede started explaining the plan.

“I brought you some hot water,” the kidnapper said, opening the door. The captive young girl nodded, the bag covering her to her shoulders.

“I’ll leave it here for you,” he said, placing the mug on the floor, and she nodded again.

“All right, just wait a bit longer, and you’ll get to leave.” The moment he turned to leave, the girl launched a kick at his defenseless back.

“Gaah!”

He slammed into the door and slumped to the ground, unconscious. He’d smacked his head hard enough against the iron door to give himself a concussion.

“Too easy,” Friede, who was wearing Micha’s clothes, said with a smile.

Once the kidnappers decided they were going to kill Micha, they’d be a lot more alert around her. So Friede’s plan had been to strike first and take them all out while they were off-guard. It was a bold, but reasonable plan. *It’d be too dangerous to climb back up out of the ventilation shaft after all...* Friede had barely made it down with more than a few close calls, so she doubted Micha could handle the climb. The princess was neither dressed for it nor had the agility and strength needed. If Micha attempted the climb and got stuck somewhere halfway, she wouldn’t be able to free herself. For now, Friede was having her hide in the shaft entrance, but she’d made it clear that Micha wasn’t to attempt the climb.

I hope Micha’s doing okay up there. Friede started to turn around to check on her, but then she heard another pair of footsteps approaching the door.

“Hey, what happ—” The man didn’t even get to finish his sentence before Friede hit him with a magic-enhanced punch to the face. There was a satisfying crunch, and the second man also fell to the floor, unconscious.

“Two more to go.” Friede would have had trouble with four people at once, but she could take two, even if they managed to pincer her. But just as she was celebrating her victory, she heard a multitude of footsteps.

“Hurry!”

“Wait, did you hear that?!”

“What’s going on here?!”

A group of men armed with rapiers and knives piled into the room. There were ten of them in total. *That’s too many!* The scent that came in with them was reminiscent of the smell of the city. They must have only just arrived in this warehouse. They kept their swords pointed at Friede while they addressed the two guards who’d been here from the start.

“Hey, this place got compromised! The werewolves will be here soon! Kill the princess and get out of here!”

It appeared the reinforcements Friede had been waiting for were finally on their way. Unfortunately, she would have to protect Micha on her own until they got here. Friede didn’t know what the situation was like outside, but they were clearly intent on killing Micha now.

The men surrounded Friede with their weapons brandished.

“Is this the princess?”

“That’s right!” Friede shouted, but another one of the men shook his head.

“No, that’s not her.”

“Come on, there’s no way the crown princess would look like that.”

“Busted already?!” Friede didn’t know why, but the men were apparently able to immediately tell she was an imposter.

“Whatever, kill her too! Someone go look for the princess!”

“I just told you, I’m Micha!” Friede boosted her physical abilities with magic and charged forward.

“Hiyaaa!”

She caught one of the men with a roundhouse kick, and he knocked over

shelves and tables as he flew backwards. As she pivoted, she caught another man with a backhanded punch, then jumped off his back, high enough to touch the ceiling.

“Uryaaaah!” As she fell, she amplified her weight for just a second and crushed another man’s shoulder blade with a well-placed dropkick. He fell to the ground, screaming in pain.

“I’m not done yet!” Friede shouted, while taking a second to catch her breath.

With this, she’d taken out a total of five guards, but there were still close to ten left. She no longer had the element of surprise either, and her foes circled her warily, their rapiers outstretched and ready to stab.

This isn’t going to be easy... Friede would almost certainly hurt herself trying to parry their weapons bare-handed. Of course, she could use strengthening and healing magic to mitigate those injuries, but then she’d run out of mana keeping herself in fighting shape. *I should just take them all out at once with a Soul Shaker.* She’d be able to get them all with it, and it would help draw the mana in the room towards her. There was just one problem with that plan.

“Coordinate your attacks!”

“Got it!”

Her foes were rushing her all at once, giving her no opportunity to cast.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!”

If she was just against one person, Friede would have been able to deal with them while focusing on casting, but this many foes required her full attention. Especially since they knew how to work as a team. *I can’t cast Soul Shaker like this!* Friede needed to suck in a big breath before she used the spell, which would naturally slow her down. People usually kept their breaths short when they were fighting.

“Hah!” She danced out of the way of a rapier thrust at her stomach, then bent backwards to avoid one aimed at her neck. Just dodging wasn’t too hard. Her kinetic vision was powerful enough that the assailants looked like they were moving in slow motion. But so long as she was focusing on dodging, she couldn’t catch a moment to take a big breath.

I need an opening to breathe or... If she didn't hurry, her strengthening magic would wear off. She wasn't good enough at it to keep it active indefinitely, and she wouldn't get a chance to recast it once it was gone. But the worst was still to come.

One of the men thrust a hand into his pocket and shouted, "I'm gonna use the spice powder!"

"Wha?!" Friede shouted, her instincts screaming "Danger!" at her. Her nose still remembered the smell of the powder that had blinded her. *They're going for my eyes!* Friede's foes all pulled out protective masks with glass goggles. This was clearly a strategy they'd rehearsed. Friede tried to steal one, but the man unleashed the powder before she could.

"Uwaaa?!"

"Gyaaaaa?!"

Two of the men had failed to put their masks on in time, and they rolled around the ground, moaning in pain. Their eyes and throats were goners. Clearly, these kidnappers didn't care about friendly fire, which made things all the more dangerous for Friede. She'd plopped the bag over her head just before the powder came out, so she hadn't taken any damage from the powder, but she still couldn't see.

"Get her!"

Friede relied on her hearing to dodge her enemies' attacks. She jumped from wall to wall, staying well out of her opponents' attack ranges. As she jumped around, she shoved over shelves and cabinets to slow her assailants. But she knew she couldn't keep this up for long. Sooner or later someone would get a lucky hit. Because they were in a closed room, no wind would clear away the powder either. Plus, taking a big breath now would mean sucking in a bunch of powder, so she couldn't use Soul Shaker either.

Wh-Wh-What do I do now?! Am I doomed?! Visions of her own death flashed through her mind, and she thought about the last time she'd been in a situation like this. *Back then, dad had shown up to save me, but right now I'm the one who came here to save Micha!* If Friede died here, Micha died with her. That thought bolstered her resolve. She couldn't afford to lose here. *I'm pretty sure*

dad took a bunch of bullets and still... Wait, that's it! Just as a plan came to her, she heard Micha's voice in the distance.

"Friede, I want to help you out, but you're moving so much I can't shoot without risking hitting you!"

"That's fine!" Friede shouted, then hurriedly added, "Mana!"

"What?!"

Micha sounded confused, but Friede didn't have the breath to give her a verbal explanation, and she was too busy dodging to pantomime one. *Please, just shoot me!* One of the kidnappers' swords grazed the bag on her head. Motes of powder started filtering in through the tiny hole.

"Gah!" Friede gasped, as she held the cut shut and closed her eyes and nose. Since she was relying solely on hearing to move around, she frequently bumped her back or her shoulder against the walls. Half of her body was covered in bruises at this point. And her reckless dodging would only work for a few more seconds.

Another sword sliced through the bag, opening another hole. The thick jute actually provided a decent amount of armor for Friede, and without it, her face would have been laced with cuts by now.

Come on Micha, I need you! Wait, I've got it! Micha had said she couldn't aim because Friede was moving around too much. Steeling herself, Friede moved directly underneath the ventilation shaft and stood still.

"Micha!"

"Okay!"

The light from the Blast Grimoire was so bright Friede could see it through her closed eyes, as well as the thick bag. She absorbed as much of the shot's power as she could.

"All right, let's do this!" Friede shouted, feeling mana suffuse her. The bag had been blown away in the torrent of light, but Friede didn't need it anymore. She used a portion of the mana to neutralize the toxins in the powder around her, making it harmless. She then sucked in a huge breath and let loose with Soul

Shaker.

“AWOOOOOOOOOO!” In a closed room like this one, her howl sounded ten times louder than usual.

“Waaah!”

“Argh!”

The masked men stumbled backwards, trembling in fear. Werewolves had been humans’ natural predators since time immemorial. Fear of a werewolf’s howl was baked into their DNA.

The battle ended immediately. All of the mana Friede hadn’t been able to absorb started gathering around her thanks to the effects of her Soul Shaker. With this much excess, she’d easily be able to go another round. Relieved, Friede used strengthening magic to protect her skin, eyes, and nose from the powder and looked around the room. *Yeah, we should be fine.* The kidnappers were all trembling in fear.

“This is payback,” Friede said, ripping the masks off of the petrified men. They immediately started writhing in pain as the powder assaulted their eyes and noses.

“Are you okay, Micha?”

“Yeah. I’m still in the ventilation shaft, and the wind from outside is keeping the powder away.”

Friede looked up and saw Micha still holding the Blast Grimoire out in front of her with trembling hands. Friede couldn’t tell if Micha was laughing or crying, but with how badly her hands were shaking, it was probably the latter.

Friede grinned, trying to reassure her. Remembering one of her dad’s favorite catchphrases, she said in a joking voice, “Never fear, the wolf’s here.”

“Thank you, Friede. Thank you...” Micha sniffled, and for a second Friede wondered if some powder hadn’t gotten into her nose after all.

Afterwards, Friede got a good scolding from every authority figure in the city.

“I am extremely grateful that you rescued Princess Micha for us. But if

anything had happened to you, relations between Rolmund and Meraldia would have deteriorated. Please take more care of yourself,” Archduke Lekomya said with a sigh.

Kurtz was standing next to him, looking resigned.

“You really do take after your father...” he said, unable to think of anything else to say. After a few seconds he stopped standing as stiffly and added, “There’s a lot I want to say, but for now, I’m glad you’re safe.”

“Thank you, professor,” Friede said with a polite bow. Lekomya and Kurtz exchanged glances, then started whispering to each other.

“Is she always like this, Sir Kurtz?”

“More or less.”

“I suppose I should have expected as much from Lord Veight’s daughter.”

“You might find this amusing since you’re a foreign lord, but I’m the one who has to educate her. I’m beginning to regret becoming her teacher.”

Still bowing, Friede raised a hand and said, “Umm, I can hear you.”

“That’s fine, just stand there and listen,” Kurtz said, clearing his throat. He then turned back to Lekomya and resumed whispering his complaints.

Once Kurtz had gotten it all out of his system, Lekomya turned to Friede and said, “You acted rashly, and your actions could have caused an international incident. You aren’t fit to be part of the Meraldian delegation.”

“I know...”

Everything Lekomya said was true, and Friede did feel bad about making things harder for him. But she knew she’d make the same choice to act if she had to.

Kurtz seemed to be able to tell that as well and sighed. “She’ll do it again if the situation calls for it. She’s just like her father.”

“I can definitely see the resemblance,” Lekomya replied with a wry smile. “As an archduke, I cannot formally condone your actions. But as a father, you have my deepest thanks. I will never forget that you risked your own life to save my

daughter's."

Lekomya squatted down, placed a hand on Friede's shoulder, and smiled.

"I owe you more than you can ever imagine. Thank you so much. I promise I'll repay this debt one day."

"I-It's fine!"

It was an unnerving experience, being thanked by Rolmund's most famed noble. Still, Friede stood her ground. There was one thing she absolutely had to make clear.

"All I did was save a good friend. I didn't do anything worthy of special praise."

For a moment Lekomya looked taken aback, but then he smiled. "I see. Now that you mention it, I suppose you're right." He patted Friede's shoulder again. "But even so, I'm still grateful to you. Please continue to be Micha's friend from here on out as well. She needs people like you by her side."

"Of course, My Lord!" Friede replied with a happy smile.

After Friede left, Lekomya went to the salon room granted to the empire's generals. Most of them were out helping suppress the rebellion, and there were only a few others in the room.

"That nearly became a disaster, Lekomya. I'm glad your daughter got out safe and sound."

"Thank you. But now I owe even more to Lord Veight, albeit indirectly." Lekomya took his seat and one of his friends poured him a cup of tea. He took a sip and said, "I thought maybe I could at least do a better job at raising kids than Lord Veight, but I haven't even managed to do that..."

"Is Friede that amazing?"

"Oh, yes, absolutely. I can't hold a candle to her." Lekomya threw his hands up in the air. "She's brave, sincere, and unbelievably kind. If she ends up taking over for her father, then Meraldia's future looks bright."

Lord Shawch turned to Lekomya and said, "Meraldia has far more demons living in it than Rolmund, and followers of all sorts of religions. It's not very

unified. Do you really think it'll remain stable so long as Lord Veight's daughter is at the helm?"

"I do. She has her father's spirit. In a decade or two, Meraldia will have two Black Werewolf Kings."

"That's reassuring," Shawch said with a smile.

Lekomya looked around at the few generals present and said, "Now then, we'd be a complete laughingstock if we let a girl who came here as our guest do our jobs for us. Let's put an end to this rebellion and restore peace to Rolmund."

"Of course. We adults should be the ones to take care of dirty jobs like these."

Rebels were given the death penalty, without exception. A lot of blood would be spilled once this rebellion was put down.

Lekomya nodded, and placed a few documents on top of the table. "The bloody cleanup work is our responsibility. As is ensuring something like this never happens again. Let's get started, friends. I want to wrap this up before Meraldia's delegation goes home."

"Now you're just asking for the impossible," Lord Pieti said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"There's a guy on the other side of the mountains that does the impossible all the time. We better get used to doing it ourselves, since soon there'll be two people in Meraldia like that."

"Hahaha."

The generals looked over Lekomya's documents, then quickly got to work.

After Micha was rescued, Friede was kept in the dark about Rolmund's internal affairs. Lekomya and the others didn't want to burden her with the knowledge that they'd carried out a bloody purge to ensure no rebellious sentiment remained. After all, she was still just a student. Originia itself was quite peaceful, and Friede and the others had many meetings and events to keep them occupied. The government hadn't paid for their trip here so that everyone could tour the city and eat sweets, after all. Friede had enough time

to get used to Rolmund's cooking before the day of her departure arrived.

"You're finally going..." Micha said sadly.

"Mhm. The council wants us back," Friede replied.

"What a shame. I wish you could come visit again in a month, but I suppose that's not possible."

"That'd be a bit difficult, yeah."

Meraldia and Rolmund still hadn't officially built any diplomatic ties. Friede and Micha both knew it wasn't just a matter of having the time and money to visit.

But Friede wasn't going to let political difficulties get in her way. In a resolute voice, she said, "Let's both do what we can in our respective countries to make sure we can meet up and eat sweets again."

Micha looked momentarily taken aback, but then nodded. "Of course."

As they were saying their farewells, Eleora showed up. Lekomya and her other chief retainers were with her. There was going to be a formal send-off for the Meraldian delegation in the courtyard later, so all the important nobles were in the capital.

"I'm sure your efforts will bear fruit sooner than you think. Demon Lord Airia and myself are both hoping our two nations can forge an alliance too. Though I'm sure there will be a lot of negotiating that needs to be done first," Eleora said, patting Friede and Micha on the head. "The two of you aren't bound by the chains of the past, like the older generation is. Which means it's up to you to shape our future. I'm sure you'll be able to accomplish what we couldn't."

"Y-You honor me, Your Majesty. I'm, err, not worthy of such praise," Friede replied nervously, trying to remember the proper formal response. Eleora straightened up and looked at the palace's main gates.

"Come to think of it, I never did give you a reward. You saved our crown princess, we can hardly let you go home empty-handed."

"Y-You really don't have to! I'm flattered, truly, but I don't need a reward!"

Any gift Friede accepted would have diplomatic ramifications. She was well

aware of that, and so firmly refused any reward for saving Micha.

But Eleora just chuckled and said, “I know you don’t. But the thing about empresses is, we’re allowed to do whatever we want.” She pointed to the ostentatious gates leading in and out of the palace. “The main gates of the palace haven’t been named yet. They need an appellation worthy of the entrance to the empress’s house. And I’ve just now decided that Aindorf Gate is a fitting name. Archduke Lekomya, see to it that the name is engraved onto these gates as soon as possible.”

Lekomya shot Friede an impish grin, then bowed reverently to Eleora.

“It has already been seen to, Your Majesty.”

“Whoops, I forgot I already decided that a while back.” Eleora gave Friede a friendly wink.



“Umm...how exactly... Huh?” Friede was still trying to process the knowledge that her surname would be on a foreign palace’s gates.

“What’s wrong? Do people not name their gates in Meraldia?” Eleora asked with a chuckle. She seemed to be enjoying Friede’s reaction.

“They don’t, actually...”

“The Aindorf name is quite famous in Meraldia. And now, everyone who enters Rolmund’s palace will walk through Aindorf Gate.”

“Whoa...” Friede muttered, only now realizing the implications of what Eleora had done.

“This gate’s name will be a symbol of our two nations’ friendship. You should rejoice, this is all thanks to the efforts of your delegation,” Eleora said.

She’s tricking me somehow. I can smell the lie on her.

“We can’t let the fact that Micha was kidnapped become public knowledge, which is why officially we’re naming this gate in the Demon Lord’s honor. It helps that it’s also Veight’s surname. We’re basically killing three birds with one stone.” Eleora gave Friede a childish smirk.

Crap, she got me good. Friede hung her head in defeat.

“Y-Y-You really don’t need to... Umm...thank you very much. It’s a great honor...”

“Hehe, there’s more than one way to play the game of diplomacy. Never forget that.” Eleora fondly ruffled Friede’s hair until it was a complete mess. Once she was done, Micha stepped closer to Friede.

“Be careful on the way back. I’ll be sure to find plenty more delicious sweet shops for our next tea party.”

“Guess I’ll have to come back soon then!” Friede said, trying to inject some cheer into her voice.

Micha suddenly hugged her, so that Friede wouldn’t see that she was crying. She stayed like that for some time, clinging to Friede until her tears dried.

During Friede’s stay in Rolmund, I made sure none of the rebels attacked the

delegation, and even helped Eleora a little in taking down their leader. Blast Canes had become the standard in Rolmund, which made my life easier, since everyone's bullets just healed me.

Once my mission was complete, Lekomya begged me to come visit the capital for a few days, but I explained my reasons for wanting to stay hidden to him, and returned to Meraldia without Friede ever learning I'd been in Rolmund. I'd been in Krauhen for a few days, telling the viceroys what I'd learned in Rolmund, when Friede and the rest of the delegation returned. First, I made sure to get a full report from Kurtz.

"Rolmund's political situation has stabilized quite a bit over the past decade, and they've begun pouring resources into research and development, as well as streamlining their bureaucracy. I suspect their rate of technological advancement will rise sharply in the coming years."

"Thank you for your report, Technical Officer Kurtz. As I thought, building a friendly relationship with Rolmund is of the utmost importance. I'll do my best to convince the council."

Kurtz had a ton more written reports for me as well, which I pored over with Krauhen's viceroy, Belken. The demon army and the Commonwealth Council would need to evaluate the political and military significance of the reports independently, but I could at least summarize them so Airia and the other councilors wouldn't have to read them all.

Just as I'd finished organizing the reports, I heard a knock at my door. *I figured she'd come around now.*

"Come in," I said, and the door swung open. As expected, it was Friede who walked in.

"Da—I mean, Councilor Veight."

"Yes?" I asked, and Friede straightened her back and gave me a proper demon army salute.

"Friede Aindorf has returned from her mission in Rolmund."

"Well done."

“Oh yeah, dad, I’ve gotta tell you something!”

You couldn’t even stick to formal speech for five seconds, huh? Sighing, I bowed to Belken and said, “Would it be all right if I took a short break to take care of some private matters, Lord Belken?”

“Of course. We’ve already finished examining the reports, so you may as well rest for the night. All that’s left to do is have my secretaries make copies,” Belken replied with a smile, and I led Friede into the courtyard.

“Did you grow taller while you were in Rolmund?” I asked.

“No one grows that fast, dad. Oh, but I learned how to properly shoot a Blast Cane from the empress!”

Oh god, what did you do? Friede excitedly told me about all that happened during her trip. I’d heard most of it already from Kurtz’s report, but there were a few things I hadn’t known about. For example, I hadn’t known that Friede had snuck out of the palace with Micha. But it seemed like the two of them had become close friends. I hadn’t expected that, but it meant diplomacy between our two nations would be easier. That was all well and good, but—

“Also, Micha’s suuuuper nice! Did you know, her dad’s Archduke Lekomya! He’s Rolmund’s greatest hero! Oh, and Micha’s hair is so pretty! And she said this perfume suits me!”

All she’s talking about is Micha. I’m sure hanging out with her wasn’t all you did, but I guess I’ll ask about the rest tomorrow. From what Friede said, it sounded like Micha was growing up to be a very competent heir. *I guess Rolmund will remain stable for another generation, at least.*

As Friede regaled me with stories of Micha, I spotted Joshua—one of the werewolves from Rolmund—running through the courtyard. Fahn was with him.

“Come on, run faster! If you can’t fight while in your human form, how will you handle a surprise attack?!” she shouted.

“Y-Yes ma’am!”

Joshua looked pretty out of breath. Fahn was one strict drill sergeant, and

Joshua was still just a kid. Her training regimen was likely too much for him. *I should probably check up on him later.* I turned back towards Friede and saw her staring at me.

“Who’s that guy?”

“He’s a werewolf from Rolmund. Some of them came here to train with us, so I had them join our squad.”

“Dad...did you go to Rolmund too?”

Uh oh, the werewolf’s out of the bag. She’s gotten sharper. As your dad I’m glad, but I wish you wouldn’t see through me so easily. I considered coming up with a cover story, but I really didn’t want to lie to my daughter.

“I can’t tell you the details, but yes.”

“I knew it...”

Friede looked visibly disappointed. She puffed out her cheeks and said, “Aren’t you being a bit too overprotective?”

From her perspective, this had been her first independent adventure, so it was hardly surprising she was mad to learn I’d come too. It was similar to how a kid would be annoyed if their parents came with them on a school field trip. *Well, I guess I should at least tell her enough to clear up this misunderstanding.*

“Don’t worry, I never even came close to the capital. I was there for work.”

“Council business?”

“Yeah, they had a secret mission for me. I’m afraid I can’t tell you anymore, even if you are my daughter.”

It was important to draw the line between my public and private life. Fortunately, it seemed that was enough for Friede.

She nodded and said, “I see... I guess I can’t blame you then.”

Thank god you’re so understanding.

She gave me a big smile and added, “I achieved a lot while you were working! I made sure to properly build connections in Rolmund too.”

“That’s great.”

Kurtz had told me about how she'd blown up half of the firing range and had beaten 30 imperial guards in a wrestling match, but it seemed like she'd made a lot of friends and learned a lot as well. Plus, even Kurtz had said that Friede left an extremely good impression in Rolmund, so I probably didn't need to worry.

I patted Friede's head and smiled at her. "Good job. I knew you'd make me proud."

"Ehehe."

"All right, let's go back to Rynheit. Mom's waiting for us."

"Okay!"

And so the two of us returned to Rynheit, only to discover sad news awaiting our arrival.

"Elder Schwaid passed away?!"

When I reached the werewolf quarter, I discovered that one of our village's elders had died. Over the last decade, our elders had slowly been dying of old age, and now there were only two left. Well, actually just one now, since old man Schwaid had been one of them.

"But he was still so full of vigor. How did he die?" I asked the last living elder, Lagar.

He slumped in his chair and hung his head.

"It was a transformation death. You've heard of them, right?"

"Yeah..."

A werewolf's transformation put a lot of strain on the body's muscles. It was rare, but sometimes that strain could prove to be fatal. If an old werewolf pushed themselves to transform, sometimes the muscles developed tumors that spread rapidly.

Lagar sighed and said, "He went out on a hunt to keep himself in shape, and when he transformed, he grew a lump in his throat. It killed him almost instantly."

That's awful.

Lagar looked up at me and muttered sadly, "I've gotten too old to transform myself... A werewolf who can't fight isn't fit to lead the pack."

"I guess we need to choose a new batch of elders then."

"We do...but you need to make sure the new elders meet the proper criteria."

"What criteria?"

In truth, I had no idea how a werewolf pack's elders were chosen.

Lagar stroked his wispy white hair and explained, "An elder must be a strong fighter, have a lot of experience, and have the support of the pack. But most importantly, they need to be an Invigorator."

"What's that?" I'd never heard that term before.

"An Invigorator is someone who gets a little younger every time they transform. Because of that, they live longer than most werewolves."

"Oh, like Vodd."

"Precisely. I sense the power of an Invigorator from him, but..." Lagar shook his head. "He won't do. He's basically my age. What's the point of naming a successor who won't outlive me? Besides, he doesn't want to be an elder anyway."

"Yeah, I can't see him enjoying the job."

Vodd did like looking after people, but he didn't like making decisions on behalf of a group. He was individualistic to the core, and wasn't suited to leadership.

"What about Fahn and Monza? They're both Invigorators."

They looked like they hadn't aged a day in the past decade. Plus, they were both strong, and had plenty of experience. Lagar, however, shook his head once more.

"No, not them. If they become elders, they'll have even less time to look for husbands. Besides, even if Fahn is fit for the job, Monza definitely isn't."

Fair enough. Monza had a bit of a sadistic streak, and she was far too

capricious.

“You’re purposely avoiding the man most suited for the job, aren’t you, Veight?”

Oh, you noticed? I took a few steps back and shook my head.

“I don’t wanna. I already have my hands full being a demon army general *and* a councilor. I can’t take on any more responsibilities.”

“But you’re a skilled fighter, loved by everyone, have plenty of experience, and are an Invigorator.”

Sure, but that doesn’t mean I want the job. Lagar got up and walked towards me.

“We’re living together with humans now. The days when we survived by hunting in the forest are long gone. Us old folk aren’t suited to lead the pack in this new world.”

“You’ve done a pretty good job so far.”

“Only because you and the demon army have been there to mediate for us. In fact, you’ve been the de facto leader of our pack for a while now.” Before I could argue back, Lagar added, “You’re the only one of us who has connections with Rolmund’s werewolves too. There’s no denying you’re the most important member of our pack. Besides, aren’t you the one who allowed young Joshua to join us?”

“Only because Volka conned me into it. She wants to make sure her people are safe in case anything happens to Eleora.”

Volka wanted footholds in Meraldia in case her pack was ever chased out of Rolmund. But stubborn old Lagar refused to budge.

“It doesn’t matter why Rolmund’s werewolves are doing this. The point is, you’re the one who’s making decisions for us, and you’re the one who’s making our pack stronger. You should be our leader.”

“Oh, give me a break.”

I wanted to retire as soon as possible so I could focus on researching magic with Master. If I became an elder, it’d take even longer before that would be

possible. I understood where Lagar was coming from though. Being an elder was a heavy responsibility. It was a position you could only give to someone you had absolute trust in.

The only reason all of us werewolves could live comfortably in Ryunheit was because the werewolf squad serving under the demon army was working hard. And since I was the leader of that squad, it made sense to make me an elder of our pack. Also, the pleading look Lagar gave me made it really hard to refuse.

“Who knows how many years I have left? I can’t keep looking after the pack for much longer. Please, won’t you safeguard our people’s future?”

It’d be inhuman of me to refuse him. Though, I guess I’m a werewolf, not a human.

Steeling my resolve, I said, “F-Fine... I’ll be our elder until the next generation’s ready to take over.”

“Truly?”

“Yes, I swear it on my ancestor’s fangs.” I nodded solemnly, and Lagar jumped for joy.

“Hell yes! It worked, Schwaid!”

“Wahaha, you got him good!”

What...? That was Schwaid’s voice, wasn’t it? I turned around and saw Schwaid walking out of the closet.

“I thought you were dead, Schwaid... Wait, you guys tricked me?!”

“Deceiving your prey and striking when they lower your guard is how you pull off a successful hunt. This is what it means to be a true werewolf, Elder Veight.”

Dammit, they got me good. While it was true my senses weren’t as sharp in my human form, I still couldn’t believe Schwaid had been stealthy enough to completely avoid detection. Older werewolves couldn’t beat younger ones in a head-on contest of strength, but they were far craftier than we were. *Wonderful. At least this means our remaining elders are still lively. Anyway...*

“I can’t say I approve of such devious methods.”

“I mean, there’s no way you would have agreed if we didn’t go this far,” Schwaaid said defensively.

This is why I hate werewolves.

“We got forced into becoming elders when we were younger too,” Lagar said with a grin. “Though, in our case, our elders beat the hell out of us until we finally said we’d do it. Wahahahaha.”

“Man, I remember those days.”

That’s too violent for me. I liked my werewolf pack, but every now and again their bloodthirstiness surprised me. Well, I guess it makes sense to make someone good at negotiating with humans an elder, since we’re going to be living with them from now on. Fine, I guess I’ll do it. Schwaaid and Lagar have worked for long enough anyway.

“Just so you know, I still have to prioritize my work for the council and the demon army. Also, even if I’m your elder now, I can’t show you guys any favoritism.”

The two elders nodded.

“That’s fine. We weren’t expecting you to ever do anything shady to begin with.”

“You lead the pack the way you think is right. Us old-timers won’t get in your way.”

Well, I appreciate that at least.

“I don’t think I can handle everything by myself, so can I make Fahn and Jerrick my assistants?”

“Go for it. No one’s gonna argue with the new elder.”

“We’ll keep an eye on things to make sure nothing gets out of hand, but otherwise, just do whatever you want.”

You totally plan to retire the moment I take over, don’t you? It’s not fair.

And thus, I became the newest elder of the werewolf pack, even though it was a responsibility I really didn’t want. It was like joining your local city council,

but while you could leave the council after a year or two, I was stuck with this role for life.

After returning to Ryunheit, Friede was accepted into Meraldia University's magic program. It had been what she was working towards until now, but it seemed she'd had a change of heart.

"Micha's a princess, so she's studying politics and military affairs too..."

After meeting Rolmund's crown princess, Friede was no longer sure about what she wanted to study. Airia and I sipped some tea while we gently watched Friede grapple with this newfound problem.

Personally, I didn't want my daughter to get involved in politics. Being a viceroy was a lot of responsibility, and it was dangerous too. But at the same time, Friede was the heir of the Aindorf family, which had served as Ryunheit's viceroys for generations. Even if Friede decided politics wasn't for her, she wouldn't be able to completely free herself of it. What mattered most though was Friede's own desires.

"What do you want to be in the future, Friede?"

"Hmm... That's a good question..." She reached for a cookie with one hand while massaging her forehead with the other. "Being a politician or a diplomat sounds like too much work. Same goes for being a general. But I guess being a magician isn't easy either?"

"It sure isn't."

Friede was beginning to understand how complex the world was. The job of a knight or general involved a lot more than just looking cool. And while it looked like politicians and diplomats got to live in the lap of luxury, they had quite a few responsibilities. Naturally, being a mage wasn't as glitzy a job as it seemed either. Research required a lot of patience.

Friede sprawled over the table and muttered, "Argh... I don't think I can do any of these jobs."

"Well, you can't right now, but that's what school is here to teach you."

“Did you study a lot too, dad?”

“Tons.” Especially if you included the amount of time I spent studying in my past life.

Smiling, Airia patted Friede’s head and said, “As long as you put your mind to it, you can become whatever you want. Just remember, each job comes with its own responsibilities. And no matter what job you pick, there’s one thing you absolutely need to properly fulfill those responsibilities.”

“What’s that?”

Airia glanced back at me and chuckled.

“Love for what you do. You need to enjoy your job—be proud of it—or you won’t be able to stick with it through thick and thin.”

Now that’s good advice. I nodded in agreement and said, “Airia’s right. You have to pick something you think you’ll want to keep doing for the rest of your life. That matters a lot more than how important the job seems, or how flashy it is.”

“Hmm... But I don’t know what I love doing...”

Yeah, I know.

Friede agonized over her choices for a while longer, then suddenly looked up at us. “I want to become stronger. I don’t mean at fighting. I want the kind of strength that can save other people.”

“Oh, that’s a good way of thinking,” I replied.

“But both politicians and mages have that kind of strength, you know?” Airia said. “A mage has the power to heal the sick, while a politician has the authority to build a hospital.”

Realizing that epiphany hadn’t actually brought her any closer to an answer, Friede once again sprawled over the table. After a few seconds, she suddenly muttered, “Oh, I know.”

Looks like she’s thought of something.

The next day, I received a visit from Fumino, who was now one of Wa's official diplomats.

"You want to send more survey teams into the Windswept Dunes?" I asked.

"Yes. The desert is massive. At this rate, it'll take hundreds of years to finish mapping the place out. We're hoping Meraldia will be willing to cooperate with us."

Creating land routes to Wa would facilitate trade, but those same roads could be used by a potential invading army. There was no telling if Meraldia's alliance with Wa would last forever, so it wouldn't hurt for Meraldia to have a hand in building those routes.

"Got it. I'll ask Zaria, Veira, and Shardier's viceroys for help at the next council meeting. Their cities are closest to the Windswept Dunes."

"Thank you very much, Veight," Fumino said, bowing her head. "By the way..." she glanced towards the door.

I smiled and said, "She's been like that all morning."

Fumino smiled as well and replied, "What a cute spy you have."

"She had an epiphany last night. I can ask her to leave if necessary."

"No, that's fine. I don't have anything confidential to discuss today."

But you will later? After Fumino left, I looked into organizing teams to map out the Windswept Dunes. I needed to hash out a budget and find out which people we could spare. *I should get some council workers to do the preliminary work of getting these teams ready. That way, I'll have a proper budget estimate to give to the council at our next meeting.* This sort of logistical work was annoying, but I was used to handling it thanks to my past life.

But before I could do much, the elder Garney brother came running up to me.

"Hey, Veight—I mean, elder! One of our youngsters got into a fight with a human!"

"He didn't kill him, did he?"

"No, it was a tavern brawl. The human's arm got broken though."

Every damn time.

“And who was this werewolf fighting with?”

“One of the soldiers from Beluza. They got into a fight over a bet on a card game.”

Oh, then it's not too bad. I let out a sigh of relief.

“In that case, I'll talk to Grizz. We'll treat the soldier at the demon army's hospital.”

If the werewolf had injured a civilian, I would have had to offer a public apology and everything. *Oh yeah, that reminds me.*

“Bring the guy who started the fight to my office later. I need to give him a lesson about the responsibilities of the strong.”

“O-Okay...” Garbert gulped, and shot me more than a few worried looks as he walked out of the room. It was precisely because werewolves were stronger than humans that they needed to be more careful when in human society.

A little bit before noon, I forced the werewolf who'd started the fight into a wrestling match with me.

“Hiyaaa!”

I threw him using one of the martial arts tricks I'd learned in Wa, and he rolled across the ground before scrambling to his feet.

“Wait, elder! I didn't mean to hurt him that bad, werewolves are just stronger than humans! I couldn't help it!”

You just don't get it, do you? I tripped him up with a leg sweep while casting magic on him to make him light enough to float. I then magnified his weight—technically, I increased the force of gravity on him, but functionally it was the same thing—and he slammed into the floor.

“Gaaaah!”

No matter how well he broke his fall, that kind of force couldn't be easily dissipated.

Still in my human form, I waited to see if he'd counterattack.

"If the strong can't help but hurt the weak, then I guess there's nothing wrong with me hurting you either, is there?"

"Wha..." He'd completely lost the will to fight. "Y-You're joking, right, elder?! If you went all out, I'd be dead instantly!"

"I can't help it, I'm just stronger than you."

Up we go. I threw him into the air and hit him with a body slam.

"Ugaaah!"

"Come on, we're just getting started."

I hadn't even transformed, and I was only using the most basic techniques. There were joint locks and pile drivers I could use to really put on the hurt, but I didn't want to cripple him, so I was holding back.

"Survival of the fittest is the law all demons follow, right? No one would complain if I skinned you and used your fur for a rug."

"Wait, elder, I— Owwwwwww!"

I put him in a wrist lock, and he tried to roll away. *Shouldn't you have a higher pain tolerance if you're a werewolf?* I let go of him when he started panting and plopped down on the ground next to him.

"See, it's no fun when someone stronger than you beats the crap out of you, right?"

"Yes... I-I thought I was gonna die..."

"There are plenty of people stronger than you in this world. Hell, there are even people stronger than me out there."

"There's no way anyone's stronger than you!" He jumped back to his feet, and I reached up to pat his head.

"If I ever fought a Valkaan, I'd be killed in one hit. I may be strong, but even I have limits."

"You're kidding, right?"

“Nope.”

It had taken every ounce of strength just to deal the finishing blow to a Hero who was already on the verge of death. I’d gotten stronger since then, but I still wouldn’t stand a chance against a Hero—or I guess Valkaan, since “hero” had just become a generic term now—who was at full strength.

I healed the young werewolf’s wounds and said, “Being strong doesn’t give you the right to do whatever you want. If anything, your responsibilities grow as you gain strength. It’s not really a good thing, becoming stronger.”

“Then why did you get so strong, elder?”

I didn’t really have much of a choice.

“Anyway, I hope you’ve learned your lesson. Don’t use violence against humans. As the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, I’ll have to punish you if you break Ryunheit’s laws.”

“O-Okay.”

That aside, why has Friede been spying on us this whole time?

After lunch, I began preparing for the upcoming council meeting.

“The man called Karankov that Friede met was almost certainly Shallier, the former Lord Bolshevik. I guess he fled far to the north, where the empire can’t reach him. It sounds like he’s enjoying his new life at least.”

Parker, who’d also met Shallier, nodded in agreement. “That would make sense. Sternenfeuer hunters and fishermen still live up there. They must have taken him in... Actually, knowing him, he probably ended up uniting them.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s their leader. He certainly managed to mobilize quite a few people and demons to help search for Micha when she was kidnapped.”

“That was probably his way of paying you back.”

From the looks of it, Shallier’s connections still ran deep. Since Friede had been heavily involved in the Micha kidnapping incident, we had a lot more intel on it than we would normally. Archduke Lekomya had sent me a private letter

detailing what had happened as well. The man was meticulous to a fault. I was honestly impressed by how far he'd come.

Parker stuck the Sea Tiger bone on my desk against his rib cage and cackled at the result.

"Hey, Veight," he said after a few seconds. "Shallier was stripped of his nobility, but he clearly has a lot of influence still. Are you sure he won't make a play for the throne again?"

"Wouldn't you understand a fallen noble's feelings best of all, Parker?"

"Ouch. Now that's harsh. But I suppose it's true that his personality is similar to mine."

It is?

Parker continued messing around with the bone as he muttered, "The Bolshevik's second son inherited the family name, while the third son went to Meraldia and became one of Woroy's retainers. There's no need to worry about the family line dying out. As the eldest son, he basically has no responsibilities left."

"Is that how it works with nobles?"

"I was the eldest in my family as well, so I understand where he's coming from."

You do? Sighing, I looked out the window.

"Anyway, I don't think we need to worry about 'Karankov the Hunter' starting a rebellion anytime soon."

As I said that, I could sense Friede's scent grow distant. She was done spying on this meeting, it seemed.

I signed off on the report detailing the movements of the Sternenfeuer cult in Rolmund and added, "This document will prove extremely useful in our negotiations with Rolmund. Make sure everyone in the demon army's top brass sees it."

"You got it."

Man, what is Friede up to?

In the evening, I went to visit Airia in her office, a bundle of documents in my arms.

“Do you have a moment, Demon Lord?”

“Yes, I just finished dealing with city affairs, so I... That’s a thicker stack of documents than usual.”

She looked pretty tired, so I spread out the papers onto the table for her.

“I went through all the reports from the delegation that went to Rolmund and took note of everything important. The short of it is that the mission was a success, and it would be worthwhile to keep sending delegations regularly. Also...” I handed Airia one stack and began rifling through a second. “Wa wants us to send survey teams to help them map out the Windswept Dunes. The desert is dangerous, so I think it would be best if the teams came from the demon army’s ranks. I’ll present my proposal to both the council and the army generals for approval.”

“Understood.”

“Lastly, a civilian werewolf gravely injured one of Grizz’s men. Apparently, the fight broke out because of a gambling argument. I’ve already sternly reprimanded the werewolf in question. It wouldn’t do to have a demon killing civilians, even by accident.”

“Of course. The last thing we want is strife between humans and demons.”

These were all issues I’d taken on as Airia’s representative, so it was important for her to be kept in the loop. I couldn’t make important diplomatic decisions of my own volition, of course, but that was why I drafted proposals for Airia and the council to look over and vote on. I was doing a pretty good job as vice-commander, if I did say so myself.

On an unrelated note, I could sense Friede was close by again. Since it was just Airia and me in the room, I figured now was as good a time as any to figure out what she was up to.

“Friede, I know you’re there.”

“Hyaa—”

If I didn’t already know you were here, that scream would have given you away.

“You can stop hiding. I’m not mad, so come out.”

“O-Okay...”

The door creaked open and Friede walked in. She looked a little embarrassed, but also determined. It was clear she wasn’t just trying to play a prank on me.

“Why exactly did you follow me around all day?”

Fidgeting awkwardly, Friede replied, “I wanted to know what kind of work a vice-commander does...”

“You’re curious about my job?”

“Yeah.”

Oho. Realizing that I really wasn’t mad, Friede cheered up a little.

“Hey, dad, is being a vice-commander fun?”

“Absolutely.” I smiled and added, “I get to help out someone I respect, and it’s the perfect job for an average guy like me.”

“Average?”

Is that really so hard to believe?

Friede gave me an incredulous look, but then she smiled. “In that case, I want to be a vice-commander too!”

“Okay, but whose?”

“Hmmm...”

“Just letting you know now, Airia already has a vice-commander, and it’s me.”

Friede cocked her head as she thought.

“Then...what if I became Micha’s vice-commander?”

“She’s the princess of another country.”

“Yuhette?”

“If you want to be the vice-commander of a Sonnenlicht bishop, you’re going to have to join the clergy yourself. Think you can do that?”

“No way.”

I wasn’t exactly thrilled to hear Friede wanted to be a vice-commander. While I personally thought it was an important, worthwhile job, I wanted her to do something with more public recognition. Preferably something that wasn’t too dangerous either. Of course, I knew that was just a parent’s selfishness talking.

“Why not become someone who gets a vice-commander of their own?”

“No, I wanna be a vice-commander. I mean, you look like you’re having so much fun at work, dad.”

Well I am, but...

Smiling, Airia interjected, “You want to help other people, right? That’s a splendid goal to have, Friede.”

“I do!”

“But helping others isn’t as easy as it looks. If you want to be a vice-commander of the Demon Lord, you’ll need to learn at least as much as your dad.”

“I-I see...but that makes it worth it.”

Hehehe, sorry, Friede, but I’m not handing over the title of Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander to anyone, not even my daughter. Friede turned to me, a determined look in her eyes.



“Dad, I want to become a vice-commander and help someone do their job better. Can you teach me how?”

“There isn’t really a manual for this kind of job...”

I hadn’t expected this, but it did seem this was what Friede really wanted to do. Refusing her here would make me a failure of a father.

“In that case, how about you help me out with my job on your days off from school? But remember, your studies still come first.”

“Yes! Thank you so much, dad! I’ll study too, I promise!”

“Good, good.”

I wasn’t sure I’d be able to teach Friede properly while also doing my job, but this, too, was one of a parent’s responsibilities. *I’ll make it work somehow.* And thus, Friede became an apprentice vice-commander.

That night, Airia gave me an exasperated look as we got into bed.

“Veight, because of you, all of our brightest kids want to be vice-commanders instead of leaders. Did you know that?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Myurei wants to be Ryuunie’s vice-commander even though he’s Lotz’s viceroy. There are a bunch of other cases too.”

Okay, but how is this my fault?

What kind of work should I have Friede do now that she’s my apprentice? In the first place, a vice-commander’s duties change a lot based on who they serve. As the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, my primary duties involved traveling and serving as her representative abroad, since her position didn’t allow her to leave Ryunheit often. Plus, Airia was far better at handling domestic issues than I was. The members of her household, as well as the officers the council had dispatched to assist her, were better at helping her with those than I was.

While I was still agonizing about how to train Friede, Airia got out of bed. She put a drop of perfume on each of her ankles, then started combing her

disheveled hair. Noticing I was watching her, she turned and smiled. I spoke the thought that popped into my head at that moment.

“You haven’t changed at all... If anything, you’ve gotten even prettier.”

Blushing, Airia shook her head. “That’s not true at all. I’m already an old lady with a teenage daughter.”

“You’re far too modest.” I grinned.

Maybe it was just because I’d spent so much time with her, but it really did feel like Airia had gotten more beautiful as time passed. *Then again, Kite and Forne say the same about their wives.*

Airia suddenly changed the topic in an effort to hide her embarrassment.

“By the way, about Friede...”

“Yeah?”

“If she’s going to be the vice-commander of a councilor or a general, she’s going to need to study math, debate, history, and accounting. Fortunately, the elementary track gave her an introduction to each of those subjects.”

“You’re right. The elementary track’s thorough enough that people who’ve only completed it still manage to find decent jobs.”

The elementary track only taught up to what would have been middle school level back in Japan, but that was pretty impressive in this world. Only the wealthy were able to get that much of an education normally. Most commoners were barely literate enough to write their own name. Some of the more studious commoners learned how to read and write properly by studying Sonnenlicht scriptures, but the vast majority didn’t bother.

“She might be inexperienced, but she does have a basic understanding of how to handle paperwork. Which means the best way to teach her would be to show her how I usually work.”

Hmm... Bringing her along on one of my trips would probably be for the best. I can’t be showing favoritism either, so I could bring a few other kids who wanted to be vice-commanders as well.

As I was hashing out the logistics of bringing a bunch of kids with me, Fumino walked into my office.

“Veight, about the teams I wanted you to send to the Windswept Dunes...”

“I’ve already calculated a budget, but I’m trying to figure out where we’ll pull the funds from. Expeditions into the desert are expensive.”

“Actually, we have a problem.”

Fumino looked uncharacteristically grim. I put down my pen and gave her my full attention.

“What happened?”

According to Fumino, one of Wa’s survey teams had gone missing.

“During our first expedition, we were able to establish a forward operating base. But the scouts we sent deeper into the desert from there all went missing. The team trailing behind them had been close enough to see them initially, but then a sandstorm rolled in. After it’d passed, the scouts were nowhere to be found. We want to send a rescue party, but the desert is exceedingly dangerous. It’s entirely possible the rescue party will go missing as well. The other survey teams who were out retreated back to base when they heard about the disappearance.”

“That was a wise decision.”

If the remaining survey teams went missing as well, we’d have even less information. I didn’t think they were heartless for retreating to safety instead of trying to look for their comrades.

“I guess that proves the interior of the desert is as dangerous as we believed. Your previous expedition had casualties too, didn’t it?”

“Yes. We lost people to the harsh climate, as well as to the dragonkin bandits and monsters that inhabit the desert.”

Baltze had at least managed to take care of the bandits recently. In fact, they’d been so enamored by his fighting prowess that they were now helping Wa map out the desert.

“The desert has been drained of all its mana, so most of the monsters your

teams encountered were scorpions and smaller bugs, right?”

“That’s right. There’s also bloodsucking cacti. When unsuspecting people or animals come to them to try and harvest water, they stab them with their needles and suck them dry.”

I actually wanted a bloodsucking cactus sample for research purposes, but they were dangerous enough that no one had managed to get a cutting.

“None of those are dangerous enough to wipe out an entire team though.”

“Precisely. Some natural phenomenon may have taken them all by surprise, but it’s also possible that unknown monsters live deeper in the desert. Either way, we can’t progress any further until we determine the cause of the scouts’ disappearance.”

Ah, I see where this is going.

“I take it that’s why you came to me for help?”

“Sharp as always,” Fumino said with a grin.

For some reason, everyone seemed to think I could solve whatever problem they had. *I mean, they’re usually right, but still.*

After Fumino left, I started thinking about who I should put on the rescue team. Normally, I’d include Kite without hesitation, but he was now Meraldia’s High Sage, meaning he was the top-ranking magician in the country. He was in charge of numerous highly important research projects, so I couldn’t take him along “just because” like I used to be able to. If the worst happened, Meraldia would lose its brightest mage.

I guess I should just take my werewolves, like usual. We wouldn’t be able to resupply anywhere, so five squads was probably the most I could take. Hamaam would definitely be part of the group since he and his squad were highly knowledgeable about the desert, while the rest would be stamina-filled youngsters. *Oh yeah, I should bring Parker as well.* He’d help round out the team.

At this point in time, I had completely forgotten about Friede.

The next day, I made my way to the Windswept Dunes accompanied by 16 handpicked werewolf soldiers. Of course, Friede was with me as well.

“She’s finally following in your footsteps...” Airia had said with a worried face when she’d seen us off.

We were traveling to the desert by ship so that we could meet up with the remainder of Wa’s survey teams. It was an uneventful trip, and we landed on the southeastern coast of the desert without incident. The Windswept Dunes looked much like Tottori’s sand dunes, but much larger in scale. Also, this desert stretched out all the way to the horizon.

Friede put on her goggles and hood, then looked excitedly out at the desert. “Wow, this is so cool! When you said there was nothing but sand, I thought it’d be like the gravelly kind I’d seen before. But this is so soft and smooth and pretty!”

“The sand in the Windswept Dunes has been eroded down to extremely fine particles. It’s kind of like flour. And just like flour, you don’t want any in your mouth or nose, so keep your hood on.”

“Okaaaay!”

Friede’s tenacity never ceased to amaze me. She hadn’t gotten seasick on the ship either. In fact, she loved the sea breeze. I’d been hoping she’d feel too queasy to keep going and would stay behind with the one werewolf squad guarding the ship, but I’d clearly underestimated my daughter. Though I was impressed by how far she’d come, I stayed focused on the task at hand.

“Remember, Friede, we’re not here to sightsee. Our priority is meeting up with Wa’s survey team.”

“Oh, right! My apologies, Commander Veight!” Friede gave me a crisp salute.

Good, you’re learning how to properly address me in public.

The moment she saw my change in expression, Friede lowered her hand and asked, “Did something good happen, dad?”

“Not really,” I said. *If only you could keep it up for more than a few seconds.*

“Friede, you and the other kids will stay towards the back and only observe, okay?”

“Understood, Commander Veight.”

Great, you’re using my title again. The other kids who’d come along were Shirin and the new werewolf boy, Joshua. Some of my human students had wanted to come as well, but considering the danger, I’d only allowed demons to accompany me. Plus, while Shirin and Joshua were still young, they were skilled enough fighters amply capable of taking care of themselves.

Parker, who was also with us, wiped some dust out of his joints and said, “The sand in my bones is wearing them down. They’re the last connection I have to my physical body, so I’d prefer to keep them in peak condition. Although, it’s not like my soul is contained in them, so if I lose this skeleton, I can just use another!”

Wait, I didn’t know that.

“Veight, look over there, by the inlet. Isn’t that Wa’s survey team?”

Parker pointed in the distance, and I saw a few tents surrounded by a makeshift fence. A small flag flapped in the wind. It bore Wa’s crest as well as a...paw print? *That has to be the grimalkin’s standard. I can’t imagine it’s anything else.*

“Let’s go,” I said.

As I thought, it was grimalkin who came out to greet us as we reached the camp. There were 20 of them, and there were a few dragonkin with them too. The dragonkin were native residents of the Windswept Dunes, not members of the demon army. They had light brown scales and called themselves the sandscale tribe. Thanks to Baltze’s efforts, they were friendly towards both Wa and Meraldia. We provided them supplies, and in return, they pledged not to raid our caravans. Until recently, they’d lived as bandits, but thanks to Baltze, they were turning over a new leaf.

Given their adventurous nature, the grimalkin were Wa’s sailors and traders. Part of the reason why they gravitated towards those jobs was because they

couldn't find work doing anything else. At any rate, the ones here were all civilians.

"I'm the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, and a member of the Commonwealth Council, Veight Von Aindorf."

The dragonkin exchanged glances with each other, then bowed to me. Though they looked outwardly unfazed, I'd spent enough time around dragonkin that I could tell they were shocked. Also, the things they were saying made it very clear.

"The aide to Meraldia's ruler..."

"Have we done something to anger the Demon Lord?"

"But we haven't broken our pledge...or done anything wrong."

Hehehe, that's right, you better be scared of the Demon Lord. Baltze's godlike swordsmanship had awed the sandscales, and they all assumed anyone he served had to be even more amazing.

It wouldn't do for them to misunderstand, though, so I hurriedly explained, "No, you haven't done anything to anger her. In fact, the Demon Lord is quite worried about your safety. She doesn't want any more of your tribesmen to be taken by the desert. I came here to prevent any further casualties."

The sandscales bowed again.

"The Demon Lord's kindness knows no bounds. I swear on our tribe's honor, we will do everything we can to assist you."

"Thank you." I nodded. "We intend to cooperate fully with you as well."

I was hoping they'd officially join the demon army, but I knew Wa was also looking to recruit them to expand Wa's influence. I didn't want to step on any toes by preemptively inviting the sandscales to join us. Meanwhile, the grimalkin were acting oddly guarded.

"This failure isn't our fault."

"Yeah, we did our job as the rear guard."

"We even tried looking for the humans and dragonkin when they

disappeared.”

Aha, I see now. Unsurprisingly, Friede and the other kids were excited to see grimalkin for the first time.

“Wow, they’re so cute! They’re like the canines!”

“Miss, we’re much cuter than any canine. Meow.”

“That’s right. And we’re not lazy either. Meow.”

The grimalkin started adding “meow” at the end of their sentences to look cuter to Friede. *Man, you guys are so obvious.*

I separated the grimalkin from Friede and the others, then asked, “So, what did you do that you’re so guilty about?”

“Absolutely nothing...meow.”

Sorry, guys, but I’m more of a dog person.

“Let me guess, you’re guilty that you feel glad you all survived because you dragged behind a bit?”

The grimalkin’s hair stood on end. “That’s not true! The human captain even said to follow behind him and the scouts!”

“Yeah! That’s why we slept in late and ate long meals.”

I see, I see. I turned back to Friede and explained, “Grimalkin are a lazy and selfish race. Well, I guess that’s true for pretty much every species, but these guys are especially lazy and selfish.”

“Now that’s just mean...” one of the grimalkin said.

Honestly, it wasn’t their fault. For generations, they’d been able to survive while doing no work at all.

After a little while, I managed to make the grimalkin confess the details of what they’d done.

Wa’s survey teams were made of a mix of humans, dragonkin, and grimalkin. The humans did the actual investigation, while the dragonkin served as their guards. The grimalkin were basically just assistants, and they’d marched a bit behind the main party. This explained why they’d been out of the sandstorm

when it had appeared. However, after the storm subsided, the rest of their team was nowhere to be found. And that was basically all they'd done.

I folded my arms and looked down at the trembling cat-people.

"You guys are civilians, so I doubt the Chrysanthemum Court will judge you too harshly. I'll put in a good word for you as well."

"Th-Thanks."

"Please forgive us..."

Though the grimalkin looked contrite, I knew they were thinking something along the lines of "You better forgive us, or we'll never help you again." They needed a reminder of who was on top here.

"But if you want to escape punishment, you'll have to help the demon army out. And in the demon army, we have strict rules. If you break them, any of the officers have the right to reprimand you however they see fit. In fact, if you *really* mess up, they can even execute you on the spot."

"Yikes!"

While this was technically true, no one in the demon army actually exercised capital punishment. Or rather, anyone who did had long since died during the disastrous invasion of the north. All the commanders who'd freely executed their subordinates had been abandoned by them when Arshes came calling.

Once I'd finished threatening the grimalkin, I smiled.

"But if you do your work properly, you'll be paid *handsomely*. I'll also throw in the booze and dried meat we brought on our ship as a bonus. We even have some fishing equipment for you."

"Now we're talking!"

"I suddenly feel like working. Meow!"

Grimalkin could be easily bribed—so long as you made sure never to pay them in advance.

My makeshift search party consisted of 17 werewolves, 1 half-werewolf, 5

dragonkin, 6 grimalkin, and 1 skeleton. Added together, I was commanding 30 people in total. The rest stayed behind, either at the camp or on the ship. Of course, the best place to start would be checking out the place where the scouts had disappeared. Though, I already had an idea of what had happened to them.

After half a day of walking through an endless sea of sand and rocks, the dragonkin leading us came to a sudden halt.

“This is the place...”

This looks exactly the same as the rest of the desert.

Friede must have been thinking the same thing, since she said, “How can you tell? It doesn’t look any different from the places we passed.”

“It’s easy enough to tell, human child.”

The dragonkin soldier looked confident in his declaration. I suspected they possessed the same ability migratory birds did to calculate their location, and I explained as much to Friede.

“Just like birds, they probably have an internal compass.”

The concept of magnetism didn’t exist in this world, so I couldn’t use it in my explanation.

“I see...” Friede gave the dragonkin a curious look, but they just stood there, their expressions inscrutable.

“We were the dragonkin who remained behind to guard the grimalkin when the sandstorm appeared,” one of them said. “It was important for us to know where we were relative to the main party at all times, which is why we know where they disappeared.”

“I see, so the answer to the mystery lies somewhere around here,” I mused.

According to the dragonkin, the sandstorm had been short, but fierce. The winds had been strong enough that the grimalkin had needed to cling to the dragonkin to keep from being blown away. However, they *hadn’t* been strong enough to move a fully grown human or dragonkin. Indeed, that was why the grimalkin had been able to use the dragonkin as anchors.

“If the secret doesn’t lie in the skies, then...” I looked down, and everyone followed suit. “It’s gotta be in the ground.”

One of the grimalkin suddenly spoke up, “But sir, I investigated the spot where the main party vanished. If whatever made them disappear came from the ground, how come I didn’t vanish too?”

You have a point. But after pondering it for a bit, I was able to come up with a theory.

“So grimalkin were fine, but humans and dragonkin were not. Let’s think about what might want to attack larger creatures but not smaller ones.”

“Is there anything like that?”

That’s what we’re about to find out. I recalled the secret gait the elders had taught me the other day. If I combined it with my strengthening magic, I would be able to test my hypothesis.

“Parker, lend me your head.”

“Oh, will my wisdom finally come in handy?” Parker asked happily, glad to finally have something to do.

I shook my head and replied, “No, I mean I literally need your skull.”

“You think that counts as a pun?!”

“No, and I’m not interested in getting into a pun competition with you anyway.”

Please just take your head off and give it to me. He finally did, and I tucked it under my arm. I didn’t need anything from the neck down, so I left it as is. I then cast a noise-suppressing spell on my feet, muting the sound of my footsteps. Since the spell effectively silenced sound vibrations, it also damped the vibrations one underground might feel from my footsteps. Next, I made my body lighter by reducing gravity’s pull on it. I was now only a fifth as heavy as normal, roughly the same weight as a grimalkin. Finally, I used the gait the elders had taught me to step as softly on the sand as I could.

Impressed, Parker muttered, “Wow, you’re not even leaving any footprints.”

“Quiet. If you talk, it’ll defeat the purpose of the noise-suppressing spell.”

“Fine, I’ll just talk like this then.” Parker was now talking directly to my spirit, which was something only necromancers could do. *But you’re supposed to ask for permission first, instead of surprising me like that.* Regardless, I was now stepping as softly as the average grimalkin did. So far, whatever was underground hadn’t reacted.

“All right, I’ll be right back.”

“Are you seriously going off by yourself again, vice-commander?” Hamaam asked in an exasperated voice, and I waved his complaints away.

“I’m the only one who can do this. Besides, scouting in smaller numbers is safer. You guys wait here.”

“But you’re the Demon Lord’s vice-commander, you can’t just—you know what, never mind.”

Hamaam had known me for long enough that he knew trying to dissuade me was pointless. I smiled at him and said, “If anything happens to me, take Parker’s body and retreat immediately. Since I’ll have his head, he’ll be able to tell exactly where I am at all times.”

“Please don’t use me like a homing device...”

“It’s a sign of how much I trust you, dear brother.”

“R-Really? Hehe, fine, I guess I’ll help. You just can’t do anything without your right-hand man, can you?”

Well, right now, you’re just the skull in my right hand, but sure.

Friede gave me a worried look. “Dad, are you gonna be okay?”

“Don’t worry. I already have an idea of what’s going on here. And like I said, if anything unexpected happens, Parker will save me.”

Parker protested, “I mean, I’ll do everything I can, naturally, but why do you like sticking your neck into danger so much?”

“Because if I take care of it, no one will have to die.”

“Perhaps, but your methods are still misguided! When will you learn the error of your ways?”

Never. Now let's get going. A strong wind began to whip up as I carefully and quietly walked to the spot where the main party had vanished.

Parker seemed bored without his limbs to do things with, so he started up a telepathic conversation. *"The way you're walking is strange. What kind of technique is that?"*

"It's a secret that only werewolf elders are taught. It was originally created to hunt other werewolves."

Werewolf elders were traditionally veteran fighters, but there was no way an older werewolf could beat powerful youngsters like the Garney brothers in a head-on fight. But demons only ever followed the strong. And there were occasionally werewolves that broke the pack's laws, and needed to be punished. Assassination techniques that worked against other werewolves came in handy for situations like that. Elders only ever employed this technique when they had to punish one of their own.

"The elders know how to use mana to erase the sound of their breathing, heartbeat, and even their scent. Sensing a surprise attack from one of them is nearly impossible," I explained to Parker.

"I see, so this is their trump card. I guess demons do value power over everything else."

As a former human, Parker found demon customs amusing. After a brief pause, he added, *"You think something dangerous is lurking underground, don't you? And whatever that something is, it reacts to weight and noise."*

"Yep. It could be a predator, or just a quicksand pit that would only trap you if you weigh enough."

Though, if it was quicksand, I had no doubt the dragonkin would have been able to spot it. My guess was that it was a predator of some sort. Unfortunately, I had no way of sensing things underground, which was why I'd brought Parker along.

"Is there anything with a soul underneath us around here?"

"No humans or demons, but...there is this huge, somewhat diluted soul. With the steps you're taking, it's about forty paces ahead and...pretty far

underground.” There was a hint of uncertainty in Parker’s tone. “It’s alive, whatever it is. But it lacks the vitality most living things have. Its mental activity is really subdued as well.”

All right, that clinches it. Smiling, I turned around and pointed out the spot Parker had marked to everyone. The dragonkin and werewolves nodded silently. I began slowly making my way back.

When I was halfway across, Parker intoned, *“Hey, couldn’t I have just gone on my own? I’m lighter than a grimalkin, so if they could walk over this thing just fine, then so could I.”*

Oh yeah, I didn’t think of that. Without his clothes, Parker was just a pile of pretty light bones. *I guess I was biased since I thought Parker wouldn’t be suited to covert ops-type stuff... I’ll be more careful not to let that sway my decision-making next time.* After I made it back to safety, I called everyone over and relayed my findings.

“I know what the threat is. It’s a large predator hiding beneath the dunes. Apparently, it’s not very active normally, so it probably lies in wait until prey comes to it.”

By staying dormant, it was likely able to keep its metabolism low enough that it could go months or even years without catching prey. Since it clearly wasn’t interested in chasing down things to consume, it probably didn’t cause much of a scene if its food escaped. *I hope, anyway.*

I needed a plan for taking this thing down.

“This creature will come out in a flash and try to swallow its prey along with the surrounding sand. And it won’t move until its prey is right on top of it.”

Eyes sparkling with curiosity, Shirin said, “Commander, let me be the one to run over its hunting spot. I’m lighter than an adult dragonkin, and I know how to fight.”

Why are youngsters always so reckless? I thought.

Smiling, I patted his head. “I respect your enthusiasm, Shirin, but there’s no need for anything so dangerous. All we have to do is make a big enough impact right above it. Skuje, set your Blast Rifle’s output to minimum. At my command,

I want you and your squad to shoot the spot I specify.”

Skuje and his brothers were the youngest members of my werewolf unit, but they weren’t kids anymore.

“Got it, boss.”

“Everyone else, ready your Blast Rifles for maximum output. Sandscales, I recommend you prepare your long-range weapons as well.”

The dragonkin warriors nodded at me. “We will use our spears then. They can be thrown like javelins, and we can attach slings to the tips to hurl rocks.”

“Sounds good. Once our Blast Rifle shots are spent, we may have to retreat or chase down our weakened prey. Your weapons will be integral then.”

“Understood.”

Finally, I turned to the grimalkin. “I want you guys to take our luggage and back up to safety. Students, your job is to protect the grimalkin.”

Friede, Shirin, and Joshua frowned at me. They were disciplined enough to not talk back to their commander, but I could tell they really wanted to fight. *Sorry, kids.*

In an attempt to cheer them up, I said, “Serving as the rearguard might be a boring job, but it’s exactly the kind of role that vice-commanders are suited for. Plus, it’s only after you learn how to be an effective rearguard that you can be trusted to fight on the front lines.”

As he reattached his head to his skeletal body, Parker quipped, “You say that, but the moment you were made Master’s vice-commander a decade and a half ago, you started fighting on the front lines. I was the one doing all the negotiating back home with the other demon races.”

“I negotiated with humans too, it just happened to be on the front lines.” *Man, back then I was using intimidation and bribery to get what I wanted... Anyway, this is no time for reminiscing. I’ve got a monster to fry.*

I turned to my werewolves.

“Get into shooting position, everyone! Skuje, you and your squad fire warning shots at the designated point from the maximum range possible! The rest of

you, advance slowly and keep an eye out for any movement!”

“We move after the warning shots are fired, correct?” Hamaam asked.

“Yes.” I nodded. “Operate under the assumption that there’s a monster living beneath the sand. Try to get as close as possible without being noticed. My guess is this monster senses vibrations people make when walking on the sand and reacts to those. The warning shots should hopefully create larger vibrations that muffle your walking.”

“I see.”

Things would get a bit hairy if this monster had other forms of superhuman perception, but such abilities usually came at an evolutionary cost. Like all other living creatures, monsters evolved through natural processes, so I doubted this thing had sacrificed general functionality for such specialized perception.

After giving my werewolves their orders, I turned to the dragonkin.

“Once the battle begins, I want you to advance at whatever pace you feel is safest. If the enemy counterattacks, please prioritize covering the werewolves in the vanguard.”

“As you command.”

Oh yeah, I should probably give this carefree skeleton something to do too.

“Parker, keep tracking the enemy’s soul. I want you to let me know the moment it makes a move.”

“Already on it.”

Man, why do you always have to be so competent? Anyway, I guess it’s time for another massive monster hunt. Reminds me of when I’d fought that giant octopus in the Sea of Solitude.

“Skuje Squad, fire!”

At my command, the four werewolves began firing warning shots in quick succession. Fifty meters away, there was a small explosion in the ground as the bullets impacted. A second later, a huge depression formed where their shots had landed. Sand began pouring into it from all sides like a waterfall. It reminded me of when an antlion sprung its trap, scaled up to an insane size.

“Keep firing warning shots at the surrounding area! Spread your fire out to confuse the enemy! The rest of you, advance!”

My remaining werewolves slowly began closing in. Skuje’s squad’s shots didn’t have much power behind them, but they still created large enough vibration ripples to mask the werewolves’ steps. Puffs of sand rose up wherever the bullets hit before being snatched away by the wind. The other werewolves and I tried to stay close to where the bullets were landing as we made our way to the depression. We couldn’t approach too much or we’d be sucked in, but we had to get close enough that our shots could hit.

“Hamaam Squad, tie lifelines around all of us. I’m coming with you.”

“But, vice-commander... You know what, never mind.” Hamaam sighed as he tied a rope around my waist. Once we were secured, we looked out over the edge of the sandpit.

“There it is...”

At the bottom, I could see a giant orifice. It was hard to judge with how far we were, but at a glance, it looked to be roughly 3 meters wide and resembled a lamprey’s mouth. The creature was likely a worm of some sort, but if its mouth was that big, then it was a train-sized worm. The mouth was filled with rows upon rows of sharp, barbed teeth. *If you fell in, there’d be no escape.*

“That’s a lot of teeth, vice-commander.”

“Yeah, and it’s pretty smart to boot.”

“What makes you say that?” Hamaam asked, cocking his head.

Trying not to trip on the slope, I explained, “It has only exposed its mouth. And that mouth is filled with so many teeth that its inner organs are protected by them. Arrows won’t be able to harm it like this.”

“You’re right... I hope our Blast Rifles can.”

To be honest, I wasn’t sure if they would. Unfortunately, I couldn’t allow such a dangerous predator to roam free in the desert.

“Hamaam Squad, begin firing at its mouth. Aim as best as you can to slip through the teeth.”

“Roger.”

Hamaam and the others hefted their rifles in one hand while keeping the other firmly on their ropes. They kind of looked like spec ops rappelling down a helicopter. *Hehehe, they look so cool...* It was probably a good thing that the demon army had begun resembling modern Earth armies in terms of tactics.

As soon as the first bullet hit the worm’s teeth, it spat a geyser of sand up at us. We continued raining bullets down on it, and every now and again it would shoot up another mouthful of sand. I couldn’t tell if that meant we were hurting it, or if it was just some conditioned reflex to being attacked. It *looked* like it was being damaged, so I had everyone continue firing.

“Vice-Commander, our light bullets are being diffused by the sand.”

“Seems like it’s got an endless supply of it to throw at us too. Well, whatever, keep firing in waves. Once you’re out of bullets, switch out with the next squad.”

I stayed behind and pulled out my trusty Ryuuga. *You’re not the only one with unlimited ammo, you mysterious monster.* Converting my mana to bullets, I fired on full-auto at the worm. Occasionally, I got blasted by some sand, but never hard enough to hurt. And so long as the rope didn’t fray, I wouldn’t fall any lower even if I lost my footing. That said, being covered in sand was not a pleasant experience. And since we were in the desert, there weren’t any nearby rivers for me to wash off in.

At any rate, it looked like my bullets were having an effect, so I decided to keep on shooting. The other werewolves rotated in and out to shoot however many bullets they had as well. Meraldia’s latest Blast Rifles had bullet magazines now. You could swap out the magesteel blocks that served as the ammo repository when one ran dry. They were difficult to mass-produce, though, which was the biggest hurdle for widespread adoption right now.

This worm tracked people using vibrations in the ground, but we were just standing in place and firing, so there was nothing for it to pick up on. Plus it was thrashing around and causing a bunch of vibrations itself, so even if we moved a little, it wouldn’t be able to tell. *Problem is, can we kill this thing before we run out of bullets?* Even my supply of mana wasn’t endless, and we were running

out of spare magazines.

“Ah! I’m sorry, boss, I accidentally dropped a magazine...and it was a fresh one too.”

I watched as a valuable block of magesteel slid down the sand into the worm’s open maw.

Smiling at the werewolf who’d slipped up, I said, “It’s fine. As long as you’re safe, that’s all that matters. Go back up and swap with someone while you grab another.”

“Yes, sir!”

Skuje’s squad was the first to run out of bullets. The warning shots they’d fired had lowered their ammo reserves, so it wasn’t too surprising.

“Vei—I mean, elder! We don’t have any magesteel magazines left!”

None of them were mages, so they couldn’t recharge the spent blocks either. *Guess I’ve gotta bring them in after all.*

“You guys stay on rope-holding duty then! I’ll get us more magazines from the rearguard!”

I pulled out my mana-powered communicator. The design was based on Eleora’s communicator earrings, but had been tweaked to be sturdier and easier to mass-produce. The trade-off was that it had to be a bit bigger—about the size of a smartphone.

I connected it to the communicator Friede and the others had and shouted, “Friede, bring all of the magesteel magazines! Hurry!”

“G-Got it, dad!”

She sounded pretty nervous, probably because I was being more curt than usual. *Also, when we’re on duty you’re supposed to call me by my title, not “dad.” Ah well. It’s a tense situation, I guess.*

A few seconds later, I heard Friede shouting, “Daaaaaad! Da—I mean, Captain Veight!”

There we go. Looking up, I shouted, “Don’t get any closer! Hand the

magazines to Skuje's squad and get back to the rear!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

She gave me a proper salute, but just then a spray of sand hit her in the face.

"Waaagh?!"

She staggered, and her feet slipped down the slope, sending her careening into the pit.

"Ah?!" someone—probably me—shouted.

She slid down the steep sandy slope, straight towards the worm's open maw.



Friede tried her best to regain her footing and stop her descent, but the fine-grain sand was too slippery. Unlike the rest of us, she didn't have a lifeline tied to her. Worse, she had bags of dense magesteel slung over her shoulders, making it harder for her to maneuver than usual.

"Da—" Before Friede could even get one full word out, I transformed. I needed to save her before she reached the worm's mouth. A world without TV and internet might not be too bad, but I couldn't live in a world without Friede. *No way I'm letting this stupid worm have you.*

"I'm coming, Friede!"

After transforming, I ripped off the rope at my waist and dashed down the sandy slope.

"Wait, boss!"

"Veight!"

"Elder!"

I could hear people shouting behind me, but I didn't have time for them right now. My daughter's life was in danger, and that was all that mattered. *Airia didn't give birth to you so you could be worm bait!* Using strengthening magic to upgrade my speed to the limit, I ran down the slope faster than Friede slid, and grabbed her just before she fell into the worm's mouth.

"Dad!"

"Don't worry, you'll be okay now!" I wasn't actually sure of that, but I had to get her out of this one way or another. This was my job as Friede's father.

Using the momentum I'd built up with my run down, I jumped just before my feet touched the worm's barbed teeth. It wasn't a great jump, since my footing was awful and the sand was too soft to get any real purchase, but it was enough to get me over the mouth. I tried scrambling up the opposite slope, but even with my strengthened limbs, it was tough going.

"Dammit!"

Friede was light enough that her added weight wasn't a problem, but the sand absorbed the force of my legs, so I had nothing to brace against for

traction. The harder I struggled, the more I got buried in the sand.

“I’ll throw you a rope, boss!”

The werewolves up above were desperately trying to help, but the ropes they threw down kept getting buried in the sand coughed up by the worm. Besides, even if they weren’t, I would have to jump across the worm’s mouth again to reach them. It had been a risky enough gamble the first time; it would probably be suicide if I tried it again. *What’s the most surefire way to save Friede?*

I was running out of time. Despite my struggling, I was slowly but surely being drawn back to the worm. I had a minute or so at most. There wasn’t enough distance to get a running jump to try and reach the other side. But I also didn’t have the strength to climb up this slope. I needed a different approach.

Friede squeezed my shoulder, looking scared. Just then, I realized something. There was only one thing I needed, and we had it.

“Friede.”

“Wh-What is it, dad?” She sounded worried, so I gave her a reassuring smile.

“I’m going to throw you over. Time your jump with my throw so you can get as far as possible.”

“What?! W-Wait! What about you?!”

“Don’t worry; once you’ve gotten to safety, I’ll take care of this oversized worm.”

I cast strengthening magic on Friede, boosting her leg strength and making her lighter for a short duration.

“I’ll explain later, there’s no time. Get ready!”

The fear receded from Friede’s face, and she gave me a confident nod.

“Okay!”

I held Friede in my palm and got into a shot put stance.

“GOOOOOOOOO!” I howled, throwing Friede as far as I could. She jumped at the perfect time, causing her to rise even higher.

“LET’S DO THIS!”

Thank god we're in sync. I guess playing these kinds of games with her when she was younger really paid off.

I was waist-deep in sand now, since throwing Friede had made me sink even further. Meanwhile, Friede had flown high enough to get out of the pit and was beyond my line of sight. *Well, that was a stressful few minutes.* Now, all I had to do was rescue myself. With how deeply I was buried in the sand, though, that was proving more difficult than I thought.

Just then, I heard Friede shout, “You better come back, dad! You can’t die here! Do you know how mad mom will be if you do?!”

Once you became a parent, you had an even greater responsibility to take care of your life than ever before. I had no intention of this being my end. That being said, I didn’t really know how to extricate myself from this mess. Friede had been able to use me as a launching pad, but there was nothing but sand in every direction. No amount of downward force would be enough to propel me out of this. Plus, only my arms were free now. At this point, it almost felt like it would be easier to let the worm eat me and kill it from the inside, but I suspected that would bring its own complications.

This worm has been swallowing its prey live for generations; it probably had ways of making sure its meal didn’t escape its stomach. *If it can swallow beasts, armed humans, and even magesteel magazines without— Wait a second. I’ve got it.* There was no need for me to get swallowed. I had a much better snack for it right here.

I looked down at the bags full of charged magesteel that Friede had left behind. Eleora had taught me long ago that magesteel could store a significant amount of mana—and if overloaded, it’d explode. That was how she’d blown up Ryunheit’s main gates over a decade ago. I had no clue how resilient this monster was, but I doubted it could survive an explosion big enough to blow up a city’s gates.

I dug the bags out of the sand and started pouring mana into them. The magesteel began to expand, the same way smartphone batteries did before blowing up. *This is kinda scary, actually.* Once the magesteel started bubbling ominously, I cut off the flow of mana and let the sand carry the bags away. I

then turned to see how the worm was doing. I was also being carried to the worm—albeit slower than the bags—but I couldn't afford to rush things here.

I raised my Blast Rifle and took careful aim. Just before I got swallowed, I poured as much mana as I could into a single shot and fired it into the worm's mouth. The recoil lifted me a little out of the sand, and that was all I remembered before losing consciousness.

I must have been out for a few seconds at least, if not longer. The first thing I heard upon waking back up was Friede's voice.

"Dad?! Daaaaaaaad!"

It sounded oddly distant. From what I could tell, I'd been completely buried in sand. I'd strengthened my lungs and taken in a big gulp of air just in case I'd been swallowed, and the extra air was coming in handy now. There was enough sand weighing down on me that I could barely move a muscle. A human would be trapped here, but with a werewolf's superhuman strength, I could probably crawl my way out eventually. Before I could even get started, though, Friede's voice suddenly got a lot closer.

"Here! I found him, Dad's buried under here!"

"The air's so dry even we can't smell him, so how can you tell?"

"Easy! There's mana gathering around here! You can tell too, right, Parker?!"

"You're right. The flow is so faint I nearly missed it, but mana is indeed gathering around here."

Enough with the explanations. If you've found me, then help dig me out. Eh, screw it, I'll just bust out of here in one go. Judging by how well I could make out everyone's voices, I wasn't buried too deep. *I should be able to take care of this much sand at least.* Using my remaining mana, I cut through the sand. The grains were fine enough that a cutting motion just caused the sand to be blown away instead of sliced through like rock. The surrounding sand hurriedly started pouring in to fill the gap, so I waded my way out before I got buried again.

Oh good, I can see sunlight. The hot air of the desert smelled fresh after my short stint as a buried mummy. I breathed a sigh of relief as I popped out,

brushing the sand out of my fur. Looking around, I saw that everyone was here: my werewolves, the sandscale warriors, and even the grimalkin. They all had sticks and shovels in their hands, and were looking at me in shock. *Why does this feel so awkward?*

I brushed some more sand off my shoulders and asked in my most vice-commandery voice, “Is everyone all right?”

In unison, my werewolves shouted, “That’s what we should be asking you!”

Sorry I worried you guys.

Friede stared at her father, who was coated in sand, but looked completely unruffled. *This is my fault... If I hadn’t been so careless, he wouldn’t have had to risk his life like that,* she thought.

She’d been so focused on fulfilling her orders that she’d forgotten to be on her guard around the monster. As a result, Veight had been forced to rescue her. Things had worked out because Veight was the strongest general in the demon army, but if he hadn’t been, Friede shuddered to think about what might have happened to her.

I need to apologize. There were plenty of people she didn’t know here, like the dragonkin and the grimalkin, but this was no time to be acting embarrassed.

“Da—I mean, Captain Veight.”

“Hm?”

He turned around, giving Friede the same gentle look he always did.

“I’m sorry. Because of my carelessness, you—”

“You don’t need to apologize, that wasn’t your fault. If anything, I should’ve had the foresight to ask the extra cartridges be kept near us from the start.” Veight scratched his head awkwardly. “This happens every time. Once the battle starts, I forget about the little details, and it comes back to bite me later. It’s because of me that you were even exposed to such danger in the first place. Go ahead and rest.”

“Huh, but...”

Friede had expected to get yelled at, so she wasn’t sure how to react.

Brushing yet more sand off of himself, Veight smiled at everyone. “We can have a proper debriefing later where we go over what I did wrong. But for now, let’s secure the area. We need to make sure that monster’s actually dead.”

One of the werewolves stepped forward. “Boss, that monster got blown into so many pieces we can’t even tell what parts of it are left.”

“Err, I guess just check on the remains then. Are there any bits of tooth or skin lying around anywhere?”

“I...don’t know?”

People started digging through the sand, looking for whatever remnants of the worm they could find. It seemed that was all Veight had to say about Friede’s apology.

After a bit of digging, people started unearthing various monster parts.

“It really is in pieces...” Veight said with a sigh, folding his arms. “I was hoping to bring it back as a study specimen, or at least get a chance to sketch how it looks.”

“...Says the guy who blew it up,” Parker said with an exasperated look.

Friede watched on blankly, until the young Rolmundian werewolf, Joshua, walked over to her.

“Lady Friede, your dad’s amazing.”

“You can drop the lady.”

“Really? But great-grandma said I need to be polite since I’m representing everyone in Rolmund’s werewolf pack...” Joshua sighed, but then his eyes sparkled, and he added, “The way Master Veight fights is so cool! And werewolves here using these Blast Rifles is totally different from how we use Blast Canes in Rolmund too! Everyone’s so skilled!”

“R-Really? I guess they are.”

Friede wasn’t interested in becoming a soldier, so she didn’t know too much about how good or bad the training was for Meraldia’s troops. Joshua was on food distribution duty today, so he started opening up the bags of hardtack and dried meat as he talked.

“I always thought werewolves were meant to transform and attack their enemies up close, but Master Veight fought the worm from a distance the whole time. It was just like how Rolmund’s soldiers fight.”

“Hmmm...”

“Rolmund’s werewolves use Blast Canes too, but only when we can’t manage with our claws and fangs. We’re not as good at shooting as you guys, by a long shot.” His expression clouded over. “Meraldia’s werewolves are so much more advanced... I bet Rolmund’s werewolves could progress this far too...if only we had a leader as good as Veight.”

Shirin walked over while Joshua talked. “How are you doing, Friede? Are you able to help?”

“Oh yeah, I’m doing just fine!”

Friede gave him a smile, and Joshua turned to Shirin with a frown.

“Can’t you let her rest for a bit?”

Shirin shook his head and replied, “We need to prepare our camp soon. The temperature drops sharply at night in the desert. We came here to help, so this is our chance to do something useful for everyone else.”

For reasons Friede couldn’t fathom, Shirin didn’t seem to like Joshua much. The werewolf boy didn’t look happy about what Shirin said, but he didn’t argue.

“Fine. But if you want help, just ask me. Friede was nearly eaten. She needs time to rest.”

“I know, I won’t ask more of her than she can handle,” Shirin replied with a cold nod.

Friede walked with Shirin to where they were setting up camp. Once the two of them were far enough away from Joshua, Shirin muttered, “He’s...not a bad guy.”

“I know.”

“But I just can’t find it in me to like him.”

“I see.”

But I have no idea why.

At around the same time, the sandscale warriors were setting up their camp as well.

“That was a surprise,” one said as he pitched a tent.

“You can say that again. To think such large monsters existed right outside our home territory. I understand now why our ancestors told us to never venture beyond our boundaries.”

The other dragonkin shook his head. “It’s true that learning what lay deeper in the desert was a shock, but I was referring to that werewolf general.” He turned to look at Veight, who was conferring with his squads. “He showed no fear when challenging that behemoth worm, and he was able to slay it without losing a single warrior. Do you think we would have been able to do the same?”

“Definitely not. Our only ranged weapons are spears, bows, and slings.”

The dragonkin fell silent for a few moments.

“When I faced the Azure Knight, I was amazed to learn that such skilled swordsmen existed in the outside world.”

“Our clan has always had strong warriors, but it’s at least understandable that another dragonkin would be able to best us. But now we were outdone by a werewolf. Not only that, but his display of strength made it clear he’s on a different level from the rest.”

“Agreed. I now see why he was made the Demon Lord’s vice-commander. Furthermore, it stands to reason that the Demon Lord he serves and the Demon Empress above her are even stronger.”

None of the sandscales had met Airia or Gomoviroa, but demon logic dictated that those who stood at the top were the strongest. And they had no other frame of reference for how leaders might be decided.

After another brief silence, the dragonkin nodded to each other.

“It seems the world outside the desert is filled with powerful demons...”

“We need to decide whether to stand with them or not. Once we return, we must hold a clan meeting.”

“Yes. It would be reassuring to have the protection of the demon army. I’ve heard that they’re on good terms with Wa as well. We won’t have to worry about war with the Easterners if we pledge ourselves to the Demon Lord.”

That signaled the end of the conversation, and the dragonkin finished setting up their camp in silence.

Hamaam and the others surrounded me the moment everyone else left.

“Vice-commander.”

“Yes?”

“Why do you have to blow things up every single time?”

I don’t really have a proper answer for that. I guess maybe because I always equated blowing the enemy up with victory in the video games I played in my past life? In all fairness, blowing this guy up did lead us to victory. Of course, I knew my actions had put us in a pickle now.

“We’re out of spare magesteel magazines. What are we going to do now?” Hamaam asked pointedly.

“Good question...”

I hadn’t exactly planned on using our ammo reserves as explosives. Man-made magesteel wasn’t quite developed yet, which meant the loss of a few dozen pounds of it constituted a significant expense. I’d probably need to write a formal apology when I got back. But first, I needed to figure out what we were going to do from here on out.

“If we encounter another giant worm, we won’t be able to kill it the same way.”

Not to mention, my method required getting up close and firing a high-powered shot at an already unstable chunk of magesteel. Even if we did have more, it wasn’t the kind of method I was eager to repeat. I’d had enough of being buried in sand. Plus, it wasn’t as though anyone else could safely do what I’d done.

“I doubt there are many more of those things, but it’s probably wise to regroup for now. If we push in too deep and get killed, we won’t be able to give

anyone a report of what we found.”

“I mean, we probably wouldn’t all die if we kept going... At the very least, I know you’d get out just fine, Veight.” Skuje said with a smile, and everyone nodded.

Do you guys think I’m invincible or something? I scratched my head and said, “It’s pretty pathetic that we have to retreat already, but it’s even more pathetic to keep going just to save face. Let’s not do anything rash and go back while we still can.”

“Says the most reckless guy among us.”

Oh, shut up, I mentally retorted. “Anyway, we’ll camp here for the night, then head home in the morning. I’m pretty sure the scouts we’re looking for were eaten by this thing.”

Unfortunately, I blew the worm up, so if any of the victims’ belongings had survived being in its stomach, there was no way we were gonna find them now. The most we’d been able to recover in our search were some corroded bits of metal. I couldn’t really tell if they were remnants of the scouts’ belongings or just pieces of magesteel though. Kite would be able to do a more thorough investigation of their origins, probably.

After the werewolves dispersed, Parker showed up. “It’s been a long time since we were in a real fight,” he said in a wistful voice.

Stop reading my mind.

“Yeah, it has. It’s been so long that I’ve gotten rusty. There were tons of holes in my battle plan, and I did a horrible job of commanding the battle. As a result, I nearly let my daughter die.”

The advanced technology I’d brought in had saved me, but as a commander, I’d made an utter mess of things.

Sighing, I gave Parker a wan smile. “I think I’m going to stick to raising the next generation from now on. There’s no need for me to be on the front lines.”

“You might believe that, but do you really think everyone else will let you retire so easily?” Parker cackled. “Of course I don’t plan on letting you retire

that easily either.”

“Weren’t you the first one who told me I should have, way back when?”

“No way! Did I really?!”

Don’t play dumb with me. That settles it. I’m gonna retire if it’s the last thing I do. Just you watch.

Since I blew up all of our spare ammo, the investigation team would have to turn back earlier than planned. It was too late to return now—but tomorrow, we’d leave for the ship.

“Dad, are you still up?” Friede asked, climbing up the hill to where I was. I was a bit away from the main camp, stargazing.

“I’m surprised you’re still up. I know we’re just going back tomorrow, but there’s no telling what might happen. You should get some rest while you can.”

I didn’t really have any right to lecture her, though, since I was still up too.

“Want an orange before bed?” I asked, taking one out of my pocket. I’d packed a ton to make sure no one got scurvy. Since we were already going back, I’d given out extra rations to everyone. There was no point in lugging all that food home.

Friede was a big citrus fan, so she happily sat down next to me.

“Let’s split it in half.”

Sorry, but you don’t get to decide that. As your dad, it’s my job to give you a little extra. I split the orange roughly in half and gave Friede the slightly bigger piece.

“Once you’ve finished this, go to sleep, okay?”

“Okay! Thanks!”

What a cute smile. Friede’s smile looked exactly like my mother Vanessa’s smile.. I was glad she took after her grandmother in that regard.

A cool night breeze blew past as we gorged on the orange.

“Hey, dad, where did this orange come from?”

“Beluza’s orchards. Specifically one of the ones Garsh runs.”

“Ah, I knew it. No wonder it’s so sweet.”

Despite being a heavy drinker, Garsh had a huge sweet tooth and didn’t actually like bitter-tasting food or drink. As he’d gotten older, his love for sweets had grown, while his tolerance for alcohol in turn went down. *Man, this reminds me of the fruit we got back on earth.*

“This really brings me back...”

“It does? Why?”

“Hmm... Yeah, I should probably tell you.”

It was about time my daughter learned that I’d been reincarnated. I didn’t want to hide anything from her, and she was old enough to understand. Maybe it would weigh down on her, knowing the truth about her father, but she still deserved to know.

“How much have you learned about reincarnation so far, Friede?”

“Huh? Umm... I learned a tiny bit when I was studying the basics of necromancy. When people die, their souls go into the cycle of rebirth, and they get born anew. But they lose all of their memories.”

It was because almost no one remembered memories of their past lives that the reincarnation theory was still a theory. Friedensrichter and I weren’t enough data points to prove anything.

I turned to Friede and explained, “The truth is, I’ve actually experienced reincarnation firsthand. I still have the memories of my past life.”

Friede nearly dropped the orange slice in her hand and gave me an odd look.

“H-Huh? Really? You do?”

“Yep. I found someone who corroborated some of my memories too, so I know it’s not just a delusion.” I gave Friede a big smile. “Also, in my past life, I was a human. And I lived in a completely different world from this one. In that world, demons and magic didn’t even exist.”

Friede stiffened up in surprise. *I know this is a lot to dump on you at once.*

Sorry about that.

“But don’t worry. I’ve had these memories ever since I was a kid, so this isn’t anything new for me. Plus, the memories of my past life have helped me out a ton. Also Airia and Master—I mean, Principal Gomoviroa—know this too.”

There was no way I would have been able to make peace with humans with just a werewolf’s sensibilities. I knew the only reason I was happy now was because I’d made full use of my past life’s memories.

Friede was staring blankly at the orange in her hands, so I added, “I was able to achieve so much because I had a whole extra life’s worth of memories to pull from. I’m not as special as everyone thinks. Had anyone else from my world been reincarnated as Veight, they would have been able to do the same.”

A werewolf’s strength and innate magical talent, combined with the backing of a powerful modernizing army like the demon army and the knowledge of the modern world, were more than enough advantages to handle any problem.

In a sad voice, Friede said, “But...I don’t want any dad except you...”

“Haha, fair enough. Sorry, I probably should have worded that better. I don’t want anyone replacing me either.”

After reincarnating, I’d been blessed with the perfect job, the perfect boss, the perfect friends, the perfect teacher, the perfect wife, and the perfect daughter. There was no way I was handing this life over to anyone else.

“Anyway, my past life wasn’t a very happy one. I can’t really say it was a horrible one either, but at the very least, I wasn’t satisfied with it. Now, though, I have you.”

“Are you happy now?”

“Of course. How could I not be when I have a cute daughter like you?”

“Fuhehehe...” A huge grin spread across Friede’s face.

I was being serious, you know. I went on to tell Friede more about my past life.

“Back when I was human, I learned how complicated their society could be. And how terrifying humans were in the right situation.”

Demons had a hard time grasping human values, but I understood them intrinsically. I had a good handle on how varied people reacted to threats, flattery, and so on. That was how I'd managed to turn most people I met into allies.

"The only other knowledge from my past life that's really come in handy here is knowing how to make gunpowder—or make sodium explode."

"Why is it all explosives?"

I wish I'd spent more time studying biology or natural sciences. If I did, I'd know how to do more than blow things up.

"I'm sure if someone smarter than me had reincarnated as a werewolf, they would've done a much better job. Unfortunately, this is the best I can do."

It was a little sad that I hadn't achieved more, but I'd done my best at least. And I was rewarded for it, so I didn't mind too much.

"Anyway, that's why I keep saying I'm just an average guy. Wait, how did we get on this tangent?"

"Don't ask me." Friede gave me a reproachful glare and said, "Still, I think you're amazing, dad. No one else could have done what you did."

It felt nice to be praised by my daughter, even if I wasn't sure that was true.

"Don't worry, you'll be surpassing me soon enough."

"No way. That's never happening."

"Oh, it is. Don't worry, I'll train you up to make sure it does."

"Are you trying to kill me?!"

"Hahahaha." I patted Friede's head, tousling her hair. "Don't worry. I know you can do it."

"You really think so?"

"I guarantee it."

As biased as I was, I honestly couldn't see Friede ending up as an average person. As long as Meraldia had her, both humans and demons had a bright future ahead of them. I had no basis for that belief, but I was sure of it all the

same.

“Umm, so you know how you mentioned you were a human in your past life and everything?”

“Yeah?”

After a long pause, Friede looked hesitantly up at me and asked, “You’re still *you*, though, right? And you’ll stay that way?”

“Of course.”

I’m Veight. Now and forever. In as cheerful a voice as I could muster, I said, “I may have lived in a different world before, but right now I’m Veight Von Aindorf the werewolf. I’m the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, and your dad. That won’t ever change.”

I had no intention of returning to my original world or going back to my past life. Sure, I had a few lingering regrets, but there wasn’t any way back that I knew of. And even if there was, I had Airia and Friede here.

Friede studied my expression for a few seconds, then finally ate the orange slice in her hands.

In a slightly embarrassed voice, she murmured, “Dad...”

“What?”

She bowed her head to me. “Umm, I still want you to be the one to teach me how to be a vice-commander. Gah... I’m not good with emotional stuff like this.”

“Did you have to add that last bit?”

“I mean... It was too embarrassing to say with a straight face.”

I get it, but this was one of those moments where you’re supposed to hold it in.

The two of us fell silent for a bit, then Friede gave me a curious look and asked, “Hey, dad?”

“Yeah?”

“What kind of place was the world you lived in during your past life?”

It was way more technologically advanced than this one, but it was also suffocating to live in... I didn't want to burden Friede with depressing stories, though, so I decided to tell her about only the cool parts. *But what cool parts should I mention? Planes and tanks probably won't seem that amazing to her, considering Master can do the same things they can with just magic. Wait, I got it.*

"Well, for starters we had potato chips, which were these fried, thinly sliced bits of potato that were sold in these airtight bags."

"Uh-huh."

The stalls in Ryunheit sold something similar, so Friede wasn't too impressed. *Just you wait, we're getting to the cool part.*

"But the thing is, by bagging these potato chips, you could make them last way longer than usual. They'd taste fresh, even after three months. They didn't get moldy or damp or anything either."

"How? Did the people making them use magic?"

"Nope, no magic. And you could find them at every store in the world. There were enough bags of potato chips that the stores never ran out either."

"No way!"

In this world, popular goods sell out all the time. There wasn't a steady supply chain yet.

"Also, a bag of potato chips this big would only cost you a single copper coin... Less, even. In some places, you could probably get three bags with that much money."

"That's so cheap!"

"It's all thanks to the power of *industrialization*."

Potatoes were relatively cheap in Meraldia, but cooking oil and firewood were a bit more expensive, so the fried potatoes sold at stalls cost a pretty penny. My gluttonous daughter drooled as she thought of a world where you could buy food for almost nothing.

"That sounds nice... I could stock up on snacks using just my allowance."

“You wouldn’t have to stock up, you could just buy more whenever you want. In my old world, shops operated well into the night, since they had electric lighting.”

“Really?! And people actually came to shop at night?!”

Yep. I was pretty much a night owl shopper myself.

“Also we had machines that could heat and cool air, so our buildings stayed cool in the summer, and warm in the winter without using any fire. Oh, and shops also had people whose sole job was to help you find what you were looking for.”

“How did your stores have all that and still make a profit while selling everything for so cheap?! Wouldn’t you go bankrupt?!”

“You bring up a good point. Nice observation.” I smiled and explained, “So for starters, it wasn’t just food these shops sold. They had a bunch of other, more expensive goods for sale as well, and they kept operating costs to a minimum across the board.”

I held up my fingers and ticked off one by one the other things companies did to increase their profit margins.

“First of all, they had a stable supply of raw potatoes. Agricultural technology in my world was extremely advanced, and you could harvest massive quantities of produce with just a few people. We also had ways of preserving food so those harvested potatoes could be used year-round. And whenever there was a bad harvest, we could buy them from somewhere else without worrying that they’d go bad during the journey.”

Friede nodded along, intrigued. *Though, unless a series of typhoons hit Hokkaido multiple years in a row, you probably would never have a bad harvest year in Japan.* Of course, there was a non-zero chance of that happening, but it wasn’t very likely either.

Chuckling to myself, I added, “We also had ways of frying and packaging the potatoes en masse, which made it a lot cheaper than making each potato chip individually. There were also well-paved roads, which made transporting the finished product to stores a lot easier as well. With all these technological

conveniences, the shops in my world could sell things cheaply and still turn a profit.”

After a brief silence, Friede nodded.

“So what you’re saying is...there’s no way Meraldia can manage that.”

Bingo, I thought. Then I replied, “We could probably make a single bag of similar-quality potato chips with Master and Ryucco’s help, but...”

It would take them quite a lot of time and effort. Even if we paid Master and Ryucco a paltry sum of 700 yen an hour, a single bag would still take 100,000 yen to make. If not more.

“We don’t have mass-production and sophisticated transportation systems in place yet, so there’s a limit to what we can do,” I explained.

“Figures...” Friede hung her head in disappointment, and I smiled at her.

“But I’m impressed you were able to follow along with my explanation. That was a pretty complex concept.”

“That’s because you already explained the importance of systems during one of our lectures, dad. You’re the one who said a weapon that can’t be slotted into an existing system is worthless no matter how powerful it is, remember?”

Oh yeah, I guess I did. But I was still proud of Friede for retaining that information.

“That’s why it makes sense that you’d only be able to make things that cheap by combining a lot of complicated systems together to create one big supply chain,” she said bluntly, like it was obvious.

It made me realize how much effort must have gone into creating a society where I could buy potato chips so cheaply I never even considered the cost. *You only ever notice what you took for granted once it’s gone, huh?*

“Hey, Friede. Don’t you think it’d be nice to make Meraldia into a country where anyone can buy as many bags of potato chips as they want for cheap no matter where they are?”

“Yeah!”

“Then we’re both going to have to work harder than ever before. The road to modernization is a long one.”

“Yeah, it really feels that way.”

First of all, we needed to ramp up the production of potatoes, olives, and rapeseed. Then we could worry about the logistics of transport and preservation.

In an excited voice, Friede asked, “What other cool things were in the world you lived in?”

“Let me think...”

I looked up at the clear desert sky full of stars and thought about what to tell Friede next.

My dad’s a little different from regular dads. He’s famous in Meraldia and Rolmund, and everyone thinks he’s amazing. I do too, honestly. He’s done a bunch of really incredible things, but the biggest of all he’s done is make peace between humans and demons. Apparently, he was the first to do that in Meraldia’s entire history.

Even though dad’s a demon, he’s really good at negotiating with humans. He managed to win over all the humans who were against him, and unite Meraldia. The demons respect him as much as they respect the Demon Lord, and the humans are confident that they’ll be able to live peacefully with demons because he’s here. But now I know dad’s secret. He was actually a human in his past life. Not only that, but he retained his memories from then. That’s why he understands humans so well.

When you know the truth, everything starts to make sense. Everyone thinks it’s weird how dad knows so much about humans, but that’s because they don’t know he has human memories. Of course, a werewolf who remembers being human would be able to get along with both sides. That’s why dad always claims he’s not special. Now that I know why, it’s kind of funny. It’s just like him to say that. He’s serious to a fault. I’m just glad he hasn’t changed.

He still loves mom, he loves to read, he’s always nice to people, and the few times he gets angry, he gets *real* scary. He still sucks at picking out clothes, and

he always does everything everyone asks of him, but there's always a smile on his face despite having so much work to do. That's the dad I know. But mom and I are probably the only people who think of him that way. To everyone else, he's a living legend, the Black Werewolf King who serves the Demon Lord.

I know they all say dad's amazing, but I don't think they get what makes him really so. To be honest, I'm not sure what that is yet either. But I think I will once I learn a bit more.

"Dad, I'm gonna study harder than ever."

"That's the spirit. But be sure to study the things you actually want to. You need to enjoy it."

"I do?"

I give my dad a confused look, and he nods deeply.

"Principal Gomoviroa's creed is that students should study what they enjoy. You're more motivated to learn things you like, and if you enjoy what you're learning, you'll be more willing to stick with it when it gets tough."

"Did you learn that from your past life too?"

"Nah. School in my past life sucked...although a lot of what I learned there did come in handy here." Dad pats my head with a wry smile. "Thanks, Friede. I'm glad you've grown up enough that I could tell you the truth about my past."

"Ehehe, you're welcome."

I feel like dad's been treating me more like an adult ever since I returned from Rolmund. It's nice, but it's also kinda embarrassing. *All right, I'm definitely going to make him proud!*

"Dad, I'm gonna study harder than ever."

"You just said that five seconds ago."

Whoops.

After cutting the investigation into the Windswept Dunes short, I returned to my peaceful life in Ryunheit. Occasional fights with giant monsters were fun, but now that I had a family, I much preferred staying at home and doing safe

busywork. I was an elder now too, so I needed to take better care of myself. Besides, I'd gotten rusty.

"I feel like I've gotten a lot better about not being reckless, Master," I said as I handed my report to her.

She had a thick book in her hands and was staring at an odd contraption of unknown purpose, with a bunch of magic circles on it. Sighing, she looked up at me and said, "Was that meant to be a joke? No matter how old you get, you simply cannot sit still, can you?"

I don't think that's true. I gave her a confused look and she stretched, tapping her shoulders with her staff.

"Do you want a massage?"

"No, I'll be all right. You really need to do something about your habit of charging into fights at every opportunity. I also wish you would stop blowing up every adversary you encounter. That was a very valuable sample you blasted to bits."

I couldn't argue with that. But then Master smiled and floated up to eye level.

"I'm joking. I have no doubt anyone else would have had an arduous time simply coming back alive. You did a splendid job of discovering why the scouting party had vanished, and of taking care of the threat that had killed them. There is nothing for you to apologize for."

Master was always so soft on her disciples. I didn't mind though.

Just then, Friede poked her head in the room. "Da—I mean, Lord Aindorf, there's something I need to tell you."

You don't have to be formal here, you know. Master chuckled and said exactly what I was thinking.

"Fear not, Friede. Right now I am just simple old Movi. You don't need to stand on ceremony. Feel free to call him 'dad.'"

"Oh, what a relief," Friede said, the tension draining from her shoulders. I felt bad that my station made things harder for her sometimes.

She handed me a small scrap of paper. It was rather high-quality parchment.

The top of the paper was signed “Thousand Salt Note” in elegant cursive. *Salt, huh?*

“This is Mao’s doing, isn’t it?”

“How did you know?!”

He isn’t being very subtle. All right, let’s see what’s going on here.

A short time before Friede barged into Gomoviroa’s room, she was at Mao’s shop to buy some salt for a magic experiment.

“So you want salt to use in a necromancy purification ritual?” Mao asked, cocking his head. “Do you know if sea salt or rock salt is better for that?”

Friede cocked her head as well and replied, “I’m not sure, actually...”

The bodyguards surrounding the two mimicked their masters’ gestures. Friede flipped through her textbook and said, “The book doesn’t specify.”

“In that case, it might be worth experimenting to see which is better, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, that’s a great idea. Would you be willing to help me out, Mao?”

Friede immediately jumped at a chance to do some research. Mao smiled, and Friede smelled what other werewolves called a “hunter’s scent” from him.

“If you find info about which salt is better, please let me know. I’d love to advertise that my salt is the one Meraldia’s university uses for its experiments.”

“On second thought, maybe I won’t try this experiment.”

Friede knew she had to be careful around Mao, since he tried to turn everything into an opportunity to make money.

“Sea salt’s expensive, so just give me three boxes of rock salt.”

“Thank you for your purchase. I’ll have it delivered by evening. Will you be paying with cash or credit?”

“Movi—I mean, Professor Gomoviroa will be paying for it from her research budget, so please put it on her tab.”

“Understood. If you’d just sign here, please.”

Mao slid a promissory note towards her. They were in common use in Meraldia and the surrounding countries now. It was easier for merchants to issue them and then collect all of their earnings at once at the end of each month.

As she signed the note, Friede muttered, “These really are convenient. Silver and gold are too heavy to carry everywhere, so it’s nice that people can do business with these notes.”

“Indeed. They’re essential for trade to flow smoothly. But for a while now, I’ve been wondering if we can’t make trading goods for currency an even smoother process.” Mao pulled out a thin strip of paper that had “Thousand Salt Note” written at the top. “This is what I’ve come up with.”

Friede picked up the note and stared at it.

“What exactly is this?”

“Simply put, it’s a document that can be exchanged for one thousand silver coins worth of salt.”

“Unless you’re salting an entire ranch’s worth of meat, I don’t think you’d need that much salt... How is this a more convenient way of trading for goods?”

Mao chuckled. “Allow me to explain. With this, you can go to any of my branch stores, and exchange it for a thousand silver coins worth of salt. Meaning it possesses a value equal to that much salt, for that much money.”

“Okay... I’m following you so far.”

Just thinking about that much salt made Friede’s mouth go dry. But Mao’s explanation wasn’t done yet.

“Let’s assume that I bought a thousand silver coins worth of goods, and paid for it using this thousand salt note. The merchant I bought them from might not be a salt merchant, and has no use for that much salt. But now he can pay for whatever goods he needs to buy with the same thousand salt note.”

“He can?”

Mao puffed his chest out proudly.

“I pride myself on being one of the richest merchants in southern Meraldia.

Moreover, I've built up a reputation of being trustworthy. Everyone knows I will honor any pledge I make, *especially* when it comes to business."

Mao had indeed built up his empire by fostering relationships of trust with everyone he dealt with. People knew he wouldn't cheat them. He claimed that he was just emulating the Black Werewolf King's way of life, but Friede at least knew he was doing it because it led him to greater profits.

"Furthermore, this note is valid even in my retirement or death. Naturally, I have more than a thousand silver coins worth of salt in my warehouses, so I can easily pay out at any time. Though, I doubt most people would bother since that would be a lot of salt," Mao added with a smile.

Friede looked down at the note again.

"Hmm..."

"It's a ground-breaking idea, wouldn't you say? With this, people won't have to walk around with heavy bags of silver and gold. The market price of salt is relatively stable, and besides, I'm promising a certain currency's worth of salt rather than any specific weight."

"You're right."

But something about this just doesn't feel right to me, she thought. Holding the note close to her chest, Friede tried to figure out where this bad feeling was coming from.

Mao took out a whole stack of the notes and gave Friede a puzzled look.

"Is something wrong?"

"Well, it's just..."

After a few more seconds of thinking, Friede realized what was bothering her about this. *He's basically invented his own money.* The flow of gold and silver coins had been controlled by the central government since the era of the Senate. Minting new coins without permission was punishable by death. The thousand salt note Mao had created wasn't made of gold or silver, but it had the same value as regular currency. *Won't Mao get in trouble if I let him go through with this?* Worried, Friede came to a decision.

“Mao!”

“Yes?”

Friede held the note up to him and said, “Can I ask Da—I mean, Councilor Veight if it’s okay to circulate something like this?!”

“Uhh, sure? I just made promissory notes a little more convenient, so I don’t think it should be an issue, but...”

Unlike Friede, Mao didn’t seem to notice the problem with his invention.

After hearing Friede’s explanation, I sighed. *That idiot nearly got himself hanged.*

“Well done, Friede. You did the right thing by telling me.”

“Ah, thanks. So this really is dangerous then, huh?”

“Yeah, if these notes started circulating, we would have a huge problem on our hands.”

And Mao would be in hot water. From the looks of it, Master hadn’t been able to follow this conversation at all.

“This seems like a convenient enough invention to me... Granted, I could simply transport a thousand silver coins via teleportation if I had to.”

“It’s not the portability that’s the problem,” I explained to Master. “Mao has just invented paper money—a new form of currency. This was how money was issued back in my world.”

“Oho.”

“The problem is, currency is supposed to be issued by a government institution, not individuals.”

If Mao had been dealing in smaller denominations, I could have overlooked this, but a thousand silver coins was equivalent to a few million yen. Meraldia’s monetary economy was still small, so even a few hundred of these banknotes would disrupt it entirely.

“Even if Mao only has enough salt to honor a few of these notes, he can afford to print more, since he knows no one will actually come to collect the

salt. Naturally, that would be illegal, but he'd never actually get caught. Because if he started running low on salt reserves, he could use the money he got from people exchanging their notes to buy up more salt."

"Hm?" Master gave me a thoughtful look.

In response, I added, "Plus, if he issues too many of these, the value of currency itself will go down."

"Will it?"

"In the same way that magic is the act of converting mana into natural and supernatural phenomena, currency is converted into actual goods. In neither case are you creating something from nothing."

I wasn't sure how well my analogy came across, but I figured this would be the easiest way to tie economics to something Master understood.

"Ultimately, it's nothing more than an exchange. If there's more currency floating around and less goods, the value of goods will naturally go up. Conversely, the value of currency will go down. In my old world, we called this inflation."

That reminds me, I wonder how the Zimbabwe dollar is doing these days...

Master cocked her head again, looking like a student who failed to comprehend the lecture. She turned to Friede and whispered, "Do you understand what he's saying?"

"Sort of, yeah."

"O-Oh..."

Master was no good at politics or economics. Unsure of how to explain in a way that she would understand, I finished off by saying, "Even if we restrict Mao to printing only as many notes as he has salt to cover, he'll get to double his assets on paper. It would give him far too much influence and power. Other merchants would quickly realize what was going on as well."

"I have...absolutely no idea what you're saying."

If Master put her mind to it, she could easily figure out the intricacies of economics, but she was one of those people who refused to put any effort into

things that didn't interest her. It was a bit of a shame, honestly. Meanwhile, Friede seemed to have grasped the gravity of the situation.

"A-And those merchants would try to emulate him, right? Since they knew they wouldn't be punished for it."

"Exactly. There would be dozens of competing currencies on the market. And, since they weren't issued by the council, we would have no way of tracking just how much currency is in circulation. Things would get real bad real fast."

I wasn't an economist, so I didn't know all the details, but I was pretty sure this would lead to a bubble that would eventually burst and bankrupt every merchant playing the currency game. This was a realm I knew far too little about. Until I could study economics a bit better and lay down sensible rules, I'd need to ban paper currency. The world wasn't ready for it yet.

"Okay, Friede, I order—no, I'm asking you to take care of this *privately*. I'd rather not go to an official about this."

"Understood, Councilor Veight." Friede gave me a crisp salute.

"Grab Mao by the scruff of his neck and confiscate his bills before he accidentally bankrupts himself and everyone else. I'll explain everything to him properly as soon as I'm free."

"Yes, sir."

And so, I was able to stop Mao from causing an economic crisis. After looking through some old records, I discovered that similar cases had happened in the past, and none of them had ended well. When small quantities were involved it was fine, but whenever people started issuing larger notes, the Senate then stepped in to take care of things. *I wish they'd made some laws about issuing currency if they'd dealt with such cases before.*

In the end, I had no choice but to call a large-scale meeting of the council and the merchant guilds to hash out fair laws about how far individuals could take promissory notes. Since Mao had created his notes before the laws had been put in place, he wasn't punished, and it was just recorded that he'd created a certain amount. We managed to wrap everything up nicely, all thanks to Friede.

Meraldia's economy and my old friend's reputation were safe because of her.

"You did a great job, Friede. You've become more reliable than ever."

"Ehehe, really?"

"I'm proud of you."

At this rate, I really might be able to retire soon. Maybe I can get Airia to retire with me, and we can go on a hot springs trip to Wa. That'd be nice.

"What are you grinning about, dad?"

"Hm, oh, I'm just happy at how much you've grown. Hahaha."

"Reeeeeeally?" Friede gave me a suspicious look. She'd definitely grown enough that I couldn't trick her as easily as I used to.

Friede had gone off to talk to Mao, so I explained the whole situation to Airia.

"We've closed the loophole that would've allowed Mao to print his thousand salt notes, and we're looking into how to set sensible laws that will allow us to print paper currency. I suspect we'll end up with a joint team made of lawyers belonging to the council as well as Mao and the other prominent merchants."

"I see. Thank you for taking care of that, Veight." My beautiful wife smiled as she took the report from me. "This was Friede's discovery, right? By the time the council would have realized the same thing, we would have had an economic crisis on our hands. We were only able to change the laws in time thanks to her."

"Yeah, I'm thinking it's about time we can trust her with bigger jobs. She wants to join the administrative side of the demon army, so it'd be good for her to get some practical experience."

"But she's still a student," Airia said, a worried look on her face.

"Meraldia is developing at an unbelievable pace, so we need to train the new generation faster than I would like. I know it's not fair to burden our children with problems the adults should be solving, but we need as much help as we can get right now."

Airia mulled over my words for a few seconds, then nodded.

“You do have a point. With how quickly Meraldia has been growing, we’ll need to write new laws and tackle novel issues more and more frequently.”

“It’s a real headache, all right. At this rate, I won’t actually have any less work even if we get the new generation to help out,” I muttered, and Airia chuckled.

Did I make a joke?

“It’s just funny how you complain about having more work to do when you’re the one making all that extra work.”

“Excuse me, I’m trying my best to have less to do here.”

“The only reason this issue with Mao arose was because you signed trade treaties with Wa and Kuwol which helped Meraldia expand its economy. You’re also the one who worked so hard to ensure the cities and roads are safe, and that our fledgling industries have room to grow.”

Airia gave me a knowing smile, and I looked down to see an unfamiliar object on her desk. It was an expensive-looking red glass paperweight. Paperweights were a common enough sight on most people’s desks, but this looked like one of the Black Werewolf King products Forne was selling. The glass had been carved into the shape of a werewolf.

Clearing my throat, I asked awkwardly, “My Lord, I see you have acquired a new item on your desk there...”

“Oh, this? While you were gone, Forne’s troupe performed the *Princess on the Precipice* play for us here in Ryunheit.”

Airia fiddled with the glass paperweight, looking a little sad. The red glass was carved in such a way that it looked like the werewolf in the center was surrounded by flames. *That werewolf’s definitely me, isn’t it? If I recall correctly, Princess on the Precipice is the play that covers Eleora’s invasion of Ryunheit.* It was pretty popular since Forne heavily advertised the fact that Eleora herself had gone to see it once. Of course, it was even more popular in Ryunheit, since it was about the city. *Why do I have a feeling that Airia’s going to say something I really don’t want to hear?*

Warily, I said, “I guess Forne wants to drum up pro-Rolmund sentiment since

we're trying to forge an alliance with them. It's exactly the kind of thing he'd do."

"Indeed. And once we start trading with Rolmund as well, our economy will expand further."

Yep. And we're going to have more complex situations we'll need to untangle. I get that we're going to have a lot more work ahead of us, so please stop messing with that paperweight. The way you keep pressing against the center is scaring me.

"Airia."

"Yes?"

"Once you're done with work for the day, would you, umm...like to go see a play with me? A different one from *Princess on the Precipice*."

"Are you inviting me on a date?" Airia's expression brightened immediately, and she got halfway out of her chair.

I put a hand on her shoulder to calm her down and said, "For your smile, I'll do anything. So please stop fiddling with that paperweight."

"Huh? Oh, this?"

Realizing what she'd been doing, Airia blushed awkwardly and put it back down. *Oh, you weren't doing it on purpose?* In the center of the flames, the carved figure of me embraced an exhausted Eleora. I could see why she would be feeling a little jealous.

"Where did you get this?"

"Forne gave it to me as a gift. He said it signified the friendship between Meraldia and Rolmund. I was pretty surprised, though, he offered it to me in public right on stage after the play had ended. There was no way I could refuse."

That's an abuse of power, dammit! Stop doing things that cause backlash against me!

"I guess I better make it a council rule that you're not allowed to do impromptu gift-giving ceremonies like that."

“Yes, I think you should. But let’s leave work for another time, shall we?”

I could tell by how excitedly Airia was fidgeting that she really wanted to go to that play with me. Smiling, I ran my hand through Airia’s hair.

“Yeah, we’ve done enough work for today. Now it’s time for family. Friede’s matured quite a bit too, so maybe we should take her as well. It’s like she underwent some kind of transformation in Rolmund. I still need to reward her for realizing the problem with Mao’s notes too.”

It’ll be nice to take her out to a fancy dinner and praise her to high heaven together. I’m sure she’ll love it too. But while I thought this was a great idea, Airia didn’t seem too happy about it.

“It’s important to spend time with our daughter, but can’t we leave it for tomorrow? I want to be alone with you today.”

“Okay, okay. Don’t give me that look, I promise tonight will be just for you.”

It wasn’t easy being a Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander.

Afterword

I'm currently writing this afterword while being sandwiched by my two daughters, who are six and two years old. The first was born just before I started writing *Der Werwolf*, actually. Thanks to them, I have a lot of real-life examples to draw from when writing about Veight's fatherhood days. If I think about it, my two girls have not only helped me grow as an author, but they've also taught me a lot about life in general. They really are angels. Even though they act like devils sometimes.

My eldest daughter loves playing blasphemous, inharmonious melodies on her toy piano, and my youngest loves messing around with the red pen I use for proofreading (she's scribbled so much with it that it's unusable now). It's hard enough writing afterwords with them messing around all the time, much less entire books.

At any rate, the protagonists of child-raising stories are the children themselves; this is why the protagonist of *Der Werwolf* is now Friede. Of course, Veight is still the protagonist of his own life. Parents are people too, after all, and their lives matter as well. There are still a few more legends the Black Werewolf King needs to make before he can retire. Veight may want to just sit back and relax, but as long as he's alive, he won't be able to stop sticking his nose in people's problems.

I hope you all continue to enjoy reading about his escapades, as well as those of his daughter Friede. Both of them are protagonists now, and while they'll be walking down different paths in life, they'll continue to have a huge influence on each other.

Now then, it's time for the acknowledgments.

First off, I'd like to thank Teshima-sensei for his wonderful illustrations. Drawing aged-up versions of characters who already have existing designs by a different artist is an impossibly difficult task, but he managed to do a splendid job regardless. I'm especially impressed by how he managed to make Friede

look slightly older through the years; it was like going through an old album. Thank you so much for your hard work.

I'd also like to thank my editor, the great Lord Fusanon—A.K.A. Saitou-sama. Your advice has been a huge help. I'm terrible at anything not directly related to writing, so his suggestions and business advice have come in very handy. In the next volume, Friede will have grown up a little more, and though she's not quite an adult, she'll start following in Veight's footsteps. I hope you enjoy seeing her learn and grow.

May we meet again in the next volume.

Congratulations on
releasing volume 13!

Friede-chan is super cute! ♡

[Signature]
Kosumi Yumichi

♪ I hope you all check
out the manga too!
Sorry for the blatant
self-promotion...



Bonus Short Story

Airia and Friede

On a day much like any other, Airia was spending one of her breaks brushing Friede's hair.

"Your hair is just like your father's, you know that?"

"Ehehe, really? I kind of wish it had ended up more like yours, mom."

"Then why do you sound so happy about being compared to your father?"
With a smile on her face, Airia ran the brush through again.

Friede turned around slightly and asked, "Were you two really enemies when you first met?"

"We certainly were," Airia replied, chuckling to herself. "In fact, he burst into the manor through that window over there. I thought I was going to die that day."

"But you didn't, did you?"

"I'm still alive, aren't I?" Airia mused. *And you wouldn't have been born if I was dead either.* She added, "Your father is merciful to his enemies, and he dislikes bloodshed. Even when I pointed a sword at him, he never attempted to retaliate."

"Dad's so cool!"

"He really is."

The two of them smiled at each other, then Friede muttered, "I can't believe humans and demons used to kill each other in the past..."

"That's because your father and I did a good job of changing things. Ryunheit was the first to join the demon army and declare independence from the Meraldian Federation."

In retrospect, that was a rather rash decision. But I had a feeling it would work out somehow. Even back then I knew Veight wouldn't let me down.

Excited, Friede asked, "And you guys took down the evil Senate together, right?"

Airia turned Friede's head forward and started brushing her hair again.

"I wouldn't say everyone in the Senate was evil, but I am thankful to see them gone. Most of the Senators did not approve of a woman serving as viceroy." Airia frowned as she thought of how she'd needed to wear men's clothes on the day she'd gone to swear fealty to the Senate. "Fortunately, you won't have to suffer the way I did. Now that I'm Demon Lord, I can make sure of that."

"Um...okay?" Friede nodded, not entirely sure what suffering Airia was referring to.

Just then, Veight poked his head into the room.

"Isn't it about time we got going?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh yeah! Mom, I can go, right?"

Airia placed a hand on her daughter's shoulder and said, "Yes, you're all set. Make sure you pick out some good clothes for your father."

"Got it!" Friede got up and gave her mom a mock salute.

Sighing, Veight bemoaned, "Who cares what I'm wearing as long as it covers me?"

"We do!" Friede retorted, pointing at her mother. "Now let's go!"

"Fine, fine. All right, we'll be back soon, Airia."

Airia smiled and gave him a little wave. "Have fun, you two."

After the door closed, she went to put away her brush, then moved to open the window. Veight and Friede had just left the building and were heading onto the main street. A new chapter in her life had begun when Veight had broken in through that very window, and that same chapter was continuing even now.

"You really can't predict where life will take you..." she muttered, waving back at Veight and Friede, who were waving up at her. "Hehe."



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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 13

by Hyougetsu

Translated by Ningen Edited by Meiru

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