



Der Werwolf

15

Hyougetsu

ill. Nari Teshima

Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight

— The Dragon's Roar —



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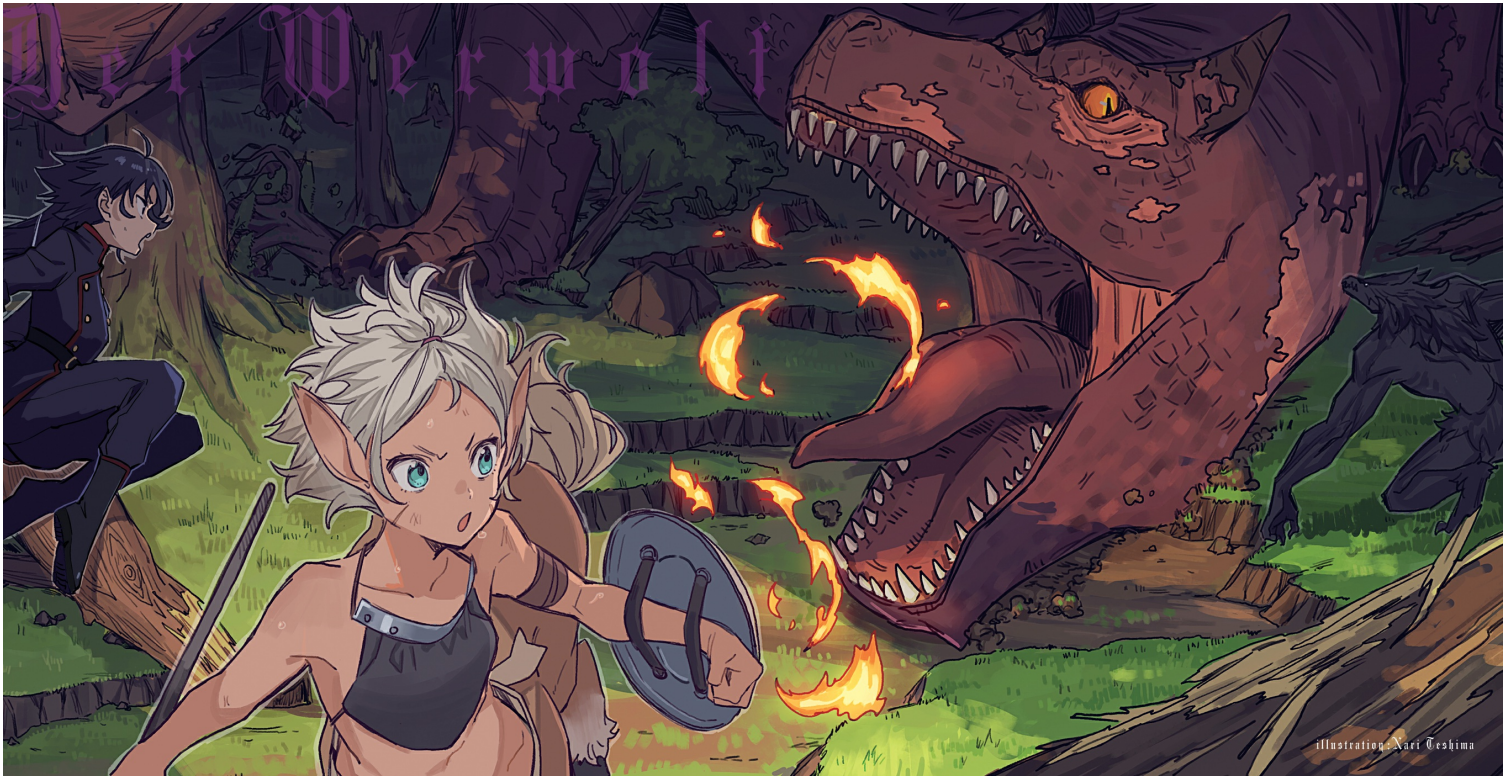
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Character

Veight

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

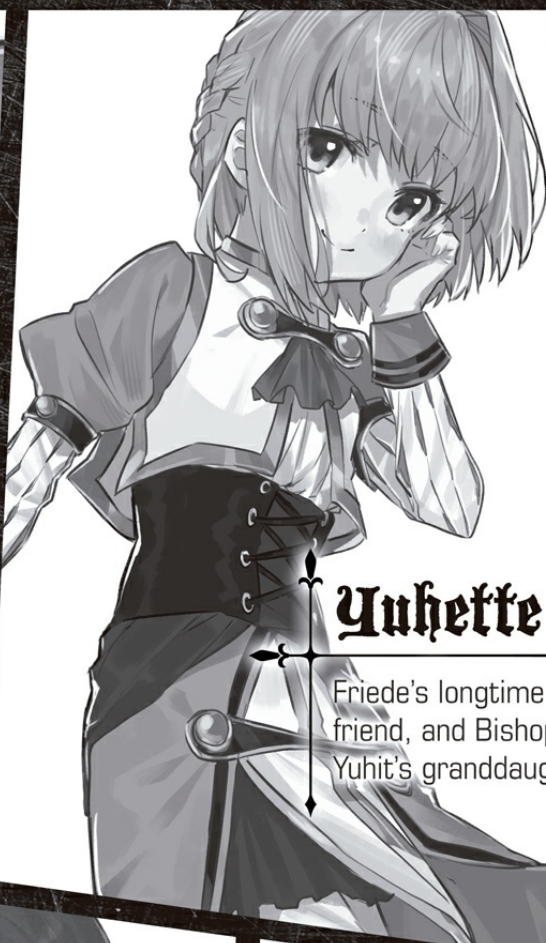
Eriede

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.



Iori

A socially awkward girl from Wa. She's the adopted daughter of the chief of the Heavenswatchers, and an accomplished spy in her own right.



Michia

Eleora's niece, and one of Friede's best friends. They don't get to see each other often, but stay in constant contact by exchanging letters.



Joshua

A young werewolf from Rolmund. He came to Meraldia to learn from Veight.



— *The Story So Far* —

Through Veight and Airia's efforts, Meraldia's friendly relationships with Kuwol, Wa, and Rolmund have continued to prosper.

Their daughter, Friede, has also accomplished great things during her visits to Rolmund and Wa.

In Wa, Friede befriended Iori, the girl who had been sent to evaluate her, and cleared every trial the Chrysanthemum Court set before the young Meraldian. Accompanied by her friends, Friede even embarked on an expedition to the Windswept Dunes and encountered a magical shade mimicking the appearance of the legendary Ason. Despite the shade's ferocious assault, Friede was able to meet up with her father, and together they put a stop to the fake Ason's nefarious plans.

Friede's actions that day once again brought peace to the continent, and further bolstered Meraldia's ties to its neighboring countries.

The story so far

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Chapter 15

While investigating the Windswept Dunes, I encountered the first reincarnator, Ason. But that Ason had been a fake—a crude copy created by the rampant mana of a magical artifact that the real Ason had once possessed. Thanks to Friede and her friends, we were able to put a stop to the fake Ason, but I was surprised to find out she was in the middle of the desert when she was supposed to be studying in Wa. *She really does take after me.*

Anyway, we were able to successfully retrieve the artifact, and we even got the chance to investigate the Great Torii of the Divine. The trip to Wa provided huge diplomatic and scientific benefits for us. Now, I was back in Meraldia enjoying some downtime. While I didn't dislike tense fights with powerful monsters, I didn't want to put myself needlessly at risk now that I had a wife and a daughter. Plus, I was technically one of the werewolf elders now. I wasn't spending as much time on the front lines, so my fighting skills were getting rusty.

"I feel like I've stopped being as reckless recently, Master," I said with a smile as I handed her the latest report from the Windswept Dunes investigation team.

She put down the thick tome she was reading and brushed aside whatever strange contraption she was working on with a sigh.

"I cannot believe you said that with a straight face. No matter how much time passes, you never seem to settle down."

I really don't think that's true. Master ignored my reproachful look, stretched her arms, and tapped her shoulders with her staff.

"Should I give you a massage?" I asked.

"No need. This body's aches are of little importance. That aside, you still haven't fixed your habit of running headfirst into danger. Even worse, you immediately turn to blowing things up. How many times have I told you that

destruction should always be a scholar's last resort?"

Yeah, I can't argue there. But then Master chuckled and floated up to eye level with me.

"I'm joking. I doubt anyone else would have been able to survive a confrontation with Fake Ason, let alone defeat him. Besides, you successfully saved your friends *and* retrieved the artifact. Your accomplishments this time are commendable."

As always, Master was soft on her students—though I liked that about her.

Master used telekinesis to float up a number of books in front of her and rapidly flip through their pages. "Being granted the opportunity to study the Great Torii of the Divine was quite the boon as well. I've learned much about the principles of reincarnation."

Oh yeah, that reminds me, I thought. "By the way, Iori told me something that might be relevant to your investigation. Apparently, a few decades ago, a foreign mage snuck into the Great Torii of the Divine and went missing."

"Iori is that new friend of Friede's, correct?"

"Well...yeah, I guess that's basically true."

Iori was the adopted daughter of the head of the Heavenwatchers, Tokitaka. She was most likely going to be chosen as his successor, but she'd taken a liking to Friede and come to Meraldia. I'd been worried Iori's decision would have diplomatic repercussions, but fortunately, Tokitaka had a soft spot for his daughter and he'd given her his blessing to go to Meraldia. She was now an exchange student at Meraldia University.

"Anyway, there are a lot of oddities regarding this mage that got into the Torii. For one thing, even though the Heavenwatchers meticulously tailed this mage, their records are fuzzy."

Their report stated that the mage's name was, "Juna, maybe Juta, or perhaps even Junan (Junan seems likely)." The Heavenwatchers were Wa's spy organization, and they were as competent as the CIA back on Earth. There was no way they'd normally leave behind such sloppy records. With how many other things didn't add up, I suspected this mage might have used memory-

altering magic. Human memory was an imperfect storage structure, so a combination of illusion magic, strengthening magic, and mind magic could easily mess with it.

“They might have manipulated the memories of the Chrysanthemum Court’s guards to get past them,” I said.

“It’s certainly possible. In which case, it was no coincidence that they ended up at the Great Torii of the Divine.”

Most of the Heavenwatchers knew prediction magic, so it would take someone with immense skill to deceive them.

Continuing my train of thought, I said, “The Heavenwatchers determined that Ju-something had used teleportation magic to escape. They tried to track the perpetrator down with prediction magic, but their magic claimed that Ju-something was nowhere.”

Master narrowed her eyes, her sharp mind immediately picking up on the implication. “It wasn’t that their magic couldn’t pinpoint this mage, but rather that it asserted they were *nowhere*?”

“Yeah. My guess is their magic tracked the mage to coordinates that don’t exist in this plane of reality.”

“So it’s possible they teleported to another world.”

When this incident happened, the Torii was already starting to break down and was only capable of bringing people’s souls over instead of their whole bodies. If that mage had jumped to another world, they wouldn’t have been able to do it with the Torii alone. They would have needed to know magic that assisted in the process. *If magic like that really exists, then we need to investigate it—both for scholarly and political reasons.*

“Hmm...” Master plopped back down in her chair, her expression pensive. “It seems there’s more to reincarnation than we realized. Though I cannot even fathom where to begin my research.”

Despite her words, Master looked excited. She floated more books up around her and looked every bit like a great sage as she rifled through them at blinding speed.

“Our recent investigation into the Windswept Dunes confirmed that the desertification was caused by a disruption in the natural balance of mana within the region. We now know for sure that misuse of mana can ravage the land and even cause unnatural life-forms to evolve.”

That reminded me of something else.

“Speaking of unnatural life-forms, aren’t the deeper parts of the forest inhabited by strange creatures as well?” I asked.

“Indeed. I suspect something akin to Ason’s Legendary Treasure lies at the heart of the forest. Unfortunately, the forest is quite vast, and there are many new and rare species that need to be documented and studied first. My research is progressing slowly on that front.”

If you just stopped getting sidetracked every time you found a new species, it wouldn’t be going so slowly. In some respects, Master was just as childish as she looked. As her disciple, and as the Demon Lord’s vice-commander, I needed to keep her focused.

“In order to do your research properly, you need a stable environment. You won’t be able to study all those new species if the forest ends up like the Windswept Dunes, right?”

“Quite true. Further, it’s possible we may be able to find other completely undocumented races like the fungoids at the center of the forest.”

“Like fire-breathing dragons?”

“Haha, now that I would like to see.”

To the west of Meraldia lay a vast forest inhabited by many demon races. When the plains became humanity’s domain, the demons fled to the forest and lived there in hiding. But now, the forest was changing.

“Nnngh!”

Face red from exertion, a young giant lifted up a large boulder.

“I-Is this good enough?!” he asked.

“Yes, now please move it outside the construction zone,” a dragonkin technician said, pointing to the rope that demarcated the construction zone.

“Th-That’s so far!”

“Which is why you should put it on the roller. It will make things a lot easier for you.” A group of canine engineers had laid out a series of logs nearby to serve as a roller.

“I-I see!” The giant placed the boulder on the logs and started rolling it away. “Phew...”

Once the giant had finished removing the boulder, the dragonkin technician offered him a handkerchief the size of a small blanket.

“Well done. Next, we need to build a hut to serve as our temporary lodging until construction is complete.”

“Let me guess. When you say ‘we,’ you mean me?”

The dragonkin nodded as he flipped through pages of schematics. “I wouldn’t be able to finish it before the end of the day, after all.”

“I...guess you have a point.”

The giant mopped up the sweat on his brow with a wry smile. Just then, the group of canine engineers came running over.

“Something’s weird!”

“Yeah, super weird!”

“Super duper weird!”

The giant and dragonkin exchanged glances.

“Looks like something’s going on.”

“You can always trust a canine’s instincts. What exactly happened, you three?”

The canines huddled fearfully by the giant’s legs and said, “I heard this really scary roar in the distance! You guys did too, right?”

“Whatever made that noise was super big!”

“Yeah, it’s scary!”

The dragonkin looked up at one of the nearby trees. One of the demon army’s

officers was keeping a lookout from her perch on its branches. She had her Blast Rifle in hand, ready to fire at a moment's notice.

"Captain Monza, what do you make of this?"

"Hmm... I definitely heard that roar too." Monza deftly dropped from her perch, landing so softly that she made no noise despite the bulky Blast Rifle in her hands. "I couldn't tell how big the source is or how far it is, but it sounded pretty strong."

"Should we continue the construction work?" the dragonkin officer asked.

Monza beckoned the canines over, and then patted their heads. "What do you guys think? Are you still scared even with me around?"

"Yeah!"

"Even you can't beat that thing, Monza!"

Monza frowned at their blunt assessment, but she knew to take them seriously.

"I think we should probably leave," she said. "Canines can't fight, so they know better than anyone when it's time to flee."

"Understood. We'll follow your orders." Dragonkin were known for being decisive. He knew that the lives of the people here mattered more than the construction schedule or losing the progress they'd made. "Everyone, retreat to base. Feel free to abandon any construction materials that are too heavy to carry."

Just then, another roar echoed through the forest, this time close enough for everyone to hear. It was very low-pitched, but it had an almost lyrical lilt to it.

The dragonkin turned to his giant partner and asked, "Sorry, but would you mind lending me your shoulder for a moment?"

"Sure."

The giant lifted the dragonkin onto his shoulder. The dragonkin then pulled out his binoculars and gazed off into the distance.

"What in the world is that?" he muttered as he saw a creature's head crest

the top of the trees.

“Then when we went to scout the place the next day, the boulder at the construction site had been turned into this.” Monza squashed my boiled potato with a fork.

Please learn some table manners, Monza.

Friede’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “That sounds so cool! Monza, tell me more!”

“Sorry, but that’s all I saw. I smelled danger, and whatever that giant monster is, it’s pretty damn fast. I didn’t want it finding me, so I got the heck outta there.”

People thought Monza was a battle junkie, but the truth was she was more of a hunting junkie. She was smart enough to not pick fights she wasn’t sure she could win. That was why I’d appointed her to oversee the construction crews. Though, it seemed like something pretty serious was going on in the forest.

After mulling over Monza’s report for a few minutes, I took the fork from her and said, “The fungoids are the most knowledgeable about the forest. I’ll ask them if they know anything.”

“I know the shrooms trust you, boss, but will the ones in Ryunheit even know anything about what’s happening out there?”

“They will, don’t worry.”

The fungoids had an extensive network of hyphae that they used to gather information over long distances. The colonies all shared one consciousness so that information didn’t even get distorted in the process of traveling from one fungoid to the other. Their communication network was second to none.

I let out a sigh as I started eating the boiled potato that Monza had mashed.

“Meraldia has grown extensively over the past decade or so, but as a result, we’re chronically short on lumber. Fortunately, the forest is still growing at a decent pace. It’s our largest source of wood, so we need to make sure we have a comprehensive grasp of what lives in it and how dangerous those creatures are.”

“I don’t really care about the economics and stuff, just tell me what I need to do,” Monza said in a bored voice, so I decided to cut the explanation short and skip to the orders.

“I want you to gather up the retired werewolves and organize a scouting team. If we can’t beat this monster with brute force, the older werewolves’ cunning is going to be more important than speed or strength. Make sure there’s a few younger werewolves in the team too though, just in case.”

“Kay. Oh yeah, can I join the team too? I’m a youngster.”

Friede gave Monza a dubious look. “Really?”

“Yep, I’m still in my prime,” Monza said with a cheerful smile.

Though she didn’t mind Friede’s rudeness, I still cleared my throat and said, “Friede, please be quiet. Remember, you’re just supposed to be an observer.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

Monza hadn’t aged at all over the past decade, but she was still about as old as me.

However, I had a policy of not needling women about their age, so I just smiled and said, “Of course, you’re a necessary part of the team. You’ll be in charge of the younger werewolves and will also be the mediator between them and the older crowd.”

“Ahaha.” Monza gave me a casual salute. “Don’t worry, boss, you can count on me!”

“Th-Thanks.” I didn’t get why she was so happy when I’d just pushed the most troublesome job onto her.

Monza ate enough food to feed three humans and then left to organize her scouting team. I turned to Friede, who was looking excitedly up at me.

“What do you think the monster in the forest is, dad?” she asked.

“We’re not actually sure it’s a monster yet, which is why we need to gather intel first. Either way, though, I’m not planning on leaving Ryunheit.”

“Why not?”

“Your guys’ education takes precedence.”

Friede was about to become a third-year student, and I had just been appointed head teacher for that year. I did think there was something wrong about making the Demon Lord’s vice-commander a head teacher, but since the Demon Empress was the principal, I couldn’t really say no. Besides, raising the next generation was definitely the most important thing we needed to do to secure Meraldia’s future. So in that respect, maybe it made sense to make me a teacher.

“Of course, there’s a bunch of other stuff I need to take care of as well. Laws need to be reformed; we have petitions from the guilds and religious organizations to address; and we still need to reorganize the demon army.”

“Wow...” Friede let out a sigh. “Your job sounds really tough.”

“It is. That’s why I want you guys to hurry up and take over so I can retire.”

The Commonwealth Council had sent over some of their own personnel to help me with my duties, but it wasn’t enough. If we were running the country like the Senate and just sticking to precedent and tradition, it would simplify things. But running a living nation that adapts to the times required highly educated and highly trained people, which we didn’t have nearly enough of.

“I have high hopes for you—actually, scratch that. You probably don’t want to be burdened with my expectations,” I said.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because your life is for you to choose what to do with. You shouldn’t have to worry about whatever I want. Incidentally, are you enjoying your classes?”

“Yeah!”

For now, Friede was aiming to be a mage officer in the demon army. Her grades in magic-related classes were quite good, and she had a natural curiosity to learn more.

“I’m really liking alchemy class! It’s so cool how you can do so much without using mana!”

“Strictly speaking, that’s chemistry, not alchemy...”

In this world, alchemy was the intersection of magic and chemistry. However, chemistry that didn’t require mana was also classified as alchemy. I’d been wanting to properly split the classifications for a while now, but unfortunately, I was too much of an amateur at chemistry to tell them apart perfectly. *If only a scientist had been reincarnated into this world instead of me.* I sighed and threw away the pile of papers on my desk.

“Dad, what’s wrong?”

“I’ve been thinking about the future of the Commonwealth Council.” I wasn’t sure if Friede could understand all of the complications I was dealing with, but I decided to try explaining it anyway. “Most members of the council are viceroys, and since the title of viceroy is hereditary, that means the position of council member is as well. With me so far?”

“Yeah. Myurei’s grandfather was the viceroy of Lotz before he took over, right?”

“Yep, Petore.”

The spry old geezer had finally kicked the bucket last year, and we’d had a grand funeral for him. He’d passed away peacefully in his sleep while on a fishing trip with Myurei and his family, so he’d died happy at least. Honestly, I was a little jealous. Anyway, the point I was getting at was that hereditary succession had a lot of issues.

“It worked out in Lotz’s case because Myurei is a talented person with a strong sense of responsibility. But when someone who isn’t like that ends up becoming the successor to such an important post, we get problems.”

For now, all the viceroys were making sure to educate their heirs properly. After all, their family’s future depended on their heirs being capable. However, sometimes the heir you’d been training dies or perhaps just wasn’t suited to the job by nature. Eventually, the time would come when someone unfit to be a councilor joined the council.

“Right now, thanks to the establishment of Meraldia University, we’re going to be getting a lot of talented people who don’t belong to any viceroy’s family

but are nevertheless the most suited to sit on the council. I've been thinking we need to move away from hereditary succession for a while now, but..."

Friede cocked her head and finished my thought for me. "...But everyone wants their kids to take over their job?"

"That's right. Well, I don't think that, but most people do, yeah."

I couldn't care less if Friede became a councilor or not. The only thing I wanted was for her to inherit my mindset. Or to put it differently, I wanted her to understand the values and perspective of someone who came from the modern world. I'd already told her everything I needed to in that regard, and I was confident that even if she didn't agree with everything, she at least understood, which was what mattered. How she wanted to live her life beyond that was up to her. *Anyway, let's get back to the topic at hand.*

"There's solid reasoning behind why every viceroy wants their children to inherit their position. They've spent years raising that kid, so they know exactly how their successor thinks and what their strengths and weaknesses are. They can rest easy knowing they've chosen someone who shares their values."

"That makes sense."

"A successor to the Aindorf family will have the decisiveness the Aindorf family's known for, and a successor to the Foenheim family will have the foresight the Foenheim family's known for."

The Foenheim family was Veira's leading family—the one Forne was from. His forebears had curried favor with the Senate while surreptitiously doing whatever they wanted once they were free from Senate oversight. Up until the very end, Veira had never openly sided against the Senate, but of course, Forne had been one of the key figures in orchestrating the Senate's downfall. All of his schemes did have the trademark characteristics his family was known for.

"Another benefit of the hereditary system is that the citizens will more easily accept a successor that comes from the same family, as will viceroys of other cities. After all, if you're part of the ruling family, you likely at least meet the baseline qualifications of competence and support needed for the job."

The ruling families were so far doing a good job of upholding their reputation,

so the common people trusted them. Even if their ultimate goal was to hand their authority over to their children, for now, they were doing a good enough job of ensuring their children were also fit to handle that level of authority and leadership. If I tried to reform the system too quickly, it would actually cause more problems than it solved.

Indeed. When the demon army conquered Thuvan, they exiled the old viceroy, and Firnir had an extremely hard time taking over. Fortunately, Thuvan's viceroy hadn't been very well-liked, so Firnir had managed to make things work. She'd needed Melaine's and my help though, and frankly, things were still dicey for a while there. I didn't want a repeat of that if I could help it.

"I don't plan on doing away with the hereditary system immediately. Eventually, I think it would be better if the citizens voted for their viceroys and councilors."

Intrigued, Friede picked up the papers I'd thrown into the trash and started skimming them.

"Huh... A system where everyone chooses who becomes the next councilor sounds interesting."

"Ah, hey, don't read that. That plan wouldn't work if I tried it right now anyway."

"Why not?"

"Just think about it for a bit..." Sighing again, I rested my chin in my hands. "The viceroys would all be against it. And even if I could force my proposal through, it would just result in the viceroy's children or influential bishops and merchants getting elected. Fundamentally, nothing would change."

"Really?"

"I guarantee you there'd be people who'd try to buy votes with money."

The aforementioned Foenheim family would definitely attempt something like that. I could see their campaign slogan being something like, "If you elect me, I'll produce a dozen new Black Werewolf King plays and give free tickets and commemorative gifts to all of them for any who voted for me!" I had no doubt Forne would get the actor who played me to endorse him or whoever he

wanted as his successor too.

Mao would get up to his usual tricks too. He'd probably give a speech that went like, "As the pillar of the salt trade in Meraldia, I give you my solemn promise that I will do everything in my power to keep prices low and match the demand of the people." *You just want to get an even bigger monopoly on the salt trade, don't you? I bet you'd even take advantage of the fact that I praised you once.* Like, "The Demon Lord's Vice-Commander, Lord Veight, has also said he expects great things from me. So please, give me your votes!" *Man, I'm getting depressed just thinking about it.*

Looking up, I saw Friede trembling, her eyes closed, as she imagined the future if Meraldia had elected officials.

"Oh no...this would be a disaster..." she muttered.

"See what I mean?"

A truly democratic system meant placing the future in the hands of the voters.

"If we want to switch to electing our officials, we first need a series of laws that would prevent corruption and bribery—but I guarantee you the council would never agree to them. After all, it would mean willingly ceding their authority."

All of the current viceroys were talented people that I trusted, but they weren't saints, nor were they dreaming idealists.

"Besides, it's not like the citizens would have any idea who the right person to vote for is. Back in my old life, we had a democracy, but most of the time I honestly couldn't tell who among the candidates was the correct choice."

Friede looked at me in shock. "Even you couldn't tell?"

"In my world, I was just an average person."

"I don't believe that for a second," Friede said with utter conviction. As she smoothed out the papers I'd thrown away, she gave me a small smile. "If you were just a normal person in your home country...you said it was called Japan, right? If you were just a normal person there, does that mean Japan is full of

Black Werewolf King-tier people? There's no way that's possible."

I get what you're trying to say, but I really wasn't all that special in my previous life. I folded my arms and explained, "The standard level of education in my world was just that much higher. The literacy rate was practically one hundred percent, and everyone learned enough math that they could do quadratic equations."

In this world, maybe the top one percent received an education on parity in comprehensiveness. But in Japan, that had been part of the compulsory education system. There was a big difference in everything from the technology to the laws and culture in this world compared to my old one.

"It'll take at least a hundred years for Meraldia to reach Japan's level of modernization."

You needed a very wealthy nation if you wanted people to be able to go to school until their late teens or even their twenties. After all, if your young population was focused on studying, they weren't doing any hard labor or other strenuous work. If I tried to institute child labor laws in Meraldia right now, we'd have a famine. Hence why we could only provide an education to the children of elites right now. This world wasn't modernized enough yet.

"I think I'll just have to give up on elections..." My strength as a werewolf and my abilities as a mage were useless when it came to dealing with large-scale problems like society.

Friede smiled and said, "Come on, there's no need to get all depressed. Even if you can't manage it in your generation, maybe we'll manage it in ours?"

"Hm?"

Her words held a lot of truth in them. *Oh yeah...I forgot. Even if my life span is finite, there'll be an infinite number of people who'll come after me. If I can't manage it, maybe my daughter will. If she can't, then maybe her kids will. And if even they can't manage it, well, someday in the far-flung future, someone surely will. Then this world will finally look like the one I remember from my past life.* The future Friedensrichter and I fought so hard for was finally within reach. We'd even properly passed the torch on to the next generation. *The rest'll be a cinch.*

Friede gave me a worried look and asked, “Are you okay? Did I say the wrong thing?”

“No, not at all. In fact, you said the most profound thing of all just now,” I said. It was a good feeling, knowing one can teach something of value to the generation that would follow. “I feel a lot better now. That’s right, I can just leave all these difficult problems to you guys.”

It truly did feel like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. *Perfect, I’m one step closer to a comfy retirement.* At any rate, it seemed like I could entrust my reliable little successor with another job that had just popped up.

“Friede Aindorf,” I said in a formal tone, and Friede immediately dropped the crumpled papers she’d been poring over and gave me a salute.

“Yes, sir?”

“You know of Kuwol, the country on the other side of the Sea of Solitude to the south, correct?”

“Yes, I learned about it in geography class. I also know a little about its history.”

“Good. Then I have a job for you as an aspiring mage officer for the demon army.”

“What is it, sir?”

I grinned. “Next month, Kuwol’s crown prince, Shumar, will be coming to Meraldia to study medicine and military strategy at our university.”

“That’s an odd combination.”

Shumar’s father, King Pajam the Second, had been assassinated by the mercenary captain Zagar. His mother, Queen Fasleen, had also been targeted by assassins while she’d been pregnant with him. That might have been what influenced the fields he chose to study.

“The original plan had been for Secretary Kumluk to lead the welcoming party, but there might be a few problems with that.”

I explained to Friede that Kumluk had once served as the right hand to the murderer who’d slain Shumar’s father. Well over a decade had passed since

then, and the details of the assassination had become an open secret, but officially Kuwol's royal family still claimed that the previous king had died in an accident.

"I've heard that Prince Shumar is wise beyond his years, but even so, I imagine he'll have a hard time staying calm when face-to-face with someone who once worked for the man who killed his father."

"Yeah, that's pretty messed—err, I mean, that does sound serious, sir." Friede straightened her back, which had begun to slouch.

Kumluk had made numerous journeys to Kuwol, and he'd even done some official work for a number of nobles. However, as Prince Shumar was still a minor, Kumluk had no reason to meet him, and thus had avoided doing so.

"Friede, I want you to guard both Secretary Kumluk and Prince Shumar and ensure they don't try to harm each other. I had originally thought of sending a proper contingent from the demon army, but Kuwol's royal family insisted that I keep Prince Shumar's guard to a minimum. Officially, you'll just be part of the student welcoming committee."

"Whoa, so I get a secret mission?! That's so cool!"

"Your formality's slipping again..."

In truth, even this secret mission was just a front for the real reason I was assigning Friede this duty. Prince Shumar himself had expressed interest in spending time with Meraldia's students, and I was hoping Friede would win him over, like she had so many others, so that future Meraldia-Kuwol relations would be secure. Besides, there was no one more fit to guard Shumar if something *did* happen than Friede. She could take on dozens of veteran soldiers barehanded. While she wasn't technically a part of the demon army yet, she was easily among the ten strongest people in it. Plus, she was the Demon Lord's daughter, which made putting her on the welcome committee a good choice diplomatically.

"Thanks to Queen Fasleen's influence, Shumar is pro-Meraldia. He has a good impression of the demon army as well." I was the guy who'd avenged Pajam the Second, after all. "Everyone from our werecat squad is from Kuwol, so I'll have two of them added as guards as well, but they'll be under your command."

“Y-Yes, sir.”

It would be hard for Friede to lead people she hadn't met before, but if she was planning on becoming an officer, it was something she'd need to get used to. On the battlefield, officers died all the time, suddenly leaving lower-ranked members in command of contingents they barely knew.

“Friede,” I addressed her again.

“Yes?”

“I won't be able to accompany you this time. You will have to complete this mission on your own, but I'm confident you can do it.”

This was a comparatively easy mission since it was on home ground. Of course, as Friede's father, I was still worried, but it was high time I let her have her independence. After all, I would most likely die before her, and she needed to be able to handle herself without me. She probably didn't know what was going through my mind right now, but she nevertheless gave me a crisp salute and said, “I'll do my best, sir!”

That honestly is reassuring, but I still can't help but worry...

—The Twisted One—

The dense saturation of mana within Meraldia's western forest had given birth to a plethora of deadly monsters. Boars were an intelligent species to begin with, but thanks to the thick mana and the deadly environment, they'd evolved into much sharper and much more brutal monsters. They were highly belligerent, and their hides were too tough for human bows to pierce. The werewolf residents of the forest had dubbed them “wildeboars.”

Among those wildeboars were a select few that had golden fur. These golden wildeboars were so dangerous that even werewolves avoided confrontations with them. They were as tall as an upright human, and their charges were strong enough to bring entire houses down. But the scariest thing about wildeboars was that they emitted an aura that messed with a werewolf's flow of mana, sealing their transformations. Initially, werewolves had believed these golden wildeboars were possessed by some kind of evil spirit, but thanks to Gomoviroa and her disciple Veight's research, they had discovered that there

was a golden fungus that infected the wildeboars and made them so much stronger and more aggressive. They were a relatively rare breed of monster, but their immense power made them kings of the forest. They wandered the woods with impunity, looking for prey to vent their aggression on. Golden wildeboars were so terrifying that even other golden wildeboars avoided them. One of those golden wildeboars had been minding its business when suddenly it spotted something on the edge of its vision and charged.

“Bwooooh!” It let out a primal roar, but then a second later it squealed in pain. “Oiiink?!”

A mighty blow sent it flying, caving its head in. The golden wildeboar was dead before it even hit the ground, blood coating its entire face. The rest of the forest was completely silent, as if deathly afraid. The boar’s massive body twitched a little as it spurted out more blood, but then a monster emerged from the darkness to eat its corpse. The sound of massive jaws chewing on boar meat reverberated through the trees.

Friede had finally been assigned her first mission as an apprentice officer of the demon army—protecting the future king of Kuwol, Crown Prince Shumar. She had under her command two werecats to help her accomplish this mission. Her longtime dragonkin friend, Shirin; the werewolf from Rolmund, Joshua; the granddaughter of an archbishop and a priestess in training, Yuhette; and the adopted daughter of the leader of the Heavenwatchers, Iori, were also willing to assist her. Or rather, they’d all come to the university’s staff room to ask for permission to assist her. It didn’t seem like it would interfere with their other duties, and it would be nice for Shumar to have more people his age to talk to, so I gave them my permission.

Meraldia’s delegation had become a lot more multicultural, but considering Friede’s ability to get along with everyone, there probably wouldn’t be any problems. I had no doubt Shirin and the others would get along with Shumar just fine. *Okay, maybe I have a few doubts, but it’ll be fine.* The dropout ninja grimalkin that Friede had brought back from Wa were also tagging along though, and I was starting to get worried the party might have gotten too large.

“Is she gonna be okay?” I muttered as I picked up a small magical device on my desk and looked out the southward-facing window.

This was a long-distance communicator that the demon army had invented. It was activated with mana and converted sound waves into mana waves to transfer them over long distances. The device looked like a wooden smartphone, but sadly it had no internet access—all it could transmit was sound. I'd given this one's pair to Friede so that she could contact me immediately if anything happened. Eventually, I was planning on mass-producing these communicators so we could give them to the common people as well.

"Is she gonna be okay...?" I muttered again and Airia smiled.

"You're worrying too much. Friede has all of her friends with her, and even if she didn't, I'm confident she'd manage."

"I agree, and I have faith in her too, but..."

Is this really going to be fine? I knew I had a problem letting go of my children. After all, Friede was already fifteen. By Meraldian reckoning, she was already an adult. *I trust you, Friede.* I put the communicator back on my desk and reached for the paperwork I still needed to finish. Right now, I should be worrying about the future of the country, not Friede.

After reading over the documents, I looked up at Airia.

"I think we'll go with the design Jerrick came up with for the mass-produced Blast Rifles," I commented.

My lagomorph friend, Ryucco, had upgraded all of our Blast Rifles during our last trip to Rolmund. They were now more customized than ever to suit our individual preferences, but the demon army also needed a model they could mass-produce for regular soldiers. As I'd suspected, it was the model Jerrick had come up with that seemed the most stable.

"A soldier's weapon needs to be reliable and durable. Those two things matter most of all."

If their weapon malfunctioned at a critical moment, it would mean that soldier's death. The only thing I didn't like about Jerrick's design was that he'd code-named it "my beloved boss." At any rate, I'd been put in charge of approving or rejecting all magical weapon designs for the demon army.

I put my signature down on Jerrick's blueprint, then offered a few bits of advice on how to streamline the mass production process. Right now, all of our Blast Rifles were produced by skilled craftsmen, and there weren't nearly enough of them. If a war broke out, we'd need quite a bit more. I needed to either find a way to rapidly recruit craftsmen or automate a good chunk of the process. I also added a note telling Jerrick to please change the weapon's name.

All right, that takes care of that. I looked back out of the window and muttered for the third time, "Is she gonna be okay...?"

"Hehe," Airia chuckled.

Look, I can't help it, okay?

A few days had passed, and by now, Friede and the others should have reached Lotz. I was messing around with my wooden smartphone—sorry, communicator—while waiting for her to call. Since she'd left for Lotz, she hadn't contacted me once.

"You know, we had a saying for this back in my old world, 'no child understands their parents' hearts,'" I grumbled to Master. "Friede could at least call once in a while."

Master shut the tome she was reading and gave me an exasperated look. "As if you're one to talk. I recall when you first joined the demon army, you went months without ever visiting home."

"I couldn't help it; I was busy. Besides, we didn't have convenient communication tools like this back then."

Master shook her head. "As a high-ranked officer, you could have easily dispatched a messenger to deliver your letters. Vanessa was complaining to me that you never wrote to her, you know?"

Vanessa was my mother, and an influential werewolf in her own right. Considering her personality, I had thought she wouldn't really mind not hearing from me for a few months. In retrospect though, I was her only son, so of

course she'd be worried. *Come to think of it, I really wasn't a good son, huh?*

Clearing my throat awkwardly, I said, "Now that I've become a parent, I realize how awful that must have been..."

"Haha, now you finally understand."

Master had remained single her whole life, so I didn't get why she was acting like she understood a parent's feelings.

"I think of all of my disciples as my children," she said. "They're all rash, thoughtless fools, but you're the worst of the lot."

"Now that's just mean..."

"You still haven't matured one whit in the decades I've known you."

I'm telling you, I have! At least, I think so. Noticing my expression, Master sighed.

"If you're that worried about your daughter, I can take you to Lotz."

"No, it's fine."

I'd given an officer-in-training an official mission as the Demon Lord's vice-commander. It would be far too overprotective of me to check up on Friede when her assignment had barely just started. That didn't stop me from worrying constantly though. *Is she doing okay? She hasn't done anything reckless, has she?*

In an attempt to calm myself down, I made a cup of tea with the green tea leaves I'd imported from Wa.

"With what I have at my disposal, it would be easy enough to have someone keep an eye on Friede or have the various viceroys send me reports on her actions—or just tail her myself." I had a significant amount of authority: my abilities as a werewolf and my magical skills. If I really wanted, constantly watching over Friede wouldn't be that hard. "But I don't think it's good for her or for me to do that."

Master pulled out her favorite teacup and I poured her some tea as well.

"Mm-hmm."

“I gave her this mission because I trust her. If I tailed her, that would just mean I don’t actually trust her as much as I think I do.” Friede probably didn’t want me treating her like a kid forever. My desire to always watch over her was a selfish one that wasn’t to her benefit. “Friede’s becoming increasingly independent. I’m sure she’ll get annoyed if I’m always hovering around, looking over her shoulder all the time.”

“That is true...” Master said. I knew I wouldn’t like it if someone was constantly following me to make sure I wasn’t getting into trouble. Chuckling, Master asked, “So, what happened in your past life that made you so adamant about this?”

“Well, uhh,ahaha...” I felt a little guilty about what had happened back then, but I really didn’t want to dredge up those memories right now. I took a sip of my tea and gave Master a small smile. “I’ll tell you some other time. But for now, I choose to believe in Friede and wait. Unless she asks for my help, I won’t lift a finger.”

“I agree. That is for the best.” Master returned my smile. “The most important part of raising people is learning how to believe in their ability, and let them go free.”

Right around the time the two of us finished our tea, my communicator began to glow, indicating that I was getting a call. It was from Friede.

“What happened?!” I asked, immediately turning my communicator on.

“Bastard! I don’t care if you’re a prince or an emperor—no one insults Friede like that!” That was Joshua’s voice. It sounded like there was an argument.

In response, Friede said in a strained voice, “Joshua, what are you doing?! Let go of the prince!”

“Uwah?!”

I heard something break, then a group of grimalkin voices saying things like “Get him!” and “Protect our boss!” I exchanged glances with Master.

“What’s going on here?” she asked.

“Friede must have turned it on by accident...” I replied. *The dreaded butt-dial.*

The argument on the other end sounded like it was getting heated.

“Joshua, for once I think I’m on your side. Your Highness, apologize to Friede.” That was Shirin.

“I can’t overlook your rude remarks either. You may be Kuwol’s crown prince, but I will not allow you to impugn Friede’s honor.” And that was Iori.

A young boy’s voice that I didn’t recognize said, “Tiriya, did I say something wrong?!”

“Your Highness, I’m sorry, but you’re an idiot. If you’d actually bothered to study Meraldia’s customs, this wouldn’t have happened. Take your punishment like a man.”

That name sounded familiar. *Tiriya... Where have I heard that name before? Oh, I remember now. He must be the kid from back then.*

“Calm down, everyone. You’re just making things harder for Friede,” Yuhette said calmly.

Ah, I think I know what’s going on here. When Shirin and the others returned, I needed to give them a lecture on decorum.

“I-I’m terribly sorry. But what did I say that was so rude?”

“You don’t even know, you—”

Before Joshua could finish that sentence, Friede shouted, “Calm doooooown!”



“Uwaaah!”

I think you’re the one that needs to calm down the most here, Friede.

“Friede, stop! Any more and you’ll kill him!” Iori shouted.

“Hah, I won’t die that easily!” Joshua shouted.

“See! He said he’s fine!”

“Gyaaah!” From the sound of it, Friede was throwing Joshua around with her wrestling skills.

Master poked at the communicator and gave me a puzzled look. “What are those children getting up to?”

“I’m guessing there was a misunderstanding because of the difference in our cultures.”

“I see. Then I suppose this is a good learning opportunity for them,” Master said with a satisfied nod. It might have been a good learning opportunity, but it was a huge diplomatic problem. *I can trust you, right, Friede?*

Once Friede and the others returned to Ryunheit, I sat them all down to give them a lecture.

“First of all, I need to give you all a history lesson.”

“Yes, Professor...” Friede, Joshua, Shirin, Yuhette, Iori, Shumar, and the young boy who served as his aide, Tiriya, were all present. They all suitably repented as they sat in front of me.

Sighing, I began my explanation.

“In Kuwol, only patrilineal male heirs of the royal family can inherit the throne. It’s not like Meraldia or Rolmund where the sons of princesses or even princesses themselves can inherit the title of sovereign. I believe I taught all of you this in class already?”

“Yes, Professor.” Everyone hung their heads. Friede’s grimalkin subordinates were cowering in a corner of the room, but I’d give them a separate lecture later. “Because of this system, it’s difficult to produce a large number of

suitable heirs for the throne. Unlike more matrilineal families, Kuwol's royal family is constantly in danger of ending."

Whether or not the patriarchal system had any merit was an important question to consider in its own right, but for now, I wanted to instill upon everyone the cultural differences between Meraldia and Kuwol.

"Currently, Prince Shumar is the only person capable of continuing the Kuwol royal family line. If anything were to happen to him, the royal family's dynasty would come to an end. It would be a huge internal crisis."

There were a few other male members of Kuwol's royal family remaining, but they were all bachelors who'd entered the priesthood. Moreover, they were all quite old.

"The royal harem is one way to help address the lack of heirs problem. The king marries many different women, and tries to have as many children as possible. There's nothing immoral or barbaric about this, Joshua."

Frowning, Joshua retorted, "But, Professor, wouldn't it be better to change the inheritance system then?"

"Perhaps. But it isn't the place for a Rolmundian to decide that. Likewise, no one in Meraldia has any right to say anything about Kuwol's customs either."

This was a rather delicate issue, and I didn't want to say anything too critical with the crown prince of Kuwol sitting right there. Honestly, I was worried I might have said too much already.

"As a Meraldian myself, I don't have much familiarity with the harem system either. Personally, I wouldn't be very happy if my daughter ended up part of the royal harem...unless that's something she wants. Do you want to join Prince Shumar's harem, Friede?"

"Definitely not."

I couldn't imagine Friede being a subservient mistress, but if that was what she really wanted, I wouldn't stop her. Thankfully, it looked like she wasn't interested.

Turning to Prince Shumar, I said, "As you can see, the concept of a harem

might be something you're familiar with, but Meraldians and Rolmundians aren't. Do you understand?"

"Y-Yes, Lord Veight... I apologize for my slipup."

I felt kind of bad that our first meeting had to go like this. Although, I was glad to see that Prince Shumar had grown up into a healthy young man. He was exceedingly handsome, and he carried himself with poise. *I guess I shouldn't be too surprised that he's handsome, considering the royal family literally selectively bred with the prettiest members of the harem for generations.* Shumar's mother, Queen Fasleen, was quite beautiful, and his father, Pajam the Second, had been handsome as well. It wasn't really important right now, but I was glad I could see a bit of both of them in him. His mannerisms reminded me of the queen as well.

"Prince Shumar. Please refrain from inviting women you've just met to your harem while you're in Meraldia," I said.

"Is it really that rude a thing to say?"

"It is here."

Sorry, but as Friede's father, I really can't condone this.

Shumar cocked his head at me. "But how will I get to know someone if I cannot bring them into my harem? There's no faster way to learn about a person's true nature than that."

Jeez, you're just like your dad. Then again, this was probably just how all Kuwolese royalty were raised. Joshua looked ready to transform and tear Shumar's throat out, but I gave him a warning glance and he settled down. *Look, I get how you feel. I'm the same way. But this isn't the answer.*

"In Kuwol, getting to join the harem is a great honor. If you join the harem, your family is taken care of, and if you ever leave, nobles and wealthy merchants will all beg for your hand in marriage," I explained.

"That's right. Regardless of whether or not she chooses to join, I invited Lady Friede as a compliment," Shumar said, turning to Friede.

I get that, but that's just now how it works in Meraldia, I thought. "The

customs of your nation aren't necessarily shared by other countries. So long as you're in Meraldia, I'm afraid you'll have to learn how Meraldians do things."

"Of course, Lord Veight, I'll do my best." Shumar nodded, and I nodded back at him.

"Joshua, don't be so quick to jump to violence. Unlike demons, humans don't solve everything with their fists. Especially not humans of high standing."

Nobles definitely do love their duels though. Granted, with how many rules there were in dueling, it was more of a sport than actual fighting.

I did feel kind of bad for Prince Shumar, since it wasn't like he'd been trying to antagonize Joshua and the others. If he'd done something like this in Kuwol, he probably would have been praised for it. "What a magnanimous prince. He's willing to invite anyone into his harem. I suppose we won't have to worry about whether or not he'll leave behind any heirs." People would have said things like that in response. In fact, I'd heard that he has a favorable reputation back in Kuwol. Incidentally, joining the harem didn't mean you were immediately expected to sleep with the king. There was a trial period where you spent time with him and decided whether or not you actually wanted to bear his children.

"The harem palace in Kuwol has also traditionally served as a shelter for women. No one would dare try to assassinate or execute a member of the royal harem. Oftentimes, women with powerful enemies would be invited into the royal harem for their own protection."

There were actually a lot of fascinating accounts regarding that. Kuwol's royal family had provided the Commonwealth Council with a list of all the women they'd taken into their protection in the royal harem. Naturally, I'd had copies of that list made for the history teachers at Meraldia University. I imagined they'd come back with some interesting findings. *Dammit, I'm getting sidetracked again.*

"At any rate, there is a lot more to the royal harem and its history than its name suggests, so you shouldn't jump to conclusions. If you'd studied more, you might have realized this."

"I-I'm sorry."

“It won’t happen again, Professor Veight.”

I might have come off too harshly there. It’s not like everyone should be expected to be an expert on foreign nations. Regardless, I’d corrected everyone on their ignorance, so I figured I could end the lecture here for today. I dismissed Shirin and the others while Fahn rounded up the grimalkin for me. She said something about how she’d pet them until they repented, but what I wanted was for her to teach them, not torture them. *Eh, I guess it’s fine.*

Shumar, Tiriya, and I were the only three left in the room.

“You’ve grown up into a splendid young man, Your Highness.”

“Th-Thank you. My mother always told me I should strive to be a sincere, principled man like you, Lord Veight. It’s an honor to finally meet you in person.”

“The honor is all mine. These past fifteen years, I have always wondered how you were getting along.”

“Th-Thank you. I had heard that you were a fierce general who’d won many victories on the battlefield, so I was worried you might be a very scary werewolf. It’s a relief to know you’re a gentle person.”

So you say, but I can tell that you’re trembling. You can be more confident, you know? Technically you outrank me. At the moment, I was a professor and he was a student, so I intended to treat him as such.

“Your father, King Pajam the Second, was a cultured man who strove for peace and loved his family tremendously. I see a lot of him in you, Your Highness.”

The thing Shumar most resembled his dad in was the way he would likely get into trouble with the opposite sex, but I couldn’t exactly say that to his face. For now, Kuwol’s political situation was stable, and a council of nobles was running the country smoothly. But things weren’t perfect; the nobles bickered over things all the time. They put their lands and people before the needs of the country as a whole. Normally, it was the king’s job to mediate between them and make sure the right compromises were made, but Kuwol currently had no

king. Without the prestige of the throne, the royal family lacked the influence to properly settle disputes between nobles. The sooner Shumar became king, the better it would be for Kuwol. Queen Fasleen had sent him here to study in Meraldia so that he could gain the knowledge and make the connections he would need to be a good ruler. She wanted to prepare her son for the hardships ahead—a feeling I understood completely. I wanted to do my best to help Shumar along his path.

“Your Highness, Friede and her friends may be a bit unrefined at times, but they’re good students, and I hope you can all be friends. Rather, I think you have to become friends.”

“Why is that?”

“Well...” I, of course, had selfish reasons, but like any good crafty adult, I couldn’t let Shumar know that. “To rule a nation, you cannot surround yourself just with those who share your opinions and follow you willingly. A true king is capable of accepting those who do not share his views and accepting them into his fold as well.”

It sounded like a simple enough thing to do, but in practice, it was extremely difficult. Only those with the right disposition and extensive training could manage it.

“Your Highness, please try your best to become friends with Friede and the others. If you cannot manage that, you’ll have no hope of reining in Kuwol’s nobles.”

Shumar nodded nervously. “I-I’ve taken your advice to heart, Lord Veight. I’ll do what I can.”

What a good kid. All right, the rest is up to you, Friede. Man, the older I get, the more time I spend duping people. It feels kinda bad... At this rate, it would probably be better for Meraldia if I retired before I became a true villain. Oh yeah, I forgot there was one more thing I wanted to ask.

“By the way, I consider it a great honor that you invited Friede to your harem.”

“Ah, um...sorry for the misunderstanding.” Shumar shrunk back slightly. I

knew he hadn't meant to be rude, so I really couldn't find it in me to be angry at him.

"I'm curious though, what did you find so appealing about my daughter?"

"Huh?!" Shumar gave me a surprised look. Blushing a little, he said in a serious voice, "Lady Friede...is cheerful, wise, and very beautiful."

It made me happy to hear other people praising her like that. Though, I couldn't help but think there were plenty of other women who fit those criteria. There must have been something more, and I waited quietly for Shumar to continue.

"Also...she's a very skilled mage, and I've heard that she knows how to use a Blast Rifle. Furthermore, she has the strength of a werewolf and is a master of hand-to-hand combat."

"That's true, yes..."

"Not only is she beautiful, but she's also strong. I feel like I could weather any challenge if she were by my side."

Yeah, I can't really deny that one. I just hope you don't think she's a musclehead or anything.

Noticing my expression, Shumar awkwardly added, "I'm sorry. But my mother has always regretted that she doesn't have the strength to fight. She told me I should choose a queen who can fend for herself."

"Did Lady Fasleen really say that?"

"Yes. She said that if she could fight or knew how to lead troops, she might have been able to save my father."

Lady Fasleen...you realize you were pregnant then, so even if you did know how to fight, you wouldn't have been able to do much, right? I get that losing your husband was a traumatic event, but I think you might be teaching your son the wrong things. Then again, I wasn't really one to talk, since I'd also failed to stop Pajam the Second's assassination.

I smiled at Shumar and said, "Strength isn't just about physical prowess. Your mother is quite strong in her own right."

A woman who'd only ever painted and done housework before had stepped up after her husband's death, and raised the crown prince all by herself. As a parent myself, I knew just how difficult raising a child could be. Fasleen was incredibly strong to have made it this far.

"Well, we can save the long lectures for your lessons. For now, welcome to Meraldia, Your Highness. I hope you enjoy the two years you spend here."

"Thank you!"

Oh wait, there's one last thing I need to tell you, I thought. "By the way, one of my men, Kumluk, wishes to meet with you. Alone, if possible."

"Lord Kumluk was part of the entourage that welcomed me at Lotz, correct?"

Yep. Kumluk had been the right-hand man of the same guy who'd killed Shumar's father. It seemed Shumar hadn't been informed of that though.

"It is up to you whether or not you grant him an audience, but as your professor, I highly recommend that you meet with him."

"Why is that?"

"He's deeply involved with Kuwol's royal family. If you want to know the precise details, you should ask him."

I had no idea whether Kumluk was planning on telling Shumar everything. It was up to him how he faced his past.

Shumar gave me a serious look and said, "I understand. My mother told me that meeting with people is an important part of a king's duties, so I shall grant him the audience he seeks."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

Shumar turned to Tiriya. "I'll be going to meet with this man. Wait here until I return."

Tiriya frowned and said, "Isn't it dangerous to see him alone? You're even weaker than a newborn lamb."

"I'm not *that* weak!"

Noticing I was watching him, Shumar hurriedly covered his mouth. His

mannerisms were honestly kind of cute.

Straightening his back and regaining his composure, Shumar said, "If this man is truly dangerous, Lord Veight would have never asked me to meet him. Lord Veight is the savior of Kuwol's royal family. Even the nobles who openly defy the royal family don't dare raise a hand against Lord Veight."

Are Kuwol's nobles really that scared of me? Tiriya turned back to look at me, then sighed.

"All right, but you better protect yourself if anything happens then. My clan'll be in trouble if you die under my watch."

"You could at least pretend to care about my safety."

"Didn't you just say it's not dangerous? Go on, shoo."

This was the first time I'd seen an attendant be so brusque with their master, but it looked like the two of them trusted each other completely.

"Don't do anything rude to Lord Veight while I'm gone, okay? I still haven't forgotten the horse dung incident..."

"If you say another word, I'm going to become the biggest danger to *you*, Your Highness."

They do trust each other, right? They reminded me of how Parker and I interacted, so they probably did trust each other.

After Shumar had left, Tiriya turned to me.

"It's been a long time, Lord Veight... We have met before, right?"

"Yes. You've also grown into a fine young man, Tiriya." Seeing them both today was incredibly nostalgic. "You look just like your father. How is Lucan doing?"

"He's the Merca tribe's chief, so he's pretty busy. I've heard tons of stories about you from the other tribe members."

"Hahaha."

Tiriya was the eldest son of the Merca tribe's chief. The Merca tribe was a

nomadic tribe that roamed the remote regions of Kuwol. Back when Tiriya had been just a year old, there'd been a dispute between the tribe and Lord Peshmet. I'd been visiting Kuwol at the time, so I'd mediated a solution, which was when I'd gotten to know the Merca tribe. Now the tribe and Lord Peshmet were business partners. The tribe guided his caravans through trade routes only they knew, and provided him with skilled cavalry in return for a share of Lord Peshmet's tax revenue.

"I heard that you studied at the school Sir Valkel founded," I said.

"That's right. Principal Valkel has taught me a great deal about both the literary and martial arts."

Once a mercenary, Valkel was now one of Kuwol's most prominent nobles. He was Lord Peshmet's chief retainer, but was also a teacher. I suspected his name would go down in history books.

"Sir Valkel is a man of virtue. Thanks to his time as a mercenary, he's seen a lot of the world. You were lucky to have him as your teacher."

"He was the one who recommended me for the position of Prince Shumar's personal bodyguard. It's thanks to him that I'm here right now," Tiriya said with a smile.

Whenever the prince came up, Tiriya became a lot more expressive. I decided to share with him a tidbit about Shumar that the Commonwealth Council had heard through the grapevine.

"I was told that Prince Shumar's best friend is from one of the nomad tribes. I assume that best friend is you?"

"We're not *friends*. I'm just his bodyguard, is all," Tiriya said, pouting a little.

I see. Someone's a little tsundere.

Seeing my grin, Tiriya hurriedly added, "We may have Lord Peshmet's support now, but the Merca tribe is still in a precarious position. We need to build connections with the royal family to secure our future."

"Of course, of course."

It was a smart move, politically. But Kuwol's royal family weren't idiots.

Queen Fasleen especially had seen her husband get assassinated, and had nearly been murdered herself. I knew she wasn't one to trust easily. The fact that she had allowed Tiriya to remain by Shumar's side spoke volumes. At the very least, Kuwol's royal family seemed to think Tiriya was worth investing in. In which case, it would probably be to Meraldia's benefit to build a stronger relationship with him as well. Besides, I already had a connection to his father.

"You know, back when you were a toddler, you gave me horse dung as a gift."

"Please don't mention that..." Tiriya said with a troubled expression. "I'm tired of being teased over something I did when I was a year old."

"This is the first time I've brought it up though." We hadn't seen each other in the past sixteen years, after all.

Tiriya looked down and said, "This might be your first time mentioning it, but the rest of my tribe has told me the story a thousand times already."

Seriously?

"My mother, father, grandfather, all the tribe elders, all of the townspeople, and even Principal Valkel and Lord Peshmet never stop talking about it."

"That sounds rough. But you know, they all tell that story because they're proud of it, I think."

Not to toot my own horn, but I am the vice-commander of Meraldia's Demon Lord, and I technically hold a high position in the Commonwealth Council. I don't really feel like a big shot though.

Grumbling to himself, Tiriya muttered, "Everyone speaks of it like it was some big deal, but all infants do stuff like that. You can say it was a momentous step towards mutual understanding, and that I understood what things had true value and all that, but I was just doing normal infant things. They're all making a big deal out of nothing."

That's just how anecdotes are. I smiled at Tiriya and said, "Your father only resolved to make his peace with the farmers after seeing what you did. You may have just been an infant who wasn't thinking about anything, but it is an undeniable fact that your presence altered history."

The Mercan tribesmen began to trust me more after seeing how I'd acted around a baby too. Tiriya may not have intended for it to happen, but he'd definitely helped negotiations.

"I will say, you've worked your way up to be the prince's personal bodyguard all on your own merits. Though, if you hadn't made it this far, people probably would have forgotten all about that horse dung story."

Tiriya looked up at me as if a revelation had just hit him. "So what you're saying is that everyone keeps telling that dumb, embarrassing story because I made a name for myself?"

"That's right. It's because you've continued to work hard and live up to the expectations that everyone has of you that they remember your early years so fondly."

If Tiriya hadn't worked his way up in the world, it would have just been the story of a nameless baby talking to the Demon Lord's vice-commander. No one would have cared.

"You're no longer an infant who offers people horse dung with a smile on his face. You're one of the young stars who'll guide Kuwol in the future. Be proud of what you've accomplished, Tiriya."

"Thank you."

Tiriya looked down, trying to hide his tears from me.

—A Pardon Seventeen Years in the Making—

Prince Shumar met with the diplomat Kumluk in the parlor next to Veight's room.

"My apologies for calling you out like this, Your Highness. I'm extremely grateful that you were willing to meet with me alone."

Kumluk knelt on his right knee. That was the most respectful greeting a noble could give another. It was a perfectly executed kneel, and it left a favorable impression on Shumar. *He seems like an upright man, but with the way he's acting, it's like he feels he owes me something.*

Shumar kept his thoughts to himself for now and said, "Not at all. You looked

after me during the journey from Lotz to Ryunheit. I was hoping to get an opportunity to thank you, and now I have one.”

“You humble me with your gratitude.” Kumluk bowed his head low. Shumar could tell whatever he was here to talk about was serious.

“Please, raise your head. One of Lord Veight’s trusted advisors shouldn’t be bowing so low to me.”

“I cannot do that, Your Highness. For I have come here today to apologize to you.”

I knew it. But what for? Shumar didn’t know much about Kumluk. There were plenty of people from Kuwol who’d emigrated to Meraldia, and a number of those people worked for various viceroys or the Commonwealth Council. Shumar knew Kumluk was one such person, and that he’d been born in Bahza to a wealthy merchant. But then he’d become a mercenary, which was how he’d met Veight and went on to serve under him. However, none of that explained why Kumluk was apologizing right now.

After a moment’s hesitation, Kumluk said, “You know that I was once part of a mercenary company that served the royal family, yes?”

“Yes. Everyone who knows you says that you’re an honest, gentle man.”

Indeed, Shumar had only heard good things about Kumluk. Even after going to Meraldia to work for Veight, Kumluk continued doing his best to help his home country of Kuwol as well.

“If you ever wish to return to Kuwol we will welcome you with open arms. Lady Birakoya Bahza speaks highly of you as well. She’s proud of your accomplishments.”

“Th-Thank you.” Kumluk wiped away the tears forming in his eyes.

A question occurred to Shumar and he asked, “Why is it that you never returned to Kuwol? Is it related to what you want to apologize for?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Kumluk stared at the ground, his shoulders trembling. “It...has to do with the death of your father, King Pajam the Second, seventeen years ago.”

In as calm a voice as he could, Shumar said, “My father was killed by the mercenary captain Zagar, was he not?”

“So you know the truth...”

“The details were never publicized, but as his son, I was told what actually transpired.”

In a pained voice, Kumluk said, “I... I was Zagar’s second-in-command.”

“Huh?!”

That was news to Shumar. Zagar had dreamed of ruling Kuwol, and in order to realize his ambitions, he’d assassinated Pajam. He’d also tried to kill Queen Fasleen and her unborn son. These were all things Shumar knew. But he’d been told that everyone who’d taken part in Zagar’s plot had been executed by none other than the Black Werewolf King Veight—Kumluk’s current superior.

Confused, Shumar said, “If you were Zagar’s right hand, does that mean you also had a role in my father’s assassination?”

“No, I would have never condoned such a plot! Had I known what Captain Zagar plotted, I would have stopped him even if it cost me my life. Killing a king is a grave sin, but the real reason I would have stopped him is because it would have meant his demise. And indeed, Captain Zagar met his end soon after he killed your father.”

Kumluk’s unwavering gaze looked sincere to Shumar.

“So despite being Zagar’s lieutenant, you were unaware of the plot to kill my father?”

“Yes. We had a disagreement shortly before he killed your father, and I suspect he didn’t trust me.”

That made sense to Shumar. Kumluk was a good person, so it wasn’t surprising that he hadn’t seen eye to eye with a villain like Zagar. And because Kumluk had been completely ignorant of the assassination plot, no one had blamed him for what had happened. *I guess that explains why he’s working for Lord Veight now.* Kumluk was Veight’s diplomatic advisor on Kuwol affairs, and by all accounts, he was doing a wonderful job. *Is he worried the royal family*

might still want to execute him for what happened?

Compared to Rolmund's imperial family, Meraldia's Commonwealth Council, and Wa's Chrysanthemum Court, Kuwol's royal family didn't have as much international prestige. Their king had been assassinated, and they'd needed foreign help to regain control of their country. Without Meraldia's intervention, Kuwol's royal family may have died out entirely. But weakened or not, the royal family still ostensibly ruled Kuwol. Their decrees were absolute. If the royal family decided that Kumluk needed to be punished for his sins, they would do everything they could to ensure their judgment was meted out—even if that meant going to war. However, the fact that Kuwol and Meraldia *hadn't* gone to war meant that the royal family had already pardoned Kumluk. Young as he was, Shumar realized that as Kuwol's future king he needed to make that much clear here and now.

"The royal family has no intention of executing you. They've already determined that you share no responsibility for my father's death. If you had no desire to kill my father, then I have no reason to hate you."

"But I was one of the few people in a position to advise Captain Zagar. I failed to stop him, and I can't forgive myself for that."

Could it be that he's not here to apologize, but rather to beg for forgiveness? Shumar thought. *In that case, I need to think of something, and fast.*

"All of Zagar's mercenaries who had no part in the assassination plot were pardoned. My family had the authority to have them executed if desired, but they knew that it would be cruel and unjust to kill the innocent."

Most of Zagar's former men had been employed by the royal family and were now working on sugarcane plantations. They were being treated like normal citizens rather than insurgents.

"You don't have any ill will towards the royal family, do you, Sir Kumluk?"

"Of course not, Your Highness. Even after immigrating to Meraldia, my respect for the royal family has never wavered."

Shumar could tell from Kumluk's conduct that he wasn't lying.

In a somewhat theatrical voice, Shumar said, "Then I, Shumar, son of Pajam,

hereby declare that you are absolved of all suspicion regarding the assassination of my late father. So long as I draw breath, no one shall ever question your loyalty to the royal family.”

Since this was a private audience, Shumar’s statements didn’t actually carry any legal weight. But the sentiment was what mattered to Kumluk, and he bowed deeply to Shumar, trembling with emotion.

“Thank you so much, Your Highness...”

“Please continue serving as a bridge between Kuwol and Meraldia for years to come. Once I become king, I will be looking forward to your diplomatic visits. Though...”

“Is something the matter?” Kumluk asked in a worried voice, and Shumar grinned playfully at him.

“I’m still young, so please go easy on me during negotiations.”

Overcome by emotion, Kumluk burst into tears.

After the meeting, Kumluk came to me and told me how it had gone.

“I see. I’m glad you finally found closure.”

“I can’t believe I started crying in front of His Highness though. How embarrassing.” Kumluk smiled bashfully and dabbed at his puffy eyes with a handkerchief. “I haven’t cried like that since I was a child.”

“I’m sure he didn’t mind. Prince Shumar is a very kind young man.”

As I’d suspected, Shumar was quite skilled at reading people. He came off as airheaded, but was capable of calculated affectation to make people lower his guard around him. He knew how to put people at ease and win them over.

Composing himself, Kumluk said, “His Highness immediately noticed that I was seeking forgiveness and used his authority as the crown prince to officially pardon me.”

“I see. That was a smart way of resolving things.”

Shumar must have realized it would have been pointless to grill Kumluk on whether or not he’d really had nothing to do with Pajam’s assassination. After

all, Kumluk was a diplomat working directly for me. It would be a political nightmare to try and launch an investigation now. It made far more sense for Shumar to simply pardon Kumluk and show what a magnanimous ruler he was. I figured at least part of what Shumar had done was calculated. Though, of course, I could tell that Shumar was also a generous man by nature. I was glad Queen Fasleen had raised him into the kind of person who wouldn't waste his time chasing pointless revenge against the wrong people.

"Thanks for accepting my unreasonable request, Kumluk."

"No need to thank me. This let me put my guilt to rest as well. After seventeen years...I can finally let go of the past."

I was the one who'd asked Kumluk to request a private audience with Shumar. I'd wanted to get a better grasp of Shumar's character, so I'd orchestrated this whole thing. It might have been a little underhanded of me, but at least now I knew Kuwol was in safe hands. *Now that I think about it, isn't this exactly what the Chrysanthemum Court did to Friede?* I never imagined I'd be the one doing the testing, but now I could see why everyone wanted to gauge how competent future leaders of other countries were.

"I spoke with the prince's attendant, Tiriya, while you were gone, and he's quite the splendid young man as well. His loyalty is unshakable. I doubt bribes or blackmail would work on him. He'd even protect the prince from a Valkaan if he had to."

"That's reassuring to hear. The future of Kuwol looks bright if His Highness is capable of earning the loyalty of the nomadic tribes as well as his own subjects," Kumluk said with a smile.

One meeting was all it'd taken to make him a Shumar fan. *Please don't forget that you're our diplomat, not his.* Granted, it would only be a net positive for Meraldia-Kuwol relations if Kumluk and Shumar became better friends. After all, I didn't really think Kumluk would abandon his duties as Meraldia's diplomat.

Smiling back, I said, "Would you mind looking after Prince Shumar while he's here in Meraldia?"

"Of course not. I'll be sure to win him over to the pro-Meraldia faction as

well.”

See? I knew I could trust you.

—Tiriya, the Demon Attendant—

He’s late. Tiriya heaved a long sigh, pacing back and forth across the waiting room.

Finally, Shumar walked in.

“I’m back. Did you wait long?” Tiriya glared at him.

“I waited for ages, but that’s part of my job, so it’s no big deal.”

“Sorry, Sir Kumluk just wanted to apologize for what happened to my father,” Shumar said with a cheerful smile.

Tiriya immediately went on high alert and asked, “Was he involved in the plot somehow?!”

“No. He’d been Zagar’s right-hand man, but he didn’t know anything, apparently. He still felt responsible for not stopping his captain though.”

If it’s not your fault, why would you feel bad about it? Tiriya thought to himself. *Besides, it’s the fate of a weak ruler to be killed by his subjects. That’s exactly why a king has to be strong. If they’re weak, they should train to become stronger, and delegate the tasks they still can’t handle to retainers they trust.* Indeed, Tiriya’s main worry was that Shumar still wasn’t strong enough.

“You should train more, Your Highness.”

“Where’d that come from?!”

With a straight face, Tiriya said, “You can’t beat me in archery, horsemanship, or swordsmanship. Don’t blame me if a weak king like you gets assassinated someday.”

“You’re my bodyguard. Is it even necessary for me to be stronger than you? Furthermore, there’s barely anyone in Kuwol who can beat you.”

Shumar took off his coat and tossed it to Tiriya, who hung it on the wall. He then pulled out a chair for Shumar to sit on.

“Thanks, Tiriya. By the way, do you know what other people call you?”

“The peasants all call me the ‘Demon Attendant’ or the ‘Scourge of the Nomads,’ I know.”

“So you do know,” Shumar said with a wry smile, and Tiriya drew closer to him.

“Don’t forget, Your Highness. We’re not in Kuwol anymore. A spoiled prince who grew in the safety of the palace won’t last long here unless he toughens up.”

“You think so?” Shumar cocked his head to one side as Tiriya brought his face even closer to Shumar’s.

“This is why I keep saying you’re *soft*. If I was a Meraldian, I would have dismembered you and displayed your head over the front gate.”

“Meraldians don’t do that!”

“But you should act under the assumption that someone might.”

Meraldia was a foreign nation inhabited by demons. Tiriya was determined to keep his guard up at all times in case anything happened. *If the worst comes to pass, I need to at least be able to protect him until he reaches the port.*

Shumar let out a sigh. “You’ll tire yourself out being on edge all the time. Really, you don’t have to be so worried.”

“Anyone would be on edge if they had to guard such a weakling prince.”

“Do you have to always be so mean?” Shumar asked with a small smile. They’d had this same conversation a hundred times now.

Frowning, Tiriya replied, “If you die, it’ll reflect badly on my clan.”

“I know. But once I’ve ascended the throne, I’ll make sure your clan...no, not just your clan.” Shumar shook his head. “I’ll make sure all the nomadic tribes in Kuwol are treated better. Both the peasant farmers and the nomads are citizens of Kuwol. For the country to prosper, everyone needs to be given equal rights.”

After a brief silence, Tiriya said, “In that case, I’ll make sure to train you up good while you’re here.”

“How are those two things related?”

I can't let a good king like him get assassinated. Unfortunately, Tiriya was too embarrassed to say that to Shumar's face.

A few days later, our troublesome guest Shumar was officially registered as an exchange student at Meraldia University. *Friede, please get along with him.* Unfortunately, the prospects for that looked rather grim.

"In Meraldia, offering a gift of sweets to someone holds no special meaning. Don't get the wrong idea, Your Highness," Tiriya said in a cold voice, glaring at his lord.

Groaning, Shumar said, "Is it just me, or have you been picking on me more than usual since we got to Meraldia?"

"Oh, you noticed?" Tiriya said bluntly.

Man, he really doesn't pull his punches. I decided not to get involved in their little squabble and focused on clearing away my lecture materials. The books I was using to teach were highly valuable tomes from the university's collection. Though, back on Earth, they would have been the kinds of things you could easily find in a bookstore.

Putting that thought out of my mind, I watched as Friede's group approached Shumar and Tiriya.

Friede gave the prince an awkward wave and said, "I didn't know sweets had symbolic significance in Kuwol... Sorry about that."

Tiriya bowed regally in Shumar's stead and said, "Thank you for your consideration, but this is Meraldia. It is we who should be following Meraldian customs, not the other way around. I'll be sure to drill that thoroughly into His Highness's head." Tiriya turned back to Shumar and said in an even colder voice than before, "A king's mistakes reflect poorly on his country. Your ignorance is Kuwol's ignorance. It'll be too late once you've taken the throne, so you better fix your ignorance now. Or else."

Shumar shrunk back meekly. "Or else what? Are you threatening me?"

"I am. Shape up or I'll thrash you so hard you won't be seeing straight for a week."

Tiriya towered menacingly over Shumar. *What a close pair they are.* As I put away the last of the books, Yuhette split off from Friede and walked over to my desk.

“Professor, is it okay to let this keep happening?” she asked.

“I don’t see why not.”

I watched as Tiriya chased Shumar to a corner of the room. Shirin, Joshua, and Iori were all nodding in approval as they watched Tiriya lecture his master.

“This is your just deserts,” Shirin said, eyeing Shumar.

“If Tiriya didn’t teach you a lesson, I would have,” Joshua growled.

“You’re lucky Friede’s so nice,” Iori said.

Turning back to Yuhette, I smiled and said, “See?”

“What am I supposed to be seeing here?” Yuhette asked in a confused voice.

“Tiriya is taking the initiative and scolding Shumar before anyone else can. Think about it. What would have happened if Tiriya had defended Shumar instead?”

Realization dawned on Yuhette. “Oh, I get it now. Things would have just gotten worse.”

“Exactly.”

Shumar wasn’t the most diligent student of foreign cultures, so he made a lot of faux pas. Fortunately, he was polite and kind enough that it never escalated into a real problem. But Tiriya still pounced on him every time he messed up.

Snapping his fingers, Tiriya took a step closer to Shumar and said, “Just because your classmates are tolerant doesn’t mean you’re allowed to be rude to them. If words aren’t enough to convince you to pay more attention to Meraldia’s cultural norms, maybe my fists will.”

“Wait, Tiriya, why are you being so aggressive? Did I do something to make you mad?”

“No, I’m just doing my duty as your attendant.”

Using one of the wrestling techniques of his clan, Tiriya put Shumar in a clean

headlock.

“Y-You shouldn’t use violence in a classroom... Come on, Tiriya...cut it out...”

“This isn’t violence, this is me *teaching* you a lesson.”

“I’m doomed...”

As someone who’d learned werewolf-style wrestling, I could tell that Tiriya’s headlock wasn’t as painful or dangerous as it appeared. Shumar likely knew that as well and was purposely acting like it hurt more than it did. Meanwhile, Friede’s fans were clapping and cheering.

“Accept your punishment like a man,” Shirin said.

“Nice one, Tiriya! Mess him up!” Joshua shouted.

“You could twist it a little harder...” Iori added. “No, actually, I suppose this is good enough.”

As a master of Wa’s gusokujutsu, Iori could tell Tiriya was going easy on Shumar. But it seemed she’d decided against pointing that out. Friede knew a good bit of wrestling as well, which was why she didn’t look very worried either.

“Yeah, this is fine,” she said to Iori.

“It’s not fine for me... Argh!” Shumar was making sure to properly distribute the force of Tiriya’s hold around his neck muscles so he wouldn’t suffocate or dislocate his collarbone. Though Shumar looked weak, he clearly had some experience with close combat. Yuhette didn’t though, and she looked a lot more worried.

“Won’t this cause an international incident?” Yuhette asked.

“It’s the crown prince’s own attendant who’s doing this, so technically this is all Kuwol’s problem,” I said. “Don’t worry, though, if it really gets dangerous, I’ll step in.”

So long as Tiriya was being this hard on Shumar, the prince didn’t need to worry about being hated by his classmates. Because they all knew that if they had any problems with something Shumar did, they could always go to Tiriya. Of course, Tiriya had taken all that into account, and was purposely being hard on Shumar to protect him.

“Tiriya really is loyal to his prince.”

“Even though he’s choking him right now?”

“Yep.”

Shumar really was lucky to have such a wonderful retainer. It was a net benefit to Kuwol and Meraldia as a whole too.

Still looking worried, Yuhette asked, “Professor, are you *sure* this is okay?”

“Absolutely.”

Eventually, Friede took pity on Shumar and pulled Tiriya off him.

Shumar and Tiriya got used to life at Meraldia University pretty quickly, and they showed remarkable growth in their studies. There was a political science exam today, in which I’d been chosen to be the proctor. The topic for today’s exam was “Does a king need a parliament?” and the students would be graded on how eloquently they made their case. The problem was, I had no idea how to evaluate whether or not a point was well-made.

Cold sweat poured down my back as I looked at the grade sheet. It didn’t help that the argument had gotten slightly off-topic at this point.

“There’s no need for a parliament. Restricting the king’s authority will weaken his political acumen, as he’ll have fewer opportunities to make decisions. All he needs is advisors,” Tiriya said, and Shirin and Joshua nodded in agreement.

“Demons have an ironclad rule of obeying the strongest among them. A leader needs to be strong to protect everyone,” Shirin said.

“A chief has to be strong, else you can’t rely on him to get the pack through the winter, or take them on successful hunts,” Joshua added.

Friede, though, held a different opinion. “It’s not fair to force all the responsibility onto one person. The more people working on a problem, the better the solution will be.”

Iori nodded emphatically. “That’s right. Consulting with others before making a decision is how you avoid fatal mistakes.”

To my surprise, Shumar was also on the pro-parliament side. “Exactly. There needs to be a system in place to stop the king in case he ever becomes a tyrant.”

Ever the diplomat, Yuhette was serving as the bridge between the two camps. “You’ve all brought up good points. This isn’t the kind of question that has a definitive right or wrong answer, so we should try and understand each other’s perspectives instead of trying to prove one of us is right.”

Since I was the proctor, I just sat back and evaluated the discussion. Honestly, everyone had grown a lot in the past few years.

Yuhette then said, “Why don’t we all try arguing for the opposite stance? We can exchange notes and analyze what the benefits and drawbacks of the other side’s position are.”

Friede immediately raised her hand and said, “Okay! In that case, I think it’s important for a king to take initiative, and a parliament would get in the way of that. If there are too many people involved, decisions get made slower! Just like how we argued for ages yesterday about where to get dinner.”

Wow, you managed to change tack fast. Though, Friede’s argument was pretty convincing, considering they’d spent a whole thirty minutes at the front entrance fighting over what the ideal dinner location was.

“Plus, it’s easier and more efficient to teach a single king. Getting an entire parliament full of competent politicians is both expensive *and* time-consuming. And, you’d still need a system of actually choosing that parliament,” Friede added.

It was funny to see the daughter of the Demon Lord criticizing Meraldia’s current form of government. It was Tiriya who came up with a counterargument first.

“No matter how good a king is, a single person is bound to make mistakes eventually. Just look at Prince Shumar. He ordered too much for lunch yesterday, and I had to finish what he couldn’t eat. Even though I’d *explicitly* told him he wouldn’t be able to finish that much.”

Tiriya had managed to pivot quite nicely as well. In order to argue devil’s

advocate, you need a deep understanding of your opponent's position, and the ability to not get too attached to your own beliefs. These kids were debating way better than I expected anyone in their teens to manage. They were relying a bit too much on anecdotal evidence, but they'd grow out of that with age.

When it got to the point where people were going in circles with their arguments, I finally called an end to the exam.

"All right, that's the end of the exam. What a wonderful debate. Shumar, Tiriya, and Iori, the three of you haven't been in this school for very long, but you've already got a solid grasp of the fundamentals. The rest of you did great as well. You all pass."

They were bearing the future of their respective countries on their shoulders, so they had way more motivation than I had in high school. It helped that they were all talented as well.

"It makes my job as your teacher a lot easier, since you're all such good students."

Joshua gave me a curious look and asked, "So who was actually right in the end?"

"That's a good question." I folded my arms and thought about it for a bit. "In recent years, most countries have been transitioning into a more parliamentary system. But no two nations have the same kind of parliament. And there's a huge variance in the scope of their powers. In Wa, the parliament makes all the decisions, but in Rolmund, the emperor still holds all the real power."

Wa's Chrysanthemum Court was definitely the most powerful parliament among the nations on this continent. The head of the court was ostensibly the nation's leader, but in practice, they couldn't really do anything without the rest of the court's approval. On the other hand, in Rolmund, Eleora had the final say in all matters. However, she was still somewhat beholden to her fourteen most trusted nobles, and she respected their opinion enough that they were functionally a small parliament on their own.

"At the moment, every nation on the continent is politically stable. Which means they're technically all using a 'correct' form of government. But of course, no country is a utopia, so none of their systems are perfect." I'd been in

politics for twenty years now, and even I didn't have a perfect solution. "It's best to assume there's no one ultimate answer when it comes to politics. Which is why you should learn as many different things as you can, and apply different solutions to different problems."

"Got it," Joshua said with a nod.

—Oath at the Battleball Stadium—

Meraldia University had a large sports ground for those studying military affairs or magic to practice their craft without fear of damaging anything or anyone. Right now, though, it was being used for simple recreation.

Shirin ran across the field and threw an elliptical ball at Joshua.

"Joshua!"

"Yep!"

Just as Joshua caught the ball, Shumar came out of nowhere and tackled him.

"You're mine!" he shouted.

If Joshua transformed, he'd easily be able to shake Shumar off, but that would be against the rules. Besides, Joshua had been distracted, so he wouldn't have managed to transform in time anyway.

"Whoa?!"

Both of them were in full armor, so when they hit the ground, they kicked up a huge dust cloud. It was Shumar who got up first.

"Joshua, what are you doing?! Get up!" Shirin shouted, but Joshua remained lying down. The fall seemed to have knocked him out.

Sighing, Shirin tried to go over and rescue him, but before he could take more than a few steps, Tiriya barred his way.

"You're not getting past me."

"Oh, I think I am."

Tiriya and Shirin slammed into each other. Both of them were masters of close combat, and they were desperately looking for an opening to gain an advantage. Shumar watched them out of the corner of his eye while he ran

towards the enemy team's side with the ball.

"Not so fast!" lori shouted, running at Shumar from his blind spot.

"Ah!"

In Kuwol, it wasn't normal for girls and guys to wrestle together, and since Shumar wasn't used to fighting girls, he hesitated for a second. lori had no mercy, though, and she vaulted over Shumar, grabbing his shoulder as she passed to try and drag him to the ground.

"Whoaaaaa!"

Shumar nearly fell, but he managed to barely maintain his balance by stepping backwards in time with lori's jump. His vast amount of experience wrestling with Tiriya on horseback came in handy at that moment. As lori landed, Shumar rolled backwards into his fall and sprang back to his feet. lori shouldn't have been able to keep her balance after such a flashy jump, but she managed to correct her posture with catlike dexterity. She was quite the formidable foe.

Realizing it was only a matter of time before the ball was taken from him, Shumar shouted, "Friede!"

"I'm ready!"

Before lori could start grappling with him, Shumar passed the ball over to Friede.

"Sweet!" Friede grinned as she caught the ball.

Now that it was in her possession, no one could stop her. She made it all the way to the goal, and the shrill note of a whistle signaled that she'd won a point for her team.

After the practice game, Shumar, Joshua, and Shirin all sat together.

"You're pretty strong for a sheltered prince... Oww..." Joshua said as Yuhette bandaged his scraped arm.

Shumar wiped his face with a damp cloth and grinned at Joshua. "Royalty are

prime targets for assassination, and the time might come when we have to lead soldiers on the battlefield, so we all learn self-defense.”

Frowning, Shirin said, “See, I told you to be wary of the prince, Joshua. Despite how he looks, he has a lot of combat training.”

“I mean, I train with the werewolves every day too. I didn’t think he’d actually get one over me...” Joshua slumped his shoulders.

Friede gave Shumar a sad look as she stripped off her armor. “Oh yeah, your father was assassinated too, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. I don’t even know what he looked like. But my mother and my retainers have taught me what I need to know to be a ruler. Kings don’t have to be the strongest fighters around, but we can’t be so weak that we’d die to a single assassin.” A tinge of melancholy entered Shumar’s expression. “I wish my father had been a peerless warrior like yours, Friede.”

“Well, I can’t really see anyone assassinating him.”

Shumar smiled sadly at Friede. “I am grateful to Lord Veight though. My mother told me about how he protected her while she was pregnant. He’s the savior of Kuwol’s royal family, and even though I hadn’t met him until just recently, he feels like a second father to me.”

“Ehehe, I guess that’d make you my brother then.”

As an only child, Friede has always wanted siblings. Shumar looked down sadly for a few seconds, but then he smiled cheerfully again.

“I want to become a strong, gentle, and trustworthy man like Lord Veight. But I also want to be the kind of king that raises up culture and the arts, like my father was.”

Shumar had been given a very romanticized account of the kind of king his father had been. Of course, uplifting past kings like that helped unify Kuwol’s nobles under the royal family line, so in a sense, it was necessary propaganda. Friede and the others didn’t know too much about Pajam the Second, so they took what Shumar said at face value as well.

“I can’t believe even foreign princes respect my dad,” Friede said with a smile.

“Like I’ve said before, your father is a living legend,” Shirin said in an exasperated voice. Shumar nodded in agreement.

“All the nobles in Kuwol are grateful to Lord Veight. The common people don’t know that my father was assassinated though, so they just have some vague recollection of him being a foreign general who came to visit once.”

“Ah, come to think of it, that’s how it is in Rolmund too,” Joshua said. “A lot of people have heard of Veight the Black Werewolf King, but only the empress, the werewolves working for her, and a select few nobles, know what he actually did in the empire.”

Veight himself had asked Eleora to keep his involvement in Rolmund a state secret.

Joshua and Shumar exchanged glances.

“It sounds like he’s intervened in the politics of every country to put an end to civil wars...” Joshua muttered.

“So it seems. But it sounds like he’s kept what he did a secret to let the various ruling families save face.”

Joshua folded his arms. “If I accomplished something huge like that, I’d totally be bragging about it to everyone I know.”

Shirin nodded. “It’s only natural for a warrior to feel proud of their accomplishments. If I achieve something great, I’d definitely want to be recognized for it.”

Friede frowned and said, “Dad doesn’t really see himself as a warrior. He says he’d much rather spend the rest of his days as a scholar.”

Shirin shook his head and replied, “The people of Rolmund, Kuwol, Wa, and even the demons of the western forest, all trust the great Black Werewolf King because of his achievements. All of our nations are only at peace because he was there to solve their problems. We’ll be in trouble if he retires to become a scholar.”

“Yeah, he knows that too. It’s why he’s still stuck being the Demon Lord’s vice-commander. Ahahaha.”

Veight had often told Friede how he felt like his accomplishments had become shackles rather than badges of honor.

Suddenly, a shadow loomed over Friede and the others.

“That’s *exactly* why I’m teaching you guys to take over, so I can retire in peace and live out the rest of my days as a scholar.”

“Dad?!”

Veight had approached them so stealthily that no one had noticed his arrival.

“How long have you been standing there, Lord Veight?!” Shumar asked in surprise, and Veight smiled at him.

“I’ll be giving you all official missions in the near future. You’ve visited other countries and broadened your horizons, and your studies are progressing smoothly as well. Both the Commonwealth Council and the demon army are in dire need of your skills.”

“You can count on us! All these battleball matches have trained us to handle anything!” Friede said, flexing her biceps. Veight nodded, then picked up the ball lying in the corner of the field.

“That’s the spirit. Man, I haven’t been able to play battleball at all recently...”

Veight was on the official battleball committee, but he’d been so busy with his other duties that he hadn’t had much time to play.

Eyes sparkling with excitement, Shumar said, “In that case, why don’t you have a match with us?”

“I’m supposed to be studying magic with Master this afternoon...” Veight said reluctantly, sounding like he’d much rather be playing.

“You know, I bet even you couldn’t dodge Shumar’s tackle, dad!” Friede said, hoping to give him the push he needed to change his mind.

“Really? Now that I’ve gotta see.” Making up his mind, Veight turned back to the kids and started spinning the ball on his finger.

“What ruleset do you want to play with?”

Friede immediately responded, “The black wolf rule set!”

“How did those rules work again? Oh yeah, that’s the one where anything goes, but you have to wear full armor, and werewolves aren’t allowed to transform. You guys sure you want to go with something that hardcore?”

“It’s Shumar’s favorite rule set.”

“Don’t blame me if you end up breaking some bones...” Veight let out a sigh, but then he smiled again when he looked at Shumar. “All right, let’s get this match started!”

“Let’s get it on!” Friede shouted.

“Please don’t hold back on my account, Lord Veight!” Shumar said.

“I want to see what it’s like when you go all out as well!” Shirin said.

The kids were excited to face off against Veight at first, but soon after the match started, they learned why everyone called the Black Werewolf King a living legend.

After the match, Veight picked up his magic tomes and walked off with a smile.

“I haven’t been getting much exercise recently, so this was a nice change of pace. If you’re gonna keep going, guys, make sure you don’t hurt yourselves.”

“We will, thank you,” Yuhette, who’d been sitting the match out, said with a nod.

Friede, Shirin, Joshua, Iori, Shumar, Tiriya, and a bunch of other Meraldia University students were lying sprawled out across the battleball field.

As he looked up at the passing clouds, Shumar muttered, “Lord Veight’s a monster... Even without transforming, he’s as fast as a horse. We couldn’t catch him once, even after surrounding him.”

“Dad’s a master of strengthening magic and werewolf assassination skills,” Friede said, taking off her helmet.

It had been a long time since Friede had last sparred with Veight, so she’d forgotten just how terrifying he could be. The black wolf rule set allowed for everything from wrestling moves to magic, but even with all the tools at her

disposal, Friede hadn't been able to steal the ball from Veight a single time. The most frustrating thing of all, though, was that she hadn't even been able to force him to go all-out. The scoreboard read 268 versus 7, which was an unprecedented sweep.

Normally, scores only went up to two digits, so the third digit had needed to be scrawled in cramped handwriting on the side of the scoreboard. Shumar's team had won, but he didn't feel like he'd won in the slightest. Only three of the points had been scored by him. Of the seven points the other team had scored, five had come from Friede when she'd managed to finally slip past Veight's guard, but that had taken so much out of her that she could barely stand now.

"Now I know why dad never plays in official matches. They'd end up too one-sided."

Joshua had constantly challenged Veight to one-on-one brawls, and he'd come out pretty battered every single time. Even his prized sliding tackles and low kicks hadn't been able to scratch the Black Werewolf King.

Still panting with exertion, Joshua said, "Godsdamn... If he's already this strong, how much stronger does he get when he transforms?"

Wiping the sweat off her forehead, Friede replied, "He can throw from anywhere on the field, and it'll go straight towards the goal. And if we try to block the ball, it'll just blow a hole through our armor and knock us back. That wasn't a match, that was a slaughter."

"His shots are like cannonballs."

"He's insane..."

"I thought the Black Werewolf King plays were exaggerating how strong he was, but if anything, he's even stronger than the plays make him out to be."

"Yeah..."

For a while, everyone just stared up at the sky.

"Next time, we have to at least force him to use his full strength, Joshua," Shumar said after some time had passed.

“Yeah, definitely. Work on that tackle of yours, Shumar. We’re gonna need it.”

“Shumar needs training of course, but so do you, Joshua,” Shirin said.

“I know, I know. Man, losing really stings.”

Yuhette and Friede chuckled to each other as they watched the boys vow to get their vengeance on Veight someday.

After a few casual rounds of battleball with my students, I left and headed to the university’s magic research lab. This was where Master held her group study sessions. They were similar to the more informal lectures I’d attended in college back in my old life. Most of Master’s other disciples were already there by the time I arrived.

“Oh, good, you’re here. Will you please get off me, Melaine?” Master said, turning to me as she struggled to break free of Melaine’s stifling hug.

“It’s rare for you to be the last one to arrive, Veight,” Melaine said, squeezing Master even tighter. Normally, she was much more composed, but she always acted childish around Master.

“I saw you playing battleball from the window. I wish you’d be as gentle with my skull as you were with the ball there,” Parker said, juggling his own skull.

Unlike Melaine, Parker wasn’t a councilor or a viceroy, but he was still part of the university’s teaching staff. When he’d first taken the job, I thought he’d teach necromancy, but to my surprise, he’d asked to be a history teacher. I wondered how the students felt being taught history by a literal skeleton. Parker did know his stuff, though, and he was a patient teacher.

“Vaito, play a match with me after this!” Firnir exclaimed, trotting over to me. “I’m the only one who can keep up with you when you get serious, after all!”

Among Master’s disciples, Firnir was the only one who couldn’t use magic. She didn’t look any older than when I’d first met her, but according to Master, she’d matured a lot.

“Enough chitchat. Let’s get this study group started already. I have to give a lecture on magical engineering to a group of dragonkin after this,” Ryucco said,

impatiently stamping his foot on the ground.

Ryucco had been spending most of his time recently teaching dragonkin how to manufacture Blast Rifles. Master had many other disciples, but they'd distanced themselves from the demon army, so I didn't get to meet them often. Most of her disciples were more interested in research than war or politics, so those of us in the demon army were actually a minority. Personally, I would have much preferred focusing on research over war and politics too, but if I left, Master wouldn't have anyone to help her with her duties as Demon Empress.

Turning to Master, I said, "Before we start, there's a new development in the forest that I need to tell you all about."

I explained the gist of what my scouts had discovered. Fortunately, all my fellow disciples were quite bright, and I didn't need to go into too much detail for them to understand the implications of what I'd learned. When I'd first heard that there might be a massive creature in the forest west of Meraldia, I'd sent in a team to investigate. While the team had included members dispatched by the council and the demon army, it was the fungoids who'd formed the core of the search party.

"When the fungoids first came out to Ryunheit, they spread their spores all over the forest along the way. Those spores now serve as part of the fungoids' communication network, and they can speak with each other over pretty long distances."

The communication network was what allowed fungoids to share thoughts and memories among every member of the colony. Though, they considered each member as part of the same whole to begin with, being a collective species and all. If an individual ended up separated from the main colony, they would encode whatever information they found into their spores and spread them for other members of their colony to find. Also, despite being strikingly similar to fungi, fungoids could walk if need be.

"Apparently, the fungoids still in the forest have had their crops ravaged."

"Wait, if this thing is attacking their crops, has it been eating the fungoids too?!" Firnir asked, surprised.

I waved my hand casually and said, "Don't worry. The fungoids all share a

singular will and consciousness. Losing a few individuals is no different than pulling out a few hairs for us.”

“Huh... That’s so weird.”

I’d been pretty surprised myself when I’d first discovered there was a colony species with sentience, but now I was used to the fungoids.

“At any rate, the fungoids kept relaying information to the rest of the colony even as they were getting eaten. I’ve compiled everything they discovered into this report, but...” Scratching my head awkwardly, I put the report down on the desk. Melaine picked it up and cocked her head as she started reading through it.

“What the? ‘The assailant is taller than a ryunforiontical’s eperette, and it resembles a kushirideo’s powazas.’ What does any of that mean?”

I wish I knew. Shaking my head, I explained, “The fungoids’ mother tongue is the ancient language of the old empire. Moreover, their lifestyle is fundamentally different from most other species, so they’ve added a lot of custom words to it.”

Master glanced over the report as well and said, “‘Eperette’ means two to the fourth power, in other words, a multiplier of sixteen. ‘Ryun forion tical’ roughly translates to ‘the low hanging branches of a climax forest.’ More specifically, it refers to the height of the lowest branches of the shade trees.”

Damn, Master, you really do know everything. Granted, it wasn’t too surprising since the ancient language was Master’s mother tongue. Everyone else still looked confused, so I decided to supplement her explanation.

“Forests eventually evolve into a state known as ‘climax forests.’ Those forests all have tall trees that block sunlight, so you don’t find any branches closer to the ground.”

Parker rested his chin in his hands. “I think I get your explanation, but that still doesn’t tell us how tall this thing really is.”

I sighed. “This is the problem with translation—it’s not a very precise art.”

Though, while we’re at it, I’d like to know what the rest means at least.

“Can you tell what a ‘kushrideo’s powazas’ is?”

“‘Kushi rideo’ roughly means ‘two-footed lizard,’ which is the fungoids’ term for dragonkin. ‘Powazas’ means ‘primogenitor’...which is simply a fancy word for ‘distant ancestor.’”

I had no idea what the dragonkins’ ancestors looked like, but now I was curious if the fungoids knew.

Stamping his feet impatiently, Ryucco summed it all up for us. “So, basically, the monster in the forest is a huge dragonkin?”

“Seems like it...” While that was what the report roughly translated to, I felt like that wasn’t quite right.

Melaine frowned and said, “Maybe we should ask the fungoids directly.”

“If we ask them to explain a word, they’ll probably do it with yet more words we don’t get. We’ll have to sift through an entire dictionary before we know what’s going on.”

Understanding foreign cultures was pretty tough.

“The fungoids’ ability to communicate over long distances instantly is appealing, but it seems we’ll need to research their culture much more thoroughly before it will be useful to the demon army,” Parker mused, folding his arms and imitating a sigh. It was always heartening to see that he still retained the mannerisms he used to have while alive.

I nodded in agreement. “You’re right. Do you think you could go to the forest and investigate instead?”

“Wait, you want *me* to go?” Parker asked, pointing to himself.

Do I look like I’m talking to anyone else? I thought. “Everyone else is busy doing other tasks for the demon army. But you look like you’re free, so you may as well make yourself useful. Besides, even if you encounter the monster, it’s not like you can die.”

“Excuse me, I *am* a teacher here, you know.”

Yeah, I know. We sit next to each other in staff meetings. Who even decided the seating arrangement for those?

“We can get one of the other teachers to substitute for you while you’re gone. The forest is pretty far, so I don’t want to send a large team, and you’re the only one who doesn’t need guards or guides.”

“I never cease to be amazed by just how mean you are to me. You’re breaking my heart!”

“You don’t have a *heart*.”

“But we can still have heart-to-heart talks!”

Why do you always get so happy whenever I go along with one of your puns? I strode over to Parker and looked into his empty eye sockets.

“You’re the famous Gomoviroa’s best pupil. If you go, everyone else will be able to rest easy knowing someone reliable is taking care of the problem. That’s why I’m choosing you.”

Parker stiffened up in surprise, then eventually said, “O-Of course I know that. And it *is* nice to know you’re counting on me. I’ll be sure to live up to your expectations, don’t worry.”

I got permission from Master as well, then dispatched Parker to the forest. In my infinite generosity, I even showed up to see him off.

“This is a cutting-edge magical communicator,” I said, handing him a wooden block. “It should be able to reach Rynheit no matter how deep in the forest you go. You know how to use these, right? Oh, and your Blast Rifle’s magesteel capacitor’s getting old, so take a spare with you. Actually, take two. You never know when you might drop one.”

“Thanks, but I’ll be fine.”

“Ah, and take this too,” I said, handing him a bag of coins. “Make sure you get an inn room every night. I know you don’t need to sleep on a bed, but you should anyway. Stop going to crypts and graveyards to sleep. Also, don’t be rude to the inn staff.”

“I get it already. Will you stop treating me like a child?”

If I was treating you like a child, I wouldn’t even let you go on this trip. I

handed Parker the rucksack I'd packed last night and went over the things I'd told him yesterday one more time, just to be safe.

"I've already dispatched werewolves and dragonkin to the area, and they've been instructed to help you in your investigation. Don't make things hard for them, okay?"

"You say it in such a patronizing way, but I can tell you're just worried about me," Parker said with a grin. He had his illusion active, so he looked quite handsome when he smiled. *God, you're annoying. Get going already.*

"Well...I admit I *am* a little worried. We don't know what we're up against, and there was that time you went missing back in Kuwol too."

"I simply went into hiding because the political situation was getting unstable. You're being a worrywart." As he said that, Parker placed a hand on my shoulder. "Nothing living can hope to beat me. It's impossible for me to lose a death match."

Parker had indeed managed to escape from the cycle of life and death. He was a glitch in the system of reality. He couldn't be killed or brought back to life. It was honestly a little depressing to think about how he'd be trapped in that skeletal body for all eternity.

Noticing my gaze, Parker smiled and said, "Don't worry, I'll work myself to the bone for you. All I've got left is bones, after all!"

"Okay, yeah, you can go now."

I couldn't believe I'd been worried about him a second ago.

Parker waved goodbye and said, "Good, you're back to your usual self. Sheesh! It takes so much effort to pacify a worrywart like you. I'll be fine. You should worry about your students and your subordinates instead."

"Oh, shut up."

I'm never worrying about you again. You better come back soon though.

—The Twisted One—

There were many monsters in the forest that were made more aggressive by parasites or diseases, like the golden wildeboars. And like golden wildeboars,

some of them had managed to turn those parasites or diseases to their advantage and grow stronger. The fanged lizards were one such creature. They were carnivorous lizards the size of alligators, with extremely large fangs.

Their fangs were filled with various pathogens, and anyone bit by them would end up horribly sick. The lizards often hunted by landing a single bite and then waiting for their prey to be weakened enough to finish off. The fanged lizards carried so many diseases with them that at least one was guaranteed to work on anything they bit. Not even werewolves were safe from them.

The most deadly thing about the fanged lizards, though, was that they hunted in packs. Reptiles used fewer calories than mammals, so even if they had to share their food, they wouldn't starve. When they went after something as a group, it was nearly impossible to dodge all of their fangs. The forest was also filled with many large creatures, so they didn't want for prey.

One corner of the forest had, until just a few minutes ago, been the territory of a fanged lizard colony hundreds large. But all that remained of them now was a giant pool of blood and flesh. Something much, much larger than the fanged lizards had crushed them all underfoot. There wasn't a single one left alive.

A massive creature picked up one of the fanged lizard corpses with its mouth and crunched down on it. But after chewing for a few seconds, it casually spit the corpse back out—almost as if it wasn't interested in feeding. It then stomped on the corpse again, and a sickening squelching noise reverberated through the trees.

After sending Parker off, I returned to my never-ending pile of work. It was bad enough that I had to take care of a bunch of administrative work, but now I was also in charge of drafting new legislation. Over the past decade, Meraldia had grown significantly, and there were a host of new problems that needed to be addressed. Our current laws weren't enough to encompass everything, so we needed new ones. But enacting new laws was a complex and involved process. I had to consult with the young legalists who'd recently graduated from Meraldia University to determine the best wording for new laws, and then those laws had to be voted on by the Commonwealth Council. Getting everyone on the same page took a lot of effort, especially because any proposed new law inevitably caused conflicts of interest.

“Are you okay, dad? Do you want some tea?” Friede asked worriedly, handing me a cup of tea.

I smiled tiredly at her and said, “Peace is all well and good, but there’s so much bureaucratic red tape you need to take care of in peacetime. I’m not good at administrative work like this.”

“I guess you’re not that tired if you can still joke around.”

I’m not joking though. I shelved the documents I was working on before drinking my tea. It wouldn’t do to spill on any of the papers. *Man, I wish we could go paperless. Maybe I’ll ask Master and Ryucco to see if we can come up with a way of making that happen with magic.*

“Dad, you’re thinking about work again, aren’t you?”

“Ah, yeah.”

I must really be making Friede worry. I smiled reassuringly at her and said, “This is all work only I can do, so I’m afraid I can’t hoist it off onto anyone else. It’s what I deserve for sticking my nose into so many different problems during my younger years.”

The rift between northern and southern Meraldia, the difficulties that came with humans and demons living together, and Meraldia’s relationship with its neighboring countries... Now that I’d gotten involved in all of these issues, I couldn’t just back out. I also had to think about raising the next generation, dealing with all the troublesome relics the ancient empire had left behind, and eliminating any dangerous monsters that showed up.

In a hesitant voice, Friede said, “Umm, you might scold me for saying this, but...”

“Hm?” It was rare for Friede to be so reserved. Gently, I said, “Go ahead and say it. I promise I’ll listen calmly.”

“Well...” Still a little unsure, Friede spoke slowly, observing my reaction after each word. “I think I’ve gotten a good amount of experience now...and I’ve learned a lot from school too.”

“You certainly have. I’m proud of you.”

It was funny to think that the young woman standing before me had once been a baby who'd fired off Soul Shakers with each cry.

"During your trips to both Rolmund and Wa, you accomplished more than any normal diplomat could have. Plus, you rescued Kite and his crew in the Windswept Dunes. Those are amazing accomplishments for a student."

"Ehehe, you really think so?" Friede blushed a little, then looked up at me and asked, "So, since I've got all this experience and those accomplishments now, do you think I could maybe start helping you out with your work? I was thinking, maybe I could be useful, at least..."

I didn't get why she was being so coy. As far as I could tell, all she was asking was if she could help out.

"I see..."

"I mean, I know you're an amazing scholar, and general, and a politician—everything—which is why there's no one who can replace you. There might not be all that much I can do, but I still want to help, you know?"

Why are you putting yourself down so much? You're usually a lot more confident. Wait, no, maybe it's not that you're putting yourself down. Maybe you're just being cautious because you know just how much responsibility comes with doing my job. That aside, it was a nice feeling knowing my daughter respected me this much.

I smiled at Friede and said, "You've really grown up into a good person, Friede."

"Huh?!"

"You know how tough my job is, but you still want to help me anyway. I'm really happy about that."

I couldn't wait to tell Airia. This called for a celebration. I walked over to Friede and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Thank you, Friede. There's a lot more that you can do to help than you think. In fact, there are a number of jobs *only* you can do."

"Really?"

“Yep.”

It wasn't fair to Friede since she hadn't been able to choose the circumstances of her birth, but she was the daughter of the Demon Lord, Airia, and the Black Werewolf King, Veight. On top of that, she was the only half-werewolf in existence. Furthermore, she'd visited Rolmund and Wa in an official capacity, and was on speaking terms with Eleora and the members of the Chrysanthemum Court. For better or worse, she was far from a regular student. Of course, as her father, I was mostly worried about the extra pressure that might bring, but it was precisely because I was her father that I knew I had to trust in her as well.

“If you really want to help, I don't mind letting you join the demon army to formally become my assistant.”

“Why the demon army and not the Commonwealth Council?”

“Because if you're a part of the demon army, I can resolve any problems by apologizing. That won't go over as well with the council.”

I can trust her and still be worried about her, okay.

Unaware of my internal conflict, Friede smiled and said, “Then I guess from today onwards I'm an officer in the demon army!”

“I never said I was making you an *officer*. You may be a top student, but the demon army isn't such a lax organization that someone with no experience can immediately reach officer rank.” It would hurt Friede's future prospects if people thought I was showing her favoritism. “For now, you'll be an officer cadet attached to the werewolf squadron. I'll put you under Fahn's command.”

Now that I had a bunch more responsibilities, I had left Fahn in charge of the werewolf squad. If Friede wanted to help out, then she would first have to work her way up the ladder properly.

Friede nodded and said, “I like Fahn a lot, she's taught me a bunch! I'm looking forward to working under her!”

It was a relief to know Friede was still motivated after learning she wouldn't be working directly under me.

“All right then, you’ll be starting tomorrow. Oh, and I guess from now on, Joshua’s technically going to be your senior. While you’re at work, be sure to show him proper respect since he outranks you.”

“Wait, really?! I’ll remember to salute him, then.”

Until now, everyone had been nice to Friede since she was the Demon Lord’s daughter, but while she was serving under Fahn, she’d be treated just like any other cadet. It would be a good experience for her.

Just then, my portable communicator started to buzz.

“Dad, your communicator’s buzzing.”

“Yeah, I wonder who it is.”

There was no screen that conveniently displayed caller IDs.

“It’s Veight,” I said, activating the communicator.

“This is Parker. Our mystery beast is close by; I can tell from the sudden shift in mana flow. I’m going to try tracking it.” Parker sounded more serious than I’ve ever heard him.

—Parker’s Investigation Diary—

Parker Pastier was an ordinary necromancer in the demon army with no special rank or title. However, the werewolves he’d rendezvoused with were all following his orders.

“Veight’s reaching middle age. I really wish he’d settle down,” Parker said to Jerrick as the two of them walked through the forest.

Jerrick frowned a little and replied, “Boss always jumps at anything that catches his interest. And once he sticks his neck into something, he feels like it’s his responsibility to see things through to the end. But that’s just how he is. You wouldn’t like it either if he changed, would you?”

“I suppose not. He’s like an adventurous little brother. Which is why I need to look after him.”

“You might think of him like a little brother, but to us, he’s our boss.”

“I know, but to me, he’ll always be the little kid who Master brought back

with him.”

The two of them glanced at each other, then laughed.

“I guess he can be a little brother and a leader at the same time.”

“He sure can.”

As they exchanged a handshake, Monza suddenly sniffed and said, “Hey, isn’t this weird?”

Jerrick turned back to her. “No, it’s not, boss is—”

“I’m not talking about him—I mean this forest.”

Monza readied her Blast Rifle. “This place should be teeming with monsters, so why’s it so quiet?”

Jerrick came to a halt and looked around, then drew his own Blast Rifle.

“Now that you mention it, you’re right. Forget monsters, I don’t even see a single rabbit.”

“Right? When all the animals start running, you know something bad’s coming—like a landslide or a forest fire.”

Parker examined his surroundings as well, though in a different way from the two werewolves. “The flow of mana here is quite strange. It’s faster and far more structured than it should be.”

Mana in the forest was denser than it was normally elsewhere and rarely moved. But right now, it was all flowing in a singular direction.

“I’m not an expert on mana, but it seems to me like something is sucking up all the mana nearby.”

The three of them stopped and waited silently for a few seconds. They all had been with the demon army since its inception, and they were veterans in their respective fields.

After assessing the situation, Parker took a small notepad out of his pocket and started writing furiously.

“I’ll take a look at where all this mana is going. Jerrick, return to relay point seven and have everyone there retreat to point six. Use the route I’m writing

down for you.”

“Roger. I’ll tell them to leave all their supplies behind.”

“Aha, in that case, I’ll be your bodyguard,” Monza said with a grin. As always, she was the aggressive one while Jerrick was the cautious one.

However, Parker shook his head and said, “No, it’s too dangerous. Unlike me, you’re not immortal. If something happens and you die, Veight will be devastated.”

“Huh?! Oh...yeah, I guess he would be.” Monza scratched her head awkwardly. “What should I do then?”

“Head back to point seven and remain on standby. I want you to keep observing the area from the watchtower there, even after the others have retreated. If anything happens to me, go back and report everything you saw.”

“I thought you were immortal.”

Parker smiled sadly at her. “I can’t die, but I can still be incapacitated. If I run out of mana and there’s something restraining me, I’ll just revert to a sack of bones that can’t do anything but think.”

“So it’s my job to call for help if anything happens to you?”

“More or less. I wouldn’t mind dying too much at this point, but I’d really rather not get buried alive and have to spend an eternity six feet under.” Parker shrugged his shoulders. “Anyway, those are your orders. Veight explicitly told me to make sure none of the investigation team dies, so you better evacuate everyone.”

“You got it,” Jerrick said.

“If you do end up getting buried alive, put your hat somewhere close by so we know where to look,” Monza added. The two of them then transformed and sprinted away. Parker hefted his own Blast Rifle and looked straight ahead.

The flow of mana has gotten more turbulent. Moreover, it’s going in the opposite direction it should be. This is definitely not natural. If the flow was being created by a mage, they would have to be considerably powerful, but Parker’s necromancy wasn’t able to detect any sentient spirits, meaning

whoever was causing it wasn't a human or a demon. *This is either a magical artifact or a powerful monster... Either way, this has to be the thing we're looking for.*

Parker quietly strode through the dim forest, following the torrential current of mana. *Monza said the canines saw a giant monster, but I don't see any large footprints, broken branches, or other indicators that a large creature passed through here.* According to the fungoids, it was sixteen times taller than the lowest branches of the shade trees, which would make it a good deal taller than Ryunheit's walls. It would be even larger than the former commander of the demon army's second division, the giant Tiverit. *If this monster really is bigger than Tiverit was, then conventional weapons won't do anything to it.* Parker hadn't spotted it yet, but he had a suspicion he might be able to go back and report his findings if he actually encountered this creature.

After weighing his options for a bit, Parker activated his communicator. As he'd expected, Veight picked up immediately.

"It's Veight."

Parker kept his voice low and briefly explained the situation. "This is Parker. Our mystery beast is close by, I can tell from the sudden shift in mana flow. I'm going to try tracking it."

"I take it the mana flow is unnatural?"

"Correct. It resembles the whirlpool-like flow Master makes when she uses her vortex powers."

Veight, of course, immediately understood the significance of what Parker had said.

"Do you think whatever we're up against may become a Valkaan?"

"I don't know how much mana it possesses in total so it's hard to say, but—"

Suddenly the forest in front of Parker was incinerated. The trees burned away in an instant, and the ground turned to melted slag. A gust of searing wind blew past Parker, burning away most of his equipment.

"Emergency!" he shouted, though he wasn't sure the communicator was still

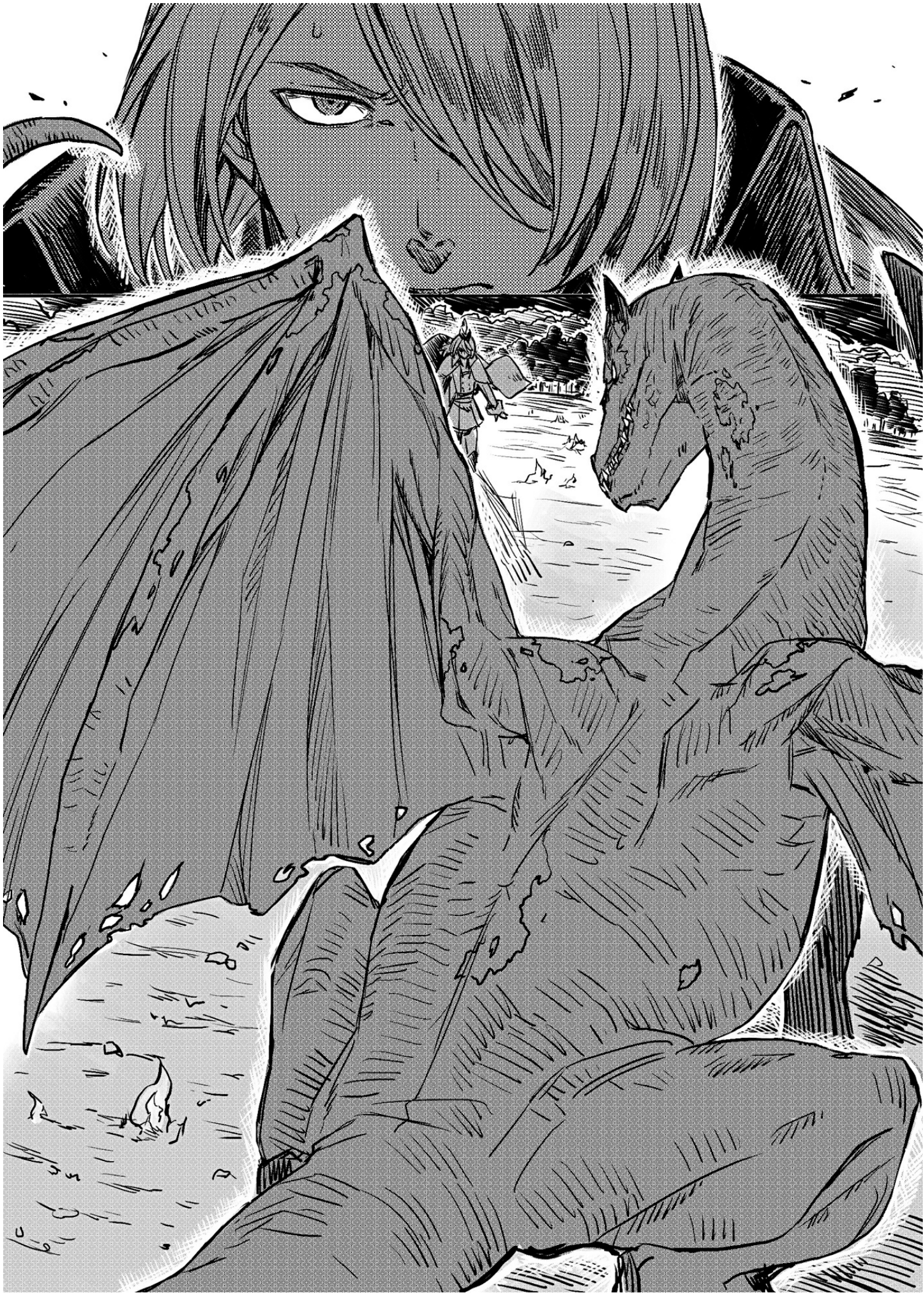
functional enough to deliver his message. The magesteel it was comprised of was red-hot, and the wooden casing had been completely burned away. Had Parker been made of flesh, his arm would have most certainly been burnt to cinders.

What the heck was that?! Parker's specialty was communing with the dead and calling upon their powers if necessary, but in a situation like this, he couldn't call forth any spirits. He was just a useless sack of bones.

"Ave Lejut Fuln Fatza!" He chanted a special spell, one that he hadn't learned from Gomoviroa, to keep the heat from liquefying his bones. The spell spread out a short distance around him, keeping the ground he was standing on from melting. *Thank goodness I learned some destruction magic on the side...though, this situation is still quite dire.*

Looking back, Parker saw that the land had been seared for quite some distance behind him, and the forest beyond that point was on fire. Turning around, Parker saw a massive black figure standing in front of him.

"That's a dragon!" he shouted, immediately recognizing the creature. There was no other word to describe a giant fire-breathing lizard with wings. Dragonkin revered dragons and considered them their distant ancestors. However, they were a creature of myth and legend. Parker hadn't even considered that they might truly exist.



You've gotta be kidding me! I can't handle something like this! There was very little literature on dragons, and most of what *did* exist was speculation or fairy tales. Realizing immediately that he stood no chance in a fight, Parker tried to converse with the dragon in the ancient empire's tongue.

"Please stay your wrath, O great ancestor of the dragonkin!"

For now, the dragon was just standing there and looking at the destruction it had wrought. It hadn't seemed to have even noticed Parker until he spoke. When it heard him shout, though, it looked down at him appraisingly. Parker continued speaking in the old tongue.

"I am the necromancer, Parker! I have no intention of fighting you, so please —"

Before he could finish his speech, the dragon opened its maw.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAH!"

It loosed a roar powerful enough to shake the earth. There was no mana in its roar, but it was still as powerful as Veight's Soul Shaker. *It's going to attack!* This time, the dragon unleashed a wave of mana, rather than fire.

"Argh!"

For the first time since becoming a skeleton, Parker felt fear. He'd barely managed to dodge out of the way in time, but he'd lost one of his legs. It had been completely vaporized. *Its breath can destroy even my bones?!* The dragon's destructive power truly was extraordinary. As things were, Parker couldn't escape, nor could he reason with the beast. With no other option but to fight, Parker defiantly took aim with his Blast Rifle. He'd protected it from the initial wave of heat with his body, so only the outer coating was slightly charred.

"Sorry, but if you're not going to parley, then you'll have to die."

Parker shot a powerful bullet of light right at the dragon's eye. He possessed quite a bit more mana than the average mage, so his bullets were a lot stronger. And yet, even Parker's superpowered bullet was easily sucked in by the blast of mana that the dragon spat. *No way!*

After a moment of surprise, Parker realized something. Blast Rifles worked

the same way as water guns, they just shot light instead of water. *The mana in the dragon's breath was strong enough to overpower the mana of my bullet!* It was just like how trying to shoot a water gun upstream in a river wouldn't work.

Finally, the dragon stopped shooting its breath and swiveled its eyes to look at Parker. There was no intelligence or emotion in them. It was simply acting as a beast. After finding its prey, the dragon turned its neck and once again opened its maw to fire another breath attack at Parker. With just one leg, Parker couldn't hope to dodge, so he instead opted to use his trump card.

"Desire, answer my call!"

He concentrated his mana at the tip of his bony finger and created a blade of pure energy. This was a secret technique that Gomoviroa had developed. Anything that touched this blade of mana was instantly slain. No matter how hard the dragon's scales were, it wouldn't be able to block it. And regardless of its size, the blade would kill it. But as Parker swung down, the blade dissipated before it even reached the dragon's body.

"How?!" he shouted, just as the dragon's next breath attack vaporized his skeleton.

Oh no. Left as just a spirit, Parker floated helplessly above the scorched wasteland. The dragon was long gone. After defeating Parker, it had spread its wings and flown off somewhere. The fact that it had been able to take flight without even needing a running start despite its massive bulk had been both awe-inspiring and terrifying.

Before, Parker had wondered what was even the point of keeping his spirit anchored to his skeleton, but now that the skeleton was gone, he realized he couldn't move without it. Unable to even speak, Parker looked down at what would have been his feet, if he was still a skeleton. A few specks of bone littered the ground. For some reason, he could tell with absolute certainty that those specks were his bones. Slowly but surely, his vaporized skeleton was trying to reform itself. *Hang on, does this mean I can't do anything at all until I regenerate? Is that how this works?* There was no one around to answer. No one else in history had ever become immortal, at least, not that Parker knew of, so he doubted anyone even knew the answer.

After what seemed like ages, his bone specks had grown to acorn size, which told him that this would take quite some time. *This isn't good. I need to hurry back and make my report or Veight's going to worry again. And here I was hoping I could finally prove he doesn't need to keep fussing over me all the time.* Chuckling to himself, Parker waited patiently for his body to regenerate.

A few days after I sent Parker into the forest, he went missing. Everyone else had made it back safely, but not Parker. *Godsdammit, why do you always have to expose yourself to danger like this?*

"Has Parker still not shown up?" Considering the situation, it was too dangerous to send a search party out for him, so all I could do was wait.

The council messenger who'd brought me Jerrick's report gave me an apologetic look and said, "The entire area was turned into a scorched wasteland, and the flow of mana is too turbulent to properly measure. This was enclosed with the report though; perhaps it will be helpful in some way."

The messenger put a lump of what looked like glass on my desk.

"This is a chunk of forest dirt that was vitrified through extreme heat, isn't it?" I asked, and the young messenger looked over the report to confirm it.

"Umm, yes. It seems so. At least, that's what's written here. You were able to tell just from a single glance?"

"I've seen something like this before... It seems like whatever is in the forest is even more dangerous than we'd anticipated."

There had been a similar piece of vitrified dirt at the atomic bomb museum I'd visited in my past life. No living person would have been able to withstand whatever had happened on that scorched field.

The messenger gave me a sympathetic look. "I know this is cruel of me to say, but it might be best to assume that Mister Parker is dead."

I shook my head and replied, "He won't die that easily. Or rather, he simply can't die. I know he's still alive out there. We just have to find him."

"I've told the squads patrolling the highways to report immediately if they see him. Don't worry too much," Melaine said, putting a comforting hand on my

shoulder. “I know you’re anxious, but if you let it show, it’ll just worry everyone else.”

“Yeah...you’re right. Sorry, I forgot.” It was only now that I realized I’d lost my cool. “It’s precisely in times like these that I need to act normal. Thanks for reminding me, Melaine.”

“No problem. Just remember, as long as you look confident, it’ll reassure everyone else.”

Melaine had lived for much longer than me, and in times like this, her experience really came in handy. After Master and Parker, she was the oldest one among us.

“You know what they say, the older, the wiser.”

“Huh? What do the words you said mean?”

I’d spoken in Japanese, so of course, Melaine hadn’t understood it. Granted, she’d get mad if I told her what it really meant, so I said, “Oh, I was just saying that you really are reliable, Melaine.”

“Hm? Of course I am. I’m glad you noticed.” Melaine smiled, but I could tell she was forcing herself to act cheerful to keep me from getting depressed.

“I am Master’s oldest disciple after all! Parker might be older, but I started studying under her first!”

Then again, maybe she wasn’t forcing herself. With Melaine, I couldn’t always tell. Either way, thanks to her, I’d managed to calm down.

The best way to help Parker right now was to come up with a plan.

“If Parker hasn’t returned, then the creature he encountered must be exceedingly dangerous. I gave him a communicator, but I haven’t been able to reach him since his last message.”

“That doesn’t sound good...” Melaine rested her chin on her hands and looked down despondently. “If it’s something even Parker couldn’t handle, we need Master for this, don’t we?”

“What if something happens to her too? The last thing Parker told me was that the creature could create a vortex similar to Master’s.”

A vortex was formed when a large amount of mana gathered in one place and created a zone similar to a localized gravitational field. And in the same way that a highly condensed gravitational field became a black hole, this mana field created a “vortex” that sucked in all surrounding mana.

“Once a vortex is formed, mana will naturally gather around it,” I explained. “If enough mana concentrates in one spot, we’ll end up with something similar to a Valkaan.”

“So we’ll get another Arshes. I’m not sure even Master could handle something like that...”

Master had been a good friend of Friedensrichter, the first Demon Lord, and after he died, she was the strongest demon left. Because demons instinctually deferred to those stronger than them, everyone respected Master. If, by some chance, Master lost to this creature, it would shatter the morale of every demon in Ryunheit.

“As the Demon Empress, Master is a symbol of strength and stability to the demons *and* humans of Meraldia. If anything happened to her, the country would fall apart.”

“Yes...I suppose that’s true. The demons would be crushed, and humans would lose faith in the demon army.”

“We need to handle this new threat carefully.”

“Makes sense.”

“Which is why I’ll go.”

“Everyone—help me restrain this idiot,” Melaine said in an exasperated voice.

Suddenly, demon and human soldiers rushed into the room and surrounded me. *What’s all this?*

“You’re doing it again, Lord Veight!”

“Why are you always like this?!”

“Haven’t you learned from your past mistakes?! You’re a scholar, aren’t you?!”

It seemed everyone had predicted I’d volunteer to go. *No wonder I’d sensed so many people nearby.* Melaine put her hands on her hips and towered over me.

“Look around you. *Leading* these people is your responsibility. Only you have the authority and the ability to effectively command such a diverse group. This is your duty now—not rushing ahead of everyone and doing stupid heroics.”

“Melaine...”

She was right. I wasn’t meant to be on the front lines at this stage of my life. Feeling a bit sad about the weight of my new responsibilities, I nodded to her.

“All right, all right. I know. My place isn’t at the vanguard anymore.”

Melaine leaned in close and asked in a stern voice, “Do you really *understand*, Veight?”

“I do.”

So please stop looking at me like that. You’re scaring me. I sat back down at my desk and cleared my throat.

“Uhh, okay, are you all ready to receive your orders?” I asked the gathered crowd.

“Yes, sir!” they said in unison with crisp salutes. Everyone looked like they’d jump into a volcano if I ordered them to.

Gathering my reports, I gave out orders to each department attached to the Commonwealth Council.

“First, we need to call an emergency council meeting so that all the cities are on the same page. Get in touch with the viceroys.”

“As you command. Come on, let’s go!” All of the human civil servants ran out the door.

“Muster up all the canine and kentauros soldiers available and organize them into scouting units. I want them patrolling the area west of Meraldia along with

the highways between all major cities. They'll be under the direct command of the dragonkin knights."

"Yes, sir!" The dragonkin and werewolf officers gave me a salute, then ran out of the room as well.

"Have the engineers gather all the mana measurement tools in our possession. Get everything that isn't currently being used for another mission and distribute those tools to the patrol units. Be sure to teach everyone how to use them as well."

"Roger. We'll ask the quartermaster to see what we have in stock." The dragonkin engineers nodded to each other and left the room. Most everyone was gone at this point, but I had a job left for the few remaining.

"Make a list of all the materials and funds the council hasn't appropriated yet. I'll need all of the spare resources I can get."

The council had set aside spare lumber and stone for highway and castle repairs, and we had emergency food stockpiles in case a war broke out. There was also a fund that had been set aside for new policies that we'd been planning to implement. Most of that fund hadn't been used yet. Unsurprisingly, the men left behind seemed apprehensive about this order.

"Are you sure about this, sir?"

"I just want a list for now. Hopefully, we won't have to use any of it, but if we do, I don't want to be scrambling to find what's available. Don't worry, I'll make sure to get permission from the various departments for this."

The council had a lot of economic clout, and owned a large amount of resources and real estate. However, none of those resources belonged to me personally, so if I wanted to tap into our financial muscle, I needed to go through the proper channels.

Finally, I turned to Melaine and said, "Look after Master for me. She's probably just as worried about Parker as I am. I'll be fine now, so go to her."

"Okay. I'll ask if she has any useful insights on the situation as well."

"Thanks."

My top priority was protecting Meraldia's cities—especially the cities close to the forest. They'd only just recovered from the devastation the demon army had caused during its invasion all those years ago. If those cities were ravaged again, people would lose trust in the demon army.

I looked around my now-empty office and folded my arms.

"I need to protect everyone..."

This would be the turning point that would determine whether or not we could hold onto the prosperity Meraldia had nurtured over the past decade, or if we would lose it all.

—The Twisted One—

When Friedensrichter had asked to join the Great Sage Gomoviroa's cause, he'd paid her the utmost respect.

He'd come to Grenchtat Castle at a time when Gomoviroa was away, so he'd waited outside the front gates for three days and three nights for her to return. Upon returning home from her investigation, Gomoviroa had found a mountain of giant centipede corpses around her castle. They'd tried to sneak in while Gomoviroa was gone, and Friedensrichter had single-handedly slain every single one of them. Those giant centipedes were a type of monster commonly seen in the forest. They possessed exoskeletons that were saturated with mana, making them quite sturdy. Their poison was lethal, and their speed belied their massive size.

Right now, one of those giant centipedes was being swung around like a chew toy by a creature much, much larger than it; the same creature that had crushed a golden wildebeast and annihilated a colony of fanged lizards.

It held the giant centipede in its mouth, swinging it around with just the muscles in its neck. The centipede had long since stopped resisting, but the creature continued slamming it into the ground and the nearby trees. Eventually, the centipede's body was ripped apart, and half of it was sent flying. The remaining half continued to feebly wriggle its legs, but there was nothing it could do to fight back. The creature tossed the centipede to the ground and started tearing it to shreds with its claws. Once the centipede's legs stopped squirming, the creature lost all interest in it and walked off.

After it was gone, the forest's scavengers scurried into the clearing and started feeding on the centipede's corpse.

Our first priority was figuring out what this creature was. The fact that Parker had disappeared meant that it wasn't very friendly or something that could be conversed with. Despite how he acted normally, Parker was one of the demon army's best diplomats. He'd convinced plenty of demon races to aid our cause. Thanks to him, the mermaids—demons who had no real interest in the demons on land—were willing to work with us.

If Parker had failed in diplomacy, then the creature must have had no intention of negotiating from the start.

"It's probably some giant monster, or perhaps an extremely belligerent demon..." I muttered to myself, just as Friede walked through the door.

"Dad, there's a fungoid here to see you."

"Really? That's rare."

Fungoids were a strange species, which made sense since they were just one intelligent hive mind. They didn't even have a concept of individual selves, and yet, even they'd found Meraldia's cities to their liking and had settled down. They hadn't said anything about it, but I suspected they wanted to take advantage of our transportation networks. It was a lot easier to spread your spores by sticking them on traveling caravans than letting the wind carry them.

As far as I could tell, the fungoids derived a great deal of joy from expanding their colony far and wide. It was probably a reproductive instinct thing, just like it was with most intelligent species. Since the spores were harmless to humans, I didn't see any problem with letting them spread all over Meraldia either. Besides, protecting demons was the demon army's *raison d'être*, and I was quite fond of the fungoids too. They were a reasonable group—or rather, individual—once you actually sat down and talked with them.

"If they went out of their way to seek an audience, it must be really important. Let them in."

"Okay."

A few seconds later, a large mushroom with legs walked into the room. They

were only as tall as my knees, which meant this offshoot was still young. Though they looked like a portobello mushroom, they smelled like a shimeji. *Man, now I'm feeling hungry.*

Vibrating the pleats under their cap, the fungoid said, "Good afternoon, Vweight."

"I think this is my first time meeting you specifically, but not our first time actually meeting, right?"

"That is correct. Long time no see."

As they spoke, I suddenly realized something.

"Wait, you're talking in Meraldian?"

"Yes. We have learned the language."

Now that's a surprise. Because all fungoids shared a single will, they didn't need language the way humans or other demons did. There were no misunderstandings or miscommunications with information transmission via spore contact either. They had learned the language of the old empire long ago solely to communicate with other species. In the past, however, they'd told me that they found repeating the same information to different individuals over and over again so irksome, they avoided talking too much.

My thoughts must have shown on my face because the fungoid vibrated its pleats again and said, "Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha."

Wait, is that supposed to be laughter?

"Humans and demons learn as individuals. Does that not get tiring?"

"I can see what you mean. Every time you have an offspring, you have to teach them all the things you taught your previous offspring already."

Well, I only had one daughter, but both Garney brothers had quite large families, and I remember they'd complained to me that they were getting tired of going through the same song and dance every time. Teaching a toddler how to hold a spoon or how to button up their pants over and over did seem rather exhausting.

Adopting a human mannerism, the fungoid's cap bounced up and down,

seemingly nodding in agreement.

“Despite how tiring it is, you continue to pursue it. That sparked our interest.”

“That’s why you learned Meraldian?”

“Correct. We need to learn it once, after all.”

That made sense. Apparently, the fungoids had come to understand the difficulties humans and demons faced because of how often they’d been asked the same questions by different people regarding this current crisis in the forest. The ancient language—Old Dynastic—that the fungoids usually spoke was a long dead language. There were a number of scholars capable of puzzling out simpler passages in old texts, but only a handful were fluent enough to converse in it. We taught the ancient tongue at the university, but learning a language in school rarely made you fluent.

After thinking about it, the fungoids had realized it would be infinitely easier for them to learn Meraldian than to make people try and understand their language. After all, once a single branch acquired the language, they could use their spores to convey that knowledge to the rest of the colony.

“Apparently, we’re quite smart.”

“Is that what your teachers told you?”

“Yes, because we acquired the language in three days.”

Yeah, you’re a genius. The fungoid swayed back and forth happily. They were picking up on human mannerisms surprisingly well. Living in Meraldia for a decade seemed to have had a big influence on them. The colony had probably realized acting more human would endear them to the humans living here, and make it easier for them to reproduce. This was a truly fascinating development.

After swaying for a bit longer, the fungoid grew tired and sat down. Sitting, they looked identical to a mushroom.

“There’s something we need to tell you, Vweight.”

Looks like it’s finally time for the serious talk.

The fungoid had some vital, and rather shocking, information for me.

“We have been forging a network within the forest.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“We have also created a network outside the forest.”

“Now that’s news to me.”

“We have been planting our spores along your highways.”

“I see.”

A race capable of organically creating its own infrastructure was quite strong. Fungoids reproduced via spores, but each of their spores contained all the memories and knowledge of the entire colony. All they had to do was toss out their spores from the top of Ryunheit’s walls, and they would naturally stick to horses or cargo leaving the city. Those spores would then fall somewhere along the road and grow into new fungoids. Because they’d spread so far, the fungoids had been able to absorb knowledge from humans all across Meraldia.

“After learning Meraldian, we decided to study some more.”

“Wow.”

“We went to the library.”

“You didn’t plant your spores on any of the books, did you?”

“No.”

Then we’re good. Though, I bet you gave librarians all across Meraldia a fright.

“It’s like a dragon,” the fungoid said.

Huh? It took me a second to realize the fungoid was likely talking about the creature that had appeared in the forest.

“You think the monster in the forest is a dragon?”

“Yes. It’s mostly a dragon.”

“What do you mean, ‘mostly’?”

Man, this exchange is weird. I got that the fungoids had decided to gather information after mastering Meraldian, since they hadn’t been able to learn

much when they couldn't understand most of the humans around them. I also got that they'd learned from the books they read that what they'd seen was "mostly" a dragon, but I didn't know what the "mostly" was doing there.

"We should have learned your language much sooner." The fungoid sounded almost bashful as they said that. Like all sentient species, they had emotions, and it seemed like they were embarrassed that they'd slacked on their studies, and thus weren't able to convey their thoughts as well as they wanted to.

"Vweight. The creature in the forest is as big and strong as the dragons we read about in your books."

Dragons were myths and legends in this world, so all of the books talking about them exaggerated their abilities to fantastical proportions. It was said that dragons could slay giants in one blow, and could shrug off attacks from catapults like they were nothing. I'd figured whatever this was, it was powerful since it had managed to beat Parker, but I hadn't expected it to be legendary levels of strength.

"How much do you know about it?"

"Not much. The branches of us that encountered it were all burned away. If we tried to stay still and pretend to be plants, we'd get eaten."

Dragons eat mushrooms? Are the dragons in this world herbivores? Wait, no, was it after the mana the fungoids possess? Fungoids were one of the most magical of the demon races, and they naturally possessed a lot of mana. However, it seemed a few of the fungoids had survived the dragon's attacks and been able to warn their network.

"The dragon is getting closer and closer to Meraldia."

"Seriously?"

"Its path is meandering, but it is heading towards the forest exit."

The fungoids were spread all over the forest, so they could easily trace the dragon's route by checking which areas they'd lost contact with. The fact that the dragon was heading here was bad news though.

"Do you know why it's coming this way?"

“No. If it desired mana, heading to the center of the forest would make more sense.”

Living beings weren't creatures of pure logic, so they occasionally did nonsensical things. Sadly, that was a problem for us. Regardless, for one reason or another, the dragon was headed towards the plains of Meraldia. *Oh yeah, I almost forgot.*

“Have any of you spotted Parker?” I asked.

“We saw him when he was moving. But with all of our branches in that area destroyed, we cannot look for him.”

“I see...”

The dragon had managed to turn moist forest soil into hardened glass, so it wasn't surprising that the fungoids weren't able to survive that level of heat. This likely meant that Parker's bones had been cremated as well. If that could kill him, it would almost be a mercy, but I suspected he was still conscious without a body to do anything with. *What will happen to him if he no longer has a body to inhabit?* I shook that thought out of my mind and returned my focus to the task at hand.

“I want to track the dragon's movements as accurately as possible. Can you help me with that?” I asked the fungoid.

“Of course. You're our forest comrade, Vweight,” the fungoid said with a nod.

Now that the fungoids had learned Meraldian, their information network would be twice as useful as before.

Grenschtat Castle, the old headquarters of the demon army, was situated within the forest, so I repurposed that as our current task force headquarters. I also had the dragonkin tribes living within the forest make me a map. Though it looked like a sprawling mass of trees from the outside, the forest had quite a lot of topology to it. By cross-referencing the map with where the fungoids said the dragon had been spotted, I was able to set up a perfect surveillance net. I no longer had to send out risky patrols to find out where it'd show up next.

However, the parts of the fungoid colony that had been eaten would take

time to regrow, so the fungoids weren't able to tell me what the dragon did after it attacked any given place. Furthermore, the fungoids' senses differed greatly from other demon races. Because they were based on fungi rather than animals, the way they perceived everything from color to shapes was different. There was a lot about the dragon's appearance we still didn't know. However, it was useful to learn that the enemy we were dealing with was indeed a dragon. I'd figured it was some kind of large monster, but having a concrete idea made it easier to set up countermeasures.

For one thing, dragons couldn't turn invisible or clone themselves. *Or so I hope, anyway.* Since it hadn't left the forest yet, I went to Master to see if she had any ideas for how to deal with it. More often than not, Master was able to come up with a solution to any problem I had.

"What do you think, Master?"

"A dragon, you say? It would be nice to capture it for research purposes."

That's not really a priority right now, Master. As always, she was letting her curiosity as a researcher cloud her judgment.

"Unfortunately, I don't think we'll be able to do that unless we stop it from moving around first. Can you think of any way to do that while keeping casualties at a minimum?"

"Hmm, give me a moment to ponder."

Master poked at her bookshelf, and one of the books flew out towards her.

"Convenient, don't you think?" she asked, a smirk forming on her face. "I got this idea from the book classification system you told me about from your old world."

"Honestly, I'm dying to know how you did it, but can we save that discussion for after this crisis is over?"

"Of course." Master flipped through the pages, then projected the image printed on one of them into the air. "Impressive, isn't it? I had Lacy help me enchant each tome to project an illusion of their images into the air with a simple command."

“Again, this is fascinating, but we have more pressing matters to deal with right now.”

“Yes, of course.” Master projected a number of different dragon illustrations into the air. “Even during my time, dragons were already creatures of legend. Older texts claimed they existed, but no one alive had ever seen one.”

“So they’re like dinosaurs.”

“Indeed. I suppose they’re akin to those creatures from your world.”

Sadly, unlike T. rexes and pterosaurs, this dragon could breathe fire. Master pointed to the dragon’s wings and the fire coming out of its mouth.

“The monsters of this world possess organs and ecologies that shouldn’t be realistically possible. It’s only thanks to mana that they’re able to do what they do.” Mana was an energy source that could be converted into literally anything, so any creature with a lot of mana could defy the world’s natural laws quite easily. Master frowned and added, “Despite their size, dragons can fly on relatively small wings and breathe fire from their mouths. But even for a monster, breathing fire should be impossible. Monsters are made of flesh and blood, so they should also be susceptible to fire.”

“True. Even monsters have their proteins denature with heat.”

In order to breathe fire, a monster would need some kind of bodily fluid that combusted upon coming into contact with the air. A few monsters had something of that nature, but they were all small. Most larger monsters had an easier time overwhelming enemies with brute strength.

“There also aren’t any other large monsters that can fly,” I said, and Master nodded in agreement.

“Yes. Doubling in size means you need four times the wingspan. However, that will mean increasing your weight by a magnitude of eight...”

“Don’t worry, Master, you can omit the explanation.” I’d learned all this in my past life, and right now, we were short on time.

Master looked a little disappointed that she couldn’t show off her knowledge, but she dutifully got to the point.

“With all that in mind, you understand how larger eagles need to flap their wings differently from smaller birds to stay aloft, correct? Something the size of a dragon shouldn’t be able to achieve lift no matter how it flaps its wings.”

“Plus, it would need monstrous muscles to move wings as big as it has, right?”

“Exactly. The laws of physics dictate that a dragon should not be able to fly. The fact that it is means it’s consuming an inordinate amount of mana to do so. I suspect it’s wandering the forest looking for things to replenish its quickly depleting mana stores.”

So it’s kinda like Godzilla. Of course, with Godzilla, the strategy is always to send some other insanely strong monster to fight it, but I don’t think Master’s definitively stronger than this guy. I was reluctant to send out Master unless I could be absolutely sure she’d win.

“You thought something exceedingly rude right now, didn’t you?”

“Not at all. I respect you more than anyone else, Master.”

Anyway, how are we gonna hunt this dragon? I thought, then said, “It sounds like an army of demons and humans won’t be able to even slow it down, much less take it down. We’re going to need a plan.”

“But of course. If it looks hopeless, I will of course try to fight the dragon myself. However, if Parker was unable to do anything to it, I’m not confident I can slay it. Parker knows a spell that can kill any living creature, and he himself is immortal. Anything that can defeat him is a threat to be reckoned with.”

“This is gonna be a real pain.”

To be honest, I was at a loss for what to do.

There was no point in fretting endlessly, so I went to the council meeting and explained the situation to everyone.

“I want all of Meraldia’s western cities to prepare for an imminent dragon attack. It’s large enough that its head will poke over the city walls while standing. And its fire breath can instantly vaporize an entire field.”

When I say it, it sounds insane, but it’s really that strong. As expected, all of

the viceroys looked shocked by the news.

“How are we supposed to prepare against something like that?”

“Surely you jest?”

The viceroys of the northern cities that had suffered the most damage during the demon invasion turned pleadingly towards me.

“Isn’t there anything you can do, Veight? We only just finished repairing Bahen’s walls last year. If the city gets ravaged again, my family will lose face,” Bahen’s viceroy, Cocteau, said, and Aryoug’s viceroy nodded along.

“The most we can do in preparation is evacuate the citizens, but they’ll lose their livelihoods if our cities are destroyed. It’ll be hard to find another city to take them in, and there’s no guarantee wherever they evacuate to will be safe.”

Vongang’s viceroy frowned and said, “If our walls won’t help, all of the military strategies we’ve studied until now will be of no use as well. How are we meant to fight a creature that strong? None of our strategy books mention how to deal with dragons.”

I didn’t blame them for panicking. In fact, that was the response I’d expected.

I smiled as calmly as I could at everyone and said, “Don’t worry, I wasn’t planning on fighting it head-on in the first place.”

“You mean even *you*, the legendary Black Werewolf King, don’t think you can defeat it?!”

“Then we really are doomed, aren’t we?!”

Calm down, guys. I should have chosen my words more carefully.

Panicking a little internally, I nevertheless kept my voice calm and said, “What we need right now is time. I’m planning on dispatching the Demon Lord’s best mages to delay the impending approach.”

“Does that mean you’ll be taking to the field?”

“Or is the Demon Empress entering the fray?”

None of the above, I mentally quipped. *Seriously, just calm down and listen for like two seconds.*

“No, it will be Lacy, the Great Sage Gomoviroa’s disciple—and the continent’s greatest illusion mage—who will be going. She used to work for the Senate, and she’s our best bet against the dragon.”

Nothing I’d said was a lie. As I finished my speech, Lacy timidly walked into the room and bowed to the councilors.

“H-Hello, everyone.”

She really hadn’t changed over these past ten years. Even though she had every right to flaunt her accomplishments, she was still timid. Kite strode in behind her, a baby in his arms. He and Lacy were married, and this was their second kid.

“Stop dawdling and go to the middle of the room,” Kite said with a sigh.

“But I’m nervous. They’re all very important people.”

You know, technically your husband outranks most of the people here, Lacy. Kite was the demon army’s Grand Magus, after all. I smiled to myself as Lacy gave her introduction.

“I am Grand Magus Kite’s wife, Lacy.”

I wish you’d give a more impactful introduction.

“*This* woman is our best bet?”

“She doesn’t look all that impressive...”

“Look, she even has children. Should we really be sending her into danger?”

In order to shut the others up, I turned to Lacy and said, “Show these esteemed noblemen what you can do.”

“Huh?”

“You know, do your thing.”

“Ah, okay!” Lacy nodded, and a second later Kite and her vanished.

“What?!” a viceroy exclaimed.

“What just happened?!” added another.

As expected, Lacy’s illusion caught everyone by surprise.

“Lord Veight, is she—”

“That’s right. The two of them are actually at home right now. What you saw was an illusion Lacy had made.”

Lacy’s illusion magic was so powerful that she could control her illusions in real time from a distance now. That wasn’t all she was capable of either.

“Everyone, please direct your attention to the walls.”

“Hm?” The viceroys turned towards the walls, still recovering from their shock. Forne was the first to notice what had happened.

“Oh my, have the walls turned from red to black?”

“Yes. I had her gradually morph the walls’ colors while we were talking.”

“I can’t believe we didn’t even notice.”

Humans were susceptible to noticing sudden changes, but they were slow to notice gradual ones. Everyone had been so focused on the meeting that they hadn’t realized the walls were shifting.

“I could use magic like this in my plays...” Forne muttered. Normally, I would have grilled him on what exactly he was planning, but I had bigger fish to fry right now.

Clearing my throat to get everyone’s attention, I smiled and said, “As you can see, Lacy’s illusion magic is quite formidable. She can craft illusions that can trick all senses but touch. There isn’t any creature out there that can see through her magic. With just a little mana, she can make an entire city look like an *empty plain*.”

The little bit I knew about cognitive psychology had helped Lacy make great strides in her research of illusion magic.

“Lacy and the demon army’s other illusion mages will lure the dragon away from the cities. We don’t know how exactly this dragon will respond to illusions, so we’re going to need to do some testing on it first. Please be patient with us while we analyze its reactions.”

“I see, so that’s your plan.”

The viceroys looked satisfied, confident that I had everything under control.

“In that case, I’ll provide lodging for the illusion mages, and ensure they have everything they need.”

“I’ll pay their salaries while they’re working on this project. I’ll even throw in a bonus once our cities are safe.”

“I’ll divert more of my city’s funding to illusion magic research. It seems like it can do much more than I initially expected.”

Everyone’s so generous. But, of course, I knew they weren’t doing this out of the goodness of their hearts. Indeed, their next words made that abundantly clear.

“So please, send Lacy to our city!” they all said simultaneously.

Look, I get how you feel. I placated the viceroys, then got to work coordinating them. If they all acted on their own, their cities would get crushed by the dragon.

First, I sent out a squad to patrol the forest’s perimeter, then evacuated all but the fungoids from the forest. I then organized to send illusion mage squads to each city for their protection. For now, we needed to buy as much time as possible while learning all we can about the dragon.

—The Vampire Queen and the Illusion Saint—

Bernheinen was the most southwestern city in Meraldia. Ever since she’d captured it, Melaine had served as its viceroy. There, vampires capable of walking under sunlight lived side by side with humans. All of the people Melaine had turned into vampires possessed few of the abilities the vampires of old used to, but they also had none of their weaknesses.

In this city of vampires and humans, Lacy let out a long sigh.

“It’s reckless to rely on only illusion magic to protect this city...”

“I’m sorry, Lacy, but you’re the only one we can count on right now.” As a necromancer, there wasn’t much Melaine could do to assist. “If Parker was defeated, then I’m almost certain necromancy won’t do anything to this dragon. High-level necromancy spells allow you to kill a target without even

touching them. If that didn't work, then nothing in the necromancy field will."

"I guess if even instant kill spells are useless, there isn't anything you can do. But what if illusion magic doesn't work on the dragon either?" Lacy asked in a worried voice. "My illusions are meant to work on humans, so if the dragon's senses are totally different from a person's, we're doomed."

"Your illusion magic can deceive even Kite's epoch magic, can't it? I highly doubt the dragon's perception is better than our Grand Magus's."

"Hmm, you're probably right." Lacy smiled, happy that people were praising her husband. "Oh, but Kite isn't as perceptive as people think. At least when it comes to some things."

"Yeah, yeah, we all know you love your husband." Melaine shook her head in exasperation, but then she smiled. "I'm glad you two seem happy together."

"Ehehe, yeah, we are." Lacy blushed and scratched the back of her head. But then her expression hardened, and she added, "I need to do my best to protect the happiness of everyone here as well."

"I'm counting on you, miss saint."

"Sadly, I'm a fake saint," Lacy replied, hanging her head.

Just then, one of the demon army's vampire soldiers walked into the room, a canine soldier trailing behind him.

"My apologies for the intrusion, but I have an urgent report from one of the patrol teams! They've spotted a giant monster at the edge of the forest!"

The canine took over from there and added, "It was a big red dragon!"

Lacy stiffened up in surprise, but Melaine kept her cool. With a gentle smile, Melaine patted the canine's head and said, "Did you see with your own two eyes?"

"Yes! A kentauros took me all the way here the moment I spotted it!"

"Can you tell me any more specifics?"

Wagging his tail excitedly, the canine said, "Umm, it was kind of just standing near the edge of the forest."

“Did it appear to be searching for anything?”

“Yeah, it kind of did. Though it didn’t seem to have noticed us.”

“I see...”

Recovering from her shock, Lacy asked, “Have you sent people to contact the other cities?”

“Yes! One of the werewolves transformed and started running to Ryunheit!”

Lacy breathed a sigh of relief and took out the communicator she’d been supplied with. The demon army had only been able to manufacture a few so far, and only mages could really use them, so none of the patrol squads had any.

“I imagine the people in Ryunheit have already been informed about the situation, but I’ll contact them just in case. We need to get in touch with Bahen and Aryoug as well.”

She activated her communicator and quickly explained the situation to the illusion mages in the other cities.

“Yes, yes. Umm, yes, I think so. Yes, that’s right. I don’t know how it perceives color, but Veight said that if it sees the same way dragonkin and lizards do, regular illusions should work.” Lacy rested her communicator between her shoulder and ear and took a notepad out to write in. “The dragon has a very high viewpoint, so I think it pays more attention to the shadows cast by objects and people than most creatures. If it’s cloudy where you are, go with patterns three and four. And if you’re planning on making the illusion look like a flat plain, be sure to have the fake grass blow in the same direction as the wind. Okay, thank you.”

Once she’d finished contacting everyone, Lacy started trembling violently.

“Wh-What do we do?”

“What do you mean? There’s only one thing we can do now,” Melaine said, turning to Lacy and putting her hands on her hips. “You sure are timid for someone who performs pretty well under pressure.”

“I’m just good at doing my job even while afraid!”

“That’s pretty impressive.” Melaine patted Lacy’s head the same way she had

the canine earlier, and Lacy blushed a little. However, Melaine's head pat did help her calm down.

"All right, let's do this!" Lacy said, bracing herself. "I'm going to cover the entirety of Bernheinen in an illusion! Make sure the townspeople know so they don't panic!"

"Will do," Melaine said with a firm nod. "Is there anything else you need from me?"

"Umm, could you pat my head again?"

"There, there." Melaine gently patted Lacy's head again, which helped her focus.

Lacy had heard that Melaine had lived for over a hundred years, and experienced multiple vampire hunts carried out by human mobs. But despite the horrible things she'd gone through, Melaine was kind to everyone she met, and both humans and vampires loved her.

I may not be as old as Melaine, but I've been alive for a pretty long time myself. Considering all the things I've been through, I should be able to handle a dragon no problem! Lacy thought, psyching herself up.

"Is it just me, or were you thinking something extremely rude just now?" Melaine asked suddenly.

"I-I wasn't!" Despite Melaine's pointed question, she didn't stop patting Lacy's head.

Lacy made her way to the top of Bernheinen's walls and cast her gaze over the city. The area just outside the walls was filled with farms, while farther out there was nothing but empty plains.

"Umm, conditions seem good. I don't think I'll need to adjust my illusion at all."

The plan was to disguise the city, the outlying fields, and the nearby roads as

an empty plain. Lacy had crafted the illusion in a dome shape where everyone inside would be able to go about their lives like normal, but from the outside, everything in the dome would look like grasslands.

Of course, an illusion spell of this magnitude and precision took a highly skilled mage to cast. Illusion magic was born from the caster's imagination. Just like a master sculptor or painter, the illusion mage had to perfectly recapture the sights and sounds of real life inside their head and replicate them. In a way, it was similar to how magicians back in Veight's world did their thing, but of course, Lacy had no way of knowing that. Lacy had already created the illusion she wanted to cover the city with ahead of time, so it didn't take too long to get ready.

When I was younger, I remember Veight always told me to carefully observe my surroundings. Back when Lacy had wanted to make an illusory ship, Veight had made her swim underneath a ship's hull to learn what it looked like from below the surface. That experience had taught Lacy to carefully examine even the most minute of details.

"All right!" Lacy slapped her cheeks and opened up her notebook. "Cloak this land in a new form, obfuscating its true nature. *Iete Safen...*"

She traced the magic circle in her notebook as she chanted. The circle was basically like a piece of program code for CGI art. Covering an entire city with the image of a plain was a massive undertaking, but a skilled mage could compress the amount of information required by simply making a small section of a plain, then copying it over and over. Lacy was basically copy-pasting the same plains section she'd created over Bernheinen. Of course, the exact same pattern copied over and over would look a bit artificial, but there was only so much a person with 1 kite's worth of mana could do. With clever use of the unique properties of her magic, Lacy had found a way to create large illusions that didn't require an immense amount of mana. Other illusion mages needed to work in groups to accomplish the same thing, but Lacy could manage this all on her own.

"Did it work?" Lacy muttered to herself. Since she was inside the illusion, she had no way of knowing. She'd tested it earlier from the outside, and it had worked just fine, but she still couldn't help but worry.

A few minutes later, Melaine came over to her, followed by a squad of her vampire knights.

“Well?” she asked simply.

“Ah, it worked, I think. We should probably be okay,” Lacy replied.

“Thank goodness...” Melaine breathed an audible sigh of relief, and Lacy gave her a puzzled look.

“What’s wrong?”

“It seems the dragon is headed straight for us, though we can’t be certain since it seems to have slaughtered the scouting unit tracking it.”

“Oh no...” Lacy felt a pang of sadness for the dead scouts. *I can mourn later. For now, I need to focus on protecting the living.*

Suddenly, one of the vampire knights manning the watchtower shouted, “Lady Melaine! Something absolutely massive is flying this way! Even from this distance, I can tell it’s huge!”

Lacy started trembling in fear, but she didn’t let her concentration slip. If she lost consciousness, the illusion would fade.

Melaine wrapped her arm around Lacy’s shoulders. “It’s okay. Everything’s going to be all right.”

Lacy couldn’t bring herself to believe that, but the warmth of Melaine’s arms was comforting nonetheless.

“Yeah...” she muttered, concentrating on keeping the illusion going.

A second later, there was a booming roar.



“Whaaaa?!”

For a moment, Lacy thought they were dead, but the dragon passed harmlessly over them. Before long, even the sounds of its roars were gone.

Once the dragon was fully out of sight, the knight on the watchtower said, “After passing over us, the creature made a large circle, then flew off somewhere. I don’t see it anymore.”

“Is it...over?” Melaine said in a trembling voice. But then she looked over at Lacy and smiled. “It seems like we survived. Thank you, Lacy. It’s thanks to you that this city is safe.”

“Y-You’re welcome.” Lacy slid to the ground, but even as relief washed over her, she made sure to keep the illusion going.

Today, too, I was in a meeting. For the past week, I’d been in meetings nonstop. The purpose of today’s meeting was to convene with all the other officers of the demon army. I’d gathered everyone to share intel, and to decide whether or not to keep the patrols going.

“The dragon appeared near Bernheinen. After flying over the city, it circled around to the south. It passed over the mountain range between Bernheinen and Beluza, and appears to have returned to the forest.”

The dragonkin, werewolf, and human officers of the demon army looked visibly shaken.

“So...it really can fly?”

“It makes sense since all the legends say dragons can fly, but it still amazes me that something that large is capable of flight...” Unbelievable as it was, this was reality so we had to accept it. “Stay calm, everyone. That isn’t all. I analyzed all the information we have so far, and I’ve learned a few things.”

I pointed to the map spread out on the wall behind me.

“As you may have guessed, this is a map of the forest. I’ve marked down all the places where the fungoid colony was attacked, assuming it was the same dragon that hit them each time...”

The forest was more than just a giant swathe of trees. There were demon

villages, rivers, and ancient ruins scattered across its vast expanse. These were the markers the demon army used to make its maps as well. Of course, all of these cartographic techniques had been pioneered by the first Demon Lord, Friedensrichter. The officers scribbled down notes as I talked. Among them was Baltze, Friedensrichter's former right-hand man, and the undisputed master of dual-sword combat. He was also Shirin's dad.

"Veight. The timing of these attacks would imply that our target can move quite quickly," Baltze said, pointing to two locations that had been attacked on the same day, but were quite far apart. "The only way it could have reached all of those points in that short a time is if it can fly at the speed of a normal bird."

"You're absolutely right."

A creature as large as a dragon would be able to cover quite a bit of distance just running across the ground, but even that speed wouldn't be enough to hit as many places as it had in one day. The thick trees in the forest would've definitely hampered ground movement.

"However, there is another possible explanation," Baltze mused. "There might be multiple dragons."

The Garney brothers had a magic trick they liked doing at every party where one of them left through the door on the right while the other entered from the window on the left to make it look like they were teleporting around. I'd seen it a hundred times, mostly because they were dead set on doing it repeatedly at every party until everyone was laughing. At any rate, if there were multiple dragons, they could be doing something similar, hitting different places in quick succession to make it look like they could move superfast.

"That certainly is a valid possibility. But even if that is the case, our strategy remains unchanged. We'll simply have to take them down one at a time if there's more. Although, I think if there were multiple, we would have heard of more sightings from the fungoids and our scouts." It was certainly still possible there were multiple, but it wasn't worth spending time thinking about right now. "All we know for sure is that the dragon can fly. We need to figure out how to deal with that before worrying about anything else."

There wasn't a single demon race that could fly. And while there were a few

monster species that could, they were all quite small. A body capable of flight normally came with a large set of drawbacks.

The officers' expressions turned grim. Conventional tactics would be ineffective against a monster so large that could also take to the sky. For one thing, it was difficult to throw an army against a creature that could show up anywhere at any time.

"I agree. Its ability to fly is far more dangerous than the number of enemies we have to face," Baltze said.

"Yep. Heck, it could fly over our heads right now, if it wanted to," I replied. *Though I doubt it will.* There was one point I wanted to emphasize, so I said, "Also, after reading all the reports we've gotten from our scouts, I can say with absolute certainty it really *is* a dragon we're dealing with. It's shaped exactly like the red dragons we've read about in legends, with the horns, wings, and all that."

Every unit had only seen it at a distance before immediately fleeing, so I didn't know how big it was. But considering how easily they'd been able to pick out details from a distance, it was likely massive.

"For now, the dragon has only approached a city once. But it's clearly expanding its territory. Before long, illusions won't be enough to protect us."

When Parker had gone missing, the dragon had been keeping mostly to the deeper parts of the forest. But now, it was showing up in the plains with alarming frequency. This was the danger with flying enemies.

"This is just Master Gomoviroa's hypothesis, but it's possible the dragon only recently acquired the ability to fly and is slowly growing accustomed to its new powers."

She'd based this hypothesis off of the nue I'd fought in Wa all those years ago. Originally, the nue had been a normal grimalkin, but after absorbing an inordinate amount of mana, it'd turned into a monster with new abilities.

"After a series of transformations, the nue in Wa also grew wings. That nue hadn't been able to fly, but if it'd continued absorbing mana it was possible it would've acquired the ability eventually. Likewise, it's possible the dragon only

recently learned to fly after another mutation. Keep in mind this is just a hypothesis, but for now, it's the most likely one we have."

Baltze nodded and replied, "The Demon Empress is Meraldia's premiere scientist, so I think her hypothesis is worth believing for now."

The other officers also nodded in agreement. Everyone trusted Master's intuition as well as her strength.

Kurtz, who was also sitting in on the meeting, said, "Our biggest problem is the sheer amount of mass our foe possesses. If we assume that it's twenty times as large as the fanged lizards in the forest, that would mean it weighs eight thousand times as much. If something that large came flying at us, no amount of fortifications would be able to stop it. In fact, it would plow right through forts and walls, and the falling rubble would only cause damage to our own troops."

I nodded in agreement. "You're absolutely correct, Kurtz. We can't hope to hole up in our cities. But at the same time, I doubt we'll be able to win a head-on clash on the plains. It managed to beat Parker, after all."

Parker's dopey smiling face appeared in my head. I wanted to go look for him, but I knew I had a job to do here.

"We need to treat this like a hunt, not a war. Ideally, we can trap the dragon in some way that lets us instantly slay it. The problem is, we need a suitable place to lay that trap. Hopefully, one of the cities is willing to help."

One of the younger dragonkin officers raised their hand. "Lord Veight, shouldn't we pick a location far from any city?"

"I considered that, but we'll have supply issues if we go too far. We'll need lodging as well as space to store all of our weaponry. It'll take time to set all that up in an empty plain. Against an enemy that can fly, that simply isn't realistic."

"You make a good point. The more soldiers we'll need to field for this operation, the less mobility we'll have."

Moving large groups of armed soldiers wasn't easy. Armor and weapons just became extra baggage during long marches, and because the march needed to

stay organized, you couldn't send soldiers out to forage for food or anything. The commanders needed to map out supply lines, and for any army larger than a few hundred people, they also needed to appoint officers to various units and set up a long chain of command. In a sizable army, you have hundreds of officers. While you could clearly organize them into a sensible structure, it was still a daunting task to mobilize that many people effectively. This was why I'd given up on being an army commander pretty early on in my career and stuck to leading just my werewolf squad.

"In this case, it won't matter how many soldiers we throw at the dragon; numbers won't help us. One blast of fire breath will wipe out an army, and even if we could somehow overwhelm the dragon with numbers, it'll just fly away once things get dicey."

If all the JRPGs I'd played as a kid in my past life were anything to go by, you wanted a party of at most four people to take on a dragon. And if MMOs had taught me anything, it was that you needed an entire guild to stake out the dragon spawn point so that a single party could actually get the kill.

In a thoughtful voice, Baltze said, "In that case, we should form a core strike force made up primarily of riflemen. With Blast Rifles, we'll be able to fight the dragon from afar, and they're more powerful than any of our other weapons."

"Blast Rifles are mana-based weapons, and while they work great on things that can be hurt by mana attacks..." As I trailed off, someone piped up from the doorway.

"Don't bother. Mine didn't even scratch the thing."

Wait a second, I recognize that voice! Turning around, I saw a handsome young man in a demon army officer's uniform. I recognized that face as well.

"Parker..."

"That's right, it's your beloved brother, Parker."

Using every ounce of restraint that I had, I turned to one of the werewolves and said, "Throw him out. He's not a general."

"Hold on, hold on! I know I'm not supposed to be part of this meeting, but I have some *extremely important* information!" Parker dropped his illusion, and

his half-charred skeleton clattered to the floor. Not bothering to pick himself up, Parker shouted, “The enemy is definitely a dragon! But Blast Rifles don’t work on it! It feeds on mana!”

“What?” I held out a hand to stop the werewolf from throwing Parker out. “Leave that pile of bones here. I need to hear what he has to say.”

“You could just be honest with yourself and say you’re glad I’m safe.”

Shut up. I can’t afford to look all giddy in the middle of an important meeting, okay?

Parker walked over to the speaker’s podium and gave his report.

“The first time I encountered the dragon, its fire breath charred me to my bones.”

It’s not like you have anything but your bones though. I held back the urge to say anything out loud and let Parker continue his story.

“After a few days, my body regenerated. But while that was happening, the dragon went past me numerous times.”

Wait, your bones regenerate on their own? I didn’t know that. How does that work? I was dying to know what force powered Parker’s regeneration, but I kept my curiosity in check.

“Once I was finally recovered enough to move, it took a few more days to escape the dragon’s territory. It seems to be patrolling the area it considers its turf rather frequently. I don’t know how much of the forest it considers its territory, but I nearly ran into it multiple times, and each time I thought I was dead for sure.”

But you can’t die, right? Right? It was so hard not to retort to every little thing Parker said.

“Anyway, eventually, I was picked up by one of the canine scouting units. They looked really happy when they found me, it was kind of surprising.”

They love playing with bones, after all.

“When I started talking, though, they freaked out and ran away. It took a lot

of effort to convince them I was harmless.”

Yeah, I can see that. Parker’s story got a few mental chuckles out of me, but I kept my expression sour as I said, “Get to the point, Parker.”

“Ah, sorry, sorry. Well, the reason I think my Blast Rifle was ineffective on the dragon is because it’s become a creature similar to our very own Demon Empress. The necromancy spell Blade of Death was ineffective against it as well. Since it’s a blade of mana that destroys something’s soul, I suspect it didn’t work for the same reason my Blast Rifle didn’t.”

After a barrage of jokes, Parker gave a simple-to-understand analysis of the things he’d tried and why they hadn’t worked. This, too, was just like Parker.

In a serious voice, he added, “I think that dragon is slowly becoming a Hero.”

I didn’t know dragons could become Heroes... Actually, I guess I should use the proper term. A Valkaan dragon. That sounds terrifying. As I was thinking, I suddenly realized that Parker and everyone else was staring at me.

“What?”

“Well, you’re the only Hero killer here, so we were wondering what your thoughts on the matter were...” one of the officers said.

Personally, I wanted to hear what Master’s thoughts were, but she was busy gathering up all of our mages right now.

I got to my feet and said, “Creatures that become Heroes—sorry, Valkaans—undergo an inescapable transformation. Regardless of what they were before, once they turn into a Valkaan, they can’t be defeated through normal means. This is especially true for a dragon. If this dragon becomes a Valkaan, it’ll be far more deadly than Arshes ever was.”

The older officers grimaced upon hearing my words. Arshes had managed to fight his way into Grenchtat Castle all by himself and had killed a bunch of demons, even Friedensrichter, before dying. Everyone seemed to think I was some kind of superhuman werewolf because I’d been the one to kill him, but the truth was, Arshes had been barely clinging to life after defeating Friedensrichter. Had he not been severely weakened, I would have been swatted like a fly.

“Unfortunately, we’re quickly running out of options. We need time to come up with a surefire plan, but if we take too much time, the dragon will become a Valkaan.” Everyone turned worriedly to each other. Honestly, I probably looked just as worried as them.

“Once it becomes a Valkaan, it’ll be unstoppable.”

“Even you won’t be able to slay it, Lord Veight?” someone asked, and I nodded.

“I’m not sure I’d even be able to survive a single hit from it. I doubt the Demon Empress would stand a chance either. Meraldia, Rolmund, and Wa will be burned to the ground.”

“That’s horrifying...” another one of the officers muttered.

“If even you can’t defeat it, then there’s no point in rounding up soldiers to fight it.”

“What can we even do against something stronger than the Demon Empress herself?”

I could see why everyone was terrified, but enumerating the dangers had given me a hint on how to defeat the dragon.

“Calm down, everyone. It’s true that this dragon is an unprecedented threat to this entire continent. However, that means the other nations can’t afford to turn a blind eye to it. We’ll petition Rolmund and Wa for help, and defeat the dragon before it can become a Valkaan.”

“But, Lord Veight, if Blast Rifles don’t work on the dragon, what can the other countries even do to help?”

“Blast Rifles aren’t our only weapon, and it’s not as if all of our magical tools are useless.”

Wa had traditional gunpowder weaponry like Iori’s matchlock pistol. I suspected they had larger weapons like cannons as well, and even if they didn’t, just having access to their gunpowder would be a huge boon. On the other hand, Rolmund had a plethora of magical tools at their disposal. Eleora was a scholar first and foremost, and she’d invented quite a few useful things.

“There’s a lot they can do to help. Besides, our job is to eliminate any threats to Meraldia’s peace, not whine and groan about how impossible everything is. Let’s at least do what we can before throwing in the towel.”

The officers all straightened their backs and in unison said, “Yes, sir!”

“That’s our vice-commander for you,” Parker added with an impressed whistle.

Man, how did you manage to get a whistling sound out of those bones of yours?

Thanks to the firsthand reports Parker had brought us, we were able to speed up our operations a great deal. Master organized a team to research the dragon’s ecology and see if they could discern any weak spots. Meanwhile, Lacy and the other illusion mages remained in their various cities in case the dragon decided to head into Meraldia again. I also had the scouts keep an eye on only the outer rim of the forest, so the perimeter was much more heavily patrolled. That was the most Meraldia could do on its own. The other important thing I needed to take care of was ensuring our resident foreign dignitary, Prince Shumar, was taken somewhere safe. As the Demon Lord’s vice-commander, I had the authority to unilaterally send him home, but as his teacher, I wanted to hear what his thoughts on the matter were first, so I called him in for a meeting.

“We’ve found a hostile dragon living in the forest. It can fly, and its breath is hot enough to vaporize anything it touches. Furthermore, it’s been expanding its area of activity, and the dragon may likely come to Ryunheit soon. Worst of all, our Blast Rifles are completely ineffective against it.”

Shumar frowned at me. “So what you’re saying is it’s too dangerous here and I should go home?”

“Pretty much.”

I could tell from his scent that he really didn’t want to leave. He was enjoying his time as a Meraldian student.

In a reluctant voice, he said, “But, Professor...”

“Look, I don’t want to send you home either. You’re a great student, and all of

your professors rave about how much fun they have teaching you. You have a lot of potential, and I don't want to rob you of the opportunity to realize it just because a dragon is rampaging around. But..." I scratched my head. "You're the last living descendant of Kuwol's royal line. If you die, the royal family dies with you, and the nobles will start squabbling amongst themselves. Once they start vying for power, it'll be impossible to stop them."

For better or worse, Kuwolese nobles didn't have any sense of unity, and they were all quite ambitious. The only authority they answered to was the royal family. If Kuwol's royal family disappeared, the country's peace would crumble in an instant.

"I've already sent a group of mermaids to Kuwol. In a few days, I imagine I'll receive a message from Queen Fasleen demanding that you be returned home."

"I understand that, but..."

Normally, Shumar was quite obedient, but he was rather stubborn today. It wasn't too surprising, all things considered. He understood the responsibilities he bore, but he still didn't want to go back. I could have pushed him harder if I wanted to, but I decided not to say any more. He was old and wise enough to make this decision for himself, so I was going to let him.

Finally, Shumar looked up at me and said resolutely, "Regardless of what my mother or the nobles say, I will remain here."

It seemed the sheltered prince had finally rebelled against his mother. As a politician, his choice would bring me nothing but headaches, but as his professor, I was happy.

"Can I ask the reason why?"

"Of course. If I return home now, I'll never get another opportunity to study abroad. But right now, I haven't learned nearly enough. Furthermore, I haven't spent adequate time with the future leaders of Wa or Meraldia."

"This is true."

Shumar had only just started his studies. Of course, he could continue them back home, but Meraldia had the world's leading university.

Shumar added, “Still, if I don’t go back to Kuwol with the knowledge and skills to lead it properly, even if I survive, the country is doomed. If I do a bad job, the royal family’s reputation will be tarnished and the nobles will stop respecting us. I can’t be just another king. I have to be a king among kings, or I won’t be able to save Kuwol from its current predicament.”

Shumar understood the state of his nation surprisingly well. He really had grown a great deal in a short time. At this point, I was willing to fully support his decision, but that would require some political maneuvering.

“I’m sure you know this already, but you do have a duty to your people. Your reasons for wanting to remain are laudable, but you will need to fulfill that duty while staying here, or I’ll have to send you back.”

“Of course, professor.” After thinking for a few minutes, Shumar said, “I’ll send a letter to my mother. Not a personal one, but an official missive as the crown prince of Kuwol.”

I see. If Shumar sent his letter in an official capacity, that would make this an internal problem for Kuwol rather than an issue between Meraldia and Kuwol. In fact, it would be a diplomatic problem if Meraldia tried to intervene in a dispute between the prince and the royal family. However, this wasn’t a perfect solution.

“If that official letter fails to persuade your mother, you may be forced to return against your wishes. I won’t be able to protect you if Kuwol formally asks for your return.”

“I know. But...” Shumar grinned at me. “By the time we’re done trading letters, I’m sure you’ll have slain the dragon, Professor.”

So that’s your angle... Shumar was learning to be quite crafty.

I smiled wryly at him and said, “Your family really likes making more work for me. But fine, I’ll stop this dragon in time for you.”

“Thank you very much.”

At this point, he’d become something akin to my disciple, so it made me happy to see him happy.

I'd already sent messengers to appraise Kuwol of the situation, but if Shumar was going to pull a card like this, it seemed prudent to send a crew of diplomats as well. I needed Kuwol to have as good an impression of me as possible. Which meant I'd also need to send someone of suitable rank to deliver Shumar's formal letter. *Man, even in this world, dealing with human society is annoying.*

I knew Shumar had said he'd never be able to return here if he went home, but I might need to send him home temporarily, so whoever I sent with the letter would need to have the authority to negotiate measures like that. After considering my options, I decided to send Kumluk and Parker to Kuwol.

"Are you sure you want me to go?" Kumluk asked in a worried voice. Despite his meeting with Shumar, he remained apprehensive about returning to Kuwol. He still felt responsible for failing to stop his captain.

I decided to once again remind him that this wasn't his fault.

"Kumluk, Prince Shumar himself has personally pardoned you. If you keep on dragging your guilt like this, you'll just be disrespecting his generosity."

"I know, but..."

Considering the gravity of Zagar's crimes, it was understandable that Kumluk couldn't move on that easily. In Kuwol, there was nothing worse than being a king killer.

"Now that Prince Shumar has forgiven you, Kuwol's royal family has no reason to speak out against you. And if they won't say anything, the nobles definitely won't. Trust in the prince."

"Very well." Kumluk gave me a salute, and Parker chuckled.

"Don't worry, I'll be going with you too. If anything happens, I can protect you. And I'm pretty good friends with most of Kuwol's river nobles."

I nodded and said, "He's right. On the other hand, you're on good terms with all the coastal nobles, Kumluk. Birakoya Bahza especially thinks quite highly of you."

Somehow that old lady was still an active ruler at age ninety. "Don't go missing on me this time, Parker."

“I know, I know. I’m here to emotionally support you, not cause you emotional stress.”

“Well, at this point, it’ll be business as usual if you go missing, so it won’t bother me too much,” I said flatly. *It’s not like you can die anyway, so there’s no point in worrying about you. You always just come back eventually.*

I pawned off my annoying skeleton friend onto Kumluk and sent them both on their way. *All right, time for the next order of business.*

Shumar’s situation was important, but right now, getting the cooperation of the other nations was far more pressing a matter. Meraldia’s forces and technology alone couldn’t handle a threat as big as a dragon. First, we needed to get Wa’s cannons. If we just got the blueprints from them, it would take too long to make prototypes and train up cannoneers, so I’d rather just have Wa ship theirs over.

“I think I’ll send Mao to Wa. He’s got a lot of connections there, and even if he was exiled, it is still his original home,” I said to Kite, who frowned at me.

“He’s corrupt to the core. If you send him, who knows what backroom deals he’ll make?”

“When I sent him to Kuwol to negotiate in my place, he did his job properly, so I think it’ll be fine. If you’re worried, you can go with him though.”

“You want *me* to go?!” Kite shouted, and I gave him a puzzled look.

“You guys are friends, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely *not*!”

But I see you guys bickering all the time. If you really hated each other, you wouldn’t give each other the time of day. Yet I always see you going to visit the other just to quarrel.

“You’ve known each other ever since we infiltrated the north. Plus, you and I are the only people he doesn’t try to bribe; everyone knows he gives you special treatment.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Oh, come on. You're a grown adult, stop acting like a baby, I thought, then said, "Sure, but I need someone with magical knowledge to accompany him anyway. You're Meraldia's Grand Magus, so diplomatically speaking, you're our best choice."

"Well, I don't want to go."

What am I supposed to do when my vice-commander isn't listening to me? Shrugging, I said, "Fine. There's no one else who can keep him on a tight leash though, so I guess he'll be free to do whatever he wants in Wa..."

"Now that would be bad. All right, fine, I'll go."

Make up your mind already. Well, at least this saves me the trouble of finding another mage to send with Mao.

By the time I'd sent everyone off onto their respective missions, it was already dusk.

As I watched the sun set through my window, I muttered, "I feel like I've been stuck here for ages..."

Ever since the dragon had shown up, I hadn't been able to leave Ryunheit. I'd been swamped with work of one kind or another. If I went to the front lines now, Airia would be forced to take care of all the work I was handling. She was already busy enough with her duties as Demon Lord, so if I saddled her with dragon slaying as well, she'd collapse from overwork. I literally couldn't afford to go to the front lines. Right now, my skills as a politician were in far more demand than my abilities as a soldier or a mage. It made me a little sad, honestly. But this was my responsibility, so I needed to make sure I saw it through. Other people could handle the fighting.

All that's left now is Rolmund. I knew exactly who to send there, but I was a bit worried about sending them alone.

"And so, Friede."

"Yes?" Friede straightened her back, her officer's uniform looking completely spotless.

Friede and her friends were still students, but they'd be graduating next year. Because this was a bit of an emergency situation, I'd fast-tracked her entry into the demon army. Honestly, I'd wanted to let her study magic for a bit longer, but she could go back to doing that after this crisis was over. Right now, I needed all the hands I could get.

I passed down the orders she'd been given from the Commonwealth Council.

"The Commonwealth Council has asked prospective members from the demon army to join the diplomatic delegation to Rolmund. The demon army has agreed, and we have decided that you, Friede Aindorf, should be the one to go."

"Yes, sir!" She gave me a crisp salute. It brought a tear to my eye seeing how much she'd grown.

With a bashful smile, Friede asked, "Did I do it right, dad?"

"You sure did." Friede still had trouble keeping things professional between us at times, but just this once I figured it was better to keep things casual.

"Honestly, I wish I could just go myself to take care of things, but if I leave Ryunheit, both the demon army and the council will fall apart."

"I thought so."

"I may have become a bit too important a figure in Meraldia," I said with a sigh.

Friede gave me an odd look. "Do you not want to be someone important?"

"Do I look like the kind of person that wants to deal with all that hassle?"

I'd much rather have a middling post with some responsibilities, but not too many. My life had been at its easiest when I'd just been one vice-commander among many in the demon army.

"I'm not as amazing as people think I am, and I don't have the charisma to lead entire countries. Fighting enemies on the front lines is more my style."

"It's because you're always saying stuff like that that mom has such a hard time, you know that?"

“Did she say that?”

“She did.”

I can't believe this is what my wife and daughter talk about... Maybe I should change my ways. Clearing my throat, I said, “Well, now I can't go on the front lines even if I wanted to. Supporting everyone from here is my new job. Which is why I need someone else I can entrust my *old* job to.”

Friede raised her hand into the air. “And that's me, right?!”

I didn't want to expose my daughter to danger, but this was what she wanted, and it would be egotistical of me to deny her an opportunity to try. To be fair, she'd already performed well above my expectations in both Rolmund and Wa. I swept my worries aside and smiled at her.

“Yeah, I'm counting on you. I can rest easy knowing you're the one going, Friede. However—”

“Make sure to come back alive?” Friede said, finishing my sentence for me.

“Yep.”

Sorry, but I'm a worrywart at heart. I know that might feel overbearing for you, but that's just how I am. To my surprise, though, Friede smiled happily.

“Don't worry, I'll make it home safely. That's the best way to show I love you, right?”

That's right. That's exactly right. Neither me nor Airia could possibly be happy in a world without you.

“You've really grown into a splendid girl.”

“You think so?”

Back on Earth, someone Friede's age would still be a high schooler, but here she was part of the demon army. She'd nearly finished her schooling in Meraldia University, and she was a decently accomplished mage. Plus, she was an expert at reading people's emotions, even without the full strength of a werewolf's nose. She could even tell how I felt.

Okay, father-daughter time is over. I stared sternly at Friede and said, “Friede

Aindorf. Use your connections with Rolmund's imperial family to bring as many talented mages and engineers back with you as you can. If they're willing to part with some of their cutting-edge equipment, secure that as well. I'll give you a list of things to prioritize."

"Yes, sir!" Friede gave me another crisp salute.

Since Meraldia had Blast Rifles too, I had no doubt Rolmund was developing weapons that would be effective against them. Some of the intelligence reports I'd received implied that they had some top secret prototypes already. The fire the dragon breathed was composed of mana, just like the Hero Arshes's sword had been, and Blast Rifles worked similarly to those two. So if Rolmund had a way to counter Blast Rifles, that same weapon would be effective against the dragon's breath.

"This time, you'll be visiting Rolmund as an official diplomat. I'll let you choose who you want accompanying you on this mission, but keep the group small, and pick only people you trust."

"In that case, I'll take Yuhette, Shirin, Joshua, Iori, and the grimalkin!" Friede replied instantly.

Yeah, I figured you'd just pick them, I thought. "Very well. I'll get the paperwork sorted out. In the meantime, get ready to depart."

"Understood!"

It really felt like I was passing the torch down to the next generation here. *Oh yeah, I almost forgot.*

"Ah, and Friede."

"What is it, dad?"

Aaand she's back to casual mode. It wasn't really a bad thing, but I was worried she might slip up around someone else.

"I've taught you many things, from history to magic to fighting."

"You also told me how cool Japan is!"

Well, yeah, I guess I did. I hadn't had a great past life, but there were still times I wished I could go back.

Clearing my throat, I added, "From here on out, you'll face many difficult challenges. I won't be by your side for them anymore. And depending on the situation, I may not even be able to come to your aid."

"Yeah..."

I wouldn't always be close by like I had been in the Windswept Dunes. But no parent could keep sheltering their child forever. Of course, I planned on assisting Friede as much as possible, but ultimately, there were some things she'd need to do herself.

"Whenever you're in trouble, know that you can always rely on the things I've taught you. But most of all, remember that your fundamentals are your strongest weapon."

"What do you mean by that?"

"When it comes to fighting, your basic kicks and punches are your best bet. When it comes to magic, the simple spells you first learned will be the most useful. This is because they're the things you've spent the most time practicing. The basics you've built up over all these years are your greatest asset. As long as you believe in yourself, you can overcome anything."

It was time my daughter became fully independent. These words were the only things I could give her now.

"After reincarnating, I obtained the strength of a werewolf and the ability to use magic. But what helped me more than either of those things were the social skills I'd developed over all the years I spent suffering in my past life."

"Everyone does say your negotiating skills are legendary."

Negotiating was really easy when you had the knowledge of a human but the strength of a werewolf. People expected you to come out strongly with threats, so they were always taken aback when you went for the peaceful approach.

"What I'm saying is: don't rely on complex moves or secret techniques. When you're in danger, stick to the *basics*."

"Got it," Friede said with a stern nod, then grinned at me.

"I get to see Michaaa. I get to see Michaaa." I sang happily to myself as I

packed, but lori frowned at me.

“Lady Micha is a princess. I know you two are close, but please keep that in mind when you see her.”

“Aren’t you a princess too, lori?”

“Ack!” lori blushed to the tips of her ears. “Me? A *princess*?”

“I mean, you are the successor of the Mihoshi family, which is one of the Chrysanthemum Court’s most prominent families, right?”

“I wasn’t planning on succeeding my father. Besides, I’m just his adopted daughter...” lori muttered. “I’ve already decided to become a Meraldian. Lady Micha is different.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you wanted to stay here permanently. Thanks, that makes me happy.”

“Umm...”

lori looked away and covered her mouth. It looked like she was frowning, but I could tell from her scent that she was happy too. Although, I didn’t really get why, since I’d just said the obvious. Anyway, since lori wasn’t saying anything, I went back to packing.

“You should come with me to Rolmund, lori. I’m sure you’ll become good friends with Micha too.”

“I doubt it,” lori said with a smile.

She seemed pretty confident she wouldn’t get along with Micha.

Suddenly, her expression grew worried, and she said, “I’m sure negotiations with Rolmund will be successful since you’re going, Friede, but will the delegations to Wa and Kuwol be okay?”

“If anything, they’ll do better than us. Both of those teams are filled with veterans, after all.”

I needed to do my best to keep up with them.

—Best Frenemies—

After reaching Wa, Mao had given an eloquent speech to the members of the

Chrysanthemum Court, which he was just wrapping up.

“In short, this will be a repeat of the nue hunt fifteen years ago, but our quarry is rather large this time around, so Veight is requesting the cooperation of our great nation.”

In truth, there wasn't a patriotic bone in Mao's body. While he had been born in Wa, he had been exiled for a crime he didn't commit. And even though his name had been cleared since then, he had no intention of returning to his homeland. Granted, he didn't truly see Meraldia as his home. It still felt like a foreign nation to him, and he couldn't bring himself to think or live like a Meraldian. In a sense, he was isolated.

However, he'd correctly guessed that appealing to his Wa heritage would make negotiations with the Chrysanthemum Court easier. He'd also name-dropped Veight, and reminded everyone of the assistance he'd provided Wa for the same reason. Kite was glaring at him from the corner of the room, but Mao ignored him. He was used to it at this point.

After a brief moment of silence, Tokitaka, the current de facto leader of the Chrysanthemum Court, said, “What manner of assistance is Lord Veight requesting? Our answer will depend on what exactly he wants.”

Mao grinned to himself. They'd taken the bait.

“My master wishes to make use of your cannons.”

“Hmm...” Tokitaka's expression turned grim.

Sensing his moment, Mao moved in for the kill.

“I have had the opportunity to examine Lady Iori's pistol. I believe that our intricate and powerful weaponry is the pride of Wa. It would be a waste not to use them, especially when they could provide us diplomatic leverage.”

One of the Kushin spoke up. “You're stepping out of line, Mao. The knowledge of how to build and use our cannons is a closely guarded secret, and one of the cornerstones of Wa's national defense. We cannot simply pledge them to anyone, even Lord Veight.”

Mao's grin grew wider. “So, you really do possess cannons then.”

“Mrr...”

It was an open secret that Wa possessed cannons, but the Chrysanthemum Court had never officially acknowledged that they did. Only the officers of the Heavenwatchers and a few other elites even had access to gunpowder weaponry. At any rate, Mao was on a roll now, and he had no intention of stopping.

“Fear not. The demon army already knows how to use gunpowder. But they lack the facilities to produce larger weapons like cannons, and they don’t have the time to get those factories up and running. Veight needs these cannons as soon as possible.”

“I’m afraid our decision cannot be rushed.”

“Oh, are you sure you want to be taking your time?” Mao smiled faintly. “If you don’t send over your cannons, Meraldia will have no choice but to start constructing its own. Naturally, they won’t just get rid of them after eliminating the dragon, which means the demon army will be in permanent possession of their own cannon units.”

Mao was effectively threatening the Chrysanthemum Court. Of course, the Kushin knew this, but they were all also veteran warriors. They wouldn’t be tricked that easily.

“Is Meraldia truly capable of casting iron hard enough to withstand the forces a cannon requires? If they were, you wouldn’t be here, would you?”

That was true. Meraldia possessed a lot of advanced technology, but their metallurgy techniques lagged behind Wa and Rolmund. Mao wasn’t fazed at all though.

“It’s not the making that’s an issue. We could spin up our blast furnaces right now if we had to. The problem is, once we start them, we’ll have to invest a great deal of resources to mass-produce cannons, or it won’t be worth it financially. Meraldia has plenty of ore deposits in its mountains, and we can easily procure firewood from the forest to power our smithies.”

Instead of backing off, he doubled down on his threat.

“I’m not sure if you’re aware, but Meraldia’s dragonkin have lived in the

mountains for generations, and are quite skilled at metallurgy. Moreover, they've been developing new techniques at Veight's behest."

"Mrr..."

Just mentioning Veight's name was enough to give the Kushin pause. Gauging their reactions, Mao decided it was time to let up the pressure momentarily. Negotiation was all about balancing threats and rewards, after all.

"Meraldia knows that if they mass-produce siege weapons, it will give neighboring nations the wrong idea—which is why Veight is asking for your cooperation instead," Mao explained. "He doesn't want to create discord."

"That's rich, coming from you..." Kite muttered from the corner, but of course, Mao ignored him.

"Besides, cannons can't till fields. Iron and firewood are both limited resources, so Meraldia would much prefer to borrow your cannons than be forced to make their own. They will, of course, immediately return them once the dragon is defeated."

"You're asking for an awful lot here," one of the Kushin said with a frown, and Mao smiled at him.

"We are allies, are we not?"

"We are. But that does not mean you can ignore proper protocol. These cannons are for Wa's national defense, we cannot loan them out without careful consideration."

"I agree that protocol is very important." In an offhand voice, Mao added, "But Veight has done many, many things for Wa without going through proper protocol, hasn't he? He's put himself at risk multiple times to save us in our time of need without first consulting Meraldia's Commonwealth Council."

Mao didn't know if Veight had actually put himself at any risk when he'd helped Wa. But Veight had told him to use his accomplishments as leverage during negotiations, so Mao was doing just that. To a merchant, the truth held little value.

"Veight has dutifully been keeping all of Wa's secrets at your behest. But if it

turns out you aren't truly his allies, he won't have any reason to do that anymore." Mao also had no idea what Wa-related secrets Veight was keeping, but bluffing was an integral part of business, and Mao was a master of doing business.

Just then, Kite spoke up right on schedule.

"Stop, you're being rude to the Chrysanthemum Court!"

"Well, well, well. Finally, the vice-commander's vice-commander speaks up." Mao turned to Kite with a sardonic smile.

Kite frowned and said, "You're being too pushy. Veight would never condone this kind of rudeness."

"You only say that because you don't understand how the Chrysanthemum Court works. They're masters of espionage and information control. This organization is far craftier than the Senate you once toiled under."

"Maybe so, but that isn't the kind of thing you should say at a formal meeting."



The Kushin looked taken aback by the apparent fight transpiring between the two Meraldian diplomats. Tokitaka, however, didn't seem perturbed in the slightest.

Meanwhile, Kite and Mao's argument grew more heated.

"Simply put, you're negotiating this all wrong. You should start by explaining what we're up against, and why it's important to Wa!"

"I'm afraid I'm not a scholar, so I'll leave the scientific descriptions to you."

"Well then, let me talk!"

The Kushin watched on in confusion. Tokitaka cleared his throat and said, "Grand Magus Kite. I would very much like to hear what you have to say. Please, the floor is yours."

"Ah, thank you." Kite shooed Mao to the corner, then turned to face Tokitaka. Mao fell silent, content to let Kite take the reins from here.

"The dragon we face is taller than any city's walls and can breathe fire hot enough to turn sand and dirt into glass. It's scorched entire swathes of the forest already."

Kite pulled a piece of glass from his pocket. As everyone stared at it, he began giving the explanation he'd prepared.

"We need powerful long-range weapons to defeat it. Blast Rifles won't work because this dragon can absorb mana."

"That does sound dangerous. But wouldn't catapults suffice?" Tokitaka asked, and Kite shook his head.

"Catapults launch stones in an arc, meaning it will be impossible to hit a moving target like a dragon. Furthermore, it would likely counterattack before we could get more than a single volley off. On the other hand, cannons fire in a much straighter line."

"That does make sense. Hmm..." Tokitaka lapsed into thought for a few seconds, then said, "Wa does indeed possess cannons. But only a few, and we've never actually had to use them. Our gunners aren't especially skilled."

He'd easily revealed the Chrysanthemum Court's secrets, which meant negotiations were finally getting somewhere. Kite glanced back at Mao. It was time to swap out again.

Mao immediately stepped forward and said, "Even a few cannons will make a huge difference. Of course, this will be well worth Wa's while as well. Veight is willing to give Wa one hundred Blast Rifles in exchange for the use of your cannons."

"What?!"

Though Wa had gunpowder-based guns, they had no Blast Rifles. Rolmund and Meraldia had already outfitted their entire army with Blast Canes and Blast Rifles respectively. Even Kuwol was training up a riflemen unit. Thanks to Wa's skilled spies, the Chrysanthemum Court knew this, and they were likely worried they were falling behind the other nations. Veight had told Mao ahead of time that the Chrysanthemum Court would definitely bite if he offered Blast Rifles.

It won't even be much of a loss for Meraldia, since they'll be old first-generation models. The demon army has much more advanced Blast Rifles now. But while he knew he wasn't actually offering anything great, Mao frowned as if he found it difficult to part with those Blast Rifles.

"Of course, Meraldia doesn't have nearly enough Blast Rifles, and we're loath to part with even a single one. But we believe this is only a fair reward in return for use of your cannons."

"Hmmm..."

The Kushin exchanged glances. As a Wa native, Mao could tell that this meant negotiations had succeeded.

Just as Mao expected, they turned to him a few seconds later and said, "Please give us a few moments to discuss your proposal privately."

"Of course," Mao replied with a grin.

—The Kuwol Delegation—

At around the same time, another group of Veight's allies was busy enacting their scheme across the sea in Kuwol.

“It would be terrible if anything happened to Prince Shumar, which was why I also suggested he return immediately. Ryunheit is quite close to the forest. He’s not safe there,” Kumluk said to Queen Fasleen.

“However, His Highness said that he does not wish to return. He stated that, unless Meraldia can secure the roads, he’ll be in just as much danger on the way back. This is the letter he asked me to deliver to you.”

Age had done nothing to diminish Fasleen’s beauty, and she gracefully took the letter from Kumluk.

“This is an official correspondence, not a private letter,” Fasleen muttered. “Tiriya penned this, didn’t he?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Surprisingly, Tiriya hadn’t objected to Shumar’s decision to stay in Meraldia. He’d grumbled a bit about Shumar’s recklessness, then had written the letter for him.

Kumluk bowed his head apologetically and said, “I was certain Sir Tiriya would try to convince Prince Shumar to leave, but...”

“If Tiriya truly believed Shumar was in danger, he’d drag him back here by force if he had to. So if Tiriya didn’t object to my son’s decision...then I suppose Ryunheit must be safe enough for now.” There was a bit of reluctance in Fasleen’s voice. “This letter states that it would be just as dangerous to attempt to return. But I can’t help but worry about what might happen if my son were to be attacked by such a deadly monster.”

“My deepest apologies, but I could not force the prince.” Kumluk bowed his head again.

In stark contrast to Kumluk, Parker said in a cheerful voice, “Monsters have plagued humans and demons for centuries. This is nothing new. You needn’t worry, Your Majesty. If it appears that Prince Shumar is truly in danger, the Demon Empress will teleport him to safety.”

Fasleen looked up at Parker.

“Can she truly do that?” she asked.

“Absolutely. The Demon Empress already has teleportation circles leading to all of Meraldia’s other cities. Ryunheit also has the famous oracle, Mitty. She’s able to predict an attack before it comes, so there’ll be plenty of time to run. So long as His Highness remains in Ryunheit, he’ll be safe.” Parker was speaking the truth. Keeping Shumar alive was integral to preserving the Meraldia-Kuwol alliance, so Veight had taken every possible precaution.

“That’s a relief. Lord Veight is currently in Ryunheit as well, is he not?”

“Yes. That’s why he wasn’t able to come here himself. He’s personally seeing to it that Prince Shumar is as safe as possible.” Parker’s assurances helped assuage Fasleen’s fears.

“I suppose there’s nothing to fear as long as he’s there,” Fasleen said with a smile, looking back at the letter her son had sent her. “Until now, he’d always done as he was told to avoid causing trouble for anyone else, so I’m surprised to see him being so stubborn here.”

“I’m terribly sorry.” Kumluk bowed so low his head was nearly touching the floor, but Fasleen shook her head.

“Oh, no, I’m very happy. Shumar has grown into a fine young man, but I was worried he might be too soft. A king needs to be gentle and wise, but also strong.”

“Your Majesty...” Kumluk didn’t know what to say. He was once again thinking about how he was indirectly responsible for the king’s death, which had influenced Fasleen’s current way of thinking.

But Fasleen didn’t seem to blame Kumluk in the slightest, and she said to him in a kind voice, “Sending Shumar to study in Meraldia proved to be the right choice. Sir Kumluk, Sir Parker, please keep my son and Tiriya safe.”

“Of course,” Parker said with a smile. “I’m glad you’re worried about Tiriya as well, Your Majesty.”

“He’s my son’s best friend. Naturally, I would worry about him as well. I’ve learned that a king cannot lead alone. Only by uniting the hearts of his people can he truly be called a king. Furthermore, even if he wasn’t Shumar’s friend, Tiriya is a good child.”

In a joking voice, Parker said, “People seem to complain that he’s too harsh on the prince, but it seems you’re just fine with that, Your Majesty.”

“The rest of us spoil Shumar far too much, so Tiriya takes it upon himself to be strict on him. He’s a true friend.”

It wasn’t just Fasleen’s looks that the previous king, Pajam the Second, had fallen for. She was an intelligent, strong-willed woman more than capable of leading the royal family until Shumar came of age.

Parker bowed respectfully to her and said, “You truly are wise, Your Majesty. Were I a citizen of Kuwol, I would have most certainly declared fealty to the royal family upon hearing your words.”

“My...” Fasleen blushed a little at the flattery. Parker was wearing his illusion right now, so he looked like a handsome young man.

Kumluk decided now was the best time to bring up the other reason he was here.

“By the way, there’s one more thing we’d like to discuss, Your Majesty,” he said, choosing his words carefully.

In Kuwol, making direct requests of the royal family was considered extremely rude. Even knowing he would be killed, Pajam had refused Zagar’s demands during their meeting. Kumluk understood this facet of the royal family quite well, so he had to be cognizant not to word his request as one.

“We will, of course, do our best to protect Prince Shumar, but we still have no concrete means of defeating this dragon. As it stands, humans cannot hope to fight a dragon, and not even most demons would not survive an attack. But many other tasks need to be done, and we are short on manpower.”

“That’s unfortunate to hear. However, I’m afraid I cannot unilaterally send aid.” Fasleen frowned, but Kumluk could tell this meant she was willing to negotiate. He stated her position for her, which was the only polite way to enumerate any complication the royal family faced.

“I imagine you will have to consult with the nobles before making a decision.”

“Yes, just as a king cannot rule alone, the royal family cannot make decisions

on their own. Without the support of the surrounding nobles, the royal family is nothing. Especially now, with the royal family so severely weakened, I lack the authority to mobilize even a single soldier without the nobles' approval. However..." Fasleen smiled. "I believe Sir Kumluk is quite close with the coastal nobles, while Sir Parker is good friends with many of the river nobles. Surely, the two of you will be able to convince the nobles' council for me?"

She got us there. Kumluk smiled wanly to himself as he bowed to Fasleen.

"Of course, Your Majesty. We will do our best to convince the nobles before the council meets."

"Then I suppose I have nothing to worry about. I hope you will offer the nobles favorable terms."

"We will do our best to meet your expectations." Suddenly, Fasleen changed the topic.

"By the way, Sir Kumluk, how are you enjoying life in Meraldia?"

"I mean no disrespect to Kuwol when I say this, Your Majesty, but it is a splendid country. The people are spirited, the roads are safe, and it feels as though the nation is moving ever forward towards new progress."

Fasleen smiled. "I was wondering more about how you were being treated there, but it seems there's no need to ask. If you love Meraldia that much, then I'm sure Lord Veight and his friends are taking good care of you."

"Yes, very much so." Kumluk scratched his head awkwardly. "There are many people of Kuwolese descent in Meraldia's southern half, but very few who were born in Kuwol. And yet, the Meraldians treat me as an equal, and I've even been granted this prestigious position."

"I believe that is Meraldia's strength," Fasleen said with a thoughtful nod. "Kuwol, too, has become a much stronger country now that the disputes between the coastal and river nobles have died down, and we've begun cooperating with the nomads rather than fighting them. I'm beginning to see how much value there is in working together with those of differing views, rather than against them." In a quieter voice, she added, "Meraldia is both a good ally and a good role model. We owe it to them to give aid in their plight. I

will at least ask the werecats to assist you. I assume this is the outcome you were hoping for?”

Indeed, that was exactly what Kumluk had been trying to get out of the meeting.

Wa’s cannons were quite heavy, so it would take someone with superhuman strength to keep them trained on a fast-moving dragon. Unfortunately, giants were too big to operate cannons, and their hands weren’t suited to dexterous work. Werewolves would have been able to do the job, but all of Meraldia’s werewolves were currently out scouting, so Veight needed outside help. Furthermore, unlike Meraldia and Rolmund’s werewolves, Kuwol’s werecats had lived in a relatively peaceful location, so their population was much larger. The werecats of Mount Kayankaka also had a strong bond with Kuwol’s royal family. They were as strong as the average werewolf, so even a small unit of them would be a huge boon.

Kumluk bowed deeply and said, “Thank you very much for your generosity, Your Majesty.”

In a playful voice, Fasleen said, “But in return, once this crisis is over, there’s something I’d like Lord Veight to do for the werecats. Would you be willing to pass my request on to him?”

“Of course!” he replied. *I wonder what it is she wants in return?*

“Negotiations are proceeding smoothly,” I said to Airia as I turned off my communicator and started gathering up the documents I’d be taking to the council meeting.

Sorting through her own documents, she smiled at me and said, “You sound like you expected them to go well from the start.”

“Well, I sent Mao and Kite to Wa, and Kumluk and Parker to Kuwol. There’s no way those veterans would fail.”

Both groups had someone with a deep connection to the nation they were negotiating with, as well as someone of high standing. Unfortunately, they weren’t here to help with the dragon crisis, but I was having everyone else fill the holes they’d left behind.

“All that’s left is Rolmund, where Friede and the others are...”

I didn’t have enough veterans to spare, so I’d sent Friede and the new generation over to Rolmund. They were all new to diplomacy, so I was a little worried.

Noticing my concern, Airia reassured me by saying, “Ashley’s going with them, so I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

“I know he lives here, but he’s still technically Rolmund’s ambassador to Meraldia. If he prioritized Meraldia’s interests over Rolmund’s, that would make him a traitor.”

Of course, while he was officially working for Rolmund, after Ashley had abdicated the throne, he’d more or less become a Meraldian. In fact, we’d basically gotten him for free, since Rolmund was still the one paying his salary. If he went back to Rolmund permanently, the anti-Eleora factions would try and rally around him, which was why he was living with us. But ultimately, he was a Rolmundian.

“While in Rolmund, Ashley is going to have to be careful about what he says. If Friede messes up, he won’t be able to fix it.”

Airia didn’t look too worried though. “It’ll be fine. Friede’s good friends with Micha, isn’t she?”

“Just because you’re friends with someone doesn’t mean you’ll be able to negotiate well with them.”

There was no downside to being friends, but I doubted Eleora was soft enough to make decisions based on the fact that Friede was friends with her niece. She wouldn’t have survived as empress for this long if she was.

“I’m worried Friede might rely too much on emotions for her negotiations.”

“Well, it’s true that she’s kind to a fault, just like you.”

I’m not that nice. I’m just a coward. I’m scared of making enemies, so I try to get as many people on my side as I can.

Airia chuckled and said, “I don’t get why both you and Friede are always so modest, considering how much you’ve both accomplished.”

“It’s a bad habit I carried over from my past life. Acting reserved and modest is like Japan’s national identity, so it’s ingrained into my soul.”

In contrast, Meraldians were quite outspoken. If I could’ve been like that in my past life, I wouldn’t have suffered as much as I did. Although, I would have also been totally alienated at my workplace if I’d done that.

Airia stood up and placed a hand on my shoulder. “If your past life is what gave you this personality, then I’m grateful for it. Because I love the way you are now, Veight.”

“Is that meant to be a pickup line?” I asked. *Isn’t the guy normally the one that says those? Well, Airia could pass for a handsome man if she wanted to too, so I guess it still fits.* Either way, I was happy to hear that from her.

“I’d be devastated if you stopped loving me, so I figure I should keep flirting every now and then,” Airia said with a smile.

“You don’t have to worry about that ever happening, but I won’t complain if you want to flatter me some more. Just don’t do it in public, or I’ll feel embarrassed.”

I must have been looking really anxious if Airia felt the need to encourage me. The exhaustion of working nonstop was finally taking its toll.

Still smiling, Airia added, “Plus, you raised Friede well, so you don’t need to worry at all about her.”

I could feel a bit of Airia’s Demon Lord tone there. She was definitely telling me to stop wringing my hands and get back to work.

It would be sheer folly to oppose the Demon Lord, so I gave her a salute and said, “As you wish, my lord.”

“Thank you. I’ll bring you some tea later.”

Airia kissed me on the cheek, then went back to her own work. Naturally, that gave me the motivation to work harder than ever.

“Achoo!” As I sneezed, I could feel in my bones what had caused it. “Mom and dad are talking about me right now...”

“How can that possibly be related to your sneeze?” Shirin asked in a dubious

voice, and I told him about what my dad had told me.

“When you sneeze, it’s because someone’s talking about you.”

“Is that some human superstition or something?” Shirin immediately lost interest and went back to reading the book on Rolmundian battle tactics that he’d borrowed. He was always like that.

“There’s nothing wrong with superstitions; they’re fun.”

“Not particularly, I don’t think.”

Iori, though, was nodding along in agreement. “There’s an old saying about that in Wa. I’m impressed you know it, Friede.”

“Ah, um, thanks.”

I couldn’t think of any good excuse for why I’d know it, so I just smiled awkwardly.

Micha gave me an exasperated look and said, “Are you getting off topic again? You never change, do you?”

“Sorry, my bad.”

Right now, we were in Rolmund’s imperial palace. I’d been here once before. In fact, I’d been in this exact room before.

Micha folded her arms and harrumphed at me. “Sheesh. How many years has it been since we met in person? You barely respond to my letters, and now that you’re finally here, it’s on business? I wanted to hang out more.”

“It costs a lot of money to send letters to Rolmund, so I can’t send that many. It takes time too,” I replied with a frown.

Since Micha was a princess, she probably didn’t realize how much it cost to send letters via merchant caravans. The Aindorf family had a contract with Mao’s business, so we were able to send letters for cheaper than most people, and it still cost a lot to get one to Rolmund. According to dad, it had taken 1/100th as much money to ship things in his world. A child’s allowance was enough to send dozens of letters. I was pretty jealous. Also, shipping things in this world took way longer than it did in dad’s. Letters had to be passed from caravan to caravan before reaching their final destination, and if any of those

points ran into issues, the delivery was delayed further.

“The Commonwealth Council is looking into creating an organized postal service, so once that’s done, I should be able to send a lot more letters to you. We’re going to make delivering letters a profession, so we can send more letters and do it for cheaper.”

“That feels like a pointless luxury... Anyway, I don’t want to talk about work!” For a second, Micha analyzed the idea like a proper member of the ruling class, but then she frowned and started sulking. “We should be enjoying our time together! Who knows when we’ll get to see each other again after this.”

Iori smiled and nodded. “She’s right. Unlike me, Princess Micha can’t spend time with you whenever she wants.”

“You’re trying to make me mad, aren’t you?” Micha said, glowering at Iori.

Iori played dumb, so Micha turned back to me, pouting again.

“This woman is quite rude! Is she the Wa spy I’ve heard is working for you now?”

“She’s not a spy, she’s my friend,” I said, and Iori grinned.

“A friend, huh?” Micha mused, then nodded. “I see! Well, if she’s your friend, then she’s an honored guest of mine. But you really should have properly introduced her, Friede.”

“Sorry, I totally forgot.”

I’d actually brought her as part of my retinue and not my friend, but if Micha wanted an introduction, that was fine by me.

“This is Iori, the daughter of Tokitaka, chief of the Heavenwatchers. She’s a kind, smart, and sincere girl.”

“Hmmm...”

Micha looked Iori up and down, thinking to herself. She seemed satisfied by whatever she saw, and nodded after a few seconds.

“She seems like a wonderful person. Oh, but why is she being so rude to me?” Micha cocked her head, and Iori looked down in embarrassment.

“Please forgive me, I’m just jealous.”

“Huh?”

“You became friends with Friede before I did, and you’re a noble like her.”

Ever since coming to Meraldia, lori had been a lot more honest with herself. Sometimes she was a bit too honest, but it was still a good thing.

Micha gave lori a confused look. “But you’re a noble too, aren’t you, lori? Lord Tokitaka is the leader of the Chrysanthemum Court. He’s basically like an emperor.”

“He doesn’t have that much authority. Besides, I’m his adopted daughter,” lori said with a shake of her head.

Before Micha could say anything, I hurriedly butted in.

“Lord Tokitaka doesn’t have any children of his own, so he’s adopted a bunch of kids. He hasn’t formally announced which one of them will be his successor though.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot that adopted children are allowed to inherit their parents’ family names. But isn’t that all the more reason you have nothing to worry about?” Micha took lori’s hands in her own. “Did you go through something painful in the past?”

“Huh?!” lori looked up at Micha in shock.

Don’t worry, I didn’t tell her anything about you, lori. I learned from dad not to spread people’s life stories around without permission.

With a gentle smile, Micha said, “I can see the specter of pain lingering beneath your expressions and mannerisms. You see it often in people who’ve had difficult pasts or carry deep scars in their hearts. I realize I shouldn’t have brought this up, but let me just say this...”

Micha took a deep breath and brought her face closer to lori’s.

“No matter what might have happened to you in the past, right now, you’re one of Rolmund’s honored guests, and both Friede and I want to be your friend. You’re a much more wonderful person than you think.”

“Huh? Uhh...” lori was at a loss for how to respond.

Micha puffed out her chest and said, “I’m the future empress of Rolmund, you know? Sure, I might still be young, but I’m a part of the imperial family. Think about what it means that someone like me wants to be your friend.”

“But you’re only saying that because I’m Friede’s friend...”

“If Friede trusts you, then there’s no doubt you’re a good person. I trust Friede, so anyone she trusts is worth getting to know.”

lori looked away awkwardly. She wasn’t used to dealing with someone as assertive as Micha.

Should I step in? Then again, despite her troubled expression, lori wasn’t making any effort to disentangle her hand from Micha’s. *When I first met lori, she probably wouldn’t let anyone even touch her hand, let alone hold it. She’s definitely grown a lot since then. I feel like she’s more reliable than before too.* All the hardships she’d overcome had forged her into a truly strong person. *If only more people would realize that... It looks like Micha gets it though.*

“You, me, and Friede are all princesses, so we should do our best to get along. I’m sure that’s what your father would want too. I know I’m not as reliable as my aunt yet, but I’m willing to be your friend, at least.”

After a long silence, lori looked down and said, “Thank you very much... I’d love to be your friend.”

“Good.”

Micha grinned, and lori blushed a little. *Yeah, looks like everything will be just fine.* lori was starved for affection, so she immediately latched onto people who opened their hearts to her.

Still squeezing lori’s hands, Micha turned to look at me. “I’d say, I’m a pretty good judge of people, and unless I’m mistaken, lori has trouble connecting with others unless they bare themselves to her first.”

“You’re definitely reading her right, but, um, I feel like you probably shouldn’t say that right in front of her...”

Micha did some unusual things from time to time, but I could tell she’d been

working hard to become a worthy successor to the throne. No one else would have been able to analyze lori so well on their first meeting with her.

In a bashful voice, lori said, “On our way here, all Friede talked about was how she wanted to see you again, so I started to get jealous. But now I see that you, too, are a wonderful person, Princess Micha. I understand why Friede likes you so much.”

There was a little flattery mixed in there, but most of that had come from the heart. *Wait, hang on.*

“I didn’t talk about Micha that much, did I?!”

“You did,” lori replied bluntly.

Well...it’s times like this that I wish you were a little less honest. Looking over, I saw that Micha was laughing.

“I see, I see! Hehe, I knew Friede couldn’t resist my charms...”

“Seriously, stop saying these kinds of things to people’s faces!”

On second thought, maybe Micha hasn’t grown that much after all...

—From Emperor to Emperor—

The previous emperor, Ashley, was currently lounging on one of the sofas in the imperial palace. *The last time I sat here, this palace was mine, but now I’m a guest.* He didn’t feel sad about this fact, however. If anything, he was relieved. No more would he have to toil as the crown prince or the emperor.

Eleora, who was sitting across from him, gave him a sad smile.

“You don’t need to pity me, cousin. Someone has to take on the mantle of emperor, and it just so happens I was next in line. You should understand that best of all.”

She saw right through me. Ashley returned her smile. “Sorry. You’re right, of course.”

Ashley had abdicated the throne to Eleora, but unlike most other nobles, he hadn’t been exiled as a criminal. Strictly speaking, he was still a part of Rolmund’s imperial family. At the moment, he was serving as Rolmund’s

ambassador to Meraldia. It was certainly a demotion from his original post, but he wasn't barred from returning to Rolmund the way Ryuunie and Woroy were. The only reason Ashley didn't return more often was because he didn't want to cause a stir.

Eleora's smile grew brighter, and she said, "I believe the official reason for your visit is to report on Meraldia's political state. I technically do have to record your report, so you might as well get that out of the way before relaxing."

"We actually have a rather serious problem on our hands. I didn't just use that as an excuse to return home for the first time in a while." Ashley straightened his back. "A massive monster has been spotted in the forest west of Meraldia. We believe it's a dragon, the kind spoken of in legends, and it's wreaking havoc."

The smile quickly vanished from Eleora's face.

"That sounds serious. All right. Give me the details."

"Please, take a look at this." Ashley handed a sealed envelope to Eleora. "It has been sealed with a magical cipher the exiled Doneiks family developed. Only you, the recipient, and me as the writer are allowed to even touch it."

"Which means I'll be the first person to read this. Got it."

As an inventor herself, Eleora was familiar with the magical seals the Doneiks family had developed. She chanted the proper decoding spell, then touched the beeswax seal. With a sharp *crack*, the magic was dispelled, and the seal popped open. Eleora took the report out of the envelope and quickly read through it.

"Is this...all accurate information? No, sorry, I know you wouldn't come to me with speculation. But this is difficult to take in."

"This is all information the Commonwealth Council has made public. I had my retainers confirm the veracity of it as well."

Many of the nobles who'd refused to serve under Eleora when she was crowned had gone to work for Ashley instead. Some of them were accomplished spies and diplomats, so Eleora knew they were capable.

Chuckling a little, Eleora said, “So, Meraldia is facing an unprecedented threat. Thinking about it normally, the tactical move would be to let the dragon devastate Meraldia, then move in to conquer what remains. However...” Eleora scratched her head the same way Veight often did. “Meraldia isn’t a normal country. In fact, there probably hasn’t been a nation like it in this continent’s history. If a dragon was all it took to bring Meraldia low, I would have taken it over back when I was just a princess.”

“I concur.” Ashley nodded. “I have no doubt our resident Black Werewolf King will take care of the threat one way or another. And on the off chance that somehow costs him his life, he’s already raised his successor.”

“You mean Friede, right? Micha’s every bit as capable as her, but I can’t deny that Friede is both virtuous and strong.”

“Princess Micha has just as much strength and virtue as Friede, I’m sure she’ll lead our empire well.”

“‘Our’ empire, huh?” Eleora asked with a teasing grin. “Despite all the years you’ve spent in Meraldia, your loyalties still lie with Rolmund? Are you regretting passing the crown on to me?”

Ashley smiled back at her and said, “Sorry, but I have no intention of reclaiming the yoke of being emperor. Since passing that responsibility onto you, I’ve been able to spend my time researching agriculture like I always wanted to.”

“I’m jealous. I’d much rather focus on research than running the country.” Eleora pouted, looking genuinely envious. But then she sighed and scratched her head again. “I should have never tried to claim the throne. I even let my first love slip through my fingers because of it, and I haven’t married because I still haven’t gotten over that.”

“Seems like you’re the one with regrets, not me.”

“You used to be a lot nicer, you know that?” Eleora puffed out her cheeks, acting like a little girl. Though she was over forty now, her mannerisms made her seem a lot younger.

“It’s still not too late to look for a partner, you know? Woroy’s still a bachelor,

and pretty much every woman in his city wishes they could marry him.”

“Forget about my love life, we have more important things to talk about. If we’re up against a dragon, we’ll have to move quickly.” Eleora’s expression grew serious, and her tone carried with it all the majesty of an empress. “Although, I can easily imagine that man standing over the corpse of the dragon, saying he just did what any boring old vice-commander would. Even if we don’t help, that dragon’s days are numbered.”

I feel like you’re overestimating him a bit here, Eleora, Ashley thought. Of course, since he was here on Meraldia’s behalf, he didn’t say anything to dispel Eleora’s inflated opinion of Veight. The more esteem she held Veight in, the better.

Eleora shrugged her shoulders, then she suddenly leaned forward, her eyes sparkling.

“So, what’s his plan for taking the dragon down? What does he need from us?”

“You’re being surprisingly cooperative...”

“Victory’s already assured, so we may as well lend him all the help he needs.” Grinning mischievously, Eleora added, “It’ll be good for us to put that straitlaced blockhead in our debt. He’ll pay us back with interest, even if it takes him decades to do so. He was able to put a disgraced captured princess on the throne, so there’s nothing he can’t do.”

“Hahaha...” Ashley smiled wryly to himself. He’d come here to convince Rolmund to lend their aid, but it seemed there hadn’t been any need for convincing in the first place. “I recommend asking Meraldia’s diplomats what their requests are. As Rolmund’s ambassador, it isn’t my place to negotiate.”

“Ah, yes, good point.” Eleora nodded. “Also, don’t pretend like you’re doing this for prosperity’s sake—we all know you just want to give Meraldia’s youth a chance to start making a name for themselves.”

“You’ve seen right through my ruse, Your Majesty. Do be gentle with them, please.”

“You know I could never say no to my beloved cousin.” Eleora made a big

show of sighing, but then added, "If they mess up, though, I'm going to squeeze every concession out of them that I can."

Ashley nodded and said in a calm voice, "But of course. Diplomacy is serious business, after all."

I'm so nervous... Empress Eleora, first of the Originia dynasty and Micha's aunt, was sitting on the throne as she looked down at me and the rest of my companions. Her expression was gentle, but she wasn't smiling.

"What's wrong? You look a little nervous."

Dang it, she saw right through me. There was no point in trying to act tough, so I scratched my head and said, "I'm actually extremely nervous right now."

"Opting for honesty, I see..." Eleora replied, then muttered, "Just like your father..."

Even if you say it under your breath, you know I can hear you, right? Everyone I met was talking about how I was becoming more and more like my dad. I was about to say as much to Eleora, but then I realized it was probably better to pretend I hadn't heard her say that.

So instead, I said, "Thank you for granting us an audience despite our youth, Your Majesty."

I did it! I said the formal greeting properly! Are you proud of me, dad?!

But Eleora frowned at me and said, "Youth has no relevance here. I granted you an audience as you are Meraldia's diplomats. Bear that in mind before you speak."

"My apologies!"

Oh wow, she's scaaary. But right now, I was Meraldia's representative, so I couldn't afford to get overwhelmed. For everyone's sake, I needed to charge forward.

"A-As Meraldia's diplomat, there's something I need to discuss with you. Right now, our nation is beset by an unprecedented disaster. We would like to humbly request Rolmund's aid in defeating this new threat. Here is the Commonwealth Council's missive."

I handed the letter to Eleora's chamberlain. *Her name's Natalia, I think? I know I've met her before.* Natalia brought the letter over to Eleora, who unfolded it and began to read. I knew Ashley had already told her the situation, so she was just reading this as a formality.

Once she was done, Eleora looked down at me and said, "I see. So a dragon has appeared in the forest. However, Meraldia is far beyond the mountains from us. What does this have to do with Rolmund?"

She was testing me, I could tell. *Come to think of it, she did the same thing when we first met. All right, time to show her how much I've grown!*

Doing my best to keep my voice calm, I explained, "This dragon can fly, and it's already expanded its hunting grounds beyond the forest. If left unchecked, it may very well choose to fly over the mountains to Rolmund."

"Hmm. I suppose that would be a problem. But surely you don't expect Rolmund to provide assistance for free?"

Oh boy. I knew this was coming, but I still don't like it. Of course, I knew Eleora wasn't saying this just to make me uncomfortable. This was how diplomacy worked.

I smiled at her. "As I've said before, the appearance of this dragon is a threat to all countries on this continent. We've already requested aid from Wa as well as Kuwol."

Dad had handed me a few trump cards to use during negotiations, and he'd said that as long as I used them well, Eleora would definitely agree to help. That being said, there was no reason to offer them all if I could help it, and definitely no reason to reveal them at the start. Diplomacy was all about playing your cards carefully...which was exactly the kind of thing I was bad at. I really wasn't the right choice for this.

"Of course, Meraldia is willing to reward any friendly nation willing to aid us during this crisis. We pledge to offer our support if Rolmund ever faces a similar crisis."

"That certainly is an appealing proposition," Eleora replied with a smile.

"Does that mean if a large-scale revolt happens in Rolmund, Meraldia will be

willing to send the demon army to help quell it?”

Huh? I mean...probably? Military assistance was one of the trump cards dad had given me, but he'd also said there was no need to use it too soon. *What should I do? Should I say yes here or not? Wait, I know.*

I did my best to put on the kind of crafty smile Mao always wore and said, “I doubt an empress as accomplished as yourself would ever allow such a revolt to occur, Your Majesty, but in the event that our assistance is needed, we will gladly give it.” I was sort of kind of promising we'd help without concretely pledging anything. It felt underhanded, but that's what I'd been taught to do in school, so it was probably the right move to make.

Eleora grinned and replied, “I see. You really have learned well from your father. But that was precisely why I was hoping you would give a concrete pledge to commit forces in the case of a revolt.”

“Huh? Umm, my apologies!”

Did I say the wrong thing? Gah, I'm really not good at this diplomacy stuff. Dad really should have sent someone with more experience. Whatever, I'll just do things my way.

“Well, I do have the authority to make that promise, but wars always lead to deaths. If I agreed to commit troops to help stop a revolt and demon soldiers died because of that, I wouldn't be able to sleep at night.”

“Ahahahahahahaha!” Eleora burst out laughing, and I couldn't tell if I'd messed up again or not. At the very least, she seemed to be in a good mood. “Bringing out your true intentions after a bit of verbal sparring—you really are the Astral Fencer's successor! I like it!”

Okay, that's good, right? Eleora crossed her legs and rested her cheeks in her hands. It was weird how she was able to make even that look elegant.

“When negotiating, it's important to have a pretext, and to offer something the other party wants. But if that was all negotiation required, then letters would suffice. When you're negotiating in person, it's important to talk about how you truly feel, discuss the things you can't simply put down in an official letter.”

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty!” *Man, talking about how I really feel is kinda hard.*
“Umm, if I may say, the Commonwealth Council and the demon army both want to continue staying on friendly terms with Rolmund, and that’s what I want too.”

“Go on.”

“We already have an official alliance with Wa, and Kuwol’s royal family also supports Meraldia, so the only worry left is Rolmund.”

“I see, I see.” Eleora nodded, her gaze surprisingly gentle.

Is this really how you’re supposed to do diplomacy? I was still a little hesitant, but I’d already started down this path, so I figured I should go down it all the way. Until I could think of a better plan, honesty seemed to be the best policy.

“But it’s not like we’re scared of Rolmund’s imperial family or anything,” I said. “Well, I guess we are kinda scared, but not in a bad way. We just want you and Princess Micha to be happy, Your Majesty. But we’re worried there might be political instability that’ll make it impossible to do proper diplomacy.”

What am I even saying? Someone, please stop me. Yuhette, do something!
Sadly, no one stepped forward to stop me, so I had to keep going.

“Lord Veight, the Demon Lord, and I all believe that as long as your reign continues, Rolmund will continue to develop into a bountiful, peaceful country. We’re willing to help you to ensure you stay empress, but, umm, we have to look after ourselves too, so please don’t ask for too much.”

Aaah, I sound like a pleading child now. I wanted to cry. I’d completely failed as a diplomat. But when I looked up, Eleora was blushing. *What the heck?* She scratched her head the same way dad always does, and let out a small sigh.

“All right, all right. You really are the strongest allies I could hope for. Since you’ve been forthright with me, I suppose it’s only fitting I do the same. Good grief, you’re making me blush.”

She got up from the throne and walked down to me.

“You’ve grown, Friede.”

“Huh?”

All of a sudden, she hugged me.



“Wh-What are you doing, Your Majesty?!”

“I’m just happy my niece’s best friend has become an official diplomat. You’re still a little rough around the edges, but you did a wonderful job. I approve.”

And now she’s patting my head. I don’t get it.

But then Eleora leaned closer and whispered into my ear, “Make a big show of how close we are. That will make my retainers respect my diplomatic power more, and it’ll make you look better to your Meraldian peers.”

Wait, this is all calculated? But she smells genuinely happy? Is she just trying to pretend this is calculated so she can pat my head?

In a loud voice, Eleora said, “Glimmers of your talent showed through when we first met, but now you’ve fully realized your potential. You really are the Astral Fencer’s successor! I have no doubt that Meraldia’s future will be bright.”

I could hear the Rolmundian nobles muttering to each other in hushed voices.

“Oho, the Astral Fencer’s daughter is quite something.”

“Her Majesty has always had a good relationship with Meraldia, but I never realized it was this strong.”

“Indeed. She’s handled domestic affairs perfectly as well. She truly is suited to be Rolmund’s empress.”

“I’ve heard Lady Friede is good friends with Princess Micha. Which means it’s likely she’ll be the next empress.”

Oh, I get it now. This is what you were after. Rolmund politics are kinda scary.

Grinning, Eleora patted my back, then let me go. In a small voice, she added, “This is the world Micha has to navigate. Never forget that.”

“O-Okay.”

The imperial palace is a terrifying place! I needed to do my best to help Micha, but first, I needed to complete my duty as Meraldia’s diplomat.

“Umm, Your Majesty,” I said.

“Yes?” Eleora looked so happy I thought she might start humming to herself.

“Does this mean that you are willing to send aid to Meraldia?”

“Absolutely. So long as Meraldia wishes to be Rolmund’s ally, we will do our best to support you.”

“We’d like nothing more than to be allies.”

“Splendid.” Eleora brandished her cape as she turned on her heel.

“So what is it that Meraldia lacks, and what is it you need? I cannot promise to provide everything you ask for, but let us at least hear your demands.”

I steeled myself and said, “Let me first explain how we intend to defeat the dragon!”

Dad had given me a list of goods and personnel that we still needed, which I took out of my pocket and unfolded. Eleora gave me an odd smile as she saw the list.

“That cunning little...” she muttered.

Ryuunie gave me a curious look.

“Is something the matter, Veight?”

“No. I’m just thinking about how your aunt’s going to react when she hears,” I said with a playful grin as I looked out the window.

You better be grateful, Eleora. Look at how far your cute little nephew’s gotten thanks to me.

I then turned to Airia and said, “All right, I think it’s time to inaugurate our new viceroy.”

“Indeed.” Smiling, Airia walked over to Ryuunie. He stiffened up a little in nervousness.

Airia rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder and said, “I, Demon Lord Airia Lutt Aindorf, hereby recognize Ryuunie Doneiks as the new viceroy of Doneiks.”

Sadly, we weren’t in any state to hold an official inauguration ceremony, so I was the only witness in attendance. After the dragon was dealt with, I planned on holding a much larger banquet to celebrate.

Airia added, “The land once called the Fetid Wastes was transformed into a

prosperous city thanks to the efforts of a foreign hero. I pray that you inherit his will and continue to lead the city he built to even greater heights. And should you ever desire our help with anything, you need but ask.”

“Y-You honor me. I will do my best to live up to my father’s reputation.”

It was rare to see Ryuunie so nervous. He normally wasn’t fazed by anything.

“You don’t need to be so nervous,” Airia said. “I know I may seem imposing, but I was once nothing more than Ryunheit’s viceroy myself. We’re not all that different.”

“Y-Yes ma’am!”

Oh yeah, I should probably tell Airia. Ryuunie’s mom died soon after he was born. He’d been raised by his father, uncle, and grandfather, so he’d always been starved for motherly love. Airia was basically the living incarnation of motherly love and kindness, so I could understand why Ryuunie was a little flustered. *Man, now I feel like bragging about Airia to everyone again.* Unfortunately, there was no one to brag to right now, so I just watched as Ryuunie blushed to the tips of his ears. Despite his nervousness and embarrassment, he nevertheless bowed properly to Airia as the ceremony finished.

“I will do my best to repay the kindness you’ve shown when my uncle and I had nowhere else to go, and even granting us land of our own to govern.”

“You’re looking at this all wrong, Ryuunie,” Airia said with a gentle smile. “It’s true that we rescued you from Rolmund because we didn’t wish for you or Woroy to die. But it is thanks to the two of you that Doneiks has become such a bustling city. We should be thanking you for doing so much for Meraldia, not the other way around.”

“R-Really?” Ryuunie glanced over at me, and I nodded.

It was true that I’d initially rescued him and Woroy out of a sense of morality, but now they were indispensable members of Meraldia’s ruling class. Plus, as Ryuunie had inherited the imperial family’s blood, he was a useful asset in negotiations with Rolmund. Not only that, but his popularity and abilities had attracted a great number of Rolmundian nobles to Meraldia wishing to work

under him. I was honestly really impressed by how far Ryuunie had come.

“I’m proud of how much you’ve grown despite having to live most of your life in an unfamiliar foreign land. Of course, I wouldn’t have abandoned you in Rolmund regardless of how much potential you did or didn’t show. But I never expected you would be the one helping us one day instead of the other way around. I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done for Meraldia.”

“Veight...” Ryuunie was a full-fledged adult, but he still had a bit of youthful hesitation left in him. I could see why Myurei was constantly fretting over him.

This was no time to reminisce though. In a more formal voice, I said, “Viceroy Ryuunie. I’m sorry to ask this of you right after your inauguration, but Meraldia’s future hinges on your efforts. Please work together with your uncle to lead our forces to victory.”

Ryuunie straightened his back and gave me a salute. “As you wish, Lord Veight. What exactly would you ask of me?”

“Allow me to explain.”

I spread a map across my desk.

“The plan is to lure the dragon to the fields outside Doneiks and deal a fatal blow to it with Wa’s cannons. Cannons are a special weapon Wa has developed that uses gunpowder and iron instead of magic. Against the dragon, they’ll be our strongest asset.”

“I learned about gunpowder in school, but I never imagined you could make weapons like that with it.”

Knowledge of gunpowder had slowly begun spreading throughout the world, but since most nations had no way to mine large quantities of saltpeter, the actual use of it hadn’t spread as far as it otherwise would.

I smiled and said, “You sure can. Of course, one or two shots won’t be enough to take a dragon down, but once we’ve weakened it enough, ten or twenty shots should kill it.”

When I’d fought Arshes, it was my fangs that had killed him. If even a Hero or a Valkaan could be slain with kinetic energy, then a dragon definitely could.

Ryuunie gave me a worried look. “I doubt it will just sit there and let us shoot it though. How are we going to seal its movements?”

“The dragon’s greatest strength is its breath. It’s like a massive Blast Rifle attached to its mouth that’s capable of incinerating entire villages. The Demon Empress and my vortex powers are effective against that mana-based breath, but tactics relying on just two people aren’t a good idea.” If Master or I got sick or happened to be sleeping at the wrong time, or anything at all, the entire plan would fall apart. “Which is why we’re requesting the help of Rolmund’s engineers. I sent Friede to negotiate, and I doubt Eleora will let her come back empty-handed.”

“Empress Eleora is quite fond of you, after all.”

“You think so?” I turned back to Airia with a questioning look, and she gave me a murderous smile.

“I recommend *not* showing her any favoritism during negotiations,” she said.

“Okay.”

Oh god, that smile is scary. I cleared my throat awkwardly and turned back to Ryuunie.

“Well, even if we don’t get help from Rolmund, the Demon Empress will be able to handle things. She’ll be coming to Doneiks to keep the city safe from the dragon’s breath. But she won’t be moving until she’s absolutely needed.”

Master needed to stay in the city as long as possible since it was where Shumar was. I couldn’t send her out until I was certain the dragon was headed towards Doneiks. Technically, Friede also possessed the vortex power Master and I did, but she wasn’t as skilled a mage, so there was no guarantee she’d be able to wield it effectively. We also didn’t know how much mana Friede could absorb in total. I had no intention of sending her out into battle, at least not this time around.

“Meraldia’s werewolves and Kuwol’s werecats will be in charge of stopping the dragon’s movements. I’ve also put them in charge of transporting the cannons and adjusting their aim as necessary.”

It would take humans far too long to move the bulky cannons, but

werewolves and werecats could easily adjust the barrel's facing and aim with a single push. Of course, actual gunners would be in charge of calculating angles and positioning. The werewolves and werecats were just providing the muscle.

"We'll also have the help of Wa's prediction mages, so we'll be able to prepare for the dragon's attempts to counterattack or escape."

"That sounds like a solid plan." Ryuunie's expression brightened, but sadly this strategy wasn't perfect.

"Even with all this, expect to see some casualties," I said. "We've already lost a number of our scouts, and if we try to keep our losses to a minimum, we won't be able to win."

Though the dragon hadn't become a Valkaan just yet, it was still strong enough that a single swipe of its tail could kill a werewolf. If we attacked it as one cohesive group, we'd likely still lose at least a few people.

"Had Wa not agreed to lend their cannons, I would have been forced to send the werewolves and werecats in to finish the dragon off. But if it came to that, there's no telling how many people would have died. The demon army's calculations predict that only one warrior would survive the battle."

"Whoa..." Ryuunie's expression darkened. He knew just how strong werewolves were, so he understood how fierce a fight that implied. With a questioning tone, he asked, "Incidentally, why is the demon army so sure exactly one warrior would survive?"

I put down the report in my hands and gave him a sad smile.

"Because everyone would die except for me."

After Ryuunie left, Airia and I returned to the paperwork we still needed to finish. If we stopped, the entire organization that was Meraldia would also grind to a halt. Everyone was waiting for our instructions.

Fortunately, it seemed negotiations with our neighbors had all gone well. We'd acquired all the supplies and people we needed. It was time to put our plan into motion. Honestly, I was a little surprised by how well negotiations had gone. It seemed my companions were even more reliable than I thought. With

all the youngsters working so hard, I needed to put in some effort myself or I'd be a laughingstock. That being said, it wasn't as though all the reports I received were happy ones.

"We've finally started losing werewolves as well..." Airia said in a glum voice.

Ever since I'd brought the werewolf squad to the demon army, I hadn't lost even a single one of them. It was mostly because I'd been able to help them with my magic, and because werewolves were good at disguising themselves as humans, so they were harder for humans to kill. Unfortunately, neither of those things was of any use against the dragon. Furthermore, I wasn't even on the front lines to try and provide support with magic.

"We've lost one werewolf-human team and one dragonkin-kentauros team. The werewolf that died was one of the newest additions to the squad."

Our total casualties still didn't number over ten, but this was enough to convince the demon army to invest their full strength into taking the dragon down. It would pay for killing our men with its life. Until the dragon was dead, the demon army wouldn't rest. That was just how demons were. As the werewolf elder, I had a duty to fulfill as well.

"The other elders have asked me to get revenge for our dead. I realize this is the wrong decision to make as the Demon Lord's vice-commander, but as the werewolf elder, I have no choice but to take to the battlefield."

"I'm loath to put you in danger, but if this is the demons' decision, then as the Demon Lord, I have to respect it."

Airia had spent enough time with demons that she knew they wouldn't back down now, no matter what. Werewolves treasured their pack more than anything else, and if I didn't go to take revenge, someone else would. And that someone else would almost certainly die.

"If anything, this is my fault for not training the younger werewolves better. I didn't drill into their heads what they should do when up against someone they can't hope to beat."

"That's not your fault. Werewolves are strong, so they almost never find themselves fighting someone stronger than them."

That much was true. Werewolves could beat almost any other race in a one-on-one duel. They had some trouble with giants and werecats, but then in a two-on-two, they would once again emerge victorious. Basically, werewolves were good at both fighting solo and in groups.

I let out a long sigh. “Werewolves’ true strength lies in their stealth. We’re highly mobile, can land from any height without making a sound, and can easily maneuver in cover.”

It was nigh impossible to catch a werewolf in a dense forest or crowded city streets. That was why I’d sent my werewolves out to scout the dragon’s movements in the first place.

“But as long as they’re thinking ‘worse comes to worst, I can always fight,’ somewhere in the back of their mind, it’s hard to send them out to patrol since there’s no way they can actually fight a dragon.”

Sadly, it was hard to beat the instinct to fight out of a werewolf. It took a lot of training and experience, which young werewolves simply didn’t have.

“I’ll start going out on patrols for a little bit. If everyone sees that even I have to run when the dragon shows up, they’ll stop thinking about fighting it.”

“Be careful. You’re not as young as you used to be.”

“I know.”

My daughter is almost an adult now. At this point, I’d spent more time living in Meraldia than I had in Japan.

Airia gave me a small smile. “Though I think you look much more handsome than you did when we first met.”

“Huh? Thanks. For what it’s worth, you’ve only gotten more beautiful over the years too. Apparently, there’s still a bunch of actresses who are dying to play the role of Airia in the *Black Werewolf King* plays.”

“Oh, my...”

You’re cute when you blush. After being sent off by my blushing wife, there was no way I could afford to die. Besides, I needed to protect this peace we’d built.

For the first time in a year, I was able to leave my desk work behind and return to the front lines. There was a slight spring in my step as I strode through the dense forest. The only people scouting with me right now were Monza and Zoi, a canine soldier. Zoi looked vaguely like a beagle and had been with the demon army since we left to conquer Ryunheit.

“Lord Veight, are you sure you want me as the other member of your squad?” he asked.

“Absolutely. In fact, I’m going to be counting on you for our most important task.”

Monza cocked her head as I said that. “Really, boss? I’m not gonna say canines are useless ’cause I know they’re not, but they’re not exactly good fighters.”

“We’d be outmatched in a fight even if I took every single werewolf with me. It’s better to have smaller, more mobile members join this scouting party.”

The immortal Parker hadn’t been able to put a scratch on the dragon. There was no guarantee even Master could beat that thing. I could bring an entire army and it’d be useless. However, there was something else canines could do that I was going to be relying on quite heavily.

“What we need right now isn’t the ability to fight, or even run away. That dragon isn’t going down easily, and it’s practically impossible to outrun something that can fly. Fortunately, what canines possess is more important than either of those skills.”

“And what’s that?” Monza asked, her curiosity piqued.

“The power to hide,” I said simply.

“I guess it’s true that canines are tiny, but...”

“They’re not *just* tiny. Canines have managed to live peacefully for generations in this forest—a forest filled with demons and monsters far stronger than them. That’s pretty impressive when you think about it.”

Monza gave me a confused look. “Hmm?”

From a werewolf’s perspective, it was hard to see what was so impressive about that. Even the biggest canine was only as large as a human child, and their claws and fangs were too small to do any real damage. They could be a threat if they banded together, but a human crowd of similar size was much stronger. Canines’ strongest assets were their hearing and sense of smell, but werewolves surpassed them in both. It was for that reason that a lot of werewolves considered canines just a weaker version of themselves. When commanding them in battle, I had a tendency to do the same thing, since they really weren’t suited for combat. However, their intuition was one of their strengths when up against a creature as fearsome as a dragon.

“Canines are better than anyone else at sensing danger. Werewolves can’t sniff it out half as well.”

“Really?” Monza turned back to Zoi, folding her arms behind her head. Zoi shivered a little, looking scared.

Smiling slightly, I explained, “Canines know that when they encounter a threat, fighting it isn’t an option. They also can’t run away from it the way kentauros can.”

“So they’re all doomed to die...” Monza gave Zoi a pitying look, and he turned worriedly to me.

I waved my hand and said, “But most of them don’t end up dead. In fact, the canines are the only race to have zero casualties so far against this dragon, despite having more of them sent out to scout than anyone else.”

“Oh yeah, now that you mention it, you’re right. It’s only werewolves, dragonkin, kentauros, and humans who’ve died.”

“For centuries, the canines of the forest have lived while hiding from all the threats that might destroy them. They’ve been able to put down villages right in the middle of dangerous beasts’ territories and gather food next to the nests of terrifying monsters. They’re used to living with danger.”

Their cheerful disposition and fearless personalities were all calculated fronts to help them survive nature’s threats. They also had a tendency to avoid

conflict among the pack and worked together any time an enemy appeared. It was thanks to those traits that the canines had been able to live safely and happily in the same forest where wild boars and poisonous lizards ran rampant. When it came to surviving, they were second to none. People had started calling me a sage recently, but the fact that it had taken me this long to realize such a simple fact proved that I still had a long way to go.

“I guarantee you, if something dangerous is coming, Zoi’s going to notice it well before either of us do. And so long as he thinks he’s safe, we’re safe.”

Monza gave Zoi a sympathetic look. “Pretty heavy responsibility, huh?”

“You said it,” Zoi replied with a nod.

Yeah, I guess our lives are basically in your hands. But we needed his expertise, which was why I’d brought him.

“Now you know what I’m counting on you for, Zoi. You’ve got the sharpest instincts out of anyone in the canine team, so if you sense anything coming, let us know.”

“Aye aye,” he said nonchalantly.

Despite the responsibility he bore, Zoi didn’t seem too pressured by it. In truth, I’d wanted to bring a few more canines, but if the dragon *did* show up, I’d have to carry them all while running, so I’d stuck to just bringing the very best. I had forgotten how easily distracted canines were though, and in retrospect, I was regretting not bringing at least one more.

Suddenly, Zoi let out a groan.

“Mrrrgh...”

That’s not the sound he normally makes, is it? Monza and I immediately crouched down.

“Boss, do you sense anything?”

“Nope.” There was no disturbance in the flow of mana, and I didn’t smell or hear anything either. I placed a hand on the ground, but I couldn’t sense any vibrations either.

Keeping his voice low, Zoi pointed to a nearby tree and said, “Look at those

trees, Lord Veight. Do you see those claw marks?”

“Which ones?”

“The moconges near the thornvines.”

Sorry, I don't know canine words for plants.

“Boss, over there. That fat tree covered in creeper vines,” Monza followed up.

Thank you, that makes a lot more sense. There were indeed deep gouges in the tree's bark, five meters up its trunk. *But how can he be sure those were made by a dragon's talons?*

Monza cocked her head to one side. “I could make gouges that high up in a tree if I transformed.”

“But they don't look anything like a werewolf's claw marks. Werewolf claws have a snicky-snick feeling to them. These marks look all *braaaaagh*.”

The heck does that mean? Most clawed creatures weren't a threat to werewolves, so we'd never really paid attention to the shapes of different claw marks. It didn't matter how their claws were shaped if we could just kill them. However, Zoi was trembling in fear.

“Those are a really big lizard's claw marks. Lord Veight, we really should run.”

“Well, if you think so, then...”

I had brought him to be our danger sensor after all. I scooped Zoi up and threw him to Monza.

“Monza, take Zoi and get out of here. If you make it to Bernheinen where Melaine is, she'll be able to contact Ryunheit for you.”

“Can't you just use your communicator here?”

“If the dragon shows up, it'll mess up the flow of mana and jam communications. We need to put some distance between it and us.”

The dragon wasn't close enough yet to jam the communicator, but it was theoretically possible the dragon could sense the mana waves our communicators sent out and track us that way.

Monza ruffled Zoi's fur, then gave me a worried look. “What are you gonna

do, boss?”

“Lure it away.”

“By yourself?!” Monza asked, shocked.

You didn't seriously think I'd let you fight with me, did you? I thought. “That was the plan from the start, Monza. If I'm alone, I'm a pretty small target, and I'd only have to worry about protecting myself. I don't think I'll be able to cover you guys against that dragon.”

After what we'd seen of the dragon's abilities, I could confidently say it is the strongest enemy we've faced yet. *With the exception of Arshes, anyway.*

“Now get going. If Zoi's hunch is right, this is your last chance to run.”

“Fine. But you better not die, boss.”

I gave her a reassuring smile. “No way I'm going to leave my wife and daughter behind.”

“Don't forget about your friends either,” Monza said, sounding surprisingly pouty.

Okay, okay, just get going. Monza transformed and sprinted away, and I hid in a nearby thicket and closed my eyes. I couldn't hear or smell the dragon yet, but it was possible I could sense it from the nearby flow of mana. I honed my mage senses and tried to read all of the mana flows in the vicinity. Ideally, I would use my communicator to let everyone know the dragon was nearby, but even weak pulses of mana would cause disturbances that would make seeking out the dragon harder. *All right, where are you?*

The forest was saturated with tons of mana, which was why so many monsters lived here in the first place. Monsters often had anatomically impossible proportions, and they only managed to stay moving thanks to the excessive amount of mana in their bodies, this allowed them to live in places like this forest. That was also how the dragon could fly; it had an unbelievable amount of mana circulating through its body. However that also meant every time it moved, it would send ripples through the flow of mana in the area. I wasn't sensing anything though.

“That’s odd...”

If I still wasn’t getting anything, maybe the dragon simply wasn’t moving. It was also possible it wasn’t actually here, but I had faith in Zoi’s danger senses. Canines were much better at surviving than werewolves ever would be. While our village had been struggling, the canines had been going all over the forest doing whatever they pleased.

A few seconds later, I felt a sudden surge of mana.

“Huh?!” I was so shocked I accidentally spoke aloud.

The increase in mana was just that huge. It was as if a dam had suddenly burst. Mana was flooding the forest. Some of the monsters noticed as well and were fleeing as fast as they could. Unfortunately, it was too late to run. *Here it comes!*

I focused my mind and activated the vortex power I had inherited from Master. A second later, a violent tide of mana swept through the area.

“Whoa!”

I couldn’t even tell what direction I’d been attacked from. The blast was stronger than a thousand Blast Rifles put together, and it took everything I had just to endure it. I tried redirecting the mana, but there was nowhere to send it. Had it not been for my vortex power, I would have been vaporized. Somehow, I managed to survive the first attack.

Looking around, I saw that everything except me had been obliterated. *Where did the forest go?* The trees had all been vaporized a hundred meters out in every direction around me. I was standing at the epicenter of the blast, with only scorched, vitrified dirt around me. A second later, a powerful gust of wind drove me to the ground. It was like the kind of wind you got when a helicopter landed, but hundreds of times more powerful. The wind was followed by a thunderous roar that shook the very earth.

“Ngh!”

I used strengthening magic on myself and jumped to the side just in time to avoid the dragon’s wicked talons. *Come on, I’m still rusty. Go a little easy on me here.*

“Watch it!” I shouted up at the dragon.

It was at least four stories tall. *Holy crap, it's even bigger than the reports described.* The thing was practically a mobile fortress. If it was four stories tall when on all fours, who knew how much taller it could be standing on two legs. There was a part of me that had an academic interest in that, but before I could start speculating, it fired another breath attack at me. Its breath was composed of compressed light rather than fire though. It kind of looked like the laser beams giant monsters in movies sometimes fired.

“Hey, listen to me!”

Fortunately, that beam of light was made purely of mana, so I could absorb it. But that one attack on its own had a few hundred kites of mana in it. If I tried shooting off blasts that strong, my mana reserves would run dry after the second shot. The dragon clearly wanted to eat me, and after the breath attack, it came down on me with its jaws. It probably wanted to feast on my mana.

“Too bad,” I said, knowing my words would be lost on the creature.

I hastily backstepped away, narrowly avoiding its teeth. The dragon was fast, but because of its bulk, it needed to do a lot of preparatory movements before it could strike. Its muscles couldn't fully handle its body weight, which proved that it hadn't always been this large. And it didn't know how to properly utilize its new, oversized body. It also had a slightly different coloration from what I'd read in the reports. Its scales were closer to reddish-brown than pure crimson. *I wonder why that is? Actually, wait, I think I know.*

“That's the color of iron...”

Iron was an interesting element that changed its properties and color depending on what impurities were mixed into it. Magesteel, too, was an alloy of iron. The mana that flowed through a living being's body was also stored in the iron in their bloodstream. In the dragon's case, it seemed its scales were also turning to iron to help it store more mana. It would make for a fascinating research sample. I made a mental note to recover its corpse once it was dead, then started running around to dodge its attacks.

Right claw, fangs, right claw, left claw, right claw, fangs, right claw, left claw again.

“Graaaaaaaaaah!” It was clearly attacking on instinct, following the same pattern each time. Because it had become so big, it wasn’t as agile as before, and there were huge gaps between each of its attacks.

“Maybe Parker should have learned some fighting techniques. He would have survived then,” I said to myself.

I was able to deal with all of the dragon’s weapons, from its breath to its fangs to its claws. Granted, while I lacked the firepower to counterattack, if I focused on defense, I could keep this up forever. The moment that thought came to mind, the dragon turned around, showing me its back. It made it look like it was about to run, but then tried to sweep at me with its tail. It was a feint attack similar to the backwards roundhouse kick human martial artists used. Had this been my first time seeing an attack like this, it would have gotten me, but fortunately, I’d seen dragonkin and kentauros do similar things before.

“You have to do better than that!”

I dropped low to the ground, avoiding the massive tail. Experience was everything when it came to fighting. The tail swept harmlessly past me, crushing the few withered trees that hadn’t been completely incinerated by the dragon’s breath. The splinters it sent flying everywhere were more dangerous than its actual attack.

“Give it a rest already!”

I tried hitting the dragon with a few punches and kicks, but I couldn’t dent its scales. I didn’t have the strength to hurt it. I’d tried hitting it with a pain spell when I’d punched it, but its mana was so dense that my spells didn’t affect it at all. My claws couldn’t score its scales either. In essence, neither me nor the dragon had the means to meaningfully harm each other.

Man, what do I do now? I had expected this was how our battle would go. Had the dragon been something I could defeat on my own, I would have done that from the start. Since it wasn’t, I had a different job this time around. I swept aside the dragon’s next breath attack with one hand and grinned at it.

“Werewolves are good at hunting, but they can’t handle being hunted themselves, so go easy on us, okay?”

It was time to do my job as a vice-commander.

—The Young Lord of the Battleball City—

“Sir. The stonemasons don’t have enough cranes to finish in time!”

“Send two giants from the demon army to tide them over! Neigen, you guide them!”

“Excuse me, Young Master, but there’s an issue with evacuating the citizens! By our calculations, not everyone will fit in the arena!”

“What?! It should be fine if we put up tents in the court... Have Jid and Kokuu double-check!” Ryuunie was in the middle of carrying out his first big task as viceroy. “Has food and water been transported into the arena yet?”

“Yes, sir! The kitchens have all the firewood they could need too! Beluza’s marines said they’d take care of the cooking!”

“Their restaurant in Ryunheit is a huge hit, so I’m sure everyone will be happy to eat their food. Send someone from the treasury office to make sure the marines have the funds they need to keep operating.”

Ryuunie deftly dealt with every report brought to him, taking notes on his map of Doneiks the whole time. *With this, the evacuation should be taken care of. All that’s left is to organize the supplies and personnel coming in.* Wa had already brought their cannoneer unit over. The support Rolmund and Kuwol had promised would be arriving soon as well. Each of these teams possessed different languages and cultures, so Ryuunie knew he had to tread carefully to not step on any toes.

“Get me Glucoa and Howan. They should be with my uncle! We need more Wa and Kuwolese interpreters!”

“Aye, aye, sir! I know a few other language experts I might be able to wrangle!”

“Thanks!”

Doneiks had been chosen as the main base for the dragon hunting operation. All of the foreign nations’ support, as well as the demon army itself, would be congregating there. Ideally, everyone would have met up in an empty plain, but

unfortunately, it was impossible to house, feed, and water soldiers in the middle of nowhere for an extended period of time. Doneiks had all the infrastructure to support a large army, so the dragon hunting platoon would be stationed there. But of course, not everyone was happy with that.

“Sir, are you sure you’re okay with this?” One of Ryuunie’s aides asked as he consolidated his paperwork. The others working for Ryuunie looked like they had similar misgivings.

“Should we really try and fight a dragon powerful enough to raze cities *here*? What are you planning on doing if the hunting team fails?”

“Well...”

In truth, Ryuunie had no backup plan for that. According to the reports, the dragon’s breath burned everything it touched, and it could fly through the sky. He couldn’t even fathom how you’d come up with a plan to deal with something like that.

Ryuunie’s retainers looked at each other worriedly, and one of them said, “I would gladly lay my life down for you or Lord Woroy, but I want to protect our women and children. Will they all truly be safe in the arena?”

Ryuunie didn’t have the answer to that either. The demon army had pledged to prioritize the protection of civilians above all else, but he didn’t know if they could really handle a dragon or not. *Everyone’s more worried than I expected...* All the people serving the Doneiks family now were those Woroy had gathered during his travels across Meraldia. They were all brave and loyal men, but even they seemed uneasy about the upcoming battle. As someone younger and much more inexperienced than them, Ryuunie didn’t know how to alleviate their fears. But then he remembered something his late father, Ivan, used to say: *“Brave men gather under brave leaders. That’s why the men of the Doneiks family must all be brave.”*

You were right, father. Steeling his resolve, Ryuunie looked up at his retainers. In a voice full of confidence he said, “I trust that Veight will protect us. So I need your trust as well. In order to survive this battle, I need everyone’s strength.”

“Young Master...” Tears welled up in the old retainers’ eyes.

After a few seconds, one of them said, “Our lord is right, this is no time to be cowering in fear. He’s risking his life for the future of Meraldia. What good are we if we cannot do the same?”

“You said it. Remember that battle with the skeletons all those years ago?”

“Yeah, back when we were first building this city. When I saw how many undead were coming, I thought we were done for.”

“But Lord Woroy, Lord Barnack, and Lord Veight protected us. This is our chance to repay the favor!”

“Now that’s what I’m talking about!”

In seconds, the atmosphere in the room went from afraid to determined.

“Compared to a horde of skeletons, a single dragon’s nothing. Besides, we’re not even going to be fighting it, our job’s just to keep things organized.”

“Hahaha, it’s been so long since we last had a fight. We’ve really become cowards, haven’t we?”

Ryuunie breathed a sigh of relief, glad that he’d managed to keep morale up.

Just then, Woroy walked into the room and said, “Oh, looks like everyone’s fired up in here!”

Though he’d retired from being viceroy, Woroy was still revered as the city’s hero. Everyone saluted him as he walked in.

“Lord Woroy, you’ve returned!”

“I got back just now, yeah. Also, stop calling Ryuunie ‘young master.’ He’s the official viceroy of Doneiks now, and a full-grown adult. Besides, he was always the true heir to the family name, I was just holding on to it until he was of age. Address him the same way you address me.”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

It seemed Woroy had been snooping in on the conversation for a while. At a glance, he seemed like the kind of person who didn’t care much about fussy details like ranks and names, but he was actually quite a stickler for proper decorum.

I've got a long way to go before I can unite people the way Uncle can...
Ryuunie thought.

Noticing Ryuunie's gaze, Woroy turned to him and said, "Rolmund's reinforcements are almost here! One of their big shots is part of the retinue too!"

"Who did they send?"

Everyone had completely forgotten their fear of the dragon and leaned in curiously towards Woroy.

"You wanna know?" Woroy asked with a grin. A second later, a young girl flung open the door to Ryuunie's room and strode inside.

"That would be *me*! Rolmund's Crown Princess, Micha Wikran Originia Rolmund!"

"Princess Micha?!" Ryuunie shouted in surprise.



Micha was the daughter of Eleora's sister, which made her Ryuunie's distant cousin.

She looked around the room with a smile, then put her hands on her hips and said, "I've come here personally to protect our allied country of Meraldia, and the city built by my esteemed cousins. It's time to see just how capable the loyal retainers of the Doneiks family are."

"O-Okay..." Ryuunie said, surprised by Micha's overbearing demeanor.

"The crown princess of Rolmund herself is here?!" one of Ryuunie's men said, recovering from his shock.

"Oh my god!"

"Make sure not to do anything that would reflect poorly on the young—I mean, our lord!"

"Yeah, it's time to show how reliable his retainers are!" Ryuunie's men quickly got to work, more fired up than ever.

Micha nodded in approval, then turned to Ryuunie.

"I've brought you Rolmund's latest weaponry, Ryuunie. I have no idea how to use most of it, but feel free to take advantage of it to strengthen the city's defenses."

"Thank you, Micha."

Micha glanced around, as if looking for something.

"Umm...where's Friede?" she asked.

"She's in the middle of a mission right now. She should be back soon though. In the meantime, we should finish our preparations. I'll take you to where the cannons are being set up."

Ryuunie ordered one of his servants to prepare a carriage.

The dragon-slaying platoon had set up camp a short distance outside the city, in an open plain with good visibility. Wa's troops and the demon army were working together to build whatever fortifications they could.

“Here! This dip is where we’re going to trap the dragon and shoot it down! Make sure all the cannons are trained on this spot!” Fumino shouted from the bottom of a small depression in the ground. She was one of the best prediction magic users Wa had, but even she could only see a few minutes into the future at best, so she didn’t have an exact idea of where the dragon would show up from yet.

The werewolves started moving the cannons in accordance with her instructions. The Garney brothers and their sons were the ones doing most of the work.

“Point these big heaps of metal at the spot where Fumino’s standing!”

“Got it! Heave-ho!”

As they started pushing, some of Wa’s cannoneers hurriedly ran over to stop them.

“Wait, wait! Don’t just move the gun barrel, you’ll break the cannon!”

“You need to move the base along with it!”

Garbert and Nibert exchanged glances.

“Why?”

“It’s not like the base does anything, right?”

At that, their sons piped up.

“Just do as you’re told, dad!”

“Yeah! Remember what Professor Veight said? They’re the ones with all the special knowledge, so we have to follow their instructions!”

“It’s because you don’t listen that mom always gets mad at you!”

Garbert and Nibert scratched their heads awkwardly as their teenage sons scolded them.

“Gods, you brats really need to learn to respect your elders.”

“Besides, even if the bases break, we can just carry the cannons where they need to go.”

Their sons pressed on, undaunted.

“Are you stupid, dad? The recoil will send you flying!”

“Yeah! You’ll throw out your back again if you do that!”

“You’re not young anymore—either of you!”

Garbert and Nibert exchanged glances again.

“Gods, what a pain...”

“Hey, at least they’re smarter than their parents, bro.”

“True that. Wahahahaha!”

They laughed together. Meanwhile, another group of transformed werewolves was piling up earth for an embankment.

Micha looked at them and asked, “Hey, Ryuunie, is an embankment going to be able to stop the dragon?”

“Not at all. But if we can hide behind it, the dragon will target people it can see first. Most of the actual cannoneers are humans, and they don’t have the reflexes to get out of the way in time if it goes after them.”

In a stern voice, Micha asked, “But you’re still going to deploy human teams even though they’re at the greatest risk?”

Ryuunie’s expression turned grim, and he responded, “Werewolves don’t know how to use cannons, and we need prediction magic to properly aim them. No matter the danger, we need some humans or this plan won’t work.”

“I see...” Micha nodded in understanding. “In that case, I’ll command Rolmund’s soldiers here, from the front lines.”

“That’s far too dangerous! At least take command from the safety of the arena!” Ryuunie couldn’t allow a foreign princess to put herself in danger on Meraldian soil.

But Micha gave Ryuunie a pointed glare and said, “I’m staying *here*.”

“Why?!”

“Because I want to be there the moment the dragon falls.”

The two of them continued arguing for a while, until finally, their respective aides stepped in to mediate.

Right now, I was facing the biggest crisis of my life. *I'm so sleepy...*

"Graaaaaaaaaah!"

I had been facing off against this dragon for the past three days. This whole time, it had been continuing the exact same pattern of right claw, fangs, right claw, left claw to attack. Every now and again, though, it tried a random surprise attack, so I couldn't completely check out.

"Shouldn't you be tired too?" I asked, knowing I wouldn't get an answer.

As expected, the dragon just kept on attacking. This time, it bathed me with its mana breath. Its breath was actually an important source of energy for me. It was thanks to it that I was able to constantly replenish my mana reserves and continue using strengthening magic for this long. I was using strengthening magic to fend off my exhaustion and muscle pain as well, so as long as my mana didn't run dry, I could technically keep fighting forever without rest. But while I could get rid of my physical exhaustion, my brain's desire to sleep didn't go away. It was similar to how an IV drip kept you hydrated, but your throat still felt parched.

"Come to think of it, one of Master's books had a chapter on a guy who'd used strengthening magic to keep fighting for ages without sleep," I muttered. *That guy had managed to hold out for like, what, a month?*

At the end of the chapter, the author added a footnote saying: "This isn't what I studied strengthening magic for," and called the experiment pointless. I could see now why he hadn't bothered doing more research on fighting indefinitely. I'd only been doing this for three days, and I was already sick of it. Unfortunately, the dragon was still full of energy.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The dragon swept at me with its tail, giving me a precious moment of rest. I squatted down and closed my eyes, getting a second and a half of sleep. These old bones would have preferred ten seconds of rest at a time, but sadly the dragon wasn't that slow.

“All right, all right, break time’s over.”

I dutifully dodged the claw attack that came next. I was keeping my movements as small as possible to conserve energy, but I was also preparing some contingencies in case I got hit, since taking one of those attacks with no defenses would kill me instantly. *You’d think this thing would be tired of trying to kill me by now.*

I knew there were wild species that were really persistent when hunting, but spending more energy on the hunt than you got from eating your prey was suicide in the long term, so even the persistent species gave up eventually. *Do I really have so much mana that it’s worth spending days fighting me?* Considering how much mana the dragon had already expended, the few thousand kites of energy it would get eating me wouldn’t be nearly enough to make up the deficit.

“Well, I guess this does prove you feed on mana and not flesh.”

If those rust-colored scales really did serve the same function as magesteel, then the dragon could probably replenish its energy reserves with the ambient mana in the forest. In which case, it didn’t need to hunt at all. Just spending all day in the forest would keep it fed. Most likely, it was the dragon’s predator instincts that drove it to hunt, not hunger. In the same way that I wanted to sleep despite not actually needing rest, it probably wanted to hunt even if it didn’t have to. That was probably why it had left the forest back then too. Its instincts had told it to kill.

“Yeah, you’re definitely too dangerous to be allowed to roam free,” I said as I slowly but surely continued luring it eastward.

Each step the dragon took moved it a few meters, so it was decently fast-going. After each attack pattern, it usually made it a couple dozen meters. Bringing this thing all the way to Doneiks was step one of the dragon hunting plan.

It took an inordinate amount of mana to turn something into a Valkaan, but there was enough mana in the forest to accomplish that. If we left the dragon alone, it would almost certainly transform at some point. However, killing it was difficult because of how deadly its breath was.

I still hadn't been able to come up with a good way to neutralize it. The best I could do was just protect myself, so the current plan was to lure it onto the mana-scarce plains, and then take it down with cannons after I'd drained it of mana. Because the cannons didn't use mana, the dragon wouldn't be able to absorb any energy from the cannonballs. The only problem was, Doneiks's preparations weren't complete yet. If I brought the dragon over now, I'd just be consigning the city to death. Furthermore, I wasn't originally the one who was supposed to do the luring. I had wanted to pick the ideal person for the job, but thanks to the dragon's sudden appearance, all my carefully laid plans were ruined. *This happens every time. Why does everyone call the Black Werewolf King some mastermind strategist when nothing I try works out the way I want it to?*

"I just came here to scope out the forest, so why am I stuck going one-on-one with you?"

Annoyed, I kicked the dragon's chin, but of course, it did basically no damage. All I succeeded in accomplishing was pissing the dragon off more, and it started attacking with even more ferocity.

"A one-on-one was the last thing I wanted..." I grumbled, this time aiming a kick at its eye when its next claw attack missed.

To my surprise, the dragon dodged. It drew its mouth back to try and bite my leg, so I instead kicked one of its teeth. *It'd be nice if that hurts it a little, but...nope, no dice. Man, this is such a waste of time.* At the very least, I'd finally taken it out of the forest, so now I just had to drag it around in circles until Doneiks was ready to fight it. I couldn't let it be, because there was no telling what it would do then, so I had to keep taunting it.

"How many more days am I going to have to keep this up for...?"

As I moaned to myself, I heard the sound of fireworks in the distance. That was the demon army's signal flares. *What color are they?*

"Let's see here..."

I backflipped over the dragon's tail and looked up at the sky. The color of the smoke signaled that Doneiks's preparations were complete and that the plan could begin. *Wait, really? You guys are done that fast?* I continued dodging for a

bit longer just in case, but then I saw a dust cloud on the horizon.

“Vaitoooooooo!”

Firnir was running towards me, decked out in a full suit of armor. Even with the heavy armor, she was running faster than a bullet train.

“Don’t get too close, it’s dangerous!” I shouted.

Unfortunately, my warning came too late, as the dragon immediately switched its attention to the new threat and unleashed its breath. A beam of light shot straight towards Firnir, too fast for her to dodge. *Oh no!* But as the light faded, I saw Firnir standing in the middle of the scorched plain, looking no worse for the wear. She twirled her spear, hefted her shield, and puffed her chest out proudly.

“I’m invincible!” she beamed.

“That’s only possible because of your magical armor. Don’t be too reckless!”

“Don’t worry, Vaito, just leave the rest to me! Uryaaah! Hiyaah!” Firnir held her shield in front of her and charged at the dragon, taking its claws head-on. They collided with the force of two trucks running into each other, but Firnir was once again unharmed.

“See, I’m *invincible!*”

“Don’t get too cocky!” I retorted, though in truth, she’d come at the perfect time.

The few seconds she’d bought me had given me time to recast my waning strengthening magic and catch my breath. Now that I was no longer alone, a wave of relief—coupled with exhaustion—washed over me. My body ached all over. *I really am getting old, huh?*

Firnir used her shield and armor to repel the dragon’s breath, then turned to me and shouted, “Reinforcements will be coming soon, so just hold out a little longer!”

“Wait, you aren’t my reinforcements?!”

“I’m just here to buy time until the real cavalry arrives! Whoa!” The dragon’s claws bent Firnir’s shield, and she deftly backstepped away.

That shield must have been as thick as a tank's armor to have taken as many blows as it had. It had definitely been enchanted with some kind of magic, but now it was broken. Fortunately, it was Firnir's armor that seemed to deflect the breath. Looking closely, I could see a rather strange mana field had formed around her. It was something I'd never seen or even read about before. *Is this one of Rolmund's new inventions?*

"Uryaaaaaah!" Firnir threw her spear at the dragon. Though it bounced off the dragon's scales, it exploded upon impact, causing the massive beast to stagger backwards.

What in the heck is that? A rocket spear?! I looked on in shock.

"Vaito, get on my back!" she called out.

"You won't be able to move with me on you!"

"Just do it!" She grabbed my hand and hauled me onto her back. Kentauros were smaller than actual horses, so she was barely able to carry me.

"D-Damn you're heavy! On second thought, get off!"

"See, I told you!" I said. *We really don't have time for this!*

The dragon was already recovering from the explosion. Its recovery rate was insane.

"I'm gonna need your help for this, Vaito!"

"Don't worry, I wasn't planning on letting you take him on alone!"

It didn't matter how tired I was, I wasn't going to abandon Firnir. Just knowing I wasn't alone gave me a surge of strength. I had people fighting together with me, and that made me invincible.

"Let's do this!"

"Hell yeah!"

As we both readied our weapons, the space above the dragon's head began to twist and warp.

"What now?!" I exclaimed.

"Whooooa!"

Experiencing teleportation for the first time was scary enough, but what was even scarier was how high up I'd reappeared.

"Why does this planet have to be rouuund?!"

Because the planet wasn't flat, you had to be really careful about calculating coordinates when teleporting people behind the horizon. That was what Movi had said, and apparently, that was why she always ended up having people drop from the sky instead of appearing on the ground. She'd warned me ahead of time, so I'd been prepared for it, but it was still scary.

"Yeowch!"

Landing hurt a little, but I managed to distribute the impact across my body to avoid breaking any bones. This could have been my coolest landing yet...if I hadn't yelped in pain at the end.

"Friede?!" dad shouted, sounding surprised. He was transformed, so I couldn't really read his expression, but his voice was still the same.

"I came to help you, dad!"

Heck yeah, I managed to say it! My dad was so strong that he could handle pretty much any opponent by himself. After all, he was the legendary Black Werewolf King. But just this once, he was up against a foe even he couldn't defeat alone. And that was why Movi had teleported me over so I could help—though I hadn't realized teleportation was so scary.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Wha—"

The dragon's roar was louder than I expected, and it fired off its breath without giving me a chance to do anything.

"Funya!" I made another weird noise because I was still a little nervous. If I didn't properly absorb its attack, I'd be reduced to ash. There was a ton of mana in the fire breath, but that just meant I got to restore a bunch of my own mana.

"Too bad! I can heal from mana attacks, just like you!" The dragon probably couldn't understand me, which honestly was probably for the best, since that meant it would keep on wasting its energy trying to hit me with its breath.

“Friede, what are you doing here?!”

“Oh! I’m, uh... I’m here to tell you that the city’s...preparations are...ready!”

Now that it was up against three people at once, the dragon was just lashing out at random. It moved pretty fast for how big it was. It had to rear back for each swing though, so its attacks were still easy to dodge as long as you were paying attention. *Wow, how many days did you spend fighting this thing, dad? You really are something else.*

“Dad...you should retreat! Firnir can carry you...all the way back...to Doneiks!”

I dodged out of the way of another attack. *Is it just me, or is this dragon targeting me more than the other two?*

“That way...we’ll be able to lure...the dragon...to the city too!”

The dragon’s attacks were so persistent that it was hard to talk. Though dad was able to dodge them with ease while holding a conversation. He wasn’t even out of breath. Noticing how I was struggling, Firnir finished the explanation for me.

“Oh yeah, Rolmund’s engineers put out a giant stockpile of magesteel outside Doneiks, so as soon as you bring the dragon over, we can carry out your plan.”

Unlike me, Firnir wasn’t being attacked very often. *I guess Movi was right. The dragon prioritizes enemies with high mana capacities.*

“The dragon...feeds on mana!” I shouted.

“Yeah, I know,” dad replied. “It doesn’t actually need to eat, so it just hunts things to satisfy its predatory instincts. But now that it’s left the mana-dense forest, it’s started slowly starving. Soon it won’t have enough mana to keep its massive body functioning.”

My dad was a scholar of magic, so he’d already figured this all out. What was really impressive though was that he was giving me a lecture on what he’d learned while in the middle of battle.

“There’s a limit to how much mana it can store, but by increasing its body mass, it increases that upper limit as well. Without mana to support it, the dragon’s bones and organs will be crushed under its own weight. The dragon is

slowly but surely killing itself right now.”

Dad dodged ten claw swipes while he gave that whole speech. *What in the— my dad’s even more of a monster than the dragon!*

As he continued dodging, he turned to me with a smile and said, “I’m glad you guys are here, since I’m nearing my limit. I don’t have the strength to defeat this thing, and I’m getting tired of defending forever. Mind helping me with my retreat?”

“You got it!” It felt good knowing other people were relying on me. I probably got that from dad.

He canceled his transformation, then hopped onto Firnir’s back. She started galloping towards Doneiks, and I followed behind her. I thought the dragon would try to run after us, but instead I heard a loud *whoosh* behind me. *What was that?!*

“Friede, it’s gonna take flight!” I turned around and saw that the dragon had spread its wings. If it flew away now, our plan was done for.

“Dad, what should I do?!”

“It can’t actually use its wings to take off! It needs to use mana to propel itself into the air. I’ll try and get on top of it before it leaves!”

Dad tried to transform again, but he wasn’t able.

“Crap, my body won’t...”

“You’ve already been fighting for three days. A normal person would have been dead by now. I’ll go instead!” I turned around and started running back towards the dragon.

“Don’t do anything reckless, Friede!”

“I won’t, don’t worry!”

I was slowly but surely starting to understand what it was I could and couldn’t do, what I should and shouldn’t do, and what I would and wouldn’t do.

“I’ll serve as our guidepost! Tell everyone that things are still going according to plan!” I shouted.

“Got it! As soon as the communicators start working again, I will!” dad said.

Oh right, you can't use communicators too close to the dragon, I forgot. Once I got the dragon away from dad, he'd be able to lead everyone from the backlines like a vice-commander was supposed to—which was why I'd volunteered to take over dragon-luring duty from him. Unlike my dad, I actually was a low-ranking officer without much strategic value.

As I ran, I made a hand sign with my thumbs and cast a presence-reducing spell on myself. With this, the dragon would have a harder time perceiving me. The hand signs weren't actually a requirement to cast this spell, but they served as a substitute for an incantation so I wouldn't get out of breath by casting. Iori had taught them to me, and apparently all of the Heavenwatchers used them when they needed to stay discrete.

The dragon turned my way, but for a few seconds, it had trouble figuring out exactly where I was. While it absorbed mana, it seemed it was still affected by spells.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

It swiped at the ground to my right with its claws, and I quickly jumped onto its foreleg. I climbed up as fast as I could, then ran over to a small dip in its back where its wing connected to its main body. The dip was small enough that a transformed werewolf wouldn't be able to fit inside it, but I could. Using suction magic, I firmly attached myself to its scales to keep myself from getting shaken off.

The dragon looked around in confusion, then remembered what it was originally planning on doing, and leaped into the air with a mighty beat of its wings. I felt weightless for a moment as the ground rapidly shrunk beneath me.

“Whoa...” I muttered, careful not to raise my voice.

Already I was way higher up than the height Movi had teleported me to. The clouds were close enough to touch. Unless they mastered levitation magic, no werewolf would be able to jump this high. The plains stretched out endlessly below me, and on the horizon, I could see the fortress city of Bernheinen. *You better not go that way...*

Fortunately, the dragon was only interested in places with lots of mana. It must have gotten quite hungry after three days of fighting. Honestly, I felt a little bad about it. The dragon hadn't asked to become like this. Sadly, it wasn't intelligent enough that we could talk to it, so our only option was to kill it.

In minutes, Doneiks came into view, and I could see the hunting grounds we'd prepared outside the city.

There was a crescent-shaped camp with humans and demons running to and fro, readying the cannons. Right in front of the camp was a huge pile of magesteel, put out to lure the dragon. We needed to get the dragon exactly in that spot or the plan would fall apart completely. However, the dragon continued to circle the skies above the encampment and showed no signs of descending.

Have we put it on guard? Or is it just not hungry enough? I can't tell. Please, just land already. My plea fell on deaf ears, and the dragon continued circling. In fact, its circles got wider with each pass. At this rate, it might actually fly off somewhere.

The original plan had been to lure it to the magesteel spot on foot, but as always, things never went as planned. I had no choice but to improvise now. Fortunately, I had one strengthening magic spell up my sleeve that could help. The most basic of all strengthening magic spells.

"Come on! Fall *already!*"

I channeled all of my mana into a weight-increasing spell and made myself as heavy as possible. This was the simplest spell I knew, and because I was casting it on myself, the dragon's ability to absorb mana was irrelevant. Naturally, there was no way I'd fail such a simple spell, and it went off without a hitch.

"Graaah?!" The dragon suddenly slowed. Right now, I weighed about as much as it did. *This is as heavy as I can get, so you better drop down.* The dragon activated all the mana circulating within its body, creating a shimmering pair of wings made of pure mana, and forced itself to speed up again.

"Graaaaaaaaah!"

Why you— Now it's definitely on guard! There's no way I'll be able to get it to

the hunting ground now!

“Godsdammit!”

Even with all of my mana increasing my weight, it wasn’t enough. The dragon just had that much more mana than me. It made sense, considering it was halfway to becoming a Valkaan.

“Nraaaaah!” Shouting didn’t do anything to increase my mana, sadly. *Is this just too much for me?*

I was about ready to give up. Unlike my dad, I wasn’t a legendary hero. I was just a half-baked cross between a werewolf and a human. Even when it came to magic, all I was good at was basic spells, and I had barely any combat experience.

No, that doesn’t matter right now! I’m the only one here, which means I’m the only one who can do anything. If I give up, it’s all over! I have to do this. I’m the only one who can!

With all of my might, I shouted, “SOUL SHAKERRRRRRR!”

This was the ultimate technique that I’d inherited from my dad. Normally, only a werewolf mage could use this move. But even though I couldn’t transform, I was capable of using Soul Shaker in my human form.

Activating my own vortex power, I started gathering all of the nearby mana to me. That included the dragon’s mana as well. All of the mana it was shooting out to keep itself aloft was now being sucked in. As a result, the dragon’s ascent slowed. Meanwhile, I used all the mana I was sucking up to further increase my weight. *I’m sending you down whether you like it or not!*

“Come ooooooooooon!” With this much weight bearing down on it once, if the dragon started to fall, it would hit the ground hard.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Panicking, the dragon started firing off its breath in every direction. It looked like it was trying to hit me, but since I was hiding behind its own wings, it couldn’t. Still, the light was bright enough to obscure my vision.

“Hey, stop that!” I shouted.

If any of those stray beams hit Doneiks, the city would be in big trouble. Unfortunately, it seemed even with all the extra mana I'd absorbed, we were evenly matched. The dragon wasn't rising any higher, but it wasn't falling either. We'd reached a perfect equilibrium. I weighed more than the dragon at this point, but it seemed I was missing one last push. Since I was using its own mana to fuel my spell, there was no way it would be able to increase its output. If I could just get one other source of mana, no matter how small, it'd be enough.

"Friede!" I heard my dad's voice from right beside me.

"Huh?!"

How's he doing that? Oh, wait, strengthening magic. He's probably using it on his voice. Looking down, I saw that Firnir was running right below the dragon, with dad on her back. Well, I assumed it was dad, since it was actually so far below I couldn't make him out clearly.

A second later, dad shouted up at me again, "Use this mana!"

I reflexively directed my vortex downwards, and it caught a massive bullet of light. Dad must have shot that out of his Blast Rifle. As soon as the bullet was absorbed, I felt strength fill every inch of me.

"All right!"

At this point, I had a good 1,000 kites of mana. Instead of using it in a contest of strength against the dragon though, I had a better idea in mind. I used dad's mana to increase my own strength, then grabbed the dragon's wing joint.

"Take this, you flying monster!"

The wing was too big for me to break on my own, but I was able to twist it a little and ruin the dragon's balance. The dragon had been resisting my downwards pressure by propelling itself upwards, but now, that force was being aimed slightly diagonally rather than straight up. In that instant, the equilibrium shattered.

"Gryaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" The dragon let out a pained roar, and the two of us started spiraling towards the ground.

"Oh noooooooooo!"

Everything was spinning, and I couldn't tell up from down. Fortunately, even if I couldn't figure it out with my eyes, my mana had already been set to go straight downwards. *This way's down, right?!* I hurriedly braced myself for impact, a second before we hit the ground.

"Oww!"

My world was still spinning, but I'd finally managed to get the dragon to the hunting grounds. *Does that count as a crash or a landing? Or a crash landing? Eh, who cares, someone else can figure that out. My job is to make sure Meraldia lasts long enough that someone else gets to figure it out!*

"The dragon's fallen!"

"Look! It's Friede!"

"Veight was right!"

I get that you're all happy, guys, but the dragon's still alive. It was only pinned down thanks to my weight. Also, with how much it was struggling, it was only a matter of time before I got knocked off.

Suddenly, I heard a familiar voice. "Don't panic! Prepare the cannons!"

Wait, that's Micha! What's she doing here on the front lines? In the distance, I could see the cannons from Wa being loaded.

"Aim for the relatively immobile torso! All cannons, fire!"

Wa's cannons were being fired for the first time in Meraldia, with a Rolmundian princess commanding the cannoneers. This was the most international force I'd seen yet. And it seemed there were no issues with the chain of command, as all the cannons fired on cue.

Cannonballs careened towards the dragon's torso, which I was sitting right on top of.

"Whoa!" I shouted, hurriedly hiding behind the dragon's head to avoid getting killed by my best friend. I couldn't actually get off the dragon or it would escape.

The smell of blood and gunpowder filled my nostrils. It didn't smell like human or demon blood, so it was probably dragon blood. With how thick the

smell was, the dragon was likely in bad shape.

A few seconds after the barrage, the dragon's mana dropped considerably. With less mana to work with, the dragon was more susceptible to my weight, and its scales started to crack. Not just its scales either—I could hear its bones breaking as well.

“Gryaaaaaaah!” The dragon let out another scream, but I didn't stop holding it down.

“I'm sorry!” I said. *I know you don't want to die, but neither do we. I'm sorry, but we have to kill you.*

I continued pressing down on the dragon's spine with everything I had. “Oneee...moore...puuuuuush!”

There was an extremely sharp *crack*, and the dragon suddenly went limp. Its neck and tail hit the ground with twin thuds. Its wings fell as well, the streams of mana disappearing.

“Stop firing! Hey! I said stop! Are you trying to kill Friede?!” Micha shouted, her voice carrying over the boom of the cannons. The cannoneers stopped immediately, and suddenly all was silent.

“Friede?! Friede, where are you?!” Micha shouted. “Friede, say something! Are you okay?!”

Upon hearing my name, I slowly staggered to my feet. I'd used up so much mana that I was dizzy. Even though I wasn't making myself heavier anymore, my body still felt heavy.

Leaning against one of the dragon's wings, I shouted, “I'm... I'm over here!”

“Friede!”

In seconds, everyone surrounded me. Dad, Shirin, Joshua, Iori, Firnir, Micha, Ryuunie, all the werewolves and soldiers of Wa, Kuwol's werecats, and all the others.

I smiled bashfully at everyone and said, “We did it, guys!”



A huge banquet was held in Doneiks to celebrate the slaying of the dragon. While everyone else was partying, I was busy listening to Kurtz's report.

"The other nations' technologies have developed far beyond what we expected, Veight."

"Yeah. We need to be particularly wary of Wa's cannons and Rolmund's mana-absorbing magesteel. I never realized unsaturated magesteel could be used to absorb bullets from Blast Rifles. Not only that, but those absorbed bullets then become mana for the enemy."

Rolmund had already begun developing anti-Blast Cane technologies, now that their usage was spreading out across the world. Unsurprisingly, it was Eleora who had come up with the idea. She was the mother of Blast Canes and our derivative Blast Rifle, so it stood to reason that she would best understand how to counter them too.

Kurtz adjusted his glasses and said, "Empress Eleora said in her letter that she came up with the idea after observing a certain 'mana-absorbing werewolf.'"

Wait, this is my fault? It was true that Blast Rifles didn't work on me since I could absorb the mana in the bullets, but Eleora was quite the genius for finding a natural material that could do the same thing. If she was able to mass-produce armor incorporating that magesteel, all of Rolmund's soldiers would have the same power as me. Well, they wouldn't be able to absorb bullets indefinitely the way I could, but even being able to fend off a few shots was a huge boon. Blast Rifles had an insane amount of destructive power, so each shot blocked was a life saved. However, it seemed that wasn't what Kurtz took issue with.

"I cannot believe you told our soldiers to fire that mana-absorbing magesteel into the dragon. You understand that new technologies are meant to be treated delicately, don't you?"

"I'm sorry. As a scholar, I realize how foolish a decision that was."

After hitting the dragon, the cannonballs had exploded, so we couldn't even recover the mana-absorbing magesteel.

Kurtz gave me a small smile. "That being said, I'm impressed you were able to

immediately devise such a practical use for that magesteel. It was thanks to your novel idea that we were able to put a dent in the dragon's mana stores and bring the battle to a swift conclusion. Only you would find a way to use defensive technology for offense."

"Thanks for the praise, I guess. By the way, was anyone in Doneiks hurt?"

Just as I said that, Master floated over.

"Thanks to me, not a single one of the dragon's breaths had hit the city. Some came close, but I was able to absorb them before they did any damage."

"Thank goodness. And thank you for cleaning up after Friede's mess."

The fact that Friede had let the dragon shoot off breath attacks near the end was proof that she still had a ways to go.

However, Master grinned and shook her head. "You shouldn't phrase it as such. She did a splendid job. Everyone is proud of how well she did, despite her youth."

"If you say so..." I shrugged.

Asking Master to serve as our rear guard had proven to be a smart choice. It was because she'd stayed behind at Doneiks that she'd immediately been able to teleport Friede over the moment she reached Bahen, and protect the city from stray attacks.

"Does Friede realize how much she worries me every time she pulls a stunt like that? I'm scared of what the future might bring now."

"My, my, as if you have any right to talk." Master exchanged glances with Kurtz, and the two of them smiled wryly at me.

Come to think of it, Master's been saying the same things to me for twenty years, hasn't she? I thought.

"I was only able to focus on defending the city because you all were able to bring down the dragon on your own. And the one who contributed most to that effort was Friede. Isn't it about time you acknowledged her skills, Veight?"

"Yeah...I guess you're right."

A few years ago, Friede wouldn't have been able to figure out how to bring down a flying dragon. She would have panicked and started attacking recklessly. But now, Friede was able to live up to the responsibilities of her station. That was why everyone trusted her.

Kurtz flipped through the battle plan I'd drawn up before the hunt and let out a long sigh. "You were only supposed to scout the forest...but instead, you ended up being the one to lure the dragon out of it. After that, Friede was only supposed to help cover your retreat...but instead, she brought the dragon down to the hunting grounds. The two of you cause us nothing but headaches, you know that?"

Master smiled at Kurtz. "Perhaps so. But in the end, we know we can always trust them. Ultimately, we ended up following the plan. We weakened the dragon with mana-absorbing magesteel cannonballs, then the demon army moved in for the coup de grâce."

"It's because you're so soft on the two of them that they— Oh, very well. I admit that I was hoping they would handle things by themselves too, once the situation got out of hand."

Kurtz looked back down at the plan and wrote, "Thanks to Veight and Friede, we succeeded with an abridged version of the operation." then drew a slash through the last few pages.

I'm sorry. In an attempt to lighten the mood, I said, "It wasn't just Friede. All of the promising members of the young generation performed well above our expectations. Ryuunie, especially, did an amazing job, considering he had just become viceroy."

Master nodded happily. "These are the rewards you reap when one puts in the effort to properly instruct younger generations. There is nothing more important to a nation's continued prosperity than that. After all, we may not be here in a hundred years, but our descendants certainly will... Although, I suppose I will still be around then."

"As long as you're here, Meraldia's future is secured, Master. Please take care of this country after we're gone."

Fortunately, Master's ultimate calling was teaching, so she'd be here to lead

new generations for centuries to come.

She smiled and said, “Fear not. Even if I am not around, the coming generation will take care of raising the generation after them just fine.”

Are you sure about that? I thought.

Doneiks was holding a huge banquet to celebrate our victory over the dragon. Tons of booze had been brought out and everyone, regardless if they were human or demon—Meraldian, Rolmundian, or Kuwolese—was drunk. I didn’t really want to be hanging out with a bunch of drunks, so I was relaxing in the Doneiks mansion.

As I sipped my tea, I told Ryuunie everything I’d learned about the dragon.

“So that dragon had originally been a normal lizard?” he asked with a surprised face. I’d been pretty surprised myself when I’d first learned that.

I took out the sketches Movi had drawn for me and showed them to him.

“Yeah. Specifically, it was one of the rust lizards that live in the forest. Normally, they’re about as big as I am lying down. They drain the blood of their prey to store the iron in it and fortify their iron scales. The Demon Empress thinks that due to a mutation, this particular lizard’s iron scales were able to function like magesteel, and could store mana.”

Ryuunie took the drawing from my hands and looked at it with great interest. “I see. Does that mean other rust lizards may pose a threat in the future?”

“The demon army’s investigating that right now. Dad said that this was a rather rare mutation though, so we shouldn’t need to worry too much.” I’d only taken a few biology and monster ecology courses, so I didn’t know the details. All I could do was tell Ryuunie what I’d been told. “Oh, there’s one more thing. When we dissected the dragon, we found a magical crystal embedded in its stomach.”

Ryuunie raised an eyebrow. “Let me guess. It’s one of those artifacts that can make Valkaan? The kind of thing that has a lot of mana stored in it?”

“Exactly. It was completely drained of mana, and seeing as the dragon hadn’t transformed into a Valkaan yet, dad—er, Lord Veight thinks it hadn’t been fully

charged with mana when the lizard found it.”

“And he believes that’s what caused it to become so big? Do you agree with that assessment?”

Hmm, it’s hard to say. I thought back to one of my dad’s lectures.

“This species of lizard can keep growing indefinitely, and they have a really long lifespan. So, maybe one of them managed to avoid being hunted down for hundreds of years, and then came across this artifact. If it had already become decently large and had a ton of scales, it would have been easier for it to start absorbing mana once it ate the artifact.”

“So you believe a combination of factors contributed to the rise of this dragon...” Ryuunie lapsed into thought for a few seconds. “How many people have been informed of this theory?”

“So far, only the councilors and the higher-ups of the demon army know.”

Ryuunie’s gaze became cold. “This could have a huge impact on magesteel research, so I’d like to keep this intel confidential. But knowing Rolmund and Wa, their spies will probably get their hands on it sooner rather than later. In which case, we may as well share this information with them of our own accord as a gesture of goodwill. Did Veight have anything to say on the matter?”

I see, so this is why dad passed that information on to me.

“Funny to ask that. He did. He said that it’d be best to tell everyone as a ‘diplomatic gesture of goodwill’ before they figure it out on their own. He also said that preventing the rise of another dragon is an international issue, so we should all try to work together.”

“That certainly is true. Considering the nue that appeared in Wa a decade ago, we should expect that creatures like this will appear with some regularity.” Ryuunie looked out the window and folded his arms. “Valkaans and beings on the path to becoming Valkaans are powerful enough that we’ll need the cooperation of all nations to slay—lest they plunge the entire continent into chaos. We have to be careful about how far we let information spread regarding how to make more.”

“I learned in history class that every time one appeared, entire nations were

destroyed, so we definitely need to keep them in check.”

Ryuunie smiled and said, “That being the case, it’s not as if we can halt the march of progress. People will keep on developing new technologies that use mana, and instead of restricting what they can do, we should focus on developing our own technology that can prevent another Valkaan from ever arising. As one of Meraldia’s viceroys, I need to do everything I can.”

“I know you’ll do great!” I said.

Ryuunie was from Rolmund, but he’d lost everything after his family’s failed rebellion. Despite that, he held no grudges against anyone, and worked hard for the sake of his new home, Meraldia. *He really is an amazing person.*

As I was thinking that, Ryuunie awkwardly cleared his throat and said, “By the way, aren’t you going to join the party?”

“Umm, actually...”

Before I could finish, the door swung open.

“Excuse me. I heard that Friede was here, so I came over,” Iori said, walking in.

“My, this is a splendid mansion. The fusion of Rolmundian and Meraldian architecture is handled quite elegantly,” Micha said, following behind Iori. Yuhette and Shirin and Joshua filed in as well.

Ryuunie smiled at all of them. “She is indeed here. Welcome, everyone.”

Though I couldn’t tell why, I smelled a hint of disappointment from him. Of course, he didn’t let it show. *Maybe he doesn’t like it when there are too many people around?*

Micha turned to Ryuunie and said, “My apologies, Lord Ryuunie, but could we borrow Friede for a while?”

“Huh? Oh, sure. Be my guest.”

“By the way, have you given my proposal any more thought? My aunt dearly wishes to meet with you.”

What proposal? And by “aunt,” Micha means Empress Eleora, right? I

thought. “Hey, Micha, are you guys—”

“Don’t worry about it. Besides, knowing Ryuunie, he’s going to discuss it with the council before giving me an answer, so you’ll find out soon anyway. Isn’t that right?”

“You are correct. But I will do my best to give you a favorable answer.” Ryuunie smiled again, and this time I didn’t smell any disappointment off of him.

Iori grabbed my right arm while Micha took my left, and the two of them started marching me outside. *What’s going on?*

Once we were out, Micha said in an excited tone, “Hey, Friede, I want to try playing battleball! Let’s make an all-girls team!”

“I would love to join that team,” Iori added.

Not you too, Iori... I mentally quipped. “But you guys are both people of high status. If you got injured, it’d be a diplomatic issue.”

“Which is *why* you better teach me the basics well, so I don’t get hurt.”

“That’s not a good solution!”

At this rate, we might really end up making an all-girls team. I’m not so sure about this...

—King of the Sacred River—

Back in Ryunheit, one of the werecats had just finished appraising Shumar of all that had happened during the dragon hunt.

“I see, so Veight and Friede managed to bring it down.” The werecat warrior smiled wanly and said, “In the end, we weren’t even needed. That man and his daughter are unbelievable.”

“But thanks to them, we had no casualties,” Shumar replied with a smile. The werecat’s smile grew brighter in return, and Shumar added, “Putting Meraldia in our debt without sacrificing any of our own people is the best result we could have hoped for.”

“You don’t have to say that aloud, you stupid prince,” Tiriya said with a sigh.

Still smiling, Shumar turned to him and said, “Everyone sees me as the sheltered, airheaded prince. I need to show them I’m capable of thought every now and then, or they’ll underestimate me.”

“I appreciate the effort, but you don’t need to do any scheming. That’s my job. You’re royalty; you’re meant to be above that.” Tiriya’s expression grew more serious. “Everyone else had so much trouble with that dragon, but the moment Veight and Friede took to the field, it was over in an instant. The two of them really are amazing.”

“I agree. They might even be able to take care of the issue plaguing us from beyond Mount Kayankaka.” The werecat narrowed his eyes and bowed reverently to Shumar.

“That is our hope as well.”

Afterword

Long time no see, everyone, Hyougetsu here.

I'm sorry it took so long to get this volume out. All of it is new content not in the web novel though, so I hope you'll forgive me. Chances are, it'll take me about as long to get the next volume out too. Most of volume 15 is ideas I wanted to include in the web novel version but never got around to writing.

I imagine some perceptive readers suspected there was more to the Windswept Dunes and the forest than meets the eye, since they'd just been plopped down onto the map without much time dedicated to them. I'm happy to say that you were right. There's a little bit more I still want to do with the forest, but I've covered all of the important stories related to it for now. I went to the trouble of making it part of the overall setting, so I'm glad I finally got to do something with it.

As you may have noticed, there haven't been any monsters capable of flight until now. There aren't any demon races that can fly either. I explained this in the work itself too, but I want this world to follow the same laws of physics as the real world. Flight is a rather difficult thing to accomplish. You can't just have giant flying monsters unless they're also capable of using magic in some way. Hence why this dragon was such an unprecedented threat.

Well, I admit part of why I didn't want flying monsters was because then I'd have to think about how human societies would evolve to defend against those monsters. Walls and castles would be built totally differently, and I didn't want to spend that much time figuring all that out. Just think about it: Veight would have had to do so much more to invade Ryunheit and take Rolmund's castles if they had anti-air defenses prepared. And then I would have had to come up with far more ingenious solutions for Veight's victories. I really didn't want to go through all that effort. There's already so many things I need to put in effort for as it is—though I end up shoving a lot of that effort onto my wonderful editor. Writing a volume of all-new content was pretty tough, and without his support,

I definitely wouldn't have been able to do it. Thank you so very much.

I ended up causing a lot of trouble for my illustrator, Teshima-sensei, as well. When I asked him to draw a dragon for me, I was worried it might be too much work, but he really went and did it. He did a really good job with Shumar as well for his introduction scene. Thank you so much for all your hard work!

On a side note, the eighth volume of the *Origins* manga should be coming out soon, and I've prepared a fun little short story for the end of it. Kosumi Yuuichi-sensei is such a good artist that I'm starting to think the manga is surpassing the source material (look, I know all authors say this, but really it's true). If you haven't already, I highly recommend reading through it. It's amazing how he managed to draw cute slice-of-life scenes and gritty battles at the same time.

Finally, I'd like to announce that the next volume of *Der Werwolf* will be the last.

Meraldia and the surrounding nations are at peace, Veight's finished raising the new generation, and they even slew a dragon. We're already at the happily ever after part of our tale, but there's just one last loose end to be tied up. And that's what the final volume is going to be for.

May we meet again there. ...Assuming I ever finish it. I'll do my best.

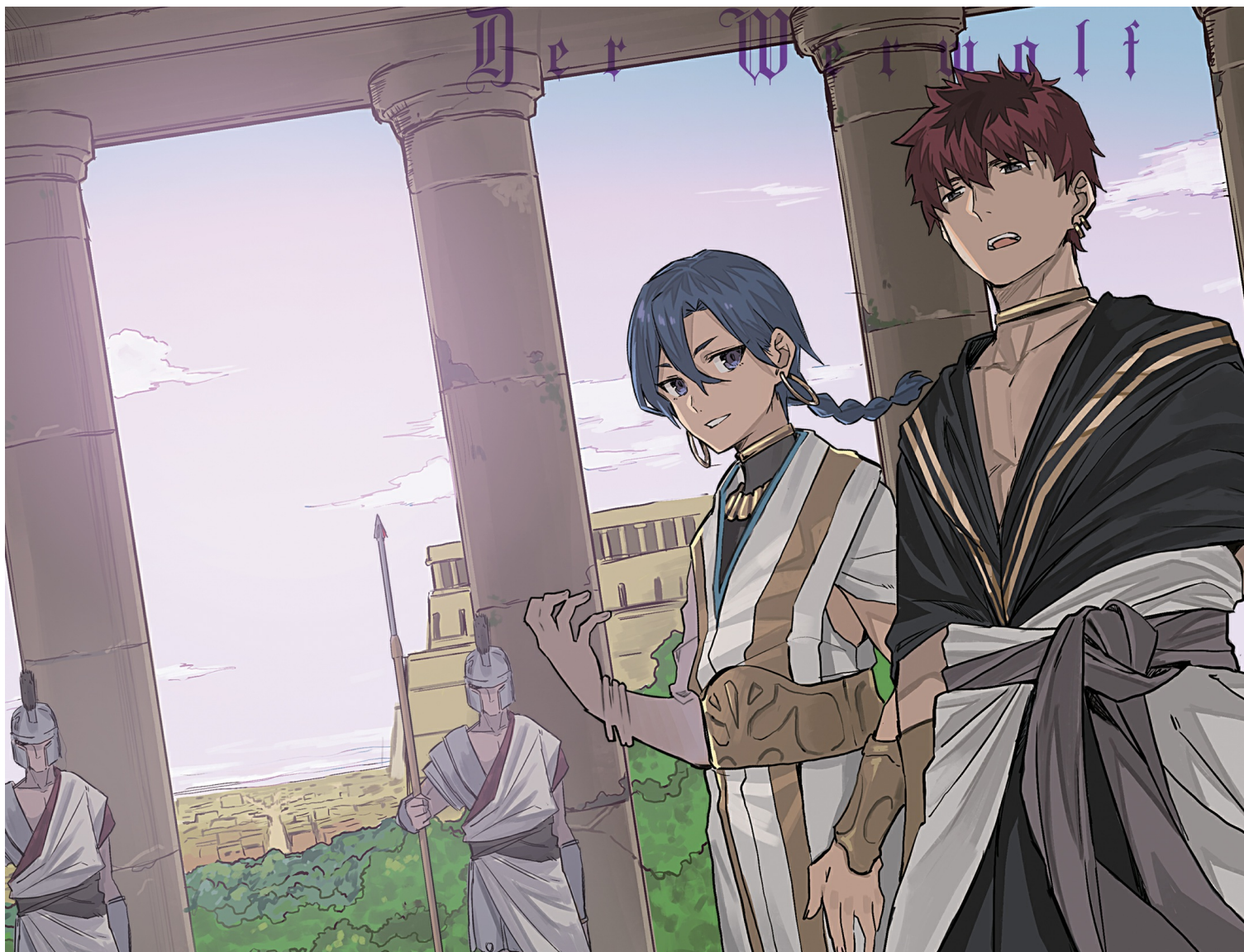


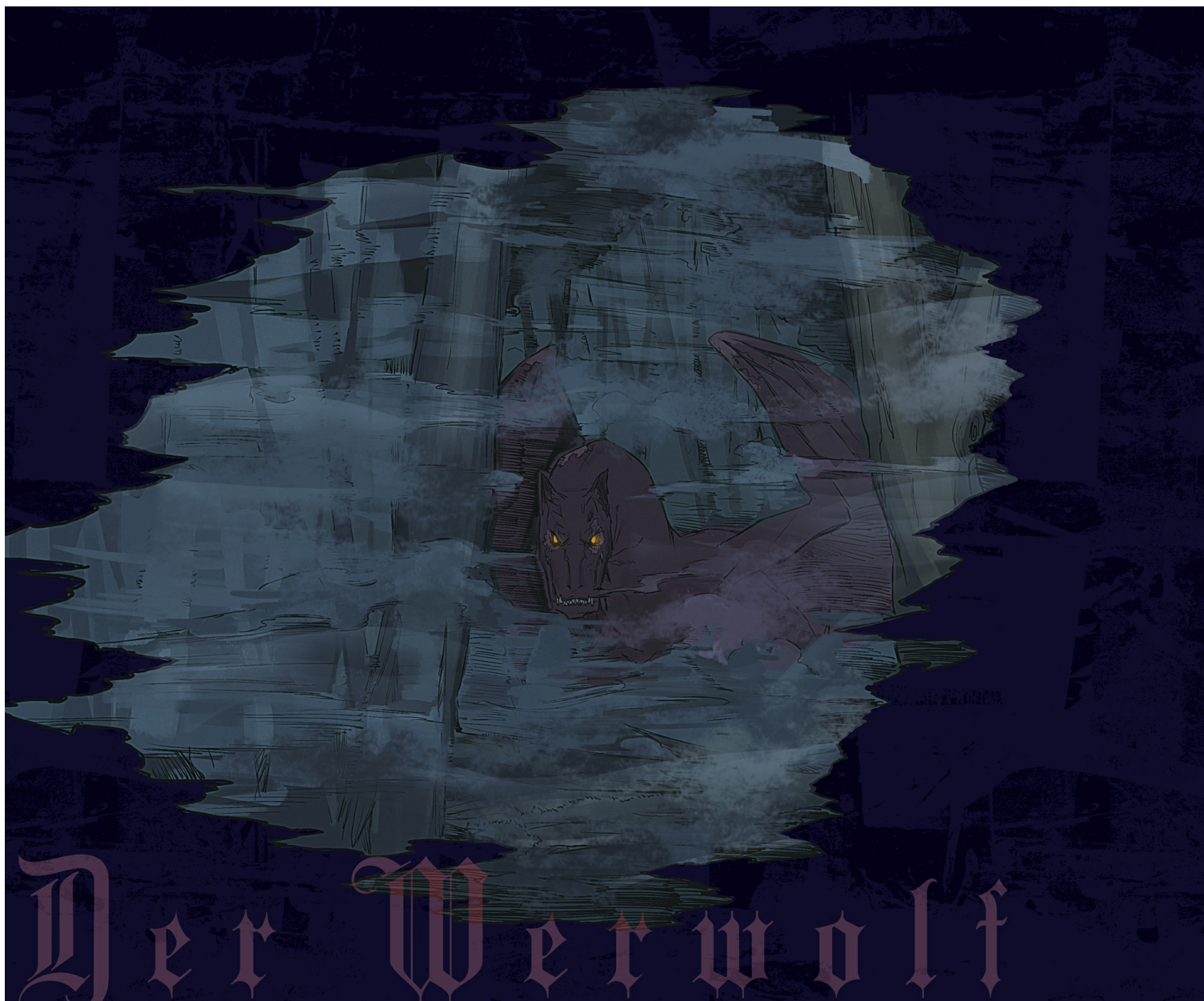
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release of volume 15!

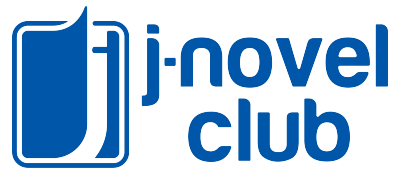
Hey, everyone!
Manga artist Kosumi Yuuichi here.
I drew this to commemorate the release
of the latest Der Werewolf volume!


Kosumi Yuuichi









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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 15

by Hyougetsu

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